

Understanding the Personal and Political Role of Multiple Minority Status

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An individual's view of the world is often structured by his or her position in the socio-political system which is determined by those in positions of power within the social hierarchy. In this social structure, the more layers of differences one has from those who determine norms the further away one is positioned from the measured social acceptability. "Systemic differences are determined by all of the individual's characteristics" (Light 1990:5) Does this hold true for both individuals and members of specific groups?

What makes a person member of a multiple minority? Is it simultaneous minority status in more than one group? Is it the treatment that members of those groups receive at the personal and political level? Yet, again could it be one's perception of and reaction to the treatment she/he gets in society? Are these questions perhaps, better asked from a different dimension such as: are the social movements, as we have known them, and constructed them, inadequate to explore both personal and political equation of oppression? Are the notions of inclusion and diversity possible in social movements that are forced to function within the present hegemonic structure? Who will be the political majority, and who will be the political minorities in the new world order that is being constructed by way of globalisation? What impacts will globalisation have on social movements and on individuals the movements aimed at liberating?

This article amalgamates components of various previously written articles on the issue of multiple minorities. The goal is to explore some of the questions posed above not necessarily with the objective of providing answers. My purpose has always been to share questions that may be explored in future research; research that is hopefully emancipatory in nature.

My interest in the issue of multiple minorities arose from the personal. I need to understand where I fitted in the system, in my immediate environment and how this explained and informed my political realities. As explored in Barile (1998) I see myself as being situated in multiple minority positions. Having immigrated to the mosaic country of Canada, specifically to Quebec, a province where language, ethnicity and politics are contentious issues, my linguistic characteristics (Italo-Anglophone) relegated me to two minority status. Being a woman in a male dominated world and a woman with multiple impairments allows for a herstory that is different than that of the majority of people. (Or is it?)

In the last few decades within both the women's movement, and the movement of persons with disabilities, individuals and/or sub-groups therein have expressed the view that they experienced hegemony both outside and inside of their primary group of membership. These are members of "multiple minorities." The terminology used to express these experiences varies: multiple, double, triple etc. layers of what some call oppression or jeopardy and others name minority status. These experiences have been reported widely in the disabled community (Fine & Ash 1981, 1988; Saxton & Howe, 1987; Driedger & Gray, 1992; Hanna & Rogovsky, 1990; Morris, 1991, 1993; Hillyer, 1993; O'Toole & Bregante, 1990; O'Toole, 1996; Vernon, 1998; St. Larent, 1999) and in the women's community (Hooks, 1984; King, 1989; Adelson, 1989; Ciatu, Dilco et al., 1998; Chancy 1999).

The concept of "multiple minority" has emerged in the fields of political and social science in approximately the last 20 years.

A multiple minority group is a group of people who are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment because they are defined as members of more than one minority group and who therefore regard themselves as objects of this combination of collective discrimination (Deegan, 1981:10).

During the research in my graduate social work degree I used this concept as a means

to ascertain what women with disabilities thought of system based discrimination (if and how they lived it). In Barile (1993) women with disabilities affirmed my hypothesis that in pure social, economic and personal terms, their positions, like the positions of women of color, immigrant women, lesbians, etc., remain largely that of underclass and invisible.

This new conceptualisation allowed women with disabilities, like others living more than one-minority status, to begin to identify the exclusionary practices that derive from constraints imposed by the sexist, ableist, heterosexist and other ingrained historical customs. The unequal treatment of multiple minorities is not identical to that of single minorities. Wertlieb (1985) and Hahn (1986), among others, delineate the experiences of single minority. Two distinguishing factors are present when using multiple minority concepts as analytical tool.

1) The differential and unequal treatment is usually more severely limiting for the multiple minority group, as compared to the single minority group (Deegan, 1981:10).

For example, in Canada in the area of employment, the unemployment rate for women with disabilities is higher than men with disabilities and higher than non-disabled women. It was reported that in 1991 unemployment rate for women with disabilities was 16.0% and for men with disabilities 13.2%. For the same period for non disabled persons, unemployment rate was 9.9% for non-disabled women and 9.7% for men (Fawcett, 1996). With respect to earnings for full time work (30 or more hours) 65.0% of women with disabilities compared to 38.4% of men with disabilities earned under \$25,000 yearly. (Fawcett, 1996)

2) The group of people discriminating against the multiple minority groups includes members of single minority groups as well as the majority group.

On a regular basis a disabled women's organisation in Montreal conducts telephone surveys of organisations of people with disabilities and with various women's groups to see if progress was made on issues of access. The surveys illustrate that both single minority non-profit organisations of persons with disabilities as well as women's organisations exclude issues of women with disabilities thereby resulting in their systemic omission in advocacy of social issues, community education and self-improvement programs offered by these groups. The most recent telephone survey, 1998, shows that of approximately 100 organisations of for persons with disabilities in Montreal only three had a committee on women's issues and of these only one was active. The results in women's groups are even worse. None of the 25 women's organisations that were surveyed had a committee on issues of disability and only one had included disability and access in their organisations objective.

Furthermore, in Quebec, from early 1980 to 1999 only three groups of women with disabilities existed. Today only two are still active. According to (OPHQ, 1996) women with disabilities make up 60% of the persons with disabilities in Quebec; yet, the organisations which aim at representing their interests receive only 1% of the funding allocated for advocacy groups of persons with disabilities. This may indeed be due to other factors such as the fact that in Quebec funding priority is given to groups organised by uni-impairments (paraplegia, hearing, visual etc.) Moreover, organisations of women with disabilities in Quebec receive no funding at all from women's based funding sources. Much like it was stated by Morris (1991, 1993) women's groups have largely ignored the systemic realities of women with disabilities in all areas.

The issue of single disability/uni-impairment groups also raises the question of multiple minority status. Many of the organized groups formed to bring together people in similar situations. People who shared common problems, struggles and solutions. However, people who have more than one disability also exist. A person who has a visual impairment and also a mobility disability or someone with a spinal cord injury who becomes deaf are situated differently. The single disability groups do not seem equipped to deal with diversity within their membership or to accommodate disabilities different than their own. This creates a marginalization within each group and a hierarchy among disability groups and difficulty for cross-dis-

ability groups. A person belonging to and achieving the status of being a member of a disability group because of having "disability A" is simultaneously discriminated against and relegated to lower position because of having "disability B." This causes additional levels of complexity when gender, race, economic status and age are added.

Golfus (1989) states that "Disconfirmation" is "the message that you don't exist." He cites William James as follows:

No more fiendish punishment could be devised, even were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticeable by all the members thereof. (Quoted in Golfus, 1989)

In economic terms women and men with disabilities have different outcomes compared to their non-disabled counterparts. This same information was not available about First Nation peoples, immigrants, women with disabilities at the federal (Canadian) or provincial level. As matter of fact, during various telephone conversations between 1998 and January 2000 with a staff member of Office des Persones Handicapees du Quebec (OPHQ, a government agency that among other things provides statistics on people with disabilities in Quebec), I was informed that although raw data exists, these statistics are not compiled by language, ethnic group and gender; implying the lesser importance and statuses of these groups in our society.

The lack of information about a group (with specific characteristics) contributes indirectly to the isolation of its members. At the individual level, this lack of identification allows for a feeling of isolation by the members of the group. They may not be aware of how certain common experience, e.g., high unemployment, shared by people with certain characteristics is in fact systemic in nature. In order to find solutions to social and economic problems of any given groups one must first identify the group. Economic and social policy makers rely on numbers of people and statistical trends to set up social programs. Funding agencies require numbers to justify giving grants. How can policy makers establish solutions if they do not know the people and real, economic, and social problems experienced by them? While surfing the Internet data on ethnicity, race, and disabilities was readily available for the U.S. population (Bradsher, 1996).

Are people with disabilities from minority groups experiencing disconfirmation? Are they receiving it from each other, from the majority counterparts or society in general? What happens when those in positions of power ignore concerns of groups in less powerful position? Does this address what women with disabilities, lesbians, women of color, and First Nations women are saying to the women's movement? Is the movement of persons with disability receiving the same message from women, lesbians, gay men and persons of color living in disabling society? While many disability organizations support other human rights and equality seeking groups, they are not exempt from being part of the hegemony of discrimination against "others."

In my earliest work (Barile 1991) I reported on the experience of women with disabilities from ethnic, linguistic backgrounds in Montreal. Ten women and I shared experiences about impairments, culture, and gender. Their experiences and my own interconnected so perfectly in ways that no other experience ever had. Consequentially, this generated my own quest about my personal and political reality.

In Barile (1993) ten women were asked to define systemic discrimination as they experienced it. They could use any form: words, sentences, and phrases. Another group of seven women were then asked to take those definitions and add their own ideas, words etc., but not take anything away and make a complete definition. In all 17 women with disabilities coming from various parts of Canada living in various disabling situations compiled the definition below. This is the collage of their own, in our own words:

Systemic Discrimination is unjust policy, structure and practices promoted directly and indirectly by the system. Those who have power within any specific system create rules, i.e. social and/or economic norms for the

groups with no power - the powerless. Establishment of these 'norms' has been unjust because they have led to exclusion, inequality and differentiation. This results in benefits for those who fit into the system-identified norms, while maintaining an artificial, secondary 'norm' for groups composed of those omitted as a result of 'inferiority' and/or 'inequality,' brought about primarily by an institutionalized economic hierarchy.

This material form of discrimination has a historical basis, which continues into the present. Although we currently have laws against discrimination, the inequalities entrenched by society (i.e. the 'norm') for society, continue to exist. Sometimes, anti-discriminatory laws are themselves discriminatory, since the core system is itself inherently unjust.

In such a society, women with disabilities (minorities & multiple minorities) are immediately forced to lead personal lives that have constant socio-political implications as a result of discriminatory acts and laws. They must constantly be prepared to defend themselves and their rights politically, legally, economically and sometimes even physically.

The above is based on the assumption and/or myth that minority and multiple minority groups are less qualified for, not interested in, or less worthy of equal treatment.

These women identified various social and personal components that act as barriers to their equity in society. In Barile (1993) I make reference to the idea that the concept of multiple minority may be a tool for conscious raising. That is, making the link, coming to the awareness that "no this is not me being: inferior, stupid etc., I now know others with my same multiple characteristic experience the same sense of failure when they are in specific social situations; even within groups where I share one or other characteristic. Thus, it can not be an individual problem rather it is a social problem."

As with women's acceptance or rejection of feminism as an analytical tool, some women from multiple minority situations can use the concept of multiple minority as a personal/political analytical tool for identifying and understanding their various experiences in relation to their multiple status. Thereby beginning the process of developing what Freire (1989) called "conscientizacao" or critical consciousness. Following this, one can begin to interweave that awareness with other similar minority experiences. By identifying and placing together the other layers of oppression one comes to the realisation of what King (1989) calls multiple consciousness.

In post-modern reality, to place emphasis on multiple minority concepts is recognition that all social movements have been less than inclusive in and sensitive to the notion of diversity. Both feminism and social model of disability claim that these movements are more than just about rights of women (Sacks 1999) and disability (Vernon 1998 citing Barnes) These movements we are told are about eradication of oppression and the building of equality for all. But as shown above not all of their potential members share that view.

In her writing King (1989) suggests that "Black feminist ideology fundamentally challenges the interstructure of racism, sexism and classism." She suggests that "It is in confrontation with multiple jeopardy that black women define and sustain multiple consciousness essential for our liberation, of which feminist consciousness is an integral part."

While the disability theories and practices of professionals, scholars and activists, attempt to address a social model that looks at the impact of structural inequality on groups, they sometimes eclipse the reality of the individual. Even with membership in five or more "groups" the individual does not necessarily get his or her needs met because the groups are designed to address a single, or double, identification or minority status. The combination of disabilities, social or ethnic backgrounds, gender or sexual orientation differences, are not addressed by the groups. The individual experiences them. The challenge then is to use new

analytical tools, or adapt existing ones, to emancipate those experiences multiple levels of discrimination due to their multiple minority status.

I would suggest that with some added elements, this could apply to those of us who live in disabling society with multiple status. Building on the premises brought forth by the social model (Oliver 1990, 1996) which positions the *primary* problems in the disabling society, the process can begin by reviewing how direct and indirect discrimination based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation and specific impairment that exists in the external social structure was transmitted into our movement creating exclusionary practices therein. Reviewing the process of decision making within the movement may create conflicts but it also may create those multiple collective consciousness that we need in order to take on the challenges of oppression that will be imposed by globalisation.

Endnotes

1. Person of Italian descent that has English as a second language. This term is used primarily in Quebec.

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