

THE CRAFTING OF GOOD CLIENTS

Becoming disabled brings us into some odd relationships with people. One most of us are familiar with is the doctor-patient relationship. When we're in it, we play a role, the sick role. We're expected to play it whether we're sick or not. Most of us know it's in our best interests to play it - we've never been taught the lines, but we soon catch on what we're supposed to say.

Soon enough, we're bumping into the disability "professionals". There's lots of them, they have different titles and work for different agencies, and often we get a bit confused as to who they are. They learn about disability by doing courses and reading books. Some of them are given diplomas for doing this, so they can then prove how expert they are in disability matters. These paper qualifications help them get jobs and make careers out of our needs.

Sometimes these "professionals", like Occupational Therapists and Social Workers, call us their "clients". Even people who help us keep our homes clean like Home Helps, or people who work in Day Centres, also call us their "clients". This confuses some of us even more.

Most of us probably thought that becoming a client was a matter of personal choice. Like when we go to a solicitor if we can afford it - or if we can't afford not to. Solicitors, accountants, consultants of all kinds - they too are regarded as professional people - but should we use their services, we have the choice, we decide. If they don't come up to scratch, we can complain to their professional body and seek redress. Or we take our custom elsewhere.

But the situation with disability "professionals" is different. Well, yes, we can complain about their performance and we may, or may not get redress via their employers. But if we decide to take our custom elsewhere - well, unless we're very well-heeled, it's best to forget it. To all intents and purposes, these denizens of the disability industry are the gatekeepers to the services we need. We either go through them, or do without. Take it or leave it.

No wonder many of us get confused. We grow up to expect that, if we become a client of some professional service or other, that it's a voluntary thing, something we do as a matter of choice. But, in terms of disability services, the choice available to us amounts to little more than Hobson's Choice. The Law gives local authorities' the power to provide and they, in turn, define the kind of workers they want. Various schools, universities and other training establishments churn out the "professionals". Together they decide what we get.

Whether we're happy or unhappy about this situation is merely academic. Going over the top of our heads is well-rooted and par for the course. Despite the growth of the disabled peoples' movement these paper professionals still think it quite normal to sit down round the table and decide what's best for us. So it is quite natural that, along with all their other decisions, they should define the nature of their relationship to us.

Given that this is the case, it is interesting and instructive to reflect why it is that these people have decided to call us their "clients". I mean, they know just as well as disabled people what is usually understood in terms of the professional-client relationship. So why have these workers been so keen to graft their ambitions on to terminology, the Latin root of which lies in patrician-plebeian; master-slave; patron -dependent subservience?

One possibility is that they do actually see themselves as superior - as opposed to seeing us as inferior or helpless. Maybe they do think of themselves as being professional in the same, or similar sense to that which is commonly understood. Or maybe they forgot that they were involved in a relationship, and that the consequence of setting themselves up as "professionals" automatically cast us in the role of "client".

Hearing some of these people explaining the terminology can be equally interesting. Like "client" is a nice easy word, which avoids the anonymity of "person" or "disabled person". Or that you can't use "person with a physical impairment" all the time because it's too long! Or like "client" gives a disabled person some dignity, some status, Nice one! Like it conveys the idea of equality wrapped up in more recent connotations which assign customer status to both patron and client. A very neat bit of professional sleight of speech, suggesting equivalence in choice and control, even though they and we know the reality is very different.

When you look more closely at this apparently innocent use of words, it is easy to see that it is all part of a very carefully engineered process. Just how consistent it is with the prevailing relationship of disabled people to our able-bodied society comes clear when you look at some of the many questions which can be raised. For example, how did these so-called professionals come to get involved with us - and what's at stake for them in the way they define their relationship to us?

The first question begs many others - but those of us who are familiar with some of the history of the disabled peoples' movement will recognise that today's "disability professionals" are on a career path which has been carefully and painstakingly carved out by generations of their predecessors.

Aware that society has been constructed by able-bodied people in ways which serve and perpetuate their own interests, these people have used our consequential marginalisation and dependence - not as a starting point for developing with us a struggle for social change and equal opportunities, but as a handy and convenient fact to justify the development of all the inappropriate disability services with which we are now so familiar.

This disingenuous acceptance of the status quo, pregnant with career opportunities, is basic to those who feed on the effects of social problems rather than engage in the struggle to deal with causes. It is a well established form of parasitism, resting on bits of Biblical dogma like " ..the poor always ye have with you." (John, xii.8). The updated version of the old Poor Law, which sustains most of today's welfare professionals, depends for its continuity on such counsels of despair. It has become, let's face it, a nice little earner.

Nowadays, these people have got it made. As a body, they have influenced government and secured their future so effectively that they and their agencies are written by name into the Statute Book. For our part, the barrier-ridden, able-bodied world of inaccessible streets, buildings, transport and information - coupled with limited services of personal assistance - has severely inhibited the extent of disabled people's own influence. Nevertheless, our movement is growing rapidly, as a reaction against these oppressive social conditions. But we have yet to eclipse the influence of these professional disability parasites. Although the day will inevitably come, we have yet to secure legislation appropriate to our real needs.

At this juncture, our lives are still substantially in their hands. They still determine most decisions and their practical outcomes. Their control over the decision making process has been carefully re-inforced by ensuring that the climate of ideas which surround the making of disability policy is also under their influence. Which brings us back once more to the web of words they have spun to entrap us.

Effective control of the climate of ideas requires a thoughtful approach to the choice of words. This is why the selection of "professional" and "client" can never be dismissed by disabled people as irrelevant or innocuous. There is, to address the second question, much at stake for the disability industry, in terms of their jobs and status, pay and conditions, and career opportunities if they begin to lose their grip.

To obviate this, they need to contain the idea of their dominance and our dependence within a coherent philosophical framework designed to encapsulate, re-inforce and sustain the interests of the industry. Such a framework needs to be flexible enough to move with the times, keep abreast of public sympathy, but ensure that their control over our lives remains essentially untouched. Thus it has

come to be that the disability "professionals" and us, their "clients" live within the carefully crafted, mechanical embrace of "care".

Today's generation of "professionals" are packing this artificial ethos with endearing little catch-phrases like "community care", "caring professionals" and the soon-to-be-foisted-on-us "care managers". The idea of "care" has been carefully nurtured until it has become the hallmark of solid social acceptability, the key to creditworthiness, and the disability industry's SDI designed to shield their programmes of social control from criticism.

It is an increasing obligation on our movement to challenge both the mythology of care and the reality of their manipulation of disability policy and decision making. Part of the process of gaining control over our lives involves us in resisting their attempts to box us in the pigeonhole of "client" – and to expose their self-styled, self-seeking efforts to elevate their second-hand knowledge about disability into a "profession".

The disabled peoples' movement has already done much solid work in re-defining disability and in creating the basis of a new hegemony of ideas which rests on direct experience of the problems we face in our daily lives. We have carried some workers in the disability industry along with us. In supporting our own active participation in, and control over our own affairs, such people are giving us the right kind of help. However, for the majority of the "professionals", despite their need to cling to power, their careful crafting of our dependence is disintegrating before their very eyes.

Ken Davis, DCDP, 1990