

'SEEN BUT NOT HEARD' - raising disability awareness within our communities - by Pelin Ahmet

We live in a world that values and privileges the 'able' body over the 'disabled' body, set as opposites. The disability is viewed as the problem, not the values of society. As a result, we are given the message that one should fear having, or acquiring a disability.

When looking at positive and negative images of disability, there are many considerations that we should be making on a societal level. We need to understand how some of the pre-conceived perceptions of disability have been formed. Essentially, we need to look at the two models of disability, which are the medical model, versus the social model. In short, the medical model suggests that disability is inherent in the individual, whose responsibility it is to overcome his or her tragic disability, which would be achieved through medical intervention, such as, attempts at curing the individual. This approach to disability aims for the normalisation of disabled people, often through the medicalisation of their condition. The societal view of disability distinguishes between impairment and disability. It holds that impairments are not inherently disabling, but that disability is caused by society, which fails to provide for people with impairments and which puts obstacles in their way (Oliver, Michael; 1999 Understanding Disability: Macmillan Press Ltd).

There are many images of disability in the British media, both positive and negative, fuelling some of our obsession with difference and diversity. Often, these portrayals of disabled people have been persistently distorted. From the first silent movies, where disabled people featured as figures of fun, evil or pity, to the present day, when non-disabled actors portraying a disabled character receives an Oscar nomination.

We all remember some of the public furore last year surrounding Cerrie Burnell (March article; 2009) the BBC Children's TV presenter, who has a disability. Some parents complained about the image of Cerrie on TV, who was born with one arm and chooses not to wear a prosthetic limb. It was suggested children would have nightmares when faced with the images of her disability on television. No consideration was made to Cerrie's ability as an effective children's television presenter. Some even suggested she had been offered the role as a tokenistic gesture, due to her disability.

Do we see disabled people as victims, whom should be pitied? Subsequently, the usage of negative stereotypes to represent disabled people, has somewhat filtered through into our common values and beliefs. Disabled people are considered to be 'in need of charity', (where the redundant term 'handicap' derives from, hand-in-cap/beggars) and essentially, charity is not just about money, but rather supporting people on many different levels. This also suggests that disabled people are always reliant and depend on others fully and a constant burden on society. Throughout history, these negative stereotypes have been used to represent people with disabilities, but how can we as citizens allow these uncomfortable portrayals to be still used in these modern times?

Generally, the public rely on mostly visible, than non-visible images of disabilities, which in itself, creates many issues for both disabled people and their carers. Advertisers and retailers are reluctant to use visible images of disability to promote their enterprise, as this does not conform to the image of 'ultimate beauty and perfection' we are exposed to, disability is not considered fulfilling to this criteria.

Other negative images we are exposed to, concern the ambiguity of the internationally recognised 'sign' for disabilities, the wheelchair sign, in particular. It is

widely used to suggest wheelchair accessibility, to public places and venues, within a specific location. One location where these signs are used, are 'disabled bays', but how many blue badge holders have parked in a 'disabled space' only to be frowned upon or verbally ostracized because they are not one of the 5% of disabled people, who require the use of a wheelchair. This can be particularly distressing for many parents and carers of children & young people on the Autistic Spectrum if they are also blue badge users, given that Autism is for the most, a hidden disability, alongside many other, less obvious disabilities, e.g. dyslexia, visual and hearing impairments also. So what sign should or could be used to demonstrate that a venue is totally accessible to all people with disabilities, that can also give a positive image to others? A simple generic symbol would highlight the diversity of disability in order to represent disabled people positively and in time reduce some of the discrimination and prejudices that some face, or have encountered due to negative perceptions of the public.

Disabled people are not sinister, evil or curiosities, as some past common beliefs would have suggested. Disabled people are capable of participating fully in everyday life, similarly us all. We should challenge the negative imagery and the perceptions of disabled people, that have been created and formed by society's deep seated fear of the unknown. Positive imagery has the potential to change societal perceptions of disability and should be embraced as part of our mainstream existence. If you would like to discuss any of these issues, or others surrounding disability contact: pelinahmet@hotmail.co.uk