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Abstract

‘Disability Solutions’: Subjectivity and the Business of Disability

Marcia H. Rioux and Fraser Valentine chart the prevalence, in public policy, of two major approaches to disability. The medical approach defines it as an individual’s physical incapacity with respect to an able-bodied norm, marking it as a condition to cure, and framing its costs as a social burden, not a public responsibility. The social pathological approach, however, treats disability as a consequence of structural barriers that handicap a given person. In this view, rehabilitative initiatives are aimed not at individuals themselves but at reforming the social standard against which they are measured and deemed disabled.

This paper reads Easter Seals Ontario’s policies, primarily its aim to unlock its clients’ potential so that they might achieve independence, in relation to these constructions of disability. The central issue it addresses, with reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s liberal view of the self as supplied by nature to pursue all his or her needs, is what kind of subjectivity Easter Seals confers upon the disabled youth it serves by offering independence as the solution to the problem of disability. Its secondary concern is whether the organization can afford to adopt a less individual-centered, more environmentally-based approach, given its need to solicit funds from the private sector, and thus justify the economic potential of its services, in equipping its clients with the tools needed to become productive members of society.