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The Attribution of 'Authorship'
in Cultural Interpretations of 'Disability'

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Abstract:
In a response to recent debates around "charitable representations of disability", this paper strategically places such representations within a wider contemporary cultural context and aims to move beyond a traditional deciphering approach to representations by challenging the a-priori categorisations we use to understand them.

I will begin with some thoughts on how cultural representations of disability have been afforded so much significance. Is it because they appear tangible; they can be seen, heard, owned, repeated and exchanged? Or could it be that they are thought to come from somewhere specific and in doing so encourage authors to be attributed? The paper will continue with a focus on the practice of attributing 'authorship' and look at how it has become linked to notions of 'authorisation', 'authenticity' and 'ontological definitions' in the academic play of understanding. It will also draw on research conducted within a leading UK disability charity to explore the possibilities of treating charitable 'authorship' as an active process, rather than a discrete moment in time, where speaking positions are sanctioned and authority bestowed. The paper ends by suggesting that considering representations as implicated in a mesh of cultural/academic practices is a departure from the orthodoxy of current analysis offering an alternative and potentially fruitful interpretative option.

<u>Paper:</u>

Today, I want to look at…
- **1.** <u>**THE '*CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY*'**</u> as an 'issue' by focusing in on its
- **2.** <u>**ITS DISCOURSES OF COMMENTARY AND/OR INTERPRETATION**</u>

By this I mean, a focus on
(i) how 'representations of disability' are being understood and what particular 'understandings' are dominating current discussions in the academy.
As part of that I'm going to look more specifically at how
(ii) thinking through 'the attribution and the interpretation of authorship' can help us comprehend the wider theoretical bases for how representations are currently being conceptualised.

Here, I focus even closer in on the author's '<u>blaming-function</u>' and the specific example of representation by <u>charities</u>. I want to suggest that there has been, in part, a "psychologizing' of the cultural understandings of <u>authorship</u> which are based on a certain notion of subjectivity and its structural relationship to language.
And finally,
(iii) I want to suggest that by considering representations as implicated in a mesh of cultural and academic practices we can begin to see that these debates are not ones which will be solved but ones which have a highly adaptable and mutually dependent relationship with the very representations they are concerned with. For the purposes of description this, again, will use the example of <u>charity representation</u>.

I. THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY

A set of debates have emerged over the past 20-25 years characterised by a concern with representations, portrayals and depictions of disability/disabled people in modes of cultural representation (such as print media, film, fiction, advertising, photography, etc). In more recent years these debates have been translated into policy initiatives. From the British government's launched of a campaign to include more disabled people in governmental advertising (2001/2002) to a European Union 'Congress on Media and Disability' (2003) which was aimed at addressing the insufficient representation *and* employment of disabled people in the media, it seems that politicians and policy makers have suddenly discovered that there is issue to be addressed.

But despite an increase in these sorts of initiatives many people would find it hard to disagree with, or seriously counter, comments like this one from Paul Darke:

"The representation of Disability in the media in the last ten years is pretty much the same as it has always been: clichéd, stereotyped and archetypal"

(Darke, 2003: http://www.darke.info/)

But rather than ask questions about the representations themselves - such as 'are they clichéd?' or 'why do they remain stereotypical?' – today, I'm interested in asking different questions:

When a representation of disability is commented upon, or interpreted, how is it done?

&

How are representations of disability currently understood - in terms of what they are and what they do?

And it is here I want to look more closely at the:

II. 'THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY' & ITS INTERPRETATIVE CATEGORIES

I've taken the case of writings in the UK here just for the sake of simplicity. When faced with cultural representations like these:

[IMAGES]

These are advertisements from the British charity the *Spastics Society* now called *Scope* and their use is about a decade apart.

When faced with such images the four most common interpretative responses are:

(1)   the representation as the _cause_ of perceptual/attitudinal change, whether positive or negative, towards disabled people

As can be seen in this quotation:

"The results [of the study] show, therefore, that the images of learning disability presented to people in the form of charity appeals can have a substantial impact on expressed attitudes to the groups that the charities represent."

(Doddington et al, 1994:220)

Here representations are deemed to shape and influence people's attitudes.

(2)   the representation as the _manifestation_ of non-disabled people's psychological abjection and fears as in this quote by Deborah Marks:

"The media uses images of impairment in order to represent some of our deepest fears concerning 'normality' and 'belonging'"

(Marks, 1999:153)

Here representations are the symptom of underlying psychological factors.

(3)   the representation as _mis_representing disabled people to the wider non-disabled general public

Colin Barnes (1991:2), for instance, has highlighted the:

"the persistence of traditional misconceptions about disability and disabled people. Stereotype assumptions, myths and beliefs from earlier less enlightened times"

Here representations are doing a dis-service to disabled people in that they are not representing a true contemporary reality.

(4)   the representation as _perpetuating_ discrimination against disabled people

As in this quotation, again from Colin Barnes,

"They [representations] are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily, and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life"

(Barnes, 1992:37)

So in this argument representations are not necessarily the cause but are a contributing factor in continuing and reinforcing prejudice.

These interpretative categories (to varying extents and in conjunction with each other) underpin most of the current attempts to understand representations like these **[IMAGES OHP]** of disability, in the UK at least, but what Mitchell and Snyder (2001:195) have termed _"the problem of disability representation"_ remains. After all representations have other, more immediate, properties than are currently accounted for. They are _intangible_. They do things but they do them uncertainly. They speak, they signify and they mean, but they do so differently under different historical and contextual circumstances. And yet they are equally _tangible_ - they can be seen, heard, touched, held, exchanged and repeated. They can often be removed from their settings, re-appropriated but retain the distinct marks of their origins. They appear to come from somewhere specific, they present as traceable, and therefore encourage authors to be attributed.

I want to suggest today that the <u>attribution of authorship</u> plays a fundamental role in all the interpretive categories I've mentioned and it is to this which we now turn:

IV. THE ATTRIBUTION AND INTERPRETATION OF *'AUTHORSHIP'*

Ever since Barthes' (1977) famous proclamation that the author was dead cultural theorists have had to take seriously the suggestion that 'authors' are unimportant and even repressive for the purposes of interpretation.

Foucault (1977), however, had a slightly different approach to Barthes. Although he agreed that the author's biography and intentions were largely unimportant for interpretation purposes he suggested that far from being dead authors still play an important part in our understandings. His legacy has been the idea of an *'author-function'* which changes the focus from 'an author' as he/she exists in time and space to the concept of 'the author' as it functions in discursive formations. It asks us to think about authorship as an active process not a moment fixed in time, and it will be this strand I follow today in outlining just one of the ways understanding 'authorship' is important to the way we comment on and interpret representations of disability. I am going to do this by concentrating on one aspect of 'authorship', that of its '<u>blaming' function</u>.

'SOMEONE TO BLAME': *THE AUTHOR AS A CAUSAL EXPLANATION*

Examples of 'the author' as a causal explanation or a source of blame in writings on the representation of disability are everywhere.
Focusing upon writings about *charity,* for instance, it functions - as an <u>author</u> - differently in different commentary/interpretative settings. In contrast to the more general <u>public arena</u>, where charity is generally an implicit yet unquestionably trustworthy author warranting public support and involved in the act of truthful representation, during <u>critical encounters</u> *charity* is cast in an author role and becomes an oppressor. Indeed it becomes *the* primary oppressor of disabled people, against which activist attacks are mobilised [*spot the spelling mistake!*]. What follows is a quotation from David Hevey in his famous 1992 book *The Creatures Time Forgot,* it reads:

"Charity photography is a form which is at once stubborn and fragile. A photograph which…is based on a medical view (or model) of disability cannot lead to the empowerment and liberation of disabled people"

(Hevey, 1992:3)

The book places charities within a capitalist disability industry and contends that although charities are currently one of the most prominent authors of 'disability' they should be actively challenged. One of the reasons given for this is that when charities represent it is largely non-disabled people who are doing the representing. As Deborah Marks (1999: 163-4) has commented:

"His [Hevey's] starting point is to argue that charities function to support the grandiosity of non-disabled people, who speak 'for' disabled people and present disabled people in demeaning ways"

This reasoning is sanctioned because the interpretation of disability representations has, in part, and in the words of Mitchell and Snyder (2001:198), *"become a matter of 'psychologizing' the cultural understanding of disability"* both in terms of its production and its reception. Or, more specifically in this case, become a matter of 'psychologizing' authorship. This has meant that the charity author is assumed to have a non-disabled subjectivity and the result, in terms of representation, is thought to reflect a non-disabled psyche which necessarily involves a fearful desire to reject of all things abnormal and hence involves the degradation of disability and disabled people.

However, appeals to such an authorial psychology are complicated further by the ambiguous interpretation of <u>charity's authorship as singular</u>. Whether that be **(i)** lumping all, often highly disparate, charities together and analysing them generically as 'charities' or **(ii)** seeing *a* charity as being one sole author when an advertisement, for instance, has had a Marketing Manager, a Chief-Executive and an advertising agency, at the very least, work on it. So, although charity's multiple authorship works to further complicate the idea of a singular-intending psyche behind representations, it has not hindered interpretations which rely on psychology for their explanation.

Unfortunately, I don't have the time here to explore the full implications of the "psychologizing' of cultural understandings of disability".

- My point here is simply to suggest that by looking at the understandings of the 'representation of disability' we can begin to glimpse the assumptions on which the debates rest.
- My more specific point is that, in one important sense, the 'author' has been used to denote <u>the psychological tendencies and/or the intentions of the actual biographical author</u>. And, in doing so, appeals to a certain notion of a fixed subjectivity and its structural mimetic relationship to language.

And so the act of commentary/interpretation can be seen as employing certain knowledges about what 'authorship' means **BUT** by doing so it also regulates the discourse around how best to represent disability'.

I'd like to move on now to briefly consider:

V. THE CHANGING NATURE OF CHARITY 'AUTHORSHIP': AN EXAMPLE

The act of commentary/interpretation circulates texts and commentaries about representations and, in doing so, alters the contingencies of their production/reception. As Sara Mills (1997:67) has commented,

"Those discourses which are commented upon by others are the discourses which we consider to have validity and worth"

So discourses around how to `represent disability' and how best to 'author disability' have been repeated and renewed (Foucault, 1981:19) in the act of commentary/interpretation. This produces (and thereby regulates) contingencies which anybody materially representing disability are able take into account. In short, the act of commentary/interpretation is staking out new parameters for the possibilities for representation.

In understanding this Foucault is again instructive here. He has commented that *"The author's name"* that is the presentation of the name of an author on a cover of a booklet, for instance, *"manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture"* (Foucault, 1977:14).

If we take the case of charities again, his suggestion points to the presence of discourses of 'authorship' that enable charities to speak and changes in these discourses have therefore had an impact on how charities themselves handle their authorship role.

For example: the development and institutionalisation of the social model of disability has allowed charities to side-step criticisms of negative representation by switching to a political social-modal discourse on disability and this can be seen in the changing emphasis away from cure to campaigning.

This change has had significant effects for their representation of disability - for it changes their biography and intentions. What used to be

an authorative, philanthropic author which appealed to notions of care and compassion are now, in some instances, attempting to retain the status of an authority but shifts its philanthropy to a political advocacy. This can be seen in the establishment of 'external policy' departments in the major charities.

VI: BRIEF CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In suggesting that we shouldn't be demanding the substitution of negative images for more positive ones or more realistic portrayals as measured against a social model I am *not* claiming that we need to move on from the politicised criticism of representations.

I *am* suggesting that when we critique representations we need to be aware of the assumptions we are mobilising,

and we need to take Foucault and others seriously by understanding disability as constituted by, rather than expressed in, conventions of cultural representation, including discourses of authorship.

Ultimately 'the problem of disability representation' will not be solved because any discussions about representations have a highly adaptable and mutually dependent relationship with the very representations they are concerned with.

And rather than acting as a benign overviews or even cruel critiques acts of commentary and/or interpretation create contingencies whereby the 'representation of disability' is only ever possible with reference to constantly oscillating yet firmly delineated discursive limits.

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