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Doctoral graduate explores an imbalance of power in rehabilitation services for the blind



Michelle Botha
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University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD graduate Michelle Botha investigated what meanings about blindness and blind persons are produced and perpetuated by rehabilitation service organisations in her doctoral thesis, "Blindness, rehabilitation and identity: A critical investigation of discourses of rehabilitation in South African non-profit organisations for visually impaired persons".

Rehabilitation services for visually impaired individuals are found within local non-profit organisations where services are offered at no cost. She found that those who experience visual impairment have to navigate not only the reality of sight loss the material effects of

blindness but also a societal view of blind persons as inherently incapable, needy and degenerate.

Having a visual impairment herself, Michelle's experience as a user of rehabilitation services began to prompt questions concerning what the impact of being drawn into the fabric of rehabilitation organisations might be for those who are experiencing the trauma of sight loss, and about the role played by rehabilitation services in relation to individuals who may be experiencing threats to their sense of self and social belonging.

"As a service user, I experienced the gaining of techniques for adjustment to sight loss as hugely valuable on the one hand and, on the other, as an assault on my identity. Part of this had to do with entering public welfare, which involved transgressing boundaries that would otherwise have protected my privilege," she shared.

"Beyond this, beginning to use visible mobility aids was, for me, an experience of becoming subject to the gaze of others, and being associated with negative ideas about blindness."

Service providers view a successfully rehabilitated, coping subject as one who can manage and continue in spite of sight loss once provided with a simple solution such as an appropriate device, skills training or computer literacy.

Service users, however, often experienced the taking on of practical techniques and assistive devices as an assault on identity. Some also described feeling frustrated by processes that felt irrelevant or did not deliver on what was promised.

They disrupt the construction of a linear and straightforward rehabilitation journey by highlighting gaps in service delivery, and present experiences of sight loss, rehabilitative interventions and outcomes that are more nuanced.

She also found that the term 'independence' for most service providers means visually impaired individuals do not need to ask for assistance and are able to move through the world on their own. One even commented, "operate like normal sighted people".

This, Michelle argues is because the problem of blindness is defined in relation to the social norm of sightedness. This combined with the signalling of an often-inaccessible world where difference is unwelcome, are factors which underpin this fixed view of independence by service providers.

The process of gaining independence is more complex than acquiring skills to do things alone. One user interviewed described the terrible experience of having to navigate public transport and the daily threats of abuse or sexual assault and felt that the service providers she engages with don't have a true understanding of what she has to go through when urging her towards greater independence.

"The staff should move amongst the students, speak to them so that they can know what we go through, the things that we must survive," shared the user. Another user pointed out that there is an unseen cost to taking on mobility aid, adding that she believes walking with a cane makes her a vulnerable target.

This cost-benefit analysis is one that users of assistive devices must do on a regular basis and this complex idea of choice while negotiating their independence was not recognised by many service providers.

"Despite the promises of organisation public face material, an image of a completely independent blind individual 'standing alone', is I argue, incompatible with the lived experiences of visually impaired people. As a result, blind people may find that the inevitable need to be assisted feels like slipping back into a socially rejected role," said Michelle.

"This may also create pressure to forgo the networks of support they have built. Afterall taking charge of one's own life may, at times, be facilitated rather than hampered by the assistance of others".

"Understanding this is essential if we are to grasp not only the physical circumstances but also the emotional state and subjective position which individuals entering rehabilitation find themselves in. This understanding sheds light on the position of influence occupied by rehabilitation organisations and workers in relation to individuals who can feel set adrift in the world," said Michelle.

Michelle's research calls for a critical evaluation of the impact of rehabilitation services at the level of identity and explores an imbalance of power in rehabilitation which remains relatively undisturbed, posing critical questions for our democracy about empowerment and citizenship in the lives of South Africans with disabilities.

Michelle graduated with a PhD in Disability Studies on 14 July 2021.

ENDS

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