

Ethics of person-centered work

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In the minds of those who named "person-centered planning", person is a social being: depending on others for care in times of vulnerability; responsible to others for contributing to the community's wellbeing. Person is not the name for an isolated individual. Desmond Tutu expresses this understanding of person in his translation of the African celebration of the recognition of Ubuntu: I am because we are. This understanding defines a civic virtue. In Archbishop Tutu's words, A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished. Nelson Mandela makes an important distinction: Ubuntu does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve? Despite much positive change, person-centered work takes place in a society that continues to be influenced by profoundly devaluing assumptions about developmental disability, which are usually unquestioned and unconscious. Two of many examples:

- * A recent poll was reported under the headline: Americans would rather be dead than disabled.

www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSN7B32025920080711

- * Public policy supports pre-natal testing that results in the abortion of 90% of instances of Down syndrome. Listen here:

www.cdss.ca/site/news/radio_spots/2007/CBC_1010_Aug30_2007.wav

When people with developmental disabilities show up in ordinary life as contributing citizens, growing numbers of people have the opportunity to escape these prejudices. However, it takes courage and confidence to cross the boundaries that exclude people. Person-centered work aims to provide competent assistance to enable contribution. Person-centered work, like any human effort that strives to promote the dignity of people who are vulnerable to social exclusion and external control, necessarily embodies dilemmas. Approaches to ethics that assume that it is possible to live with integrity by simply following rules set down in policy manuals don't offer people the resources they need to act with discernment in difficult situations. Because so many rules have accumulated around the funds that pay worker's salaries, many workers have decided that they must comply with rules that seem to intrude unnecessarily on a person's freedom or waste time and energy in compliance activities. They believe that non-compliance will result in loss of the funds necessary to support their relationship. In this session we discussed one ethical principle that can frame the kind of mindful decision making necessary to function with integrity (see the slides attached).