The Coveted Positioning on the Human Axis:
Disabled Persons' Experiences with their Representations

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Since society tends to shun disabled people, bar their presence in public spaces, and relegate them to their private realms, the mediated arena is probably the only place they can be fully seen. By and large, disabling representations are stereotypical and place the disabled outside the 'regular' stream of existence in order to elicit feelings of pity, terror, or adoration. Textual analyses of popular media and canonical arts yield the fundamental phenomenon of erasure: The disabled are all but invisible in the symbolic reality. However, erasure is not complete, and disabling images do occasionally flicker, among them the following stereotypes are dominant: The Victim, The Evil Threat, The Maladjusted Burden, and The Supercrip. The overall picture is of human beings who are forever 'Others', inherently different from the non-disabled. The different negative images attributed to disabled people substantiate, corroborate, and reproduce their inferior and peripheral positioning outside 'normal' society.

There is an assortment of mechanisms for the symbolic production of the disabled. But a crucial question arises: How do the disabled perceive these erasing and disfiguring methods? Though quite a few studies have conducted textual analyses, these cannot answer the question. There is today a burgeoning theoretical and methodological trend to conceptualize meaning only in the context of the interaction between texts and active readers, who are situated within socio-historical milieus. This leads us to question the relevance of textual analyses to the lived experiences of the disabled. Several researchers have already voiced a similar dissatisfaction with the existing body of work, which ignores the reception of disabling images by those who are most acutely affected by them.

The present research is based on the ethnographic approach which examines the subjective meanings ascribed to mediated texts as well as the socio-cultural contexts of media consumption in order to uncover interactions between readers and texts. I conducted interviews that began with a standard question: 'What is your first or most remarkable memory of a disabled person in the media?' On the basis of the responses, a free, unstructured

conversation ensued. My objective was to reveal subjective interpretative patterns of mediated messages, therefore I was careful not to lead them into pre-conceived configurations. Since this is a preliminary exploration, I have not made any attempt to analyze links between socio-demographic variables and themes.

A wealth of themes was extracted from the interviews. I will now elaborate on those that refer to questions of reception of two representations.

Many interviewees related to disabled people who attained commendable achievements. These references were by and large imbued with admiration for the people who could and did triumph over various obstacles. The majority of the informants hailed this image. They expressed a desire for representations of people for whom obstacles are not impassable. They serve as role models and objects of emulation and constitute examples of disabled individuals who can become 'normal' human beings.

The problematic situation of the disabled guides them to look for models of overcoming physical, social, and cultural obstacles. Disabled media consumers seek images that can corroborate their own hopes to overcome these difficulties. A common metaphor is that of the fighter: someone who has mobilized inner resources in order to fight the impairment and the environment. Against all odds, the fighter survives in a hostile world, and thus becomes a venerated symbol of the longing to be a complete human being.

One of the most significant parameters of success is a professional career. **Yossi** is a 50 year old engineer who uses a wheel-chair because of polio. He is adamant in his view that the best images of the disabled are those who are employed and climb the ladder of a professional career. Yossi constructs such people as a kind of supercrip:

Please note: The quotations closely follow the colloquial Hebrew the interviewees used. All names are fictitious.

> I definitely think that the media should show more cases of disabled who are what I call 'successful'. Never mind if they succeed in business or the work place or family life…
> […] No one, I assume, knows that until ten years ago the registrar of companies was in a wheel chair […] I absolutely expect the media to show these things. The good things, and not only the disabled who demonstrate in the streets or those whose economic situation is bad… and who encounter hardships…

Disabled media professionals are relevant in this context. They break through the inherent structural barriers and are, by definition, visible. They constitute a paradigmatic example of the universal desire to put an end to mechanisms of exclusion and symbolic annihilation. Disabled media professionals whose impairment plays no role in their career— who can, for instance, anchor programs that have nothing to do with disability—demonstrate

that normalcy is possible. That the disabled can actually be integrated into social systems. The implicit message is of practical and political advantage: Other disabled people can learn that they can achieve professional and other kinds of success, while the able-bodied can learn that discrimination should end.

Nira—a 52 year old unemployed paraplegic—admires media professionals, because they serve as role models and have become public actors who undermine stereotypes. Nira perceives them as incentives for other disabled people:

> [A famous radio anchor] is successful and works in the media. […] For me it was an example, a message: 'Look how wonderful!' He is in a wheel chair and he works in the radio. […] I didn't really think that disabled people would have key positions in work, on the radio, such places. [… Another radio anchor] gave me the opportunity to see one of us… on top. It is very important for me that the disabled advance.

Nehama—a 50 year old secretary with muscular atrophy—accentuates the fact that the disabled always start off from a lesser position than their non-disabled peers. In order to excel, they need to surmount the obstacles which all the disabled face. Their ascent to the center of public attention is thus a source of great satisfaction for other disabled people.

> I will not say that I salute, but I certainly am happy for people who have great careers. To mention one - then Itzhak Perlman, who won success, and is still successful world-wide. […] From where he began, from this disability, from the hardships […] I definitely appreciate him.

Mali—a 48 year old book-keeper with polio—like many other interviewees, stresses that the disabled are 'just like everyone else', and hence do not warrant special treatment by the media. Current media coverage can be rid of structural discrimination by using examples of successful disabled. Only then will the disabled be integrated into mainstream society as equals.

> I say that the media have nothing to say about the disabled. They talk about them only when there is a demonstration or when one receives the Israel Prize […] There is no reason to talk about them, because they are regular people. […] There should not be media coverage of the disabled, that is, except for achievements and demonstrations. They talk about the achievements and it's good that they want to show that the disabled, in spite of their limitations, have great achievements in sports. […] In our club [a social club for the disabled] we say: 'You know, we've seen this guy on TV'. It gives us a

good feeling to know them, and we know they are lawyers and such… First of all, the disabled are not a burden on society. […] I think that every disabled wants to achieve this, to feel that he is equal, he is worthy.

The complementary image of the pitiful disabled is grounded in a process of objectification, whereby disabled people become the personification of their impairments. Since they are imperfect beings who cannot survive independent of another person, they lose their agency and become helpless objects. Their existence is dependent on the feelings of pity they arouse. All the interviewees abhor this image and expressed views that alternate between frustration and fury. This cultural construction of their identities is perceived to be the epitome of their negation.

Being pitiful is meant to trigger sympathy. However, the objects of this sentiment share a profound antagonism to any such attempt. Stimulating pity is perceived as another means to exile the disabled out of the 'normal' social fabric. Objects of pity are not normal human beings, but doomed creatures who, without pity, cannot survive. Their humanity is thus severely damaged. Moreover, commiseration permits the able-bodied to momentarily absolve themselves, instead of taking steps toward sincere social change that will allow integration. Feeling hence becomes a substitute for action. Pity also positions the disabled as worthless; people with whom no ordinary relationship is possible.

Ya'akov—a retired 56 year old banker with polio—indicates the schism between his own self perception as able and the mediated image of the weak disabled. As is evident in all interviews, the informants tend to move from singular to plural pronouns. Indeed, the mass disseminated image is perceived to be a token or an ambassador of sorts for all disabled people. Therefore, the mode of representation seems to be necessarily projected unto all disabled and the ways they present themselves. To a large degree, the media usage of a particular image is also perceived to be the sole mode of identity formation in the social reality. The symbolic and social realities are enmeshed within each other until the mediated images and 'real' identities are entangled and cannot be extricated from one another. Ya'akov reminisces:

I remember in my childhood […] I read about all kinds of people with disabilities. Mostly, poor ones. Pitiful people. […] I didn't feel myself to be pitiful, so it annoyed me a lot. I never understood why the media treat me as pitiful. […] I have lived with this [polio] all my life and I knew that I was physically limited. […] I tried to do more than others to prove, because it was like this from the media's point of view. […] We were mentioned only in a certain connotation, just within the framework of wretchedness: 'This poor cripple did this and that.' And then I always said: 'My God!

Why do they always show cripples who are poor and dirty and disheveled and beggars… but never in a positive way?'

Anat—a 40 year old social worker with muscular atrophy—began unfolding her memories by mentioning television talk shows, that were condemned by many interviewees. In recent years many talk show hosts have cultivated a trend of helping 'poor' people. The latter are by definition miserable creatures who must rely on the kindness and compassion of strangers. This new format assigns social prestige to all involved: The hosts position themselves as humane, altruistic guardian angels; commercial firms that donate money or services benefit from publicity while making only a minimal investment; audience members donate money or simply enjoy playing a virtual part in this real life drama; and, finally, the 'poor' person receives material goods and fleeting celebrity status. Anat expressed deep resentment against this phenomenon: National authorities evade their responsibilities towards the disabled and talk shows become the only opportunity for many to be helped.

My memories are of the talk show that has a hooker and the 'token disabled'… and I've never wanted to be there. […] The disabled who needs money for a wheel chair, for a van, and other things that the State doesn't want to give him. […] The 'token disabled' needs money, and the State humiliates him. […] I could have, for example, gone to this host, because it [an electric wheel-chair] cost me 34 grand. I somehow succeeded in getting donations, and didn't go to the show because I was ashamed. I was not willing to be presented this way in the media.

Nehama's observation sums up the various criticisms of the pitiful image, which reproduces, reinforces, and maintains the stereotype of the disabled person as an unwanted and parasitical hump on the back of 'healthy' society. Nehama opposes pitiful against successful images, and clearly supports the latter as the proper and accurate approach.

The media still locates the disabled not within society itself, but outside of it. As a group of people that are different than society. They are not yet society proper. Still different. And maybe the problem is that sometimes the media, when it covers the disabled, maybe it covers them from a position of pity. […] When we are defined, for example, as a group of weak people, I say, it is not that we are weak. We are weakened. Society at large weakens us. [Question: What is the right way, do you think?] Not to bring pictures of poor people, but to bring the people… who have families, who work, who make a living, who achieved something on their own. Actually, this is one of the

things that disabled people have difficulty with, that they are always shown as very poor. And this is actually not true.

<u>Existence on Both Poles of the Human Axis: Discussion</u>

The lion's share of the interviewees in this study were empathetic towards the supercrip model. They emphasized that this was the appropriate mode of representation because it constitutes a beacon of hope, a model for admiration and emulation. Being awkwardly situated on the invisible and disenfranchised outskirts of Israeli society makes the disabled seek images of success. Images of people for whom the impairment plays no crucial role in the fulfillment of their wishes and ambitions. The supercrips who participate in the public sphere thanks to some achievement—be it marriage to an able-bodied spouse, a professional career, or public recognition—are perceived as role models, a source of consolation, as well as respected emissaries to the rest of society.

The contrast between this representation and the pitiful one surfaced throughout the interviews. I would like to propose an axis of humanity where the disabled are located on both poles, but never at its 'normal' center. They are either 'more than human' or 'less than human', but seldom, if at all, do they enter the public sphere as 'regular' people performing 'regular' tasks. To the interviewees' chagrin, the media still focus on the crippling stereotypes that situate all disabled people as helpless, wretched creatures who are doomed to eternal misery. This pitiful image is still prevalent and is pivotal in the phenomenon that Murphy called 'diminution of self'. These individuals cannot develop a full human self, for both symbolic and social realities teach them that the disabled are not entitled to be anything but 'quasi-human'. An existential rift separates the disabled from the bedrock of 'normalcy'.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the informants detest the pitiful image and are unwilling to play the seemingly natural role that our culture allocates to them. The able-bodied seem to believe that the 'natural' response to physical impairment and its repercussions is despair, self-pity and wretchedness, as if wretchedness were the inherent outcome of being handicapped. The prevalent media representation reproduces this quasi-human state to a great extent. The reaction of the interviewees in this study to this approach was acutely negative. For instance, some of the interviewees noted that they refused to watch talk shows because this genre cold-heartedly exploited the disabled, turning them into post-modern beggars who practice their 'vocation' in television studios instead of on street corners.

Disabled people aspire to be included in the public discourse irrespective of their disability. Disability should neither be a factor in nor a pretext for such participation, should not affect the form of the representation, and should not be the sole focus of public attention. Notwithstanding the positive perception of the supercrip stereotype, most interviewees prefer not to relate to their impairments and display the disabled person as an integral member of

society. They want to be situated in the center of the human axis and to eradicate the tendency to shove them toward the periphery. Indeed, their wish is to be included in the public sphere as 'regular' or 'normal' actors, whose corporality is negligible and insignificant. Bodily impairments are essential components of the self, but the human totality should neither be minimized nor objectified. To be like everyone else is the prime objective: neither excelling nor suffering. Such a model of representation can advance profound social change. The media can take part in affirmative action if they depict the disabled who are located in the epicenter of normalcy.

To sum up, questions of personal identity and socio-cultural positionality are an integral part of media reception. The ways in which individuals construct their identities within the social matrix are relevant to their patterns of sense-making of symbolic reality. Disabled people's challenging situation prompts them to pursue models of triumph over physical, societal, and cultural barriers. As media consumers, they seek examples that corroborate their belief that these obstacles can be overcome. Highly regarded supercrips embody but one instance; 'regular' (i.e., 'someone like me') people are especially coveted. This triumph is used to validate the disabled individual ('I can do it') and to alter societal perceptions ('the disabled can be like everyone else'). Consequently, the wish to see disabled people who 'have done it' is particularly intense; while the pitiful disabled trigger antipathy because they reproduce and reinforce the cultural status quo.