

# Envisioning New Meanings of Difference

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This paper describes theoretical frameworks and experiential aspects of *Building Bridges*, a project designed to explore everyday experiences and creative capacities of adult women with physical differences and disabilities. Recognising there are few spaces for women to examine the influence of challenging cultural images and social encounters, we undertook to develop workshops for participants to expand their knowledge and skills and envision new meanings of difference. We emphasise key components of the project, focusing on feminist and narrative-informed methods and expressive art activities, to illustrate the ways in which women revisit and reinterpret the meanings and significance of living with physical differences and disabilities. We invite discussion about the ways that women generate communities across difference and disability through critical questioning of cultural messages as well as creative imagining of new possibilities for ways of seeing themselves.

Keywords: physical difference, disabilities, feminism, narrative ideas, community, cultural images

Despite growing discourses about diversity issues, there are many cultural misconceptions and few positive images of women living with facial and physical differences and/or disabilities (Zitzelsberger, Odette, Rice & Whittington-Walsh 2002). Embedded within broader binary oppositions of 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies (Davis 1995, 1997), physical differences and disabilities frequently are interpreted as incapacity, inferiority, personal tragedy, and a burden to self and others (Rogers & Swadener 2001). While contending with discriminations faced by women generally and by men with disabilities, women with disabilities and physical differences are perceived to possess a body and an identity which simultaneously are seen as 'less than whole', 'not quite human', and 'other than female' (DiMarco 1996; Garland Thomson 1997, 2004; Goffman 1963).

Postmodern and feminist perspectives emphasise how body images and identities are produced and experienced through cultural representations and social interactions. Cultural meanings given to bodies become a basis for identity in interpersonal exchanges. Women construct a sense of their bodily self from messages, spoken and unspoken, that they receive from popular images and other people throughout their lives. This occurs when they grasp how others perceive their bodies and understand the personal and social significance of these perceptions to their sense of identity and possibility. One of the ways women with physical differences and disabilities are marginalised in our society is through cultural messages about the female abject body, such as bodily vulnerability, dependency, unattractiveness, and undesirability. Challenges of living with bodily differences are interwoven throughout conventional cultural images and everyday interactions. Many women experience negative, inaccurate, and invalidating perceptions of their bodies and lives, encountering judgemental comments, intrusive stares, and questions about their bodies (Keith 1996). These are commonplace, occurring in interactions with family, friends, strangers, medical practitioners, and others (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

Women with facial and physical differences and disabilities frequently internalise negative judgements about their bodies and selves. They may have learned to view their bodies as inadequate, unacceptable, and a source of stress and anxiety.

Stresses involved in encountering negative perceptions can leave women feeling vulnerable in social situations. While women tell how rejecting looks, critical commentary, or stereotypical perceptions are everyday experiences, they also speak of affirming messages that are features of their relational lives. Through connections characterised by support, validation, and affirmation, many come to understand and resist cultural meanings of their bodies that position them as 'other' within social discourses and relations, and to envision preferred images of their lives.

In this paper, we describe our involvement with *Building Bridges*, a project that examines everyday experiences related to appearance and ability of adult women with disabilities and other body differences. We outline project activities such as workshops and art-making groups that have been designed to create opportunities for women to share stories, insights, and practical ideas with others who have similar concerns and experiences, and to build on their existing knowledge and skills together. We highlight key components of the project, such as narrative and feminist-informed methods and expressive art activities, to demonstrate the ways women revision the meanings of physical differences and disabilities. Making explicit and transparent theoretical underpinnings of this practice, we stress our project 'praxis'. We ground our work in feminist, disability, and narrative theorising to show how we support women in connecting problems to broader social patterns and oppressions, and assist in opening up possibilities for solutions in contexts and relationships rather than solely within selves. Reflecting on the evolution of our initiative, we identify what we have learned from our practice and, most significantly, what we have learned from women who participated in the workshops. We conclude by emphasising how expression through art facilitates women's critical questioning of conventional representations and fosters their creative imagining of new meanings of difference.

## INVOLVEMENT IN OUR INITIATIVE

In August 1999, *Building Bridges*, a partnership project of AboutFace International<sup>2</sup> and the Body Image Project, Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre, was developed<sup>3</sup>. This project was created with, by, and for, women living with

facial differences, physical differences, and/or disabilities. Quotes and artwork embedded throughout this paper are the voices and images of women who have participated in the project.

Our initiative for women with disabilities and physical differences began as the outcome of a series of conversations between Carla Rice, Manager of the Body Image Project, and Lorna Renooy, staff member at AboutFace International. Importantly, the different interests and embodiments of organisers and facilitators foreshadowed and reflected the work on difference that was done through the initiative. Carla was galvanised to work with women with disabilities and physical differences as a result of interviews she had been conducting as part of her research on body image across the life-span. Lorna's interest in body image came from her academic, professional, and lived knowledge that there were few places for people with facial and physical differences to openly and safely discuss the influence of negative social interactions on their bodies and lives. Interested in affirming capacities of women with disabilities and differences to navigate difficult social situations as an outcome of her community and academic work, Hilde Zitzelsberger entered the Project as co-ordinator in 2001.

Ani Aubin's involvement in *Building Bridges* stemmed from her unique understanding of popular perceptions of physical difference through her experiences as a performer with a facial difference. Ani was particularly interested in exploring how media, such as drama, music and visual arts, could be used to revisit and reinterpret the meanings of physical difference and disability. Fran Odette's involvement emerged from her lived and professional understanding of gender and disability, as well as her work within communities on issues of sexuality, body image, violence, and health. From her experiences and knowledges as a counsellor and as a woman with a physical disability, Wendy Porch became intrigued by the narrative approach of the project. She appreciated the narrative perspective that women's self-stories are largely constructed by privileged narratives, but that by deconstructing experiences and building on less privileged narratives they can uncover a preferred notion of self. Having lived knowledge of disability, Esther Ignagni's interest flowed from her work within communities and academic settings on cultural

representations of and by youth with disabilities. Her commitment originated through discussions with others involved in the *Building Bridges Project*.

A vital part of our project was the series of workshops held across Ontario from 1999 to 2004. Women who have joined our workshops include those with facial differences (vascular birth marks, cleft lip and palate), physical differences (burn injuries, dermatological conditions, mastectomy) and physical disabilities (mobility disabilities such as spinal cord injury, sensory such as low vision, blindness, hard of hearing, chronic illness such as multiple sclerosis). Facial and physical differences and/or disabilities can be present at birth or acquired through injury or illness, and may be visible or hidden. Some women with facial and physical differences may not identify themselves as having a disability. However, concerns and issues regarding body and self-image in social interactions have emerged as a common thread among women with physical differences and/or disabilities.

## IMPETUS FOR OUR INITIATIVE

*I have so much to say ... a voice muffled by the fears of others I refuse to stay quiet. I will be heard.*

Since dominant groups aesthetically and physically design spaces, impetus for *Building Bridges* came from the recognition that there are few cultural and physical spaces for women to explore their subjective and social experiences of living with physical differences and/or disabilities. It was also recognised that there are few places for individual and group resistance to dominant views of body difference. While women and men with differences and disabilities share common challenges in social interactions, their experiences and insights also differ due to social expectations of appearance and abilities that are specific to gender. As a result, our objective in the workshops has been to provide a place for women to acknowledge their bodies and lived experience as sites of knowledge (Zitzelsberger, Odette, Rice & Whittington-Walsh 2002).

One unique feature of *Building Bridges* is the facilitators' and participants' own crafting and occupation of a space that is supportive of each woman's knowing. Through making connections, many claim multifaceted identities as women and as people with disabilities and physical differences.

While enhancing individual agency, women also develop connections with other women living with physical differences and/or disabilities, generating a community of learners/teachers. In this way, the project builds bridges between and across participants' perceived differences and among established and emerging communities of those with disabilities and differences.

*I have learnt the benefits of having a cross-disability workshop. Not only did the participants become sensitive to issues of cross-disability, but they learnt that their 'community' is greater than they had previously thought. I believe that this awareness will create a stronger base for change in society.*

Another significant feature of *Building Bridges* is the 'in-between' positioning of the project. Liminality situated between a mainstream health care institution and a grass-roots community organisation, the project also creates opportunities for building bridges between women with and without facial differences, physical differences, and disabilities. This is vitally important. From their vantagepoint, women living with physical differences and disabilities have unique insights about operations of cultural meanings of body normalcy and body abjection within everyday life that position them as sites of knowledge to all women (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

*We all have issues around appearance. Let's stop looking at each other like we're supposed to be something other than who we are and start realising we are on this continuum of difference.*

### **IMPORTANCE OF FACILITATORS WITH 'INSIDER KNOWLEDGE'**

*In our culture we're all raised with the idea of being independent and being strong, and this is especially true for people who have facial differences. I know a lot of times when I grew up I got these messages all the time: 'Oh you are so strong and coping so well'. So that kept me from wanting to talk about any problems or issues.*

In our workshops, women with physical differences and disabilities are facilitators. Having

facilitators who can become part of the group while remaining aware of group process, is highly effective. For example, many people with physical differences and disabilities have learned that they should not speak of the difficulties that they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Friends and family members often feel they have little experience to draw upon when responding to women confronting stressful and challenging interactions. It may be difficult for friends and family to know their loved one is experiencing daily intrusions they can do nothing to change. Consequently, when trying to discuss a troubling social moment, many women have encountered subtle cues suggesting that it was a topic best avoided.

In communicating their stories to a facilitator and a group of women who also live with bodily differences or disabilities, women do not have to succumb to societal pressure to make their story-telling more palatable. Facilitators who share their own challenges of living with a difference can support participants to speak of painful situations and vulnerabilities. In the company of others with disabilities and differences, women also can circumvent the expectation in interactions of having to explain their appearances and differences. In this way, participants and facilitators with 'insider knowledges' can act as role models, mentors, and advocates (White 2002; Peer Counsellors 2003). Women in our workshops have commented on how comfortable they were made to feel by facilitators and participants, and how much they appreciated the personal sharing by facilitators and participants (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

*I am so glad to have had this quality experience with a group of women of all ages and backgrounds. Their diversity made it a rich learning experience. Also, it is amazing that this was free! I value that the facilitators were women with physical differences.*

### **FROM SKILL DEVELOPMENT TO SKILL DISCOVERY**

*Building Bridges* workshop sessions have used individualised exercises, art making, journaling, small group work, discussions, and large group activities including drama and story-telling. Whatever the modality, a key aspect of our workshops and art-

making groups has been the cultivation of a positive identity, not in spite of difference and disability, but partly through incorporating one's body difference into one's positive sense of identity.

While we began workshop and support group sessions using traditional 'skills development' and 'solutions-focused' methods (Fiske 1999; Metcalf 1998), we increasingly adopted a feminist-informed and 'narrative approach' in our facilitation (Drewery & Winslade 1997; Gremillion 2003; Russell & Carey 2003; White & Epston 1989). We see this method as a therapeutic application of postmodern theory. Facilitators working from a narrative perspective view participants as having expertise and skills in the challenges of living with body differences, but understand that this knowledge may be hidden by dominant stories that represent them as inadequate in some way (Peer Counsellors 2003; Silvester 1997). From our perspective, because a narrative stance views women as possessing unrecognised skill in the challenges of living with difference, it more fully supports them in discovering their own knowledges, and in building on capacities for reflection and action that may already work for them in their own lives (Rice, Renooy, Zitzelsberger, Aubin & Odette 2003).

Ani sums up her perspective on the workshop process:

*Speaking as a woman with a facial difference, I believe that it is essential that women living with disabilities/facial differences understand that being different is not only negative, but that it has many positive sides (i.e., empathy, strength, courage, etc.). Through the Building Bridges Program, the participants revisit and remember what they already know and possess: their survival skills, their inner strength, their communication skills, and their ability to adapt to challenging situations. Women have lived this far in a society that condones attitudinal abuse, and in the workshop context are encouraged to look at the consequences of this abuse and to hone their knowledges derived from their experiences. We offer support so that women may become more comfortable with their bodies and their lives. Through our program, they understand that they are not alone.*

Over time, we have reworked and refined our workshop method to encompass five strategies for

helping participants' discover and build on individual and communal knowledge and strengths: telling our stories; taking a not-knowing stance; asking purposeful questions; de-centering our expertise; and creating communities across disability and difference (Rice, Renooy, Zitzelsberger, Aubin & Odette 2003).

## **BUILDING BRIDGES WORKSHOP METHODS**

*What is positive for me about the group is to see that I am not alone and I can share my life experience with others.*

### *Telling Our Stories*

One of our most significant workshop methods has been use of story-telling within a group context. Story-telling invites description and explanation on the who, how, why, what, and then what (LaBonte & Feather 1996). It enables women to see themselves as authors in their own lives. Most activities are designed so that participants can look at what has worked well in interactions and what they could do differently. Through telling stories and witnessing story-tellings, participants are able to remember and reclaim the knowledges and skills that they already possess, gain insights, and identify alternative actions in challenging situations. Others' reflections on their stories amplify participants' awareness of knowledge and skills they already use to handle difficult situations. When women recognise the ways their stories resonate with each other, this creates movement, or new understandings of common experiences and new energy for action.

*Building Bridges gave me an opportunity to explore and express my thoughts and feelings. I was able to meet with other women with disabilities to discuss and reflect on common issues of concern ... I gained comfort knowing that others deal with the same issues and are successful.*

There can be a lot of stress when a woman with a physical difference or disability feels vulnerable, or unsure of how others will respond to her appearance or abilities. At the same time, women develop a number of strategies to manage social interactions throughout their lives, which they themselves may identify as effective, or not, within their current life. Some strategies that women in *Building Bridges*

groups have identified through telling their stories include the following:

- Withdrawing from or avoiding social encounters.
- Using concealing make-up and clothing or changing body movements to 'pass' as someone without a disability or difference.
- Countering hostility or negativity in others by being defiant/aggressive.
- Trying to make others comfortable by smiling, being polite, and answering questions.
- Taking the initiative and sustaining the interaction (recognising others' and our own responses and moving beyond the initial response).
- Using humour to put the other at ease and deal with our own feelings.
- Practicing a variety of strategies depending on our reading of what is possible in each situation.

When they identify a range of options, individuals can make conscious choices about how to respond in different situations. For example, sometimes women may want to avoid uncomfortable social situations; sometimes they may want to educate others; and sometimes they may want to protect their privacy. Each of these options is valid. The strategy chosen may depend on people's awareness of the responses they already use, their reading of others' willingness to change their behaviour, and their knowledge of a range of options available to them for navigating the encounter. Many women have commented that they have felt more empowered through recognising their abilities to make choices and by expanding their choices within interactions.

*The exercises were ones that we could apply to everyday life. Also, looking at things the way others see them, was very valuable to me. Thus, I learned NOT to make myself the victim before I enter a situation.*

#### *Taking a 'Not-Knowing' Stance*

Narrative facilitators uncover people's stories by taking a curious or 'not knowing' stance, asking questions without having preconceived ideas or theories about what the outcomes should be (Drewery & Winslade 1997). The facilitator's expertise

lies in looking for the meaning and effects of problems in people's lives and listening for alternative stories, or examples of their responses and actions in constraining circumstances.

We know that valuable perspectives are gained by living with a facial difference, physical difference, and/or disability. In *Building Bridges* workshops, facilitators offer questions that help participants to access what they know about dealing with difficult encounters and to share this knowledge within the group. Facilitators are influential not by imposing interpretations or making interventions but through using questions and reflections to guide participants toward the knowledge and skills they have of their lives that are relevant to addressing the challenges at hand.

For example, a series of questions in a workshop context may be:

Think about a difficult situation:

- What happened? What thoughts went through your mind and how were you feeling?
- What were your responses in the situation? What were possible options for action? What obstacles or constraints did you encounter? What was the best response for you in the situation?
- What were your intentions towards others and yourself in the encounter? What values, desires, purposes, and aims did you bring into this interaction? What do you imagine the other person was thinking, feeling, and intending?
- What do your responses reveal about your intentions toward others in relationships? What do your responses reveal about your knowledge and understanding of living with physical differences and/or disabilities? What do your responses reveal about your skills in negotiating social interactions?

In *Building Bridges* workshops, facilitators refrain from encouraging 'survivor' or 'success' stories with uniformly positive endings. Telling stories where obstacles are always overcome perpetuates the myth that one must always be strong, and stresses success and/or failure rather than viewing experiences as opportunities for growth and learning. For many women attending *Building Bridges* workshops, challenges in interactions related to experiences of gender and bodily difference

emerge as significant. In one workshop, for example, a woman who acquired a facial difference disclosed difficulties in her relationship with her husband. She spoke of having had an argument with him prior to a group session about coming to the workshop instead of staying at home and doing the housework. When a facilitator asked her how she was able to attend the session in light of her husband's objections, she told of how she wanted and needed to be with other women. In response to her reflection, group members began to speak of pressures and expectations they also encountered from family and culture regarding domestic work. Later, the woman wrote her discovery that 'cleaning is not as important to me as it is to my husband'. Through the group process, she clarified how important it was for her to be in the presence of other women living with disability and difference with whom she could share struggles related to experiences of gender.

Through approaching all experiences as opportunity for gaining insight, facilitators support participants to recognise and share their vulnerabilities as well as their strengths and find accounts of their lives that are suitable to them. Facilitators also refrain from assessing responses as 'good' or 'bad' and from stressing assertiveness as a main goal of the workshops. This does not allow for participants' voices, desires, and aspirations to be heard, nor does it take into account the structures and relations of oppression and marginalisation that often frustrate people's attempts to influence outcomes. Facilitators recognise and work with, in an explicit way, the real social constraints that may undermine women's efforts to intervene in events while strengthening and affirming their preferred accounts of themselves.

#### *Asking Purposeful Questions*

*A wheelchair can be seen as something positive. It's a tool that's liberating. I always thought of it as a prison on wheels. Now I see it gives me freedom.*

A key aspect of the *Building Bridges* method is to support participants in recognising and validating their own knowledges by the questions that facilitators ask and the ways they phrase these questions. The method assists participants in deconstructing oppressive identities and in claiming

subjugated knowledges marginalised by dominant views. Questions facilitate generative processes of exploring other possibilities of embodiment and preferred accounts of selves (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

In *Building Bridges* workshops, rather than giving emphasis solely to the problem, this approach to asking questions stresses the multiple facets of each person that they bring when dealing with challenging situations. During a session entitled 'Possibilities', facilitators asked women to reflect on the following question: What three possibilities do you hope for in your life and in yourself over the next few years? In undertaking this exercise, one woman whose disability made it impossible for her to continue in a successful dance career spoke of losing her connection with dance. Noting that dance was a prominent theme in her imagined possibilities for herself, a facilitator asked what she made of the fact that she still envisioned dance as part of her life. In reflecting on the question, she realized that she currently was connected to dance ways that made sense within her present life circumstances, such as by teaching techniques she had mastered years before. Within the group, women wondered together how a genre that privileges conventionally able bodies still could be a possibility for their lives. Two participants who had previously started a disability dance troupe, spoke of opportunities that involvement in dance had offered for revising their sense of body and self. One woman who never had access to images of people with disabilities in dance with which to imagine this possibility, was inspired by the discussion to pursue dancing for the first time. In this way, participants in *Building Bridges* workshops collectively reconsider received ideas about difference and reflect on past and present experiences to open up preferred possibilities for their lives.

Facilitators support participants to explore and expand choices, and to move towards examining their expressions of agency. In *Building Bridges* workshops, facilitators introduce the idea of personal agency, which they define as the capacity to recognise choices and to discover one's own perspectives, values, and purposes in relationships; the ability to impact on others; and the capacity to respond and act in the world. In this way, facilitators ask participants to recall contexts, experiences, and

relationships that have enhanced or undermined their self-agency, and to reconsider ways that past expressions of agency can be mobilised in the present. Rather than encouraging women to take responsibility for others' conduct or for outcomes of interactions, facilitators direct the focus toward supporting them in reflecting on their ethics and actions in situations.

Through remembering messages received from others about beauty, ability, and desirability within the group context, women commonly become more significantly aware of how they separate from their bodies, physical differences, and their feelings about their bodies. Many participants have said: 'I don't usually think of my body, even less about what I like about it. I don't even want to look in the mirror or have photos taken of me.' Facilitators are careful not to frame this separation as negative response on the part of the individual, but as an expression of agency in a world that over-values bodies and under-values persons. It is one strategy or practice that women with body differences may use to disconnect their sense of self from their sense of body to protect that self from others' intrusive looks, words, and touch. While affirming these and other expressions of agency, facilitators also explore potential or actual consequences of participants' actions. In *Building Bridges* groups, facilitators affirm the value and examine the efficacy of possible responses through looking at effects of strategies — positive and negative — in women's emotional and relational lives. This involves inviting their re-viewing and re-visioning of body and self-images, practices, and actions in relationships as a continual and purposeful process (Lindgren 2004).

#### *De-Centering Our Expertise*

Facilitators have found that the more they 'decentre' themselves by not taking the expert role (White 2002), the more participants in the group speak openly, and direct the focus according to their own interests, desires, and solutions. When facilitators are 'decentred', women are recognised as having expertise and 'primary authorship status' over their own lives. Participants, not facilitators, hold knowledge and skills generated over the course of their lives that can become important tools for addressing the predicaments they face (White 2002).

Facilitators pose questions that invite women to think beyond the problem to solutions and possibilities for their lives. Generally, the idea of finding meaning, power, or knowledge in one's disability or difference is introduced gradually and woven through workshop activities. In one workshop centred on the theme of 'love', for example, facilitators asked the group to consider the following questions: How do you know when you are loved? How do you know when you are loving? How does love operate in your life? In response, a woman told of how she felt restricted and closed in by experiences of her hidden chronic illness and how she also wanted and valued freedom and love in her life. Through talking with other group members, she crystallised her growing awareness that, if she had a partner, it was essential that they understand the lived experience of feeling different from others around them. While perceived as attractive in conventional terms, she saw this as an important value for anyone with whom she would have a romantic relationship. For her, it was as essential for an intimate other to acknowledge and grasp that, although her illness did not show outwardly, it still affected her life daily.

Incorporating difference into one's reconceived sense of body and identity could be easily dismissed if participants have not yet deconstructed dominant discourses related to women and disability. While some members come to workshops with critical perspectives on cultural meanings given to bodily difference, others have not had the opportunity to question conventional accounts. The group provides a place for women to access and/or articulate these understandings and to find new ways of giving expression to experiences. For example, facilitators open up conversations about beauty and desirability by asking participants to recollect and reconsider cultural messages about beauty, sexuality, and disability that they may have encountered in their lives. Through discussion, participants often identify how dominant views can 'disqualify' women with disabilities and differences from a sexual identity and distort their desirability and desiring. Many also speak of how negative perceptions may undermine their efforts to express their gender and sexual identities. To explore participants' preferred views of body and self, facilitators ask questions along the following lines:

- If there is one quality, characteristic, identity, or purpose that you wanted people to perceive about you when they first interact with you, what would it be?
- What do you think would enable you to project that identity, quality, characteristic, or purpose into the world?

Through such conversations, new ideas of beauty, desirability, identity, and possibility are explored. The goal is not to move participants into accepting their appearances and differences or into adopting cultural imperatives to be, or not be, sexual. It is simply to bring forward for consideration a new idea, a new way for women with differences and disabilities to see our/themselves in the world that we/they can gradually consider.

*My goal was to see myself as a sexual and beautiful person. Now when people flirt with me, I accept it as a compliment and I don't automatically think that it's impossible for someone to flirt with me.*

#### *Creating Community across Difference*

In *Building Bridges* workshops, the facilitator's role is to build a collaborative group learning process. Group responses are structured to give participants the tools to witness, affirm, and inspire each other. Encouraging individuals to share with others helps end feelings of isolation. This is important, as many people with differences and disabilities may have limited opportunities to learn or talk about their bodies and relational lives.

We have found that some participants may feel afraid or intimidated by being in a group with other members with a difference and disability. Having a difference or disability does not mean women are immune from cultural misconceptions about what it means to live with one, especially if they have had little contact with communities of people with disabilities and differences. To address fear of body difference, we frame our discussions in terms of women not making judgements — positive or negative — about each other's experiences but validating their own and other's experiences as they, or others, name them. Even if the nature of the physical difference or disability

varies, an important aspect of the workshops is exploration of affinities that exist across differences in experiences, and participants' discovery of shared understandings of challenges and significance of living with differences and disabilities.

Most participants are initially more conscious of differences within the group, yet openness to safely ask questions and share experiences eventually sparks interesting conversations about people's diversities and affinities. Within the workshop settings, participants have the opportunity through activities and discussion to question and resist cultural meanings related to their bodies that position them as 'other' in interactions. Women attending *Building Bridges* groups also have a place to put into practice critical perspectives on disability and difference that they may have encountered in other areas of their lives. Through seeing themselves as members of a group that is rejecting its position as marginal, many participants move to cultivating new or preferred views of their difference. While enhancing individual agency, women develop connections that build bridges with other women and create commonality around physical difference and disability. This not only helps participants to challenge perceptions of themselves, but it builds a sense of community across physical difference and disability (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

*It is fascinating how powerful we feel with each other's support; there's nothing like knowing we have shared experiences and outlook. I really think that since we have a social problem, having social support is part of the solution — both in the workshop and afterwards.*

## **IMAGINING NEW MEANINGS OF DIFFERENCE**

Over the past two years, we have held four creative expression workshops, including two creative expression sessions on body image, an art-making series called *Being and Becoming*, and a photography workshop series entitled *See Me*. In our body image sessions, women were given opportunity to explore perceptions of body and identity using visual media. *Being and Becoming* featured four themes: love, sexuality, spirituality, and possibilities. In the *Being and Becoming* workshops, women were

encouraged to do anything that came to mind relative to each theme with any of the art materials available, including paint, clay, magazines for collage, textiles, and other craft materials. The *See Me* workshop sessions focused on participants' examining, through photography, social moments of looking and being looked at; exploring what was concealed and revealed in social interactions; and recollecting old and imagining new ways of seeing their bodies and themselves. For many women with disabilities and differences, cameras have an association with pictures taken in medical and clinical settings. Women may also have experiences of being excluded from family and friendship photographs, or being included in ways that conceal their bodily differences. In *See Me* workshops, participants have the opportunity to take their own pictures, creating images that resonated with and

reflected on their different senses of self (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

In our art and image making groups, participants are introduced to a process for witnessing and participating in the group (adapted from White 2002). Facilitators introduce this process by telling group members that it is not their role to give opinions, or place positive or negative judgements on other participants' art or images. As witnesses, their task is to engage with others about what they have heard and seen, and link and build on each other's expressions. Participants are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned or how they have shifted as a result of viewing others' artwork and listening to them talk about their expressions of creativity. Most participants are significantly affected by their own and others' meaning-making through art. One woman commented: 'I am surprised at what I have drawn.



### STUPID STAIRS

*When I took this picture I was remembering the time that I was being filmed for a documentary. The director needed more images of people with disabilities to fill in some spaces of the documentary. Throughout the day, the able-bodied crew kept having me do things like approach a flight of stairs looking angry or attempt to use an ATM that was obviously too high, looking frustrated. I kept telling the crew that the things they were having me do weren't real: people who use wheelchairs know they can't go up stairs and they don't spend their days approaching flights of stairs being mad. Yes, this ableist world does give me reason for anger, but I do not go around cursing stairs whenever I come across them. In fact, I hardly notice stairs—my eyes seek out ramps.*



### PINK

*There is really no deeply political meaning to this one. I just happen to think everything looks great covered in pink sparkles. Maybe I covered the image in sparkles because as a queer femme I see how something perceived as so feminine (like pink sparkles) can be 'queered' and used to challenge the norms it supposedly is constructing. Maybe it is because I am an optimist and I see beauty everywhere. Maybe it is because I couldn't use the other markers. Maybe it is because pink is my favorite color. Maybe I covered the image with the sparkly pink paint because I was curious or because when I cover myself with glitter I feel fun, flirty, and fabulous.*

I didn't know I had this in me.' In another workshop, two women who incorporated a disability symbol into their art spoke of how they did not see themselves as disabled but as members of the Deaf community. Their representation prompted group members to discuss differences in experiences of gender and sexuality within communities, such as 'dating' or 'bringing a partner home', that are often hidden under the label 'disability'. This approach to witnessing and participating helps facilitators and participants to shift from evaluating or interpreting the artwork to allowing themselves to be moved by each other's art-making.

Unlike traditional support group exercises that are highly structured, the creative processes women partake in are more fluid, without sharp beginnings and endings. Often participants undertake exploring possibilities for their bodies and lives in informal conversations as they pick out a paint colour or learn how to set up a shot with the camera. For example, one participant who created two clay sculptures of her bodily differences said about her art pieces: 'My nose and my spine are issues that are very hard for me to look at'. Once her pieces were done she expressed: 'It felt so liberating to feel the clay nose, and to trace my clay spine with my finger'. In another session, a woman who watched another make a collage using an image of a baby, initiated an exchange on motherhood. As others joined in, the ensuing conversation created space for participants to share fears and dreams around possibilities of parenting, including the woman who remarked: 'I can begin to imagine disability as a resource for parenting, rather than a barrier'. Comments from workshop evaluations suggest that, while women view the art and image making as valuable, the most meaningful feature of these groups is the sense of connection they feel in sharing their images, artwork, and stories with other women. One woman wrote what inspired her most was 'the joy' she felt in witnessing participants discuss their creative work, where others wrote that they were most moved by learning other women were dealing with similar issues (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch & Ignagni 2005).

*Building Bridges* creates an opportunity for shifts in meaning of difference and disability to occur. Making space for conversation and creativity enables women to share strategies learned through

confronting common challenges as well as to script new possibilities for their bodies and lives. The project does not deny the challenges of others' and our own perceptions of body difference, but it does open up the possibility to imagine. Imagining becomes a resource that allows women make new meanings and create new connections through art, image, metaphor, and narrative, and in so doing, envision new images and interpretations of difference.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The *Building Bridges Project* has produced two resources: *Talking About Body Image, Identity, Disability, and Difference: A Facilitator's Manual*, and *Building Bridges Across Difference and Disability: A Resource Guide For Health Care Providers*. Our Facilitator's Manual is designed for use in diverse settings and includes detailed information, activities, and resources for running a group using the *Building Bridges* workshop method. Our Resource Guide is intended for diverse audiences of health providers to enhance their communication, stance, and sensitivity to boundaries in interactions with people with physical differences and disabilities. If you are interested in ordering your own copies of the Resource Guide or Facilitator's Manual, please call AboutFace International at 1-416-597-2229 or toll-free 1-800-665-3223 (in North America) or email to: [info@aboutfaceinternational.org](mailto:info@aboutfaceinternational.org).

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- <sup>2</sup> AboutFace International is the only organisation in Canada providing services to persons with facial differences.
- <sup>3</sup> The Building Bridges project was supported by the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

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