

CURRENT ISSUES

# What Are You Doing Here? 'Non disabled' people and the disability movement: a response to Fran Branfield

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Branfield's response to Drake's earlier paper filled me with considerable unease, though it achieved its function as a polemical piece, if that indeed was its intended function. I believe Branfield's paper may make writers working in 'disability studies' feel a greater sense of urgency to write on this subject. I will not identify myself as either disabled or non disabled as this identity is being handled in a particularly adversarial and oppositional way in this present discussion. Also, non disclosure will serve me a purpose towards the end of this short paper.

I do not doubt the conviction of Branfield's views, and as such I cannot dismiss them. Rather, I ask where do her views take us, and what do they do to us in the process? From my reading of her reply to Drake's current issues paper, Branfield gives Drake an intellectual bruising which I feel is undeserved. This bruising is a result, I believe, of the particularly oppressive theoretical position she leads us towards, one that mirrors the oppression experienced by disabled people. She enters a discourse of exclusion by suggesting non disabled people have no place in the disability movement and a limited place in disability studies. This is very much against the ideology of inclusion which my own involvement in the field of disability has offered me room to align myself with. Branfield takes us towards a discourse that sustains a kind of binary opposition. What I mean by this is her argument rests on splitting disabled people from non disabled people, joining a familiar set of similar binaries: female/male, black/white, child/adult, homosexual/heterosexual etc. These are all binary oppositions sustained by this type of discourse where one binary is preferred to the 'other' and afforded socioeconomic and political privileges in the process (employment, income, social status, voting rights etc.). With respect to disability, this type of discourse sustains the practice of segregated education and employment opportunities: disabled people are thought of as the 'other' and too different from the 'mainstream' to be integrated into it. Perhaps Branfield feels it sufficient to turn the table on these binaries and to privilege the 'other' that has historically been dealt the lesser hand. But this would be shifting the focus of

oppression while leaving the practice of oppression intact. To draw a political parallel, would this not be similar to an argument that apartheid was not a bad thing, it was just that whites rather than blacks should have been marginalised in the process? These ideas are not in the content of Branfield's paper, but for me they are embedded in the ideological position she adopts. They may be rather large conceptual leaps for me to make, but the emotive nature of Branfield's comments makes me feel at ease to make them. She does dilute her position in the last paragraph (two sentences), but this for me is too little, too late.

Clear-cut and unproblematised distinctions between disabled and non disabled people are too simplistic to take us far in our understanding of the field. Non disabled people regularly become disabled just as disabled people can become non disabled. These identity shifts can be the result of social, economic, political and/or medical interventions. Some people's identity can flux between both, many people live with identities that place them somewhere between the worlds of 'the disabled' and 'the non disabled'. For example, this is the case for people who have 'recovered' from a psychiatric disability but who are still treated as though they have an impairment and people who have been diagnosed with a genetic degenerative disorder, who will show no signs of impairment for years to come yet are treated as disabled at the moment of their diagnosis. Disabled people do not come in a neat, clear-cut package, there are as many differences within the disabled population as there are similarities, and disability status is much more fluid than it is often described.

The divide between 'the oppressors' and 'the oppressed' is similarly less than unproblematic, especially in the way Branfield appears to confound the identities of all disabled people with the oppressed and all non disabled people with the oppressor. Oppression can be enacted by disabled as well as non disabled people. The insidious divide between the Para Olympic and Special Olympic movements is an example of this, where people with learning difficulties are segregated from people with physical and sensory impairments. Perhaps closer to home for Branfield, 'meta-theory' that seeks to 'explain' what disability is, developed by the disability movement (i.e. the social model) has been argued to be oppressive towards some disabled people (see recent editions of this journal) when it has been seen to deny the individual experience of impairment. The disability movement further has been suggested to be non inclusive towards older, working class, black people and people with learning difficulties. It has been argued that those who have been privileged in the movement are the 'white, male, spinal injured elite'. Disabled people can be oppressors, whether they are educators, employers, administrators or academics, and their actions can be oppressive towards women, ethnic minority group members as well as their disabled peer group among others. This would not lead me to suggest disabled people are oppressive though in the type of reasoning Branfield adopts perhaps it should. To class all non disabled people alike is as ideologically violent as the tendency to treat all disabled people alike. Though in some ways a political necessity to present oneself as a minority group movement to have a common voice, and a common culture, it is another to bring this discourse into the level of theorising on the contributions of non disabled people to disability studies and to the

disability movement. It is nothing more than blanket discrimination based on an individual's biology and physiology (the 'absence' of impairment), the same blanket discrimination used to oppress people according to gender, ethnicity and impairment.

Oppression is a characteristic of many people's lives. One in four adults and one in three children live on the margins of poverty in the UK. The unemployed, underemployed, women, ethnic minority group members among others all experience acute oppression in our society. When I think of such groups (while not wishing to make a crass generalisation), I have trouble associating non disabled oppressed people as the oppressors of disabled people. Similarly, I am aware of the tremendous contribution of non disabled people to the campaign of rights for disabled people (this in no way suggests the contribution of disabled people is any the lesser). Blanket discrimination against non disabled people would support rather than refute their complicity in the oppression of disabled people.

I have a further, less ideological and more pragmatic, reason why I am uncomfortable with the path Branfield is taking in her reply to Drake. This concerns the status of disabled people as a minority group in society—not minority in number, but minority in political power. The eminent social psychologist Serge Moscovici's theory of minority group influence suggests that a fortunate path for minority groups to effect social change is to have a degree of autonomy in their voice. For a minority group to exert influence over majority groups, they are assisted if they have allies outside their group membership who will support their aims. It needs both internal and external calls for change. The dissent against a system of disability benefits that traps disabled people into lives on the margins of poverty can resonate more strongly if this dissent comes also (not only) from those not reliant on disability benefits, i.e. both disabled people in satisfactory employment and non disabled people. Their call is autonomous in that we can see little in how such dissenters will personally profit from the changes they call for, other than perhaps a 'moral(e)' victory. Non disabled people can add to the clarion call of disabled people. There is a place for non disabled people to speak up on disability issues. To return to a political parallel I used above, this is as 'true' as was the need for the international community to speak up against the oppression of the black community in South Africa. Similarly, it is 'true' for the need today for the international community to speak up against the oppressive violence in Northern Ireland. We do not have to live in these countries to become passionately positioned against the oppression we hear happening in these countries. Why should one have to be native to disability history and culture to voice one's concerns of the institutionalised violence directed towards disabled people? Unlike Branfield, I feel such concerns are not solely located in the 'sincerity' or 'sympathy' of non disabled people but can also be located in their full-blooded outrage on violence towards disabled people. Drake is right to remind us non disabled people must avoid speaking on behalf of disabled people, and is right in asking us to reflect on the nature of the role non disabled people should have. Unlike Branfield, I do not feel this is so obvious that it does not need stating. Drake has done much to show the disempowered position of disabled people in disability charities which was not obvious to me until I first read his work

some years ago. I hear Branfield's anger in her reply to Drake and can empathise with her reaction but not with the direction her action takes her.

Finally, as a newcomer to this journal I am able to leave my disability status undisclosed. Is it important you know whether I am disabled or non disabled? Would it make a difference to how you read this paper? If no, then does that not undermine the argument that disabled people alone should speak up on disability issues that concern the disability movement and/or be actively engaged with disability studies? In other words, it does not matter whether a person is disabled or non disabled for their thoughts on disability issues to be taken into account. I suspect readers are, however, curious to know my disability status. The question I ask is: if I am disabled, does this add more legitimacy to my assertions than were I non disabled? Were I non disabled, perhaps it is out of self-interest that I write supporting the inclusion of non disabled people in disability studies and the debates created by the disability movement. It would be to my advantage if there was employment for non disabled disability researchers if I were a non disabled researcher. If I were disabled, is not my assertion all the more powerful, in that it is not in my immediate (career) interest to support the inclusion of non disabled people into disability studies and encourage them to speak out on the concerns raised by the disability movement. In fact, in many ways my speaking out on these issues would counter such interests, I would lose the privilege of being a disabled researcher and a disabled writer working in the field of disability if I was willing and keen to share the platform with non disabled colleagues. I believe the more powerful reading of my paper in this respect is the one where I have a degree of autonomy. Is this not a good reason why we should encourage non disabled people to engage as allies to disabled people in disability studies and to speak up on the concerns raised by and the interests of the disability movement rather than having their voice silenced? The voices of non disabled allies *should* be heard, as voices that add to the vociferous activities surrounding the disability movement. We must avoid the oppressed becoming the oppressor, and the children of revolutions becoming the parents of the oppressors of the future.

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