Inspiration Porn, Please Stop: Disability Services’ Role in Promoting the Social Model of Disability

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Who am I?

2nd Year M.S. 
Student Affairs in 
Higher Education 

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Anticipated 
Graduation 
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Assistant Resident Director, 
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Student Disability Services 
Practicum Student

Disability Studies 
Co-Instructor

20 year long 
wheelchair user

Spinal Muscular 
Atrophy II
Why am I here?

To inform on a topic I think is running rampant in our society

To initiate dialogue on the social model of disability in our field

To offer my perspective as a disabled individual
I am not here...

Because I know everything about this topic

To say my opinion is the only valid one and correct one

To speak for all disabled people
Learning Objectives

1. Understand and describe what inspiration porn is in today’s society.
2. Articulate the difference between the medical and social model of disability.
3. Develop ideas around stopping the growth and popularity of inspiration porn through the work of their office.
4. Conceptualize role of promoting the social model of disability while working in a predominantly medical model focused field.
Your poll will show here

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or
Open poll in your web browser
What is this picture?

➔ What’s the first word that comes to mind when you see that little girl?
  ◆ Inspirational, happy, courageous!

➔ Obviously, having no legs is a bad thing. Right?
  ◆ Not really. There are plenty of people who have no legs or no arms or are otherwise disabled.

➔ And why, precisely, would I not want to be defined by my disability?
  ◆ Disability is constructed to be a bad thing.

“The only disability in life is a bad attitude.”
-Scott Hamilton
Setting the stage
Stella Young

- Passed away in December of 2014
- “I really want to live in a world where disability is not the exception, but the norm.”
- “It’s not a bad thing, and it doesn’t make you exceptional.”
- “I wasn’t doing anything that could be considered an achievement if you took disability out of the equation.”
Inspiration Porn Defined

Porn Defined as

➔ Sensationalizing and objectifying a group of people

Inspiration Porn

➔ Inspiration porn is when disabled people are called inspirational or brave for doing anything that able bodied people do.
Based off the premise that

» Must have it so much worse than the rest of society.

» “Well, if she can get up in the morning and do this without complaining, so can I!”

◆ Underlying assumptions that complaining is occurring
“You’re so inspiring!”

- For just being you?
- What makes getting out of bed in the morning and going to the gym so inspiring? Nondisabled people do it.
- Inspires nondisabled people to feel good about their lives and makes them do something. Disabled people are not tools.
Why is it so bad if someone with a disability motivates me to become a better person?

They are not doing anything particularly motivating
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No societal expectations

They don’t exist to motivate you

Reducing a human being – and a stranger, at that – to “inspiring” or “brave” is problematic
How we/society view(s) disability

**Medical Model**
- Deficiency
- Personal problem
- The goal is to cure or fix
- The cure requires professional intervention
- Professionals are the experts

**Social Model**
- Neutral difference
- Interaction between the individual and environment
- Focus is on the environment/attitudes
- Access facilitated by everyone (designer)
Medical vs. Social Model of Disability

The medical model of disability

Her impairment is the problem! They should cure her or give her prosthetics.

The social model of disability

The stairs are the problem! They should build a ramp.

Image by UAA: http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/accessibility/topic/architecture.cfm
Inspiration Porn in our Society
Me Before You (2016)
1. Have you seen this film?
2. What message does it send?
3. Why was it so popular?
Traditional Disability Stereotypes

➔ Object of charity
➔ A fate to be feared
➔ A fate worse than death
➔ Our heroes

And these come from...

➔ Language
➔ Media
➔ Social construction
Jerika Bolen

→ Cheering her on to die
→ Where’s the suicide prevention hotline?
→ Better dead than disabled.
→ What’s the message this sends to other adolescents who want to die?
  ◆ If only they had a disability they could have a parade.
What’s the message?
High school QB takes friend with Down syndrome to the prom

➔ A person with Down syndrome is given some award or nice treatment by their peers, and the coverage fixates on how that makes those peers feel great.

➔ The articles use the word “friendship,” even though there’s no indication that the two have an ongoing reciprocally rewarding relationship.

➔ Has he seen her since the fourth grade? Do they hang out together? What does Mary think?
Couple with Down Syndrome go to Homecoming

Would this be a newsworthy story if the teenagers were nondisabled? People of color? Members of the LGBTQIA community?
Where do we go from here?
Group Discussion:

What are 2 strategies to stop inspiration porn on your campus?
How do we stop inspiration porn?

➔ Educate
   ◆ Find venues to show Stella Young
   ◆ Pay attention to language we use
   ◆ Take time to educate oneself on ally behavior

➔ Activism to eliminate physical barriers
   ◆ Goal being to not have distinction between disabled and nondisabled
   ◆ Insist on universal design on campuses
   ◆ Educate faculty on UDL in classroom
     • Workshops for faculty and staff

➔ Challenge family/friends/colleagues on what they believe is “inspirational”

➔ Stop reposting inspiration porn

➔ Comment and educate on social media when visible

➔ LISTEN to the disability community
Disability Services Role

➔ Decreased distinction between disabled and nondisabled by promoting UD and UDL
➔ Attention to language use in campus marketing/brochures
➔ Creating disability pride student organizations
  ◆ Awareness/advocacy campaigns
➔ Creating an inclusive environment (safe space) where university community can explore disability rights
➔ Developing materials for dissemination about disability law and Disability Studies
➔ Educate about disability as human diversity not as deviance
“Inspiration porn turns the disabled individual into an object for your (nondisabled) consumption.”
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Questions?

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