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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Little People by

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## FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

*Little People*. 58 minutes. 1984. Rental \$85, purchase price \$850 (\$700 for video) from Filmmakers Library, 133 East 58th Street, New York, NY 10022.

This is an upbeat but sensitive film about being a dwarf in America. The audience views a series of nicely edited segments of various dwarfs going about their daily lives; activities such as buying shoes (2 1/2 EE) or loading a watermelon onto a supermarket cart present special difficulties. Dwarfs are also filmed talking about their lives and interacting at a national Little People of America convention.

The film focuses on a number of issues, such as the problem of job discrimination and the importance of social supports in increasing the degree of professionalism in a discriminated-against group. A college graduate with a degree in accounting relates that upon seeking a position with a major accounting firm he was told, "You have no business here—you belong in a circus." Another talks of the pressure of trying constantly to prove himself at work, so that he is not thought incapable because of his size.

Other sections focus on the social rejections and pain of dating and adolescent athletic cliques: ". . . the tremendous feeling of loneliness, of exclusion. You knew that the parties were going on and you weren't being invited. . . . You were in the middle of the group but you were alone."

Medical problems and the difficulty of deciding whether or not to have a child are also portrayed: the fear and guilt of having a

dwarf child, the fear of difficulties in pregnancy, and the fear of having an average-size child who will reject dwarf parents.

Another topic is the negotiating of physical environments designed by average-sized people. As a Christmas present, one couple decides to build up their bathroom floor so that the toilet seat is no more than nine inches off the floor.

The overriding theme is the dwarfs' reactions to the reactions of their physical size. A young woman talks about the first time she saw others similar to herself and her feeling then that her normal-sized parents were the strange ones—the giants. There was the satisfaction of seeing other small people, but also the discomfort of knowing that she looked like that.

The audience is exposed to a number of viewpoints: those of adolescents, younger children, young and mid-year adults, both male and female. In addition, average-sized parents talk about the experience of having a dwarf child. The medical problems of dwarfism can be severe, resulting in spine, hip, and lower-limb deformities that require corrective surgery and physical therapy to prevent wheelchair living.

Interspersed with these sections is a number of old film clips and ads showing historical media portrayals of dwarfs. There is a portion of a tongue-in-cheek newsreel of the first convention of Little People of America. One can see the proprietary orientation of the titles for Jed Buell's Midgets in *The Terror of Tiny Town*, a film with an "all-midget cast," and in ads for Rose's 25 Midgets. In addition, Oscar Meyer used a dwarf for a while to represent a living version of the company's trademark.

Dwarfism is not always seen as a liability. George, who runs a packaging materials business with his wife, notes that customers are surprised when they place their order on the phone to someone who has an "average-sized voice" and then come in and see him. He believes that they are tickled that they met a little person, and he believes that it helps his business. A young boy points out another advantage: when you're playing hide-and-seek, it's a lot easier to hide. An analogy is drawn between black pride and dwarf pride. Says one dwarf, "To say I have a defect is someone else's value judgment. Pride may be

foolish, but it balances out the years of feeling ashamed."

The most appropriate courses in which to use this film are deviance courses and introductory sociology courses in which the concept of stigma is explored. The film provides an excellent explication of Goffman's concept of the discredited person, who can "pass" as normal only in telephone interactions. The film illustrates the various patterns that the "moral career" of a dwarf may take and the effect of stigma management upon social identity.

Appropriate study questions may include the following:

1. One of the dwarfs in the film says, "If we're the ugly people, society needs us, because without the ugly people there can't be beautiful people." What does he mean by this?

2. Are there parallels between black pride and dwarf pride? What, if any, are they?

3. Think about movies you have seen in which a character had a physical handicap. Was that character evil or super-good? Was his or her character related to the handicap?

The film has only a few shortcomings. First, because there is no narration, there is no information on how many dwarfs there are in the United States or in Little People of America. In addition, the difference between proportionate and disproportionate dwarfism is not discussed, although that point may not be sociologically relevant. The film was produced, directed, and edited by Thomas Ott and Jan Krawitz.

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