

Disability

Psychology and other knowledge-based professions could sensitise the political and administrative community on the outcomes for those with a disability. Psychology could play a role in the demystification of the problems of people with disabilities, particularly for those people with an 'unseen' disability. (Emma Nicholson MEP, May 2003).

AS psychologists we need to contribute to the quality of life of all people, paying particular attention to the disadvantaged, excluded or

Guest editor **PAT FRANKISH** introduces the special issue.

marginalised. If human behaviour can be understood within a social context, it must be accepted that anything that prevents access to society will affect behaviour. Psychologists are well placed to address the complexity of the position of disabled people in society by studying, and talking about, the behaviour of the oppressors as

well as the victims. The Society's Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities (SCPEO) seeks to address these issues (see box opposite), and we hope all readers will find some food for thought in this special issue.

In our first article, Sarah Supple, from her own position as a blind psychologist, takes us through the construction of disability in the recent literature. The medical model predominates, as do negative images. So far psychologists have failed to challenge these in an effective way, and Sarah invites us to start from the position of the disabled person as an individual, accepting the full range of diversity as we would in an able-bodied group.

Parents of disabled children, as Lisa Woolfson shows us, have to cope with all the developmental issues that other parents face, plus the negative cognitions that are associated with society's view of disability as a tragedy. Psychologists working with

EXPERIENCES OF EXCLUSION

'There are many perceived barriers imposed by employers and advisers for disabled people trying to enter the psychology profession. But I believe few are real, in the sense that adjustment or a change in outlook cannot overcome them – and I am keen to see or assist in a change in attitudes.

I believe that the barriers I faced may be typical of any disabled person attempting to enter the psychology profession. These difficulties arose due to the lack of good quality advice, an inability to gain initial experience, the application process and the imposed constraints of posts. All of these to some degree exclude applicants who are disabled primarily because of the inflexible attitudes behind the advice, recruitment and employment procedures. If attitudes were to change significantly, there would be few barriers.'

Peter Stannett

(See also *The Psychologist*, December 2002, available from tinyurl.com/lbgef6c)

PROMOTING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Society's Standing Committee for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities is engaged in a monitoring exercise to discover how many BPS members are disabled (among other things). This will then be used to see how many disabled psychologists are active on committees or receive honours. The BPS is probably as guilty as other privileged groups of excluding people who are different. In fact, Peter Stannett (see box opposite) reminds members that the BPS seems unable to support people with disabilities to become applied psychologists. By raising the issues, SCPEO has inevitably shown that the profession is failing to find the courage to challenge traditional medical models and to promote enabling psychological models.

SCPEO will continue to campaign within and outwith the BPS for equal opportunities for all. The London office must be replaced with an office that has access for all. The qualifications system must be able to accommodate differing needs. The honours system must be able to honour people for overcoming adversity, not just for excellence in the eyes of the peer group. The next big project is around working with interpreters as the composition of the UK population changes to include many more languages than English.

their own community. Laura Gorfin and Alex McGlaughlin tell us about their efforts to empower people to choose where they want to live and the problems they face in doing this.

On a slightly different note Rudi Coetzer talks about life as a community psychologist supporting brain-injured people in rural Wales. This group of clients receive no service in some parts of the country. He draws our attention to the psychological work that has to be done by brain-injured people if they are to live fulfilling lives. They have no chance if they remain invisible.

Much to be done

My own life has involved living and working with and for disabled people, most with learning disabilities but some with physical disabilities, brain injuries and social exclusions. My own disabilities prevent me from taking as full a part in life as I would wish. A period of time in hospital, completely immobilised, helped me to realise how excluded from ordinary life we become if we cannot actively move to join in.

The Disability Discrimination Act should be powerful in enabling individuals to obtain their rights to a full life. So far it is difficult to see the impact of the legislation. The resources for Disability Facilities Grants are often redirected to other purposes, access to buildings is limited, and lip service is paid to many of these things. On the positive side, most buses and trains now have appropriate space for wheelchairs and, so long as you remember to book in advance, assistance to board and alight is available for trains. However I would challenge anyone to

manage the British public transport system using a wheelchair and looking after a child and the shopping. Plus it is important for us to note that practical problems can often be solved by the use of sufficient financial resources, but attitudes are different. Changes in the construction of disability require a fundamental cognitive shift away from the stereotypical view that the young white able-bodied male is king, and towards the valuing of all individuals for the contribution that they make to the richness of the world in which we all live.

We also need to consider the scope of this endeavour. In the introduction to her paper 'The rights of the disadvantaged' (*International Journal of Human Rights*, Spring 2003) Baroness Mary Warnock indicates her intention to 'address the question of the human rights of disabled people, including among them not only those who have physical or sensory disabilities, but those with intellectual or behavioural disabilities as well'. She also argues for 'expanding the concept of disability, so that it may embrace all those who are manifestly disadvantaged'.

All of the psychologists who have contributed to this issue have spent many years in using psychology to make things better. They show a commitment and an understanding that provide many ideas of how things could be done in a more effective and positive way. Hopefully, readers will be inspired to face up to the responsibility that being in a privileged position brings.

■ *Pat Frankish is a consultant clinical psychologist and disability psychotherapist working in independent practice. E-mail: pat.frankish@btinternet.com.*

families are in a key position to support the parents to complete the cognitive shift they need to make if they are to carry out their parenting tasks in a positive way.

Rebecca Lawthom and Dan Goodley urge us, as psychologists, to enable rather than disable. They argue for the bringing together of community psychology and disability studies to find a way to work

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with disabled people in fully inclusive studies, taking the perspective of the oppressed people. Their position reminds us of the professional habit of talking between ourselves and thence maintaining established positions.

People with learning disabilities are usually not allowed to choose where they live or what they do. This means that they are forced into dependent positions and are prevented from making contributions to