

Disability Culture: A Nigerian's Perspective

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In this paper, I look at disability from a cultural perspective. I Examine relationships of people with disability in Nigeria. I looked at the society from a Macro- systems level. I identify the many ways in which I could demonstrate my skills as a culturally competent practitioner. I highlighted the keys to becoming an anti-oppressive practitioner in Nigeria. I also talk in depth about the role of advocacy in fundamentally changing the way societies views people with disability.

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Introduction

According to Smith (2011), it is estimated that about 10% of Nigerians have some type of disabilities (Smith, 2011, p. 35). In an attempt to address the daunting challenges that face people with disabilities and improve their quality of life, Nigerian government adopted the United Nation's Convention on the rights of person with disabilities in 2007 and has ratified it in 2010. However, due to the rampant level of corruption in government, many of the pressing challenges that face people with disability in Nigeria today has yet to be addressed. Over the years previous to the adoption of these laws, there was very little research being conducted into the plight of people with disabilities. In other words, very little was known about the challenges that faces people with disabilities in Nigeria (Akhidenor, 2007, p. 23). As a result of the ratification of the convention on the rights of person with disabilities, there has been a growing pressure from non governmental organizations for the need put in place social programs to address the challenges faced by people with disabilities. However, as a result of years of marginalization and oppression, the larger socio-cultural groups are hesitant to address many of the challenges face by this group of people. Additionally, African mythology and religion fanaticism have played a huge role in marginalizing, segregating, and oppressing people with disabilities (Akhidenor, 2007, p. 32).

Mythology

Traditional mythology is deeply rooted in almost every African society. The deeply rooted beliefs about the nature of reality and the concept of citizenship can therefore be greatly affected, depending on the approach which the society assumes.

The common assumption that many people in Nigeria have about disability is the correlation between evil and disability. Within the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, the general understand is that a person with a disability has either been cursed by god or has offended the witches and wizard of the land (Akhidenor, 2007, p. 3). This is similar to the idea expressed by Okafor (2003) when he said: "some local ancient mythology has it that the disabled are social outcasts serving retribution for offenses of their forefathers"(Okafor, 2003, p. 5). Due to low levels of literacy and high level of ignorance, many Nigerians associated the cause of illness such as mental illness and depression to supernatural causes. As a result, people with mental illness are not given the proper medication and treatment in order to be able to function in society, instead, they are taken to the traditional doctors for traditional remedies. Additionally, in some cases these disabilities are not treated at all---they disregard them because they believe that is their punishment for their sins (Akhidenor, 2007, p. 7).

Families

As learned in Family Support, the challenges of caring for people with disabilities in any society is more evident in the cohesion and adaptability of the family. In Nigeria, Families are tasked with raising and caring for their family members alone. There is no governmental agency task by ensuring that families have adequate resources to be able to meet the needs of their family member with a disability (Akhidenor, 2007, p. 12). When the challenges of caring for their family member is unbearable, some families segregate them inside the house and ensure that they are kept in a place where no one can see them. In situations like this, many of their rights are threatened. They are treated like slaves and animals. In some cases, some families ostracize their family

members with a disability. In a situation like this, they might leave them at the door of someone, they might throw them in the garbage, they might leave them beside the roads for death. In all of these cases, their ability to defend themselves or protect their rights is limited and become very vulnerable to people who sell human parts for rituals. Many families that decide to ostracize their family members are of lower socioeconomic background and are often uneducated. According to Okafor (2003), there are often psychological consequences for people with disabilities who have been socially deprived (Okafor, 2003, p. 7).

Religion and Disability

Nigeria is a very religious country. There are two predominantly two main religions in the country, Islam and Christianity. Introduced in the era of colonialism, Christianity and Islam have played a significant role in the traditional fabric of Nigerian society. Therefore, understanding the role that religion has played in the way people with disabilities are perceived and treated will help answer some crucial questions about the plight of people with disability in Nigeria. (Munyi, 2012). Most families in Nigeria often attempt to apply prayer to the disability before attempting to seek any other conventional forms of care. Depending on the family, they might go to their religious counselors who often play a huge role in perpetuating stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about people with disabilities. In most cases, religious counselors often tell parents, especially, that their child is cursed by witches and wizards that they offended. (Munyi, 2012). They ask parents to pray and the disability will go away. After several years of praying and hoping that the disability will go away, they decide that the only option is to segregate that member of the family. (Munyi, 2012).

People with disability's plight Today

Despite the fact that Nigeria is rich in natural resources, human resources, customs and traditions, there has been very little done to address the challenges faced by people with disabilities. The micro system of the society plays a very significant role in the way values are developed. Families pass on values to their children, which in turns shape the way society treats people with disabilities. Gellman (1959) argues that the practice of child rearing affects people's attitudes towards people with disabilities. Adding that early relationships play a significant factor in the way children grows up to see people with disabilities. The need to conform to the standard of the adults affects the way a child interacts with people with disabilities (Gellman, 1959, p. 254). Odufuwa (2007) tells us that people with disabilities in Nigeria are marginalized economically and politically. Many of them have no sustainable livelihood (Odufuwa, 2007, p. 93). Persons with disabilities do not have access to transportation and their quality of life is often lower compare to the rest of the society (Odufuwa, 2007, p. 93).

Addressing These Challenges

The support currently available to tackle the challenges faced by people with disabilities is often inadequate. In the rural part of the country, there is a lot more support available to families of people with disabilities. The extended family plays a very important role in caring for family members with disabilities. (Smith, 2011, p. 40).The grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts all come together to ensure that the best care is given to their family member who has a disability. However, when families do decide to move to the cities, either because of economic opportunities or for other reasons, the supports available to people with disabilities are lower in quality and quantity. There are several

non governmental organizations who provided basic services to families with a disability. These community organizations are playing a major role in advocating for better quality in services afforded to people with disabilities and the quantity of services available. They do this by advocating for these services. (Smith, 2011, p. 35). They are also doing a lot of sensitization and educating the public about different types of disability and what their causes are (Odufuwa, 2007, p. 94). They have been very successful in getting the government to create what is called the Nigerians with Disability Decree Act. This act was created to address the issues that face people with disabilities and serve as laws that protect people with disabilities from having their rights withheld unnecessarily (Odufuwa, 2007, p. 93). However, the challenge facing the law is that it is not being implemented (Smith, 2011, p. 37). The government needs to create agencies that will be mandated for tackling these issues by enforcing the law (Odufuwa, 2007, p. 94).

Education and Disability.

There has been a growing number of interest in ensuring that people with disabilities are educated and are rehabilitated. The Nigerian government has created, under the Ministry of Education, a branch dedicated to tackling the challenges faced by people with disabilities in accessing the education systems. Due to the fact that many people with disabilities come from lower socioeconomic background, the government is providing supplementary loans and equipments for people with disabilities. Depending on which state of the country you are in, the amount of money you get is decided on an individual basis. This is partly due to the fact that some states in the country have no laws that particularly deals with issues facing (Akhidenor, 2007, p. 23).

Anti-Oppressive Practitioner in Nigeria

In order to be a good disability worker; a culturally aware disability worker, being person centered is important. It requires being truly focused on what the person wants as suppose to what I want. Making sure that my biases are not influencing the way I deliver services to the people I am working with. Listening and hearing what the person has to say goes a long way in demonstrating my competency skills. Keeping in mind the long history of oppression and marginalization of people with disabilities in this country, being sensitive to the needs of each individual is very important. Not assuming that what works for one family will work for another family. Taking time to build trust---I think that is the foundation to developing a relationship that is collaborative; truly taking an opportunity to let the families get to know me and be open minded (Ingram, 2012, p. 6959).

When delivering services, understanding that because of the experiences that people with disabilities in Nigeria have had, they might not be very open to support. Knowing how to connect them to services or other people with similar experiences from their culture will be part of my approach. I speak the various languages in the country, hence my ability to help the families with navigating services if they are new to the country will be an asset. Although, the primary language in the country is English.

Respecting the family's privacy is a major part of being a culturally competent disability worker. Helping the family access services in a way that is customized to fit their needs as opposed to just trying to provide service in a western fashion. In order to be able to do this, one must be flexible. My schedule will be flexible enough to

accommodate the need of the families. Being aware not to use stereotypes that can offend people is a significant part of being a competent practitioner. I will do everything to prevent this from happening if I ever witness it (Ingram, 2012, p. 6957).

In order to understand the nature of interactions between cultures, the ecological system can be used. The meso system refers to the instructions that exist between an individual's micro system. So this would be working with people at school, working with people in their community. As much as possible, ensuring that we develop a relationship that is built on trust is essential for the interactions that we encounter within this system is focused on the individual and that my role is merely to facilitate the interactions that will help germinate a future that focuses on the goal of the person. Advocating for people's right, ensuring that we use power with as opposed to power over, creating an environment that is conducive for developing relationships and ultimately a feeling of pride and inclusion in society (Moffatt, 2008, p. 251)

The macro system is looking at the more globalized aspect of society that affects the individual. At this level, I will like to advocate for the rights of disabled persons in Nigeria. While there have been several laws passed to address the needs of people with disabilities, there needs to be more action. More needs to be done to ensure that people with disability have some equality, justice and acceptance in Nigeria (Moffatt, 2008, p. 253)

In conclusion, the role of culture in understanding the disability experience cannot be overemphasized. The beliefs, traditions, mythologies and religion of any society will play a significant factor in they way they perceive different experiences.

However, as demonstrated by Nigeria's experience, as a society progress, the need for understanding and appreciation of the uniqueness of every member of that society becomes more critical. When people combine their power and comes together, they are able to mold a society that reflects the aspirations and desire of all it's citizens, irrespective of their disabilities.

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