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A Comment on the Social Model(s)

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Almost all writers in the field of disability studies in English speaking countries and those writers in non-English speaking countries who publish in English describe the Social Model of disability as universally accepted and treat it as if there were only one version. However, there are at least two Social Model versions to be found in research and analytical writings in English. These two models and at least seven others are all versions of the disability paradigm. (Pfeiffer, 2001) Although a distinction can be made between "model" and "paradigm," they are considered synonymous for this essay.

One distinct version of the Social Model is the crypto Marxist version found primarily in the United Kingdom, but used in other countries. It states that the organization of society produces discrimination experienced by people with disabilities. (In the United Kingdom the term disabled person is preferred over people with disabilities.) This social organization, it says, must be changed in order to end discrimination based upon disability.

The other version of the Social Model is found chiefly in the United States, but it is also used in other countries. It states that fulfilling the "normal" role models in society helps constitute a person's identity, at least as seen by others. The definition of disability is an unexpected differentness (to use Goffman's term) which makes some roles impossible or at least quite difficult to carry out. Although Goffman may not have agreed, changing these role expectations will end discrimination based upon disability.

Both of these versions show up repeatedly in articles published in the *Disability Studies Quarterly* and elsewhere. Overlooking the distinctions between these two versions of the disability paradigm (and the other seven versions) can lead to dire consequences in both research and in advocacy. It can also lead to unnecessary conflicts and misunderstandings between researchers and advocates.

Researchers using the UK Social Model will analyze social structures and their impact on people with disabilities. Researchers using the US Social Model will analyze social roles and attitudes toward failure to fulfill them. While

these two things are related, they are actually distinct phenomena.

Advocates using the UK Social Model will work for changes in social structures. Advocates using the US Social Model will seek to change attitudes and behaviors. Again, these two things are related, but they again are distinct phenomena.

In addition, researchers and advocates who are not familiar with the other seven versions of the disability paradigm will miss a considerable amount of the experience of disability. They should be aware of all versions and should (where appropriate) explicitly state which version or versions they are using. Most of us, however, are very tolerant of the other versions and, thank goodness, work together for common goals. Still, clear communication requires that the viewpoint (for lack of a better term) of a writer/speaker be understood. Reaching common goals depends upon clear communication.

#### Reference

David Pfeiffer (2001), *The Conceptualization of Disability, Exploring Theories and Expanding Methodologies: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go* edited by Sharon N. Barnartt and Barbara Mandell Altman in the series *Research in Social Science and Disability*, New York: Elsevier Science, volume 2 (2001), pages 29-52.