

How Do You Understand “Learning Difficulties”? Towards a Social Theory of Impairment

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Learning Difficulties as Postmodern Impairments

A particular postmodern view—*poststructuralism*—acknowledges the cultural basis of knowledge about and interventions with human beings (Foucault, 1970, 1975, 1983). As Foucault put it: There is a price to be paid in human subjects speaking “the truth” about themselves. Truths, of course, do not emerge out of thin air. They are tied to particular institutions (and related research practices), such as medicine, psychology and social work, what Rose (1985, 1999) called the “psy-complex,” which enjoys dominance in late Capitalist society. Psy-complex practitioners create discursive truths that serve to inform and to govern human subjects. One such truth states that impairment is a *naturalized* and *pathological phenomenon*. A theory of ‘learning difficulties’ that maintains this *biological* vision of this label always threatens to leave these truths in the hands of the very institutions that social theories purport to challenge. In contrast, learning difficulties as an object of poststructuralist analysis need no longer be understood as inevitably biological. Instead, it becomes an aspect of the social world than can and should be theorized as part of a politicized vision of disability. (The terms *learning difficulties* and *disabled people* that are used in this paper reflect the preferred labels of organizations of disabled people in Britain, such as People First and the British Council of Disabled People. Specifically, the term *learning difficulties* is chosen instead of other synonyms such as *mental handicap*, *mental impairment*, *mental retardation*, or *learning disabilities* because it is the term preferred by many in the British self-advocacy movement. As one self-advocate stated: “If you put “people with learning difficulties,” then they know that people want to learn and to be taught how to do things” (quoted in Sutcliffe & Simons, 1993, p, 23).

Reconstructing Impairment

We think that much can be gained from a poststructuralist social theory of learning difficulties.

In particular, our experiences with people who have this label suggest that this objectified group is subjected to peculiar varieties of interventions, symptomatic of late Capitalism, which are the very stuff of postmodern analyses. We offer two types of oppressive intervention—‘inscribing impairment’ and ‘individualized competence’—and offer challenges to these interventions, via *deconstruction*, as storied through our involvement with people who have learning difficulties.

Inscribing or challenging impairment? Fairclough (1992) suggested that the poststructuralist method—deconstruction—involves untangling the mixing of discourses that are utilized in the practices and techniques of governance employed by the psy-complex. For people with learning difficulties, their identities are governed in a number of professional contexts. Accordingly, a variety of discourses are brought together in this process, such as psychological notions of “mind,” which when applied to people with learning difficulties, emerge as syndromes and mental impairments. These *objects* contribute to the seduction of psychological discourses and, when adopted, lead to particular assumptions about people who are so-labeled:

The special school’s Christmas performance. I take my seat at the back, amongst an audience of family members, teachers, support staff and local dignitaries, to whom students sang, danced and acted. Enter stage left, Hugh. A slight teenage lad, Hugh performed to piano accompaniment the classic Tom Jones number “It’s Not Unusual.” As his performance was greeted by enthusiastic applause, a teacher turned to me and shouted above the noise, ‘It’s his syndrome you know—it makes him so extraverted’ (Goodley, in press).

Hugh’s actions are *framed* in terms of the available object of syndrome. Consistent with Butler’s beliefs (1993, p. 129), Hugh’s “personhood” is understood as a set of naturalized violations or injuries to his very personhood. All that remains that may be spoken of meaningfully in relation to Hugh is a syndrome. Deconstruction goes further to unearth the historical a priori that delimit the totality of experience in a field of knowledge. Such historical

a priori define the permissible mode of being of objects that appear in a field of knowledge, to become the things that are “known.” In this sense then, learning difficulty as impairment must be understood relationally, historically, practically, and critically. As Fairclough (1992) and Wetherell and Potter (1992) have pointed out, not only is the deployment of one *particular* discourse rather than another always a political act, but also power struggles occur in, through, and over discourse, as elements of social and personal change. This view resonates with our own experiences: We have been drawn to the ways in which people with learning difficulties resist categories of object and forms of subject that are thrown at them. Close and detailed attention to the qualitative nature of social life opens up possibilities for challenging taken-for-granted narratives, such as impairment as biological insult:

Karen had recently had a meeting with an educational psychologist because, she joked, “I’m dumb in the head.” A supporter who works at the college suggested that this meeting be arranged because Karen “was not joining in in class”. Karen disagreed—“No, I was bored” (from Goodley, 2000, p. 191).

According to Fairclough (1989, p. 28), the social nature of discourse and practice always implies social conventions: Assumptions of and about “the retarded” become second nature in professional interventions and, as Danforth and Navarro (1998) have shown, such professionalized knowledges readily come to permeate lay discourse. However, human subjects may also be *enabled* through being constrained: Being socially constrained does not preclude being *creative*. Where there is power there is also, inevitably, resistance (Foucault 1975)—as evidenced by Karen’s reaction.

Individualized or collective competence? Booth and Booth’s (1994, 1998) research on parents with learning difficulties clearly shows how assumptions commonly held by professionals tend to frame parenting skills in terms of the impairments owned by each parent. Their work draws attention to the ways in which professionals approach the task of support with assumptions that promote deficit thinking: Problems will arise in parenting because of the psychological deficits of the parents, and this will impact negatively on their independence as parents. In contrast, and in line with a view of disabled people as social beings, Booth and Booth unravel the (lack of) social networks surrounding parents that contribute to what we might term *fitness to parent*. In relation to parenting competence as an

indicator of an individual’s independence, they argued that:

Competence may more properly be seen as a distributed feature of parents’ social network rather than as an individual attribute. The notion of what might be termed “distributed competence” attests to the fact that parenting is mostly a shared activity and acknowledges the interdependencies that comprise the parenting task. (p. 206)

Such a social conceptualization of the notion of competence allows for a *relational* and *interdependent* stance in relation to assumptions about parenting incompetence and, hence, impairment. Fitness for parenting is not, of necessity, an individualized quality but, rather, a product of social and relational networks. The rise of the self-advocacy movement, both nationally and internationally, constitutes another sociocultural context inhabited by people with learning difficulties (Williams & Shultz, 1982). Recent research suggests that such contexts exhibit a variety of relational qualities in which notions of learning difficulties as lacking can be revisited (Goodley, 2000, in press). Specifically, the working self-advocacy groups question the idea that people with severe learning difficulties causally disable social relationships. Take, for example, the following observational vignette from a self-advocacy group:

[Rachel arrives at the meeting by minibus from the local “Autistic Community.” She does not speak often.] She spends her time quietly and apparently contentedly smelling her fingers and looking around the room. She doesn’t appear to interact with any of her friends. At break-time Bill asked her if she would like a cup of coffee or tea. Erica, who lives with Rachel, replied, “She likes coffee don’t you Rachel?” Bill looked at Rachel, “Coffee then?” (Goodley, 2000, p. 193).

The preceding vignette could be read in terms of personal tragedy, with Rachel being unable to contribute actively to the group as a consequence of her impairment (in this case autism). However, we can see how Rachel’s solitary actions—her perceived lack of independence—provide a catalyst for other self-advocates to act. Indeed, without Rachel’s apparent inactivity, a chance for interdependence would have been lost. If we choose to understand self-advocacy groups as contributing to the development of collective self-empowerment and decision-making of their members, then Rachel becomes an essential cog in the mechanism that brought about such a development. Such events invite us to reconsider how we conceptualize independence. Reindal (1999) argued that in disability studies investi-

gators tend to emphasize the dichotomy of independence–dependence. This is based on a modernist view of the human being that emphasises the voluntary and rational components of the human condition. Yet, as Rachel reminds us, there is a need to situate the self in relational understandings. If we maintain the independence–dependence dichotomy, independence remains an individualized quality, with related essentialist views of the subject being kept in place. Post-structuralist critiques of modernity’s emphasis on individual human beings, either capable or incapable of autonomy and rationality, suggest that such notions have been superseded by a turn to texts of the public, signifying activities of collectivities of subjects. Here the subject is no longer the: “solipsistic subject that constitutes through its faculty of reason, transcendental apprehension, self-consciousness and so forth” (Reindal, 1999, p. 361). Instead, we acknowledge a subject that is a “Community of selves . . . in a certain culture and epoch of history, i.e. an embedded self. Hence, the possibility of self-hood, agency, personal autonomy, universalism and so forth, is reinterpreted in light of this *expanded identity*” (Reindal, 1999, p. 361, italics added).

A weak postmodern version of the death of the subject presents a situated, enlarged subject—the subject as a social movement—where *interdependence* is crucial to the formation of notions of autonomy evident in parenting and self-advocacy—to name but two areas of disabling and enabling social life.

Towards a Social Theory of Impairment

The resistance of people with learning difficulties and their experiences of being disabled (where naturalized views of impairment are at the core of oppression) offer us lived examples that enable the re-socializing of impairment (Goodley & Moore, 2000; Goodley, in press). We argue that a critical postmodern stance encourages us to work with these incidents of resistance as part of the political struggle against disablement. As readers of a journal entitled *Mental Retardation*, we need to excavate and constantly re-assess how we understand such a label. In this paper we clarify two key considerations: (a) that impairment is up for grabs in the discursive world and (b) that we need to be sensitive and attentive to the challenges posed by people with the label of

“learning difficulties”/“intellectual disabilities.” Such a sensitivity, we argue, is enabled by a view that locates the supposedly individualized phenomenon of learning difficulties in the dynamic social and interpersonal world of discourse and practice.

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