**Applying the Social Model of Disability:**

**A Phenomenology of Initiating Change in Higher Education**

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**Background and Purpose**

In the past decades, disability service professionals (DSP) in higher education began adopting the social model of disability (SMD) as a theoretical and practical framework for creating more inclusive campus environments for students with disabilities who attend colleges and universities in growing numbers. In the early 2000s, an international organization of disability professionals, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), took on a strategic effort to shift the paradigm of disability services toward systematically removing barriers to full participation and transforming disabling environments—away from the prevalent modes of service focusing on the medical model, legal and regulatory compliance, and ad hoc accommodations, which many DSP, scholars, and advocates have come to see as insufficient from the social justice perspective. While the calls for change are intensifying, literature is sparse with respect to the motivations, paths, and experiences of DSP who set out to move beyond the medical and legally mandated accommodation by advancing alternative ideas and practices, including those individuals advancing SMD. Overall, the social phenomenon of this change is not well understood, yet is critical to examine in order to help reform-minded faculty, staff, and senior administrators to initiate a wider adoption of models and methods that they consider essential to greater inclusion. Seeking to expand knowledge in this area, this study aimed to understand the factors related to initiating a transition to SMD on university and college campuses by examining the process from the point of view of DSP initiating the change. Three research questions were posed: (1) What factors, personal and organizational, compel faculty and staff to initiate efforts, broadly conceived, to put the ideas of SMD into practice on campus? (2) What is the process for this engagement and what meaning does it have for the actors? (3) What lessons can be learned from their experiences toward greater inclusion of students with disabilities?

**Methodology**

Using the methodology of qualitative research in the interpretative tradition, this study examined the social phenomenon of leading change as a lived experience of DSP. Conceived as phenomenology, the study was based on the in-depth interviews with seven DSP participants selected through purposeful sampling. The interviews were anchored by open-ended qualitative questions, informed by the “in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviewing” method proposed by Irving Seidman (2013). This study inquired into: How participants first engaged with the issue of disability; How participants became aware of SMD and how they responded to these ideas in the context of their personal and professional experiences; How participants decided to act on the ideas of SMD and went about implementing them; and What this change meant to participants as individuals and professionals and what lessons these experiences offered. The study followed the participants’ narratives as they discovered how the precepts of SMD aligned with their personal dispositions toward social justice, sense of right and wrong; and took an active stance (as leaders, managers, professionals, and private thinkers) toward correcting the compliance, legal, and medical model mindsets that they found to disadvantage the people they served. The key limitations of the study consisted in the small number of participants who self-selected to be in the study and only represented DSP points of view, although faculty participation was initially expected. Nonetheless, the information generated by the study provides rich grounds for identifying several themes that can help inform further research and spur ideas for leadership formation in these reforms.

**Findings**

The study generated rich narratives of participant experiences with how they came to align themselves with SMD and to initiate the efforts to put these ideas into practice, as they found this model to (a) be consistent with their personal and professional values; and (b) offer better solutions for serving students, resulting in greater professional satisfaction and meaning for participants themselves. They saw that the reality of serving people with disabilities largely as a matter of the legal and administrative regimen or medical sorting fell out of step with the spirit of social justice and equal rights, and this dissatisfaction, when combined with exposure to and a growing understanding of SMD, served as a kind of inflection point for change, adopting SMD theory and practice.. Some of participant experiences aligned with AHEAD’s early strategic efforts to shift the paradigm of disability services toward systematically removing barriers to full participation and transforming disabling environments; and their transitions were informed by professional development experiences and direct encounters with advocates of reforms.

This analysis also brought to the surface two especially salient themes in the narratives of change: (a) the gradual, iterative, reflective process of changing the followers’ frames of disability services; and (b) the importance, for the leaders, of mastering SMD and becoming skillful at articulating its ideas when influencing the followers. Participants sought to achieve change within the organizational settings where the ideas and practices of SMD departed significantly from the accepted ideas and practices; where acceptance of SMD varied among campus constituencies with different degrees of power and different value systems (even among members of the same disability service office); and where different conceptions of disability and disability services co-existed and competed for dominance—a significant challenge in leading organizational change and influencing others, which participants recognized. Participants narratives exhibited the evidence of transformational leadership qualities and behaviors as they worked to reframe disability service work and shift the paradigm in the higher education space. Participants reflected on their experiences, learning from role models, experts, and scholars, and from their own practice, and persisted in addressing one misconception, one barrier at a time, where change was not a swift revolution, but a gradual, laborious process of changing mindsets, repeating itself as new people joined the disability service profession and disability service offices, potentially bringing along new misalignments and thereby raising the question among the advocates of SMD: What needs to happen to achieve a “tipping point” (a participant’s term) in the disability service profession so that the gains are sustained over time? In fact, the time it took participants themselves to transition to SMD from the models into which they were initially socialized through post-secondary education and professional experiences featured in the overall concern about the pace of progress.

**Implications**

Further exploration of the transformational leadership theory and methods in this space, drawing on participants’ own experience with developing affinity to SMD, can help guide change agents and is suggested as direction for future research. Another direction for future research is to explore the process of the transition to SMD and the questions it raises for different constituencies (faculty, senior, administrators, and DSP), simultaneously, from all points of view. This research may lead to insights about accelerating the paradigm shift by proposing frameworks for social change that: (a) are attuned to, integrate, and address the values, professional identities, organizational processes and constraints, and the language and fears of stakeholders; and (b) identify and present the arguments, project outcomes, and disability literature that satisfy the well-intentioned skeptics in the efficacy of SMD, while recognizing, as participants did, the limits of reframing. Leaders who have dealt with the challenges and emotional impact of resistance to the SMD change might like to see a literature review synthesizing relevant leadership lessons and strategies and indicating a path forward that acknowledges the limits of voluntary adoption of SMD, perhaps where SMD is codified into policies for staff and faculty.

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education & social sciences* (4th ed.). New York and London: Teachers College Press. Columbia University.