

Disability and Impairment, what is the essential difference? Deconstructing the language of the social model

Abstract:

The Social Model of Disability represented a paradigm shift in the history of the construction of disability when it first appeared, separating the concept of “non wholeness” from the individual and placing that upon societies interactions with the individual.

Nonetheless it has in turn become the dominant ideology and how well does it really serve the individual in terms of self concept, and liberation ideology, has it merely replaced one form of words with another meaning precisely the same.

Has current thinking ossified and become as much a barrier to progress as the model that were supposedly replaced?

I intend to show that it has, and that the language has not really moved with the ideology, particularly as it expresses a very Anglo-centric concept that does not really translate well into other languages with their own embedded referents and connotations

It is time to do away with “impairment” altogether and finally remove the “disability” from the individual and look at the relativity of the concept.

Different times and different situations require different pragmatics, in the post modern world no one model can be seen to be morally or culturally superior, without arousing claims of discrimination

History of Social Model and why this matters to me.

The social model, came about not so much as an academic discourse but as an active strategy, a campaigning tool, to change societies perceptions about the place of disabled people in that structure, it was a reaction to what then was not even thought of as a model so much as the natural social order.

However in its historical context, arising after the second world war within the social context of a shift towards left wing collectivism, and Keynesian economics, it was no doubt seen as a very modern idea replacing as it did notions of hierarchical society and individual or charitable responsibility toward welfare of non productive members of the economy.

I expect others can dwell on the particular history at greater lengths, cite dates, and crucial texts, I will merely elaborate at this stage my gradual awareness of this taking place.

The Social model has by transposing the burden of disability from the individual to the greater world that impacts on the individual supposedly been a liberating one, but before I even start on the deconstruction of the linguistic basis it claims to have used in doing this, I need to focus back on the individual, for liberating or not it seems to ignore the individual narrative. As a post modernist I cannot extract the historicity of my own circumstances and intertextuality from the narrative, however whilst actually making the narrative I cannot escape from the personal perspective illusory though it might seem

I came to this discourse by way of active involvement in a nascent disability rights movement in Coventry. back in the early eighties and wishing to be better informed threw myself into the available literature at that time encountering the ideas of Mike Oliver (1990), Vic Finkelstein (undated), and radical literature such as “in from the cold (Liberation Network of People with Disabilities, 1981 –1987)” on the way

My mother who had persuaded me into this career choice being a more social animal than I encountered the same ideas through what I can only describe as a loose network of people who were involved in a variety of leftward leaning activities, from trade unionism, to women’s issues.

She made her own transition from modelling herself according to a hand me down working class status and economic reject to self empowered activist on picking up the social model as a tool on the way.

We entered this world at a time when organisations and local action were still very much parent/and professional organised and were part of the drive to change that. We went through stages of awareness I guess beginning with the notions of people first language, which seemed at the time to be a logical step to relocating disability from the individual, but later came to see the fallacy of that euphemisation within the context of what is now called the social model, which allowed one to form an identity as a minority oppressed by disability not of course, ones own disability (what you may call impairment and I call difference). People first language and accompanying philosophies of normalisation and Social Role Valorisation (Wolfensburger 1983) that accompany it tend by contrast to be euphemising discourses, accepting and apologising for the ills of society. (Arnold, 2006)

That was then, how about now:

The next transition in my ideology did not come about until after my mother died. My own condition had been an irrelevance a question put off until I was forced into a more active interface with society, only then discovering it had a name even. For sure society is the problem, particularly when one discovers ones own condition is constructed largely in terms of a social deficit and the rest of it hinges upon ones failure to come up to expected standards of literacy, numeracy and dexterity, which combined with that supposed social deficit, which by its very nature I was unaware of until I had a name for my condition and encountered the literature, leaves one somewhat unemployable.

I also discovered that the prejudice against such a nebulous disability of mine did not exist solely in the realm of employers, and government, it existed right in the heart of what I had been accustomed to call the disability movement, for those fine models of the 80's and still current lack the intellectual equipage to deal with something outwith the usual constructions and perceptions of disability.

Nonetheless in finding my own kind, I discovered the limits of the social model, particularly as a personal construct for understanding ones own position. Early on I came across Judy Singer and her l essay in Corker and French's disability discourses (Corker and French, 1999) which introduced me to the term neurodiversity. I had also come across other writing from within the online autistic community from Martijn Dekker (1999), and Jim Sinclair (1993), names not so well known in what I now call the mainstream world of disability studies. Shortly after this I took to media studies and became more immersed in Post modernist ideology.

At which point I shall like El Cid at the end of the movie ride out of the gates of history and into legend. Or to put it less poetically, here the narrative stops and the discourse begins again.

Definitions:

The World Health Organisations model is essentially summarised in Amelia Harris' definitions of 'impairment' 'disablement' and 'handicap' in 'Handicapped and Impaired in Great Britain', (Harris et al, 1971)

'Impairment' is defined as 'lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body'. 'Disablement' as 'the loss or reduction of functional ability'. 'Handicap' as 'the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by disability'.

The radical Politburo of the UPIAS and it successors such as the BCODP found this to be wanting and substituted what I consider to be no more than an intellectual legerdemain, and a juggling of largely cognate terms that, having arisen in an English speaking discourse is rooted in that particular linguistic culture.

Thus defining Impairment as "lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body"; and Disability as the "disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation that takes no or little account of people who have physical impairment and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities". (UPIAS, 1976)

If you want to know more it can be found in Finkelstein's Reflections on the Social Model of Disability: The South African Connection on the Leeds University disability studies website (Finkelstein, 2005)

Well disregarding for the moment how the text might translate out of English it seems to be largely a somatic construction of impairment and disability notwithstanding.

And an alternative view:

Now at this point I reach for my dictionary no, not the tired Oxford English or Merriam Webster stereotypes (for even there they don't agree on points of Transatlantic variance) but a rather ancient and dusty tome handed down from father to son entitled "The Universal Dictionary of the English Language" (Wyld, 1932) edited by Henry Cecil Wyld

Here impair is described in most pejorative terms as a transitive verb as deriving from Old French empaier "to make worse" and cognate with the Latin peiorare from whence we get pejorative in the first place

Further out takes give us "to lessen in strength vigour quality, value, to cause to diminish or deteriorate, to injure, to reduce".

Who wouldn't prefer disability as a term in preference to that. Notwithstanding that when one looks up disability in the same tome it does in practical effect mean precisely the same thing by a different root (in both the tree and road sense of that)

I quote again: "To make unfit physically, to incapacitate deprive of power of action to injure, cripple to disqualify or make or pronounce incapable"

That is in other words disqualified, invalidated linguistically to not have the capacity (from whatever means) to do.

One can see both similarities and differences which I will return to later, but in both senses we have the noun deriving from an action and the semantic differences become only ones of the more legal context of the second the sense of both being extremely negative and not at all socially neutral.

According to David B Morris (1998) the fixation with the body is a particularly post modern concern substituting the media generated ideas of ideal surface that can potentially be modelled and altered cosmetically and through physical exercise for biology.

In the light of that in what sense would something like anorexia an impairment or a disability, it does not fit neatly into medical or social models but in post modernist terms it is a consisting in part of being as Lakoff (Lakoff & Johnson 1990) describes "an embodied mind", in discourse with the particular social and economic pressures it faces, at once a corporeal and incorporeal thing neither taking precedence as the focus shifts from situation to situation.

I have already alluded in my introduction to the appearance of the Corker and French book. This contains a number of essays introducing what seems to me a post modernist critique of the usefulness of the social model when negotiating ones individual relations with the avowedly post modern word essentially looking at the hitherto suppressed importance of individual narratives in understanding the constructs of disability impairment or what you will. In the introduction to that Impairment and Disability (as defined within the social model, not my dictionary) are seen as a Dyad neither of which can exist without the other and in continual discourse. One cannot really separate the two and talk of disability without reference to the other.

The terms we use in this discourse are embedded to within our language and culture. The analysis of this cannot take place purely within the notions of a politically charged sociology of disability as is currently advanced, but has to take account of such genres as socio linguistics, and psycho linguistics even.

We cannot simply change the language and mean something different for though we may be clear in what we mean when we use it even going so far as to enshrine it in our particular paradigmatic definition, there is interference in the usage. Language is two way, there is a transmitter and receiver, and what the receiver connotes and even denotes by the same term can never with certainty be transferred one from the other without all manner of interference by way of cultural overlay, context and provenance getting in the way. Ultimately we understand the basic model in our own way and distort that further when we attempt to use it within our own external discourses be they academic, political or personal.

The Irony to me of course, in this is that my own condition is partly constructed as an impairment of language and communication, and never mind the differences between langue and parole if you pardon my French and allowed out of my metaphorical cognitive prison long enough to essay that. I will continue to put my hypotheses on trial.

You see I am amused at the similarities and differences and as with Derrida's writings it sometimes becomes to me elaborate play, if you were to dissect my elaborate bilingual punning there, for later on I intend to return to the difficulties of translation. Essay in French meaning to attempt, to try, or assay which means to evaluate by weight. Where metaphorically we put the arguments against each other in imaginary balances like the scales of justice.

German and Swedish Examples.

Last year at the Autscope conference I recall some Swedish speakers, attempting in English to convey the work they had been involved in. The most noticeable thing for me to begin with was their "politically incorrect" terminology. Use of terms like handicapped for instance (which one still finds much in US discourses as well)

I felt critical of this at first but then realised this was probably not the intent of the speakers, but a factor of the translation. In turn I wanted to go behind the terms they were

translating and to know what they were in the original Swedish. The term that became Handicapped was originally funktionshindrad a word I recognised as similar to the word behinderte I am more familiar with in German, which suggest to my mind the sense of hindered, in English the term behind has the same root, to hinder means also to retard, and hence an even more objectionable terms in today's political correctness devils dictionary

As if to prove my theory to be true, I typed a mixed series of English and German terms into google to find discourses in German on the Social Model, and was not surprised to find that due no doubt to the cultural Hegemony of the Anglo/American dominance of this field that such a discourse could not proceed without the heavy use of loan words, much as our own UK legal system proceeds with loan words from Latin and Norman French dictating a direction of economic and political hegemony.

For example Newsletter Nummer Fünf September Zwei Tausend Ein (Behindertepolitik, 2001) (yes it is called "newsletter" littered with other untranslated concepts in raw English such as "disability studies"

Worse than that I came up with this from the University of Marburg:
Geographie und Behinderte. Erklärungsansätze (Daubert & Steinbrecher, undated)

Which included a discourse on the social model with such terms as Fähigkeit for ability and körperliche beeinträchtigte for physically impaired, which again set me reaching for my dictionary which came up with these alternative (and not always clear to me) translations for beeinträchtigen; to vitiate, to trench on (upon, to compromise, to affect.

All of which to me complicates any simple translations from one language to another, and makes it plain to me that what the speaker or writer has in mind is not necessarily the same as Finkelstein and Oliver et al had in mind.

Anyway to turn aside from the German Krüppelbewegungssparole literally cripple-movement-speech

Actually it is not unreasonable these days to deride the classic Whorfian hypothesis that I seem to be expounding here, that the language we use governs our understanding of the concepts beneath it, and without the supposed forty words for snow we who don't know them cannot know snow as the Inuit does. Well to me that leaves out the worlds of the artist, the cinematographer and poet who can encode perception and difference in ways the mere prosifier cannot.

Again I return to the individual narrative to make a point about the discourse since the two are interrelated at this point, I make this presentation from an avowedly autistic perspective, and if it is not politically correct or respectful to do so, then I say that it is neither a crippled or an impaired one and any disability with regard to that is granted by the listener who does me not the respect to listen.

Because I do not think primarily in words I have a fascination with them, when it comes to choosing the means of translating my concepts, and temporal spatial relations to the world of speaking people. Thought without grammar is that possible? Well to those who denied the capacity of thought to mute people apparently not, others would even label my native mode of being inhuman (to quote from a recent textbook), but if my neurones have to fire according to some principle elucidated by physicists there perhaps is where the grammar lies, or does it, if I go looking for Schrödinger's cat?

However I am communicating to you in the realm of words and words and a word as 'Humpty Dumpty said, means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.' only a mathematician like Dodgson who dealt with the clear relationships of symbolic logic perhaps could satirise so clearly the absurdity of language.

Jabberwocky is indeed a study in itself as Dodgson himself expounded (Carrol, & Gardner 1999)

"He finds that the Anglo-Saxon word "wocer" or "wocor" signifies "offspring" or "fruit". Taking "jabber" in its ordinary acceptation of "excited and voluble discussion," this would give the meaning of "the result of much excited discussion." (Hollander, undated)ⁱ

There is even a page of international translations if I ever needed to make my point about the difficulties of transmogrifying it.

Semiotics (Chandler, undated) teaches us that the word is not merely a signifier of what it denotes, but an index of what it connotes as well, every word (and complex arrangement of them) is inescapably embedded in a cultural context.

Nonetheless we are attempting in our models of disability to force a particular language to conform to what we want it to, but does it truly map onto what is beneath and beyond it, the emotional substrates and metaphorical extensions?

Capacity as alternative descriptor

Impairment perhaps is a measurement the capacity to hold the perceivers notions of perfection and normality. Not a thing in itself but a gradation as with temperature. As if impairment as a term could value free and neutral for to me though in spite of the pretensions of the Social model to revise the language the word still signifies the somatic/functional model of disability

Disability cannot escape the psychological and self related construct of what it connotes never mind etymology and usage. It does not relate to impairment in all cases, as with disfigurement or the possession of aids, epilepsy, which on the face of it is serially no more impairing than the regular incapacity due to colds and other transitory ailments.

As Morris (op cit) said in *Illness and Culture* in the post modern age “suffering no matter how isolating and horrific, occurs only within a context of social life p204)

Now as I was writing this I took a break from the discourse, picked up one of my flutes, played and then attempted to reflect upon wherein my joy of playing was located. For sure I enjoyed the modern economic artefacts of a Boehm system flute but take them away and my ability would remain, and I concluded that the enjoyment preceded my need for the artefacts and created that, but my want of the artefacts in their absence would not be impairment or disability.

However at the historical point when I was writing this paper another personal example sprang to mind and hindsight will tell me more. I stood according to the medical model in danger of losing the active use of my hands without being operated on. So how is that diminishing facility an impairment? Well regardless of functioning hands, that is not where the musical ability lies for it is a mental one deep seated one which I would be unlikely to lose without catastrophic brain injury and not even a facility dependent upon conventional notions of intelligence at that. However it is not considered normal to have that inherent musical ability, it is not a wholly universal trait, the impairment measured from the norm, is wholly subjective upon my own norm.

If I did not have that ability, would the loss of my ability to play through an external cause, either loss of access to the technology, or diminishment in the physical faculty be half so tragic (as such narratives are usually conceptualised.)

A supposedly perfectly endowed physical specimen with the financial ability to purchase a flute James Galway might murder for, and a Mensa IQ to boot might still neither desire or be capable of learning to play with the same joy, enthusiasm and facility as I can.. Is such an individual then impaired, and through that socially constructed as disabled?

Am I impaired, because I am not built like a Greek god with Hollywood teeth, impaired because I am not an athlete or film star? All is subjective and individual. Well I can be impaired in practically every way depending upon the socially defined parameters of normality, but if I chose to reject the norms one cannot even say that a social model holds sway at all because I am doing the defining not society, nor society's critics.

This paper is of course as individual a text as I am myself a text or palimpsest, for although this text is embedded in my own personal and cultural experiences it has been created in a very post modern way, emerging as a confusion of individual thoughts and references begging to be written down and only later given the overall narrative structure tying into a sense of history, the conventional paradigm of what an academic paper should be.

Society may surround us, but society is not constant or monolithic thing identical in every location and at every time I find myself. Here right now I am in a subset which is not the same subset I might find in a pub this evening even though the same people might populate my environment. Society is built of individuals, and how those individuals relate

to each other at the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels is built of many things. Individual physical difference is but one, how we are educated is another, and beyond that our own cognitive and perceptual apparatus and how they govern not only how we experience our physical differences but how we think about, indeed how we can think about them. Language is a very poor medium of exchange in this complex environment. Ultimately this is all about how you or I construct our own notion of being disabled and about what the disability means in a wider context.

It is tools the job. Language and discourse is fine, medical tools are fine too when I want something fixing. The Social model is not an objective truth, it is but another metanarrative, (Lyotard, 1984) constructed by intertextual actors who are no more the authors of it, than I am the author of this discourse, it is our times and relationships that form these discourses. An idea has its time but over time becomes in itself the new orthodoxy and begins to hold back progress. I do not for one moment suggest going back to prior models as if there is this false dyad but we have to realise that we are in a pluralistic world is the Social model a Panglossian (Voltaire, 1980) best of all possible worlds, or can we preach liberation in new ways, for if liberation is Mao suited China where perhaps all physical wants are supplied but individual differences suppressed, that is not where I hope any of us would like to be. You can level up with increasingly sophisticated engineering prostheses supplied to all who require them or you can level down, with Harrison Bergeron like devices to handicap one in the horse racing sense, but are either of those choices freedom?

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