



Exploring Psychology

Exploring Psychology: Identity and Disability 1

Peter White

Hello. I'm Peter White, and I'm joined by three guests to discuss how physical impairment can affect the way we view our own identities to help us maintain an exploring psychology focus. Let me go round the table and introduce my three guests. Mike Oliver is Professor of Sociology at Greenwich University. Mike has written extensively on disability and impairment and it is cited in the Chapter. His books include 'The Politics of Disablement' and 'Disability Politics'. He has also been a campaigner against discrimination towards disabled people. Lois Keith is also a writer, a former English Teacher, she has written 'Take Up The Bed And Walk', which is an exploration of how children with disabilities are portrayed in classics, such as 'What Katy Did' and 'Heidi'. She has also edited 'Mustn't Grumble', which is a collection of women's writing on disability. And Al Alvares, novelist, critic, poker player, former rock climber, who also wrote the very influential book on 'Suicide, the Savage God' and has now written his autobiography 'Where Did It All Go Right' and he has also described his congenital disability, and the one acquired later, as the result of a climbing accident as meaning he entered the world limping on his left leg, and will exit from it limping on the right. The plan is to ask the three of you, in turn, to give us your take, through your experiences on impairment and its effects on your sense of who you are. And by the way that I am reading this script from Braille, because I have been blind from birth and I went to a so called 'Special School.' Okay, let's start with Mike Oliver, Professor Mike Oliver. Mike, like Lois, your disability is as a result of an accident which means you're a wheelchair user and I think in your case, it came bang in the middle of adolescence.

Mike Oliver

Yes. I was 17 at the time and it was the first time I had ever been away from home, away from my parents and I dived into a swimming pool, when I was on holiday with some friends, broke my neck and have been paralysed ever since. I think in many ways, that was an interesting event, shall we say, in my life. In that I didn't have a particularly happy adolescence, I wasn't particularly successful at school. I was a grammar school reject and failure. I left with three 'O' Levels. I was working as a Clerk in a fairly boring office job. Breaking my neck, in a sense, broke me out of the typical kind of working class life and subsequent to that, I've had a rich and varied life and regard my accident as wholly positive.

Peter

But you couldn't have known that at the time and you couldn't have thought that at the time, presumably.

Mike

I was struck...prior to my accident, about a month before I had an accident, I met a young man in a wheelchair and I spent three hours talking to him and I remember thinking how awful that was and that if that ever happened to me, I would want to die. It happened to me a month later and I don't ever remember wanting to die, as a consequence, I think of that in a much more positive sense, than I would have done, had I spent that year continuing to go to the boring office job, and so on.

Peter

What effect do you think it had on your sense of who you were?

Mike

Well I am a Sociologist so in a sense I don't see identity as fixed and stable anyway. I see identity, as changing constantly, both over time and in different situations. So in that sense I don't see my sense of self as changing significantly. But I do think I went from being just one of very many to somebody who was particular and who was in one sense, special, in that I was unique.

Peter

So it made you more important, in a way.

Mike

Yes, of course. I mean there are negatives as well and I'm not trying to deny those. But I think there are positives. This kind of idea that somehow acquiring an impairment is wholly tragic was certainly not something that was borne out by experience as I interpreted it then or subsequently when I as a professional came to read the literature from when I found this wholly negative view of disability. It simply didn't accord with my experiences.

Peter

Did you see yourself at that stage, or fairly soon after that, as belonging now to a group, on any way?

Mike

I remember in the early 70s. Going to meetings with blind people and deaf people and we used to have these kind of things that were beloved in psychological literature about hierarchies of impairment and which would be the worst. I remember talking to a blind guy, and saying 'God, I would hate to be blind.' And he said 'Well God, I would hate to have broken my neck.' and these things didn't make sense because it wasn't about the kind of problems of individual impairment it was the disabling society that we all faced. We all faced similar barriers. That was what liberated me, I think that's what gave me the strength and the confidence to take on the disabling society, if you like.

Peter

Okay. Let's just leave it there for a moment. Because that raises all sorts of interesting points and it also places your solution in a way in working out a politics of it and getting together with groups of people.