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The experience of disability activism through the development of the disability movement: how do disabled activists find their way in politics?

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This paper reflects critically upon part of the findings of research about key activists' experience of disability politics in Cyprus from 1966 to 2004. Disabled activists' experience of politics is conceptualized through a critical analysis of the different stages they went through while struggling to develop the disability movement in the given social, cultural, political and historical context. Having located this research in the theoretical sphere of feminism and postmodernism I have developed a model to illustrate the strength of feminism and postmodernism in understanding disability, the contribution of feminism in explaining disability politics and the limitations of postmodernism in guiding powerful disability politics. Finally, I use this model to reflect critically on the need for theory to guide disability activism.

Keywords: disability movement; experience; feminism; postmodernism; Cyprus

Introduction

In Britain, the formulation of a social model of disability (Oliver 1990) emerged to challenge traditional understandings of disability as a medical problem located in the individual, and it became a major point of reference for those writing about disability theory. The social model asserted that the society disables individuals with impairments by posing barriers to their participation in social life. Thus, the cause of disabled people's oppression was no longer the impairment located within their bodies; rather it was society's failure to respond to their body state. The social model opened the way for disability politics through the development of the disability movement. The politicization of disabled people in Britain through the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS 1976) and worldwide through Disabled People International resulted in a clear distinction between impairment (functional limitations) and disability (social restrictions to participation), which guided disabled people's involvement in politics.

Understanding disability as a form of social oppression, initially for the purposes of activism, led to calls for the development of a comprehensive sociology of disability marked by materialist understandings of disability (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990), and followed by feminist (Morris 1991; Thomas 1999) and, more recently, postmodern and poststructural approaches (Corker and French 1999; Corker and Shakespeare 2002). The theoretical positions of feminists, postmoderninsts and

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poststructuralists vary regarding impairment, disability and difference. On one hand, disability feminisms[1] can be roughly conceptualized by two schools of thought expressed either by scholars who have been influenced by materialist assumptions (Morris 1991, 1996; Crow 1996; Thomas 1999, 2001, 2002) or by scholars who have been influenced by the assumptions of postmodernism/poststructuralism (Corker 1998a, 1998b; Price and Shildrick 1998, 2002; Corker and French 1999). Generally speaking, however, what differentiates the two schools of thought is the interest of the materialist feminists in both impairment and disability and the impact of capitalism on the personal experience of disability, in contrast with the concern of the postmodern/poststructural feminists about the dangers inherent in the impairment – disability binary and their focus on discourse and culture. On the other hand, theorists who adopt a postmodern/poststructural approach to disability call for a shift of interest in impairment, culture, discourse and identity (e.g. Scully 2002; Titchkosky 2002; Tremain 2002) and they generally embrace Foucault's ideas in the sense that they use them to challenge some of the 'naturalized' perceptions about impairment and disability. Other scholars, although not bounded by Foucault's ideas, conduct research or develop theory based on the general traditions of postmodernism/poststructuralism (Shakespeare 2006; Davis and Watson 2002; Valentine 2002).

As disability theory began to disengage from the social model of disability, it was enriched with different conceptual frameworks emphasising the need to understand the personal experience of disability, and unravel the role of culture, history and discourse in constructing disability. In the light of recent modes of thinking, the British social model of disability was strongly criticized as an inadequate and outdated grounding for social theory (Shakespeare and Watson 2001). Swain and French (2000) call for an 'affirmation model of disability' built on the social model, which not only seeks to remove barriers from society, but also celebrates individual differences irrespective of race, sexual preference, gender, age or impairment. More recently, Tom Shakespeare develops a series of arguments to suggest that the social model of disability should now be abandoned and he ends with the statement that 'the social model is wrong' (Shakespeare 2006, 53).

Even though disability studies scholars worldwide have recorded the history of national disability movements (Campbell and Oliver 1996; Longmore 2003), the disability movement has not been researched from the perspective of social movement theory. Occasionally, however, it has been theorized from this perspective as part of broader research projects.[2] Similarly, social movement theorists focused on conceptualizing other social movements such as the women's movement, the labour and trade union movements and the psychiatric survivor movements (Hallsworth 1994; Crossley and Crossley 2001), leaving the disability movement outside their agendas.

The question 'What constitutes a disability movement?' becomes central in this discussion. In Britain, relevant debates arise from the distinct features of new social movements (NSMs) and 'old' social movements (e.g. Dalton, Kuechler, and Burklin 1990; Johnston, Larana, and Gusfiled 1994). There are two important differences between the two types of movements. Firstly, NSMs are identity-based and although they are characterized by heterogeneity, the actors are engaged in a process of shaping a collective identity to convey their demands. In contrast, 'old' social movements, and more specifically the labour movement which is the paradigmatic 'old' social movement, are class-based (all members share the same social class), which enables their members to focus on pursuing their material interests. Secondly,

the ideological characteristics of NSMs stand in sharp contrast to the working-class movement and to the Marxist conception of ideology as a unifying element of collective action. NSMs exhibit a pluralism of ideas and values and they are more concerned with post-materialist values that have to do with the improvement of quality of life (Crossley 2002).

A group of disability studies scholars agrees that the disability movement is an NSM, as it is located at the periphery of the political system, offers a critical evaluation of society, is concerned with post-materialist values and focuses on issues that cross national boundaries (Oliver 1990; Barnes and Mercer 2001). Other academics are more sceptical about classifying the disability movement as an NSM. Fagan and Lee (1997) argue that the disability movement cannot be characterized as an NSM as its historical development indicates that it aimed to improve the financial condition of the victims of industrialization. Similarly, Shakespeare (1993) holds that the disability movement can be characterized as a liberation struggle and not as an NSM as it is concerned with resource allocation in favour of its financially deprived members.

In Cyprus, researching and theorizing about disability and disability politics is extremely limited. Arguably, this reluctance to show interest in disability issues is closely related with the historical and political specificities of Cyprus. Being a small Mediterranean island with 750,000 inhabitants (Press and Information Office 2004), Cyprus is mainly inhabited by two ethnic groups (Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots). Its recent history records its independence in 1960, the Turkish invasion in 1974, which forced the two ethnic communities to split geographically and led to the division of the island, and its accession to the European Union in 2004. In this turbulent context, the absence of a platform of academics, and more particularly disabled academics, in the field of disability explains further the absence of disability research. Linked to the absence of disability studies scholars and research evidence is the absence of local theorizing about disability issues. Theorising takes the form of occasional expression of individuals' perspectives in daily newspapers or on occasional TV shows. Furthermore, distinctions between the medical and the social elements represented by impairment and disability have not been made.

As this paper reports on the findings of a research concerning Greek-Cypriots, it is important to note that in Greek language, the term *anapiria* is used, which is translated to disability, but it actually carries the concept of impairment. A disabled person is known as *anapiros* (disabled) or *atomo me anapiria* (person with disability). Disabled activists do not distinguish between the two and they use both ways to refer to disabled people. People outside the disability movement and a few disabled activists use the term *atomo me idikes anagges* (person with special needs) stemming from the most dominant term *pedi me idikes anagges* (child with special needs) which is used in the education system and it dominates media discourse. Within this context, engaging with disability research, theory and discourse becomes a challenging experience and an immensely important endeavour.

The research I reflect upon in this paper aimed to explore the experience of disability and disability politics in the context of Cyprus from the beginning of disabled people's activism in 1966 until 2004 (Symeonidou 2005). What does it mean to be disabled in Cyprus? What is the nature of disability politics in Cyprus? I attempted to conceptualize disabled activists' understandings of their experience by placing them in a historical perspective and in the culturally-specific context of Cyprus.

Methodology

The conceptualization and design of this study was guided by the assumptions underpinning hermeneutics. Hermeneutics rejects the idea of a naive realism or objectivism with respect to meaning (Schwandt 2000). In contrast, it emphasizes the existence of multiple realities that can be interpreted from different standpoints (relativist ontology). The role of the researcher is to make sense and understand the meaning of what is being researched and provide the best possible interpretation (hermeneutic epistemology). The ontology and epistemology underpinning hermeneutics suit the Cypriot cultural context in significant ways as it has a coherence that enables Cypriots to identify with it, while at the same time being internally incoherent in certain aspects. Furthermore, although I belong to this particular cultural context, my personal realities and truths are different from those of the respondents, dependent as they are upon my physical condition and gender: non disabled, female researcher.

The style of research methodology I adopted is a blend of ethnographic, historical and case study research. The methods used were archival material and oral history interviews. The archival material (e.g. newspaper and periodical articles, minutes and correspondence) was collected from disability organizations, individuals and public libraries and covered the period 1966–2004. Oral history interviews of 16 key activists were conducted in one or two sessions. The first-session interview was unstructured and involved the oral narration of the respondents' lives from childhood to the present. Eight out of 16 respondents participated in the second-session interview which was semi-structured, guided as it was by the use of artefacts which awakened the respondents' memory.

Once the population of the study was identified, I set the criteria for the selection of the sample: (a) long-term involvement in committees of single-impairment and collective organizations; (b) increased involvement in consultation procedures with the State; and (c) increased contribution in raising awareness about disability issues (e.g. by writing letters to newspapers, public speaking or by participating in radio/TV programmes). The individuals were prioritized, starting from those who best matched the criteria and who are considered key activists. The sample was balanced in terms of impairment and gender in the best possible way. To begin with, a balanced sample in terms of impairment was achieved by including both activists with congenital and acquired impairments. Furthermore, the sample was balanced to represent activists with different types of impairments. It should be noted here that two non-disabled people were included in the sample for two important reasons. The first non-disabled person was the parent of a woman with learning difficulties[3] who participates in the umbrella organization of disabled people. He was included in the sample as people with learning difficulties are not politically active in Cyprus and they are represented in the disability movement by a parents' organization. The second non-disabled person was important for this research due to his critical role in the formation of the first disability organization and his impact on the development of disabled people's activism. Balancing the sample in terms of gender was problematic given that women are under-represented both within the disability movement and in the political apparatus. Thus, although women activists did not satisfy the three criteria, four of them, who satisfied at least one criterion, were included in the sample.

Due to the historical nature of the research, the issue of anonymity or non-anonymity was raised. Yow (1994) notes that anonymity is problematic for historical

research where facts and events need to be reported. Miles and Huberman (1994, 288) pose questions such as: 'What good is anonymity if people and their colleagues can easily recognise themselves in a case study? When they do, might it hurt or damage them in some way?' Keeping in mind that non-anonymity would add to this research and given the fact that participants in such projects often feel honoured and do not hesitate to have their names revealed (Yow 1994), I decided to give them the option of maintaining or not maintaining anonymity by signing the informed consent form at the end of the first-session interview. The timing of this agreement is important as each respondent had just given the interview and s/he was fully aware of what s/he chose to mention. Of the 16 respondents, 14 agreed to have their name revealed, and thus, I decided to choose non-anonymity while at the same time I maintained anonymity for the two respondents who requested it.

The 'art' of interpretation is a complex task. For the hermeneutical scholar there can be no final interpretation as the data can be re-interpreted from different angles (Usher 1996). Linked to this is the assumption that both the researcher and what is being researched (e.g. text, human action, spoken utterances) are engaged in interpretations. This process of interpreting the interpretations is known as *double hermeneutics*. In the case of oral narratives, for example, the researcher needs to interpret the narratives, which are themselves the products of the respondents' interpretations of past experience, beliefs, etc. In hermeneutics, the interpretation always takes place against a background of assumptions and presuppositions, and beliefs and practices of which the subjects and the objects are never fully aware and can never be specified (Usher 1996). Given that each researcher can focus on different aspects of what the data uncover (Goodson and Sikes 2001), the argument that there is no final interpretation is further justified. Furthermore, the researcher needs to operate within a *hermeneutic circle* in order to understand the meaning in the interaction of part and whole, because interpreting the whole depends on the interpretation of the parts and vice versa.

Hermeneutics enabled me to combine the analytical trends of feminist and social model epistemologies in the sense that in my analysis of the data I was concerned with grounded theory approach (social model epistemology) and voice relational approach (feminist epistemology), the latter arising from hermeneutical approaches (Goodley et al. 2004). These analytical approaches were blended and organized to facilitate theory building. During analysis I was constantly interpreting the data through multiple lenses suggested by the voice relational approach (Goodley et al. 2004): the respondents' voice and the use of 'I', 'we' or 'them', my response to the stories, the relationships between people, organizations, and other bodies and by placing people' stories in the cultural and social context of Cyprus. Theory building was achieved at two levels. Documents and oral history interviews were integrally linked during analysis and this was the first step to theory building at a micro-level. At this stage, I began to draw out of the data common themes and patterns that I considered important in creating a meaningful story. Through my engagement at a higher level of theory-building I was able to draw the connections with broader explanations and theories. Apart from the literature, my interaction with disability studies scholars at conferences and meetings in Britain and the feedback received from disabled activists in Cyprus were useful to the development of my thinking to this on-going process of developing meaning. The concept of narrative identity, developed in the writings of Ricoeur (1991), was of fundamental importance in understanding peoples' self-presentation through stories and proved useful for the

discussion of findings. Disabled people's voice was central throughout this process and was handled with increased consciousness. My engagement in critical thinking and interpretations was constantly guided by my commitment to non-oppressive disability research (Stone and Priestley 1996), one that not only seeks to contribute to the academy, but also to the group researched.

Last but not least, being a non-disabled researcher trying to research disabled people increased my level of ethical responsibility in respect of my respondents and urged me to consider *power relations* so that a system of domination and oppression of disabled people was not reproduced through research. How can I, as a non-disabled woman researcher, claim to be able to interpret disabled people's experiences since I do not experience this type of oppression? My commitment was to do my best as a non-disabled female researcher who is aware of the existing literature of disability studies and other relevant disciplines, and does not seek to judge, accuse or attack the respondents in any way. Rather I tried to make sense of their stories and understand the development of the disability movement, maintaining the status of 'the researcher as a critical friend' (Barton and Clough 1995, 144).

Disability and disability politics through feminism and postmodernism

As this research sought to understand how disability and disability politics were experienced and conceptualized in a particular cultural context, i.e. Cyprus, where disability theory and political disability models are currently absent, I consider that feminism and postmodernism proved to be a rich framework to inform this research, as the model in Figure 1 illustrates.

The upper part of the model explains how disability can be conceptualized through feminism and postmodernism, whereas the lower part of the model explains how disability politics can be conceptualized through feminism and postmodernism. In this model, feminism and postmodernism are at either end of the continuum as they are distinct approaches in disability theory. This does not preclude that feminism and postmodernism do not have points of intersection (postmodern feminists subscribe to ideas of both approaches). However, they are presented as separate approaches in this model so that a clear distinction of their basic assumptions is provided.

The upper part of the model suggests that disability may be conceptualized through the personal experience of disability, an interest shared by feminists operating in different types of feminisms, and through positioning this experience in the given culture, history and identity, which are important factors for postmodernists. The lower part of the model suggests that disability politics may be conceptualized through the feminist maxim that 'the personal is political' and the postmodern assumption that politics need not have a theoretical framework or adopt universal trends and tactics. The notes in italics marked on the model summarize the main findings of the research and help understand the case of Cyprus. In this paper, I attempt to answer the second research question 'What is the nature of disability politics in Cyprus?', and I will therefore focus on the lower part of the model. I will return to this model at the end of the paper to elaborate further how feminism (or feminisms) and postmodernism help us conceptualize disability politics in Cyprus.
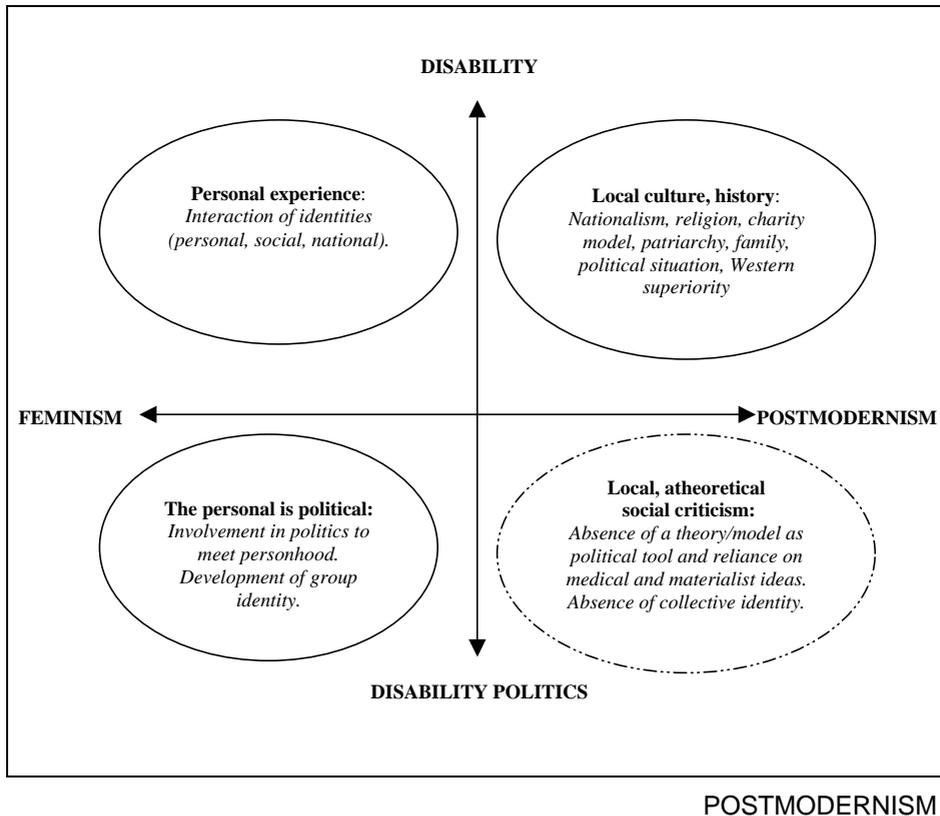
Figure 1. Conceptualizing disability and disability politics through feminism and post modernism.

What is the nature of disability politics in Cyprus?

The key issue emerging from this study is that the nature of disability politics in Cyprus is shaped by the relationship between the personal experience of disability and disability politics, and the absence of theory that could be used as the basis of a political tool. The interaction of these elements has encouraged the formation of a group (impairment) identity rather than a collective (disabled) identity, the reproduction of the medical model within the disability movement and the development of an internal hierarchy based on the nature of individuals' impairments and their gender.

Early forms of disabled people's activism

The disability movement emerged in 1966 with the Pancyprian Organization for the Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PORDP), a collective organization run by both disabled and non-disabled people representing people with different types of impairments. When a group of disabled people felt that the time had come to claim their rights from the state, they approached Petros Stylianou, a non-disabled politician, and asked him to help them get organized. According to Stylianou (1971, October–December), the group of disabled people who approached him were

civil servants. This piece of information is important as, at the time, disabled people were supposedly excluded from the civil service by the law which favoured able-bodiedness. The group of disabled people who initiated disabled people's activism in 1966 were a minority who were employed, either in the civil service or the private sector, possibly because of the type of impairments (impairments of upper or lower limbs). Thus, this initiative came from disabled people who were in a better situation, compared to other disabled people who were restricted in their homes and excluded from society. Thus, disabled people did not join the organization as a result of a collective movement sharing a common ideology, as is the case for new social movements (Crossley 2002). Rather, a group of disabled people engaged in tracing as many disabled people as possible, as Giannakis Christoforou reports:

> We focused on finding members for our organization. It was very difficult. Now we have the telephone. Then, it was different. We worked in different regions ... We found disabled people and we registered them. We used to plough Cyprus to find disabled people. This went on for a few years.

This initial attempt for engagement with activism did not have a politically powerful conceptual framework. All the available issues of PORDP's periodical, *Anapirikon Vima*, suggest that the organization functioned within the medical and charity assumptions held by non-disabled administrative members, a conceptual framework which remained unchallenged by disabled people. The structural and philosophical profile of this first disability organization can be explained by locating it in its historical, social, political and cultural context, as social movement scholars recommend (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Crossley 2002).

In 1966, Cyprus had only been an independent state for six years, still recovering from the National Liberation Struggle of 1955–1959 which had not resulted in the much desired *Enosis* (annexation to Greece). The relationships of the two communities, the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot, were tense and the fear of a possible invasion by Turkey was growing. In this context, disabled people's activism emerged tentatively and since most disabled people were confined to their houses in different parts of the country, the first step was to locate them. As the documentary material suggests, PORDP liaised directly with the president of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios, who was well respected. Their meetings aimed to inform Archbishop Makarios about the organizations' activities and secure his support on new initiatives. These meetings are reported in full in the organization's periodical, *Anapirikon Vima*. A special issue of *Anapirikon Vima* (1977, July–September) published after the Archbishop's death demonstrates the close relationship between the organization and Archbishop Makarios. As PORDP was extending its membership, the 1974 Turkish invasion sentenced Cypriots to a period of suffering and instability, especially for the newly formed group of refugees. The impact of 1974 on the first disability organization was inevitable as its members were also experiencing the damaging consequences of bloodshed. The political problem of Cyprus became more important than ever and disabled people's issues were not a priority.

'Our fate in our hands' through single-impairment organizations

In the 1980s, a wave of single-impairment organizations sprang up, reviving the disability movement. Their structures were in complete contrast with those of the first disability organization since they had disabled people as leaders and they were

committed to the principle 'our fate in our hands'. According to the late Andros Procopiou:

> Our intention was to take our fate in our hands. We still believe in that principle today. We were the first organization to say: 'We don't want non-disabled people'. That meant no more patronising, no more manipulating. We wanted to take our fate in our hands.

The ideology these organizations espoused was expressed by their focus on securing benefits to improve both the financial and health situation of their members. According to the primary sources, single-impairment organizations mobilized by securing financial resources and by establishing networks with equivalent groups abroad (e.g. Pancyprian Organization of the Blind, 15 November 1985). They worked on finding ways to negotiate with the state, but negotiations were hampered by politicians' preference for individual and personalized solutions to problems, as Chrisis Michaelides argues:

> CM: ... I remember once, when we met the minister of Finance and I told him that we need rules and criteria, he told me: 'Chrisis, do you want to solve your disabled people's problems'? I said: 'Yes'. He said: 'Send them to me, I'll solve their problems, and don't claim criteria and things like that, because you will never get them'.
> SS: So disabled people depend on ministers' good will ...
> CM: Not only that. This is the commercialization of the relationship: You come to me, I solve your problem and you give me your vote.

These organizations focused on improving the quality of life of their membership and they considered their action successful when their impairment group was accorded 'special' treatment, as stated in the minutes of the Pancyprian Organization of the Blind (19 April 1981):

> We achieved recognition of the blind as a separate case of disability. The blind have to be treated separately from other disabled people in terms of legislation.

Some of the respondents reported conflicts which acted as turning points for changing the organizations' philosophy. For example, Michalis Demosthenous explained why the conflict in his organization was a necessary step:

> The conflict was necessary so that a change in thinking and policy was achieved. Inevitably, we reached this point. There was a conflict in philosophy. What prevailed was that the organization should follow a specific policy by minimising charity and spending its energy towards the state. So, we turned towards the state.

Negotiating charity was an issue for most single-impairment organizations. At the beginning, charity seemed to be the only way for mobilization. However, as the members became more experienced in politics, charity was increasingly seen as humiliating, as stated by Clelia Petridou:

> Going into the streets to collect money is humiliation. We did a couple of fund-raising campaigns, but then we said: 'Enough!' First of all, we cannot go out in the streets because of our illness. So, we should ask people to do it for us ... We live in a society which buys off everything with money. We pay. Since we pay, we've done our duty. This shouldn't be the case. If there is no appreciation for people, no understanding and no sensitivity, no matter how much you pay, you just hide things. People prefer it that way. Because they still can't confront disabled people.

Some of the respondents mentioned that their experience in single-impairment organizations was guided by personal goals and dreams. This was something to be

expected as the respondents of this research are what could be termed 'the first generation of activists'. Most of them were among the founding members of single-impairment organizations and they engaged in disability politics when social policy was non-existent. In this context, they could not go far without personal goals and dreams. For example, Christakis Antoniou reflects on his personal goal:

> I decided that the time had come for me to resign because I had been in the organization from 1980 until 2002. Imagine, it is twenty two years! Sixteen out of twenty two years, I was the chairman. There comes a point that you feel tired. My goal was the construction of our main building ... When this goal was achieved, I decided it was the time for me to resign and so I did.

Antoniou saw the realization of a personal goal, the completion of the organizations' main office building, as the culmination of his career. This organizational goal set in 1982 became his personal ambition and when that was achieved, a phase in the organization's development closed together with the chapter of his life as an activist.

When asked about their identity as activists, the respondents tended to subscribe to their impairment group and not to the disabled people's group. Mikis Florentzos, a leading figure of the disability movement in Cyprus, states:

> It is a mixture, I cannot distinguish between the two ... But above all, is the identity of blindness. If someone told me to withdraw from one of the two organizations (the single-impairment one and the umbrella organization) I would prefer to stay with the Pancyprian Organization of the Blind. This is because I worked there right from the start and I know the difficulties first hand.

Arguably, this statement would be condemned by a group of key disabled activists worldwide who maintain that the collective identity should hold the central role in the disability movement. However, this view is common among key disabled activists in Cyprus and was clearly expressed during the interviews.

The respondents' stories indicate that single-impairment organizations in Cyprus have acted as 'miniature social movements'. Importantly, the dynamic relationships that developed between the members of each group through negotiating ideas, reaching consensus and resolving disagreements, in turn facilitated the formation of a strong group identity, and cemented their emotional ties with the organization. This argument is further supported by the way disabled activists experienced their involvement in collective organizations, as I now turn to explain.

The emergence of the disability movement

To capture the historical dimensions of this research, the 1981 International Year of Disabled People marked the first step of disabled people towards collectiveness. However, this year was not directly acknowledged by the respondents as an important turning point for activism. A new collective organization, Confederation of Organizations of Disabled People of Cyprus (CODPC or 'the Confederation') emerged in 1984, and invited all single-impairment organizations to become members ('The disabled took their issues and their fate in their hands', 22 November 1984; 'The disabled take their fate in their hands', 22 November 1984). However, the period between 1984 and 1999 was marked by conflicts between the first collective organization, PORDP, and CODPC. The essence of the argument centred on the fact that PORDP refused to join CODPC because PORDP's committee members

believed that it was representative of disabled people. Their refusal to join was further influenced by the fact that some disabled people had left PORDP (which considered itself a federation), to form their organizations leading to the formation of CODPC (which labelled itself a confederation)[4] and this was considered a kind of betrayal. This is how Chrisis Michaelides puts it:

> CM: PORDP was itself a federation. We couldn't join CODPC.
> SS: But some disabled people left PORDP and formed their own organizations.
> CM: PORDP was initially a federation. Then it became an organization, but it continued to be PORDP. Nothing had changed. The only substantial change was that it was undermined because there were other organizations. The splitters formed their own federation and we didn't belong in it.

The long lasting conflicts (1984–1999) between CODPC and PORDP constrained the development of the disability movement, the formation of a collective identity and the development of a political model. In 1999 disabled people agreed to be represented by one collective organization. Eventually, the Confederation of Disabled People's Organizations of Cyprus was renamed to Cyprus Confederation of Organizations of Disabled People (CCODP) and PORDP agreed to join. However, it is still early days to comment on how far disabled people will go in shaping a collective identity, while the group identity remains dominant.

By the time the first disabled activists engaged in collective action, they had already experienced a taste of empowerment through single-impairment organizations. Collective action aimed to contribute further to their empowerment, but first, they had to negotiate the nature of 'equality'. The lack of consensus about equality was a recurring theme in the respondents' stories. According to Mikis Florentzos, this issue emerged as soon as the collective organization was formed:

> When CODPC unified different kinds of impairment into the same 'pot', we realised that there were common needs and common claims. There were also differences. What I tried to communicate to the disability organizations is my personal philosophy stemming out of my experience in Cyprus and abroad, that there are differences we should consider in our claims. For example, the blind and the paraplegics demand mobility allowance because they have difficulties in mobility. It is not right when the other organizations say: 'We want it too'. But why do you want it? There are no arguments to justify this . . . Each organization should think what is necessary for each type of impairment and then determine which needs are common. Gradually, these ideas are being shaped. CODPC had an important role to play in that process.

For Florentzos, the experience of 'unifying all kinds of impairments into the same pot' meant that they had to resolve the issue of who claims what. Other respondents felt similarly, but they report that it was difficult to persuade other disabled activists of this viewpoint.

Within this context, I wish to illuminate another dimension of the disability movement as a whole, i.e. the place of different groups of disabled people within the movement. Deal (2003) reports that disabled people have constructed a hierarchy of impairments which is expressed by their attitudes towards other impairment groups. In Cyprus too, there is a hierarchy of impairment groups within the disability movement as certain groups are comfortable with their involvement in the movement whereas other feel underrepresented and underclass. One such group is people with hearing impairments. This is how Demos Eleftheriou feels:

> There is a difference. All the other disabled people can talk. They can express their opinion easily. We don't talk, we have no voice. We have the interpreter but they don't pay the necessary attention. We may be members of the CCODP, but sometimes it is as if we aren't. They can't think of the problems that deaf people encounter. We have to tell them that there are deaf people here and we have to discuss their problems ... I can't deny that the CCODP has helped us ...

Furthermore, those who became disabled as a result of national wars function independently in their negotiations with the state. The cultural recognition of this group, the status it was attributed and the personal identities of the people who form it led to separation from the wider group of disabled people. Clelia Petridou notes:

> Soon, I learnt that there are different categories of disabled people. One organization would say: 'We want more than you because we are war-disabled people and not disabled due to car accidents' ... Mind you that war-disabled people don't belong to our organization. They think that they are A-class disabled people.

If we think of this 'privileged' group of disabled people at one end of a continuum and outside the disability movement, then at the other end would be people with learning difficulties who are the underclass of disabled people, also outside the disability movement. This illustrates the low status of people with learning difficulties in Cypriot society, which has traditionally responded to this group with negative discourses (presented as passive people who want our love) and fundraising activities. Parents of people with learning difficulties have long undertaken the role of representing their daughters and sons in decision-making arenas, and they remain ignorant of the option of self-advocacy.

In summary, the nature and development of disability politics in Cyprus is linked with the personal experience of disability in the Cypriot culture and is characterized by the absence of collective identity and the lack of a theoretical model to guide activism. I now turn to locate these distinct features of disabled people's activism in Cyprus with feminist and postmodern ideas.

Understanding disability politics through feminism and postmodernism

As the lower part of the model suggests, feminism can be helpful in understanding how the personal experiences of disability have influenced the involvement of the respondents in disability politics. In particular, a feminist approach in Cyprus disability politics helps us relate activists' involvement in politics with their efforts to meet personhood. This explains the formation of a group identity which seems to have empowered disabled people in the given culture and historical period in their efforts to meet personhood. In contrast, postmodernists' arguments in favour of atheoretical social criticism have not been helpful in the development of powerful collective action in Cyprus. In particular, Cyprus disability politics were not guided by theory or a theoretical model and this kept activists from developing a powerful collective identity to inform political engagement. Returning to the model presented at the beginning of this paper, the reader may note that the section explaining the relationship between disability politics and postmodernism is presented in a discontinuous circle, to suggest that postmodern assumptions did not lead to powerful disability politics in Cyprus.

First, the feminist maxim 'the personal is political' applies in the case of Cyprus. I would argue that the factors which shaped the respondents' personal experiences of disability influenced their involvement in politics as well. Their stories about the

personal experience of disability, which could not be included here due to restricted space, share their eagerness to count as persons in the Cypriot society; to use Ingstad and Whyte's (1995) term, disabled people in Cyprus tried hard to be accorded 'personhood'. Today, being a valued person in Cyprus depends on being 'well-educated', having a 'decent' job, a family of your own and a good social life. The respondents' stories express their continuous struggle to achieve the aforementioned goals. Single-impairment organizations were the means towards disabled people's route to personhood, and through them they lobbied the state for materialist benefits. Yet, bounded by this struggle to secure compensation, a mobility allowance, a duty-free car, a free fax line, etc., they have not challenged social structures. Thus, they have contributed to the reproduction of medical and materialist ideas that characterize the Cypriot culture. In the case of Cyprus, the intersection between the personal and the political experience was expressed by the formation of powerful group identities, which remain unchallenged.

Second, the postmodernists' calls for atheoretical social criticism are verified in the case of Cyprus, albeit with negative consequences for the nature of disability politics. Although the respondents and their organizations did not articulate postmodern ideas, the disability movement in Cyprus functioned within a post-modern political framework in the sense that involvement in politics was not guided by theory. This finding adds to the debate about the contribution of postmodern ideas to disability politics, an area not adequately researched. Disability scholars in Britain have argued that postmodernists' assumptions, although useful for disability theory, may weaken the disability movement because they turn disability into a complex concept (Corker and Shakespeare 2002). Indeed, the British disability movement, which had the social model of disability as its main political tool, is an example of a powerful disability movement operating within the assumptions of modernism. This is not to say that in the absence of a social model, disability politics is sentenced to failure. Besides, not all countries agree with the expressed need for a social model. Nordic countries, for example, adopt a family of ideas instead of a model. According to Traustadóttir (2004), Nordic countries view disability as relational (person–environment mismatch), situational or contextual, and relative. Thus, a theoretical basis seems to be important for politics.

The argument that postmodernism may not be helpful for informing politics was more imperatively supported by feminists, who have drawn upon the work of the radical postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard to consider the limitations of his work in respect of politics (Benhabib 1990; Fraser and Nicholson 1990). Lyotard, in his classic book *The postmodern condition* (1984) calls for local, ad hoc and atheoretical social criticism which feminists consider disastrous for effective social criticism and politics of underrepresented groups. The example of the Cypriot disability movement verifies their argument as, although it is an atheoretical movement, it has not proved powerful in its commitment to social criticism. Both feminists and disability scholars emphasize that powerful theoretical tools are fundamental to address important political problems.

Linked to the absence of a theoretical framework that could guide disability politics in Cyprus is the absence of a collective identity. Once again, postmodernism does not provide a sufficient basis for political action since its advocates argue against the distinction non-disabled (Self) and disabled people (Other). Postmodernists argue that such identities sustain the categories of disabled and non-disabled people constructed by discourse and power/knowledge relations. However, the

concept of collective identity is essential in social movements and the example of Cyprus suggests that the absence of a collective identity can lead to weak disability politics. The definition of collective identity as a process helps us perceive why the development of a collective identity was impossible in the case of Cyprus. According to Melucci (1996) the formation of collective identity depends on the actors' gradual agreement on definitions about the ends, means, and the field of action, the development of active relationships and emotional investment in the movement. However, the respondents expressed a lack of consensus about the goals of the movement and the ways of negotiating with the state (some conformed to a 'good-boy' strategy when negotiating, others supported protest as a tool, but consensus is still not reached). They also complain that they have not developed the dynamics of effective relationships and that part of the membership is unaware of how activists should operate. Last but not least, the respondents' stories indicate that they do not feel emotionally connected to the collective organization of disabled people, even though most of them share more than three decades of involvement in activism.

Conclusion

In summary, the development of the disability movement followed a unique trajectory. The social, cultural and historical context in which events took place defined its nature and actions.

In the mid-1960s, early forms of mobilization were marked by joint efforts of disabled and non-disabled people to locate disabled people and establish an umbrella organization to represent them. The absence of theory and the prevalence of the medical and charity model were the main characteristics of this period. In the 1980s, disabled people realized that they should 'take their fate in their hands' and withdrew from the umbrella organization to form their own single impairment organizations. They focused on securing financial and health benefits for their impairment group, they experienced conflicts that acted as turning points, they negotiated charity, they had personal goals and dreams for their organizations and they developed strong group identities. Soon after this turning point, the idea of collective mobilization of disabled people emerged, but the efforts of forming a representative umbrella organization were marked by conflicts between the first umbrella organization and the confederation formed later. The conflicts constrained the development of the disability movement which struggled to find a balance between the needs and place of each impairment group within the movement.

The development of disability politics in Cyprus was related to the personal experience of disability in the Cypriot culture and was characterized by the formation of strong group identities, a lack of theory to guide collective activism and an absence of collective identity. The theoretical model employed here helped explain that although postmodernism and feminism provide a useful framework for understanding and theorizing disability, a dimension that was not analysed in this paper, they offer differing insights into disability politics. Feminism is helpful for its 'personal is political' assumption whereas postmodernism is unable to support powerful disability politics.

The analysis initiated in this paper unravels the urgency for the disabled people's movement to engage with the ideas developed in disability theory and find ways to improve disability politics in Cyprus. Theory can inform disability politics through the development of a clear theoretical basis for collective activism. This is an essential

step to understand why the formation of a collective identity was impossible to achieve and how this influenced disability politics. This realization emerges through this research, but it needs to be researched further from within.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Feminism speaks with one voice in characterising the world it experiences as a patriarchal world and the culture it inherits as a masculinist culture (Crotty 1998). However, feminism takes various forms and thus scholars talk about feminisms rather than feminism. Tong (1995 in Crotty (1998)) suggests that feminism may be liberal (women's oppression as a result of restrictions towards their autonomy in an unfair society), Marxist (women's oppression as a result of capitalism), radical (women's oppression as the oldest, most profound and most widespread oppression of all), psychoanalytic (women's oppression as a result of the particularities of the female psyche), socialist (the confluence of Marxist, radical and psychoanalytic steams of feminist thought), existentialist (women's oppression as a result of being considered the Other compared to men who are the Self) or postmodern (deconstruction of women's oppression by breaking the binaries reason/emotion, beautiful/ ugly, Self/Other).
2. For example, Campbell and Oliver (1996) draw upon certain aspects of social movement theory in their historical account of the British disability movement.
3. Learning difficulties is the UK way of referring to the group of people that in other countries is referred to as people with intellectual disabilities.
4. The terms federation and confederation as used by disabled activists in Cyprus do not correspond to their definitions. According to *The new shorter Oxford English dictionary* (Brown 1993), a federation is a union of states under a federal government, each remaining independent in internal affairs, whereas a confederation is a union of states for mutual support or joint action, a league, an alliance. In the debate presented in this section, PORDP considered itself a federation, although according to the findings it acted as a confederation and CODPC considered itself a confederation, although according to the findings it acted as a federation.

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