Ascribed or Authentic? Challenging the Assignment of ‘Identities of Difference.’

In reviewing the STM report from Ottawa that gave voice to the lived experiences of young people with ‘dis’ability, I was discouraged to hear similar narratives that many of us have heard for decades. Being societally othered and subsequently denied an opportunity to speak to that marginalization continues. Despite our hope that things are better, the youth voices told us that they are not. In response to our opening panel regarding identity, it struck me that for children, for marginalized groups, and actually for animals, identities are assigned – ascribed – and are done so in comparison to the so-called norm….the yardstick against which all else is measured. The process of having one’s identity assigned is problematic in and of itself – but to have it assigned based on where one is less than/deficient/different is where I will situate today’s comments.

In many cultures, beings deemed different, deficient or of lesser value are socially marginalized, disempowered, devalued and face innumerable barriers to health and quality of life. Girls/Persons deemed disabled are one such group. Through oppression, discrimination, and constant degradation, marginalized groups are denied the basic human right of dignity. For five girls with Spina Bifida, the experience of societal ableism, i.e. the belief that being able bodied is normal, eroded their sense of self worth, impinged upon their human rights, and isolated them in their own degradation - until they came together and spoke. In a Canadian project entitled My Mom Was My Left Arm, a quote I heard from one of the girls in the project illuminated the impact of sexism, ageism, and ableism on the social determinants of health of girls living with Spina Bifida. The relationship between quality of life, generated anger-then-denied and ableist discrimination as lived by young women with Spina Bifida was explored.

Broadly, the experience of being marginalized and pathologized generated anger and impinged upon the rights and quality-of-life for young women deemed disabled – and thereby defined solely by this disabling label by mainstream culture. Privileged, I spent some time with girls and young women associated with the Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Ontario. I learned so much from them, and they from one another as for two days we explored the CRC, ableism and anger. For example, I learned that, as young women with disabilities, they have ‘disability specific incidences of anger.’ One young woman who does peer counseling told me that most of her counseling for adults living with SB is related to anger issues, because of memories of poor treatment and also because they are at a significantly higher risk for being more socially isolated and therefore having no one to support them through hard times so ‘things build up.’

In asking about anger, I learned of their experience of being marginalized. They were always made to feel different and had to tell their story over and over to able-bodied people. They felt excluded most times and live their life as a constant struggle. They expressed anger
about being made to own their disability, that they were often seen as an inconvenience or something on display. The attitudes of others, especially in school, created a barrier to their learning and they consequently felt that they had never reached their full potential. Having a disability, for some, meant that they were seen as stupid, asexual, an inconvenience, and not a full person.

For the girls, their age compounded their ascribed identities, for they were further viewed as incompetent – their age serving to reinforce this powerful ableist message. Many explained that they were most often made to feel far younger than their actual age – a point reinforced by the young women in the room who were in their 20s. They shared that despite getting older, being seen as a disabled girl, meant never being viewed as an adult, competent, or fully female.

And then there was gender. For the girls, gender-based expectations to be quiet, passive, get along, nice, accepting, and forgiving meant that their anger was not acknowledged by others – and worse – often not by them. It meant that they were not permitted to be angry, not permitted to challenge their mis-treatment, and worse, not permitted to challenge their identity being assigned and grounded in societal expectations regarding age, ability and gender.

Nursing’s ethical imperative to advocate for social justice, equity, fairness and dignity is not a nice-to-do, but rather a must-do. And our work is far from over. Therefore, in this work, consciousness raising was a central goal, whereby the girls would be (finally) free to acknowledge specific violations of several portions of the CRC. Expectations to be patient, were then understood as examples of a lack of will to change anything substantively. Expectations that all disabled people should be nice, never get angry and try to understand that those without disabilities ‘just don’t get it.’ was recognized as societal ableism’s tactic of passing the buck back to the marginalized.

The experience of being dismissed, viewed as stupid, excluded, seen as their disability, infantalized, pathologized and pitied became a shared realization that to experience life as a constant struggle, all the while knowing that you are viewed as an inconvenience to the majority, was changeable AND transformable all by talking back to ascribed identities grounded in difference. The impact of having one’s identity defined for them is that of denied authenticity. Ascribed identities based on difference maintains hierarchies of better than and less than while denying a young person’s right to self-define, meaningfully belong live an authentic life.

*Health is the Increased Becoming of Who we Are Most Deeply*  
Author Unknown

Over 50 years ago, Rachel Carson warned us of the inevitability of a Silent Spring if we continued to exploit the natural environment. This preventable, yet human-manufactured silent spring, she said, would be hauntingly void of the songs of birds, silenced by a short-sighted focus on capitalist wealth. Carson’s adept critique still rings true today. It links, to me, to the silencing of children, persons disabled by labels, and others. And while her silent spring was a metaphor for the silencing of nature, to view humans as more valuable than animals or nature, and to view able-bodied humans as more valuable than disabled humans is a recipe for both social and planetary disaster. For hierarchy serves one purpose: to marginalize the many for the benefit of the few.