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Research Paper

Plurality and continuity—Understanding self-identity of persons with intellectual disability

Pluralité et continuité—comprendre l'identité des personnes en situation de handicap intellectuel

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to explore the complexity and continuity of self-identities of persons with intellectual disability. This is done by close reading of four life stories. The findings are that intellectually disabled people's self-identities are basically plural and fluid. A fruitful approach to understanding this plurality is given by "positioning theory" developed by Harré & Langenhove. We analyze the subject's sense of continuity in terms of our own concept of "inner dialogue". Our point of departure is a review of literature with special focus on multiple identities. We distinguish between three strands of knowledge within this field: (1) sociological studies of other-defined, identities, which are hard to change; (2) psychological studies of dynamic, self-defined identities characterized by adaptation and continuity, and (3) discursive studies of fluid and plural self- and other-defined identities. The third strand has contributed significantly to the field of disability studies by transcending the classic dichotomy of normalcy or deviancy (of identity) of persons with intellectual disabilities. In our aim to probe deeper into the issues of plurality and continuity of self-defined identities, we turn to Stuart Hall's noteworthy text:

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'Who needs identity?' (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Hall proposes that a new direction for a theory of identity needs to build on input from discursive studies, but it should also embrace the question of how the subject maintains a sense of personal continuity.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer la complexité et la continuité des identités des personnes en situation de handicap intellectuel. Une lecture attentive de quatre récits de vie montre que les identités exprimées par des personnes qui présentent une déficience intellectuelle sont fondamentalement plurielles et fluides. La « théorie du positionnement » de Harré & Langenhove est particulièrement utile afin de rendre compte de cette pluralité. Par ailleurs, nous analysons le sens de la continuité de l'identité personnelle à l'aide du concept de « dialogue intérieur », que nous avons développé dans le cadre de ce projet. Notre revue de la littérature explore l'usage de la notion d'identité multiple. Trois champs de recherche sont examinés : (1) les études sociologiques des identités stables attribuées par les autres ; (2) les études psychologiques des diverses identités dynamiques que la personne s'attribue à elle-même, avec un accent porté sur l'adaptation et la continuité et (3) les études discursives des identités fluides et multiples, définies aussi bien par soi-même que par les autres. À l'issue de cette revue, il apparaît que le troisième champ de recherche est particulièrement fertile pour l'étude de l'identité des personnes en situation de handicap car il transcende la dichotomie entre la normalité et la déviance. Afin d'approfondir notre compréhension de la pluralité et de la continuité des identités personnelles, nous nous appuyons sur le texte souvent cité de Stuart Hall : *Who needs identity*? (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Hall propose une théorie de l'identité qui combine les apports des approches discursives à ceux des approches qui se centrent sur la continuité de l'identité personnelle.

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1. Introduction

Questions of identity in relation to intellectual disability have been discussed for at least 50 years (Bogdan, 1974; Edgerton, 1967; Kugel & Wolfensberger, 1969). Some studies addressing identity issues related to acquired cognitive disabilities and to disability in general have considerably increased our knowledge of the field (Gelech & Desjardins, 2011; Medved & Brockmeier, 2008; Shakespeare, 2006; Stiker, 1999; Wright, 1960). In general terms, identity is understood to be multifaceted, hence it has been studied from many viewpoints. Lange & Westin (1981) organized the most frequent aspects mentioned in the literature on identity in a taxonomy distinguishing between two main divisions, self-perceived and other-perceived identities. Self-perceived identity may in turn be partitioned in individual and social "I and we identities". Similarly, other-perceived identities may be divided into personal and social "you and they identities" (defined by others). Our paper takes its point of departure in the self-perceived flank of this taxonomy reaching out to the other-perceived aspects. Individual and social identities are discussed first and foremost in relation to plurality and continuity.

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