



“TO PEE OR NOT TO PEE?” ORDINARY TALK ABOUT EXTRAORDINARY EXCLUSIONS IN A UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT¹

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Abstract. This paper demonstrates the sorts of questions that arise for sociologically informed disability studies scholarship in the midst of the interactional scenes of access struggles in an educational workplace environment. From my experiences in the third largest building of a large Canadian university, I have recollected ordinary talk that justifies the exclusion of disabled people and have pieced together narratives representing things-possible-to-say-today about accessibility struggles. By using an interpretive sociological approach, this paper explores how meanings of disability are generated through talk that justifies the exclusive shape and inaccessible structures of university life. I demonstrate that access is not a synonym for justice but is a beginning place for critical questioning where social relations between body and space can be thought anew. This paper adds to sociologically informed disability studies scholarship by analyzing how the ordinary everyday narration of disability acts as a social power reproducing the status-quo even as the material environment changes.

Résumé. Ce texte démontre le genre de questions qui se présentent aux études sur la condition des personnes handicapées informées par la sociologie en interrogeant les interactions qui émergent autour des luttes pour «l'accès» dans un milieu de travail scolaire/ académique. Au cours de mes expériences dans un des plus grands édifices dans une des plus grandes universités au Canada, j'ai amassé des

1. I thank the dynamic group of graduate students in my disability studies seminars at OISE/UT with whom this paper began. A part of this paper was presented at the 7th Annual Second City Conference on Disability Studies in Education (Chicago 2007), *Disability Studies and Inclusive Education: Implications for Practice*. I thank the organizers of the conference and offer a special thanks to Len Barton. His engaged discussion with me undoubtedly enhanced the analysis here. My work is also funded by a standard SSHRC grant “Organizing Disablement: The University and Disability Experience,” with co-investigator, Dr. Rod Michalko. [#410-2006-2132].

paroles quotidiennes qui justifient l'exclusion des personnes handicapées. J'ai rassemblé des narratifs représentant ce-qui-est-possible-de-dire aujourd'hui sur la lutte pour l'accessibilité. En utilisant une approche sociologique interprétativiste, ce texte illustre la façon dont les significations de l'incapacité sont générées par un discours qui rends légitime la construction exclusive ainsi que les structures inaccessible de la vie universitaire. Dans ce texte, je démontre que l'accès n'est pas synonyme de justice mais, par contre, est un point de départ pour la réflexion critique où les relations sociaux entre corps et espace peut être considéré à nouveau. Ce texte contribue aux études sur la condition des personnes handicapées informées par la sociologie en analysant la façon dont la narration ordinaire et quotidienne de l'incapacité peut continuer à, en même temps que l'environnement physique change, agir comme pouvoir social qui reproduit le statu quo.

The truth about stories is that that is all we are.

Thomas King 2003:2.

You know, I mean, things just weren't built with people with disabilities in mind. That's why there are no accessible washrooms here.

An Ordinary Story 2007.

Disability studies must recognize that its critique should be trained on the institution of the academy as much as on the social and political context outside its walls.

Snyder and Mitchell 2006:196.

INTRODUCTION

Distinguishing itself from the established knowledge regimes of “cure or care” of bodily “deficit or deviance,” *disability studies* treats disability not as an individual biological matter, but as a social phenomenon requiring critical inquiry (Finkelstein 1998:33; also, <http://www.disability-archive.leeds.ac.uk/> 11/15/07). Disability is conceived of, and studied as, representative of the cultural environment in which and through which our lives as embodied beings always appear. “Historically, disabled people have been the objects of study but not purveyors of the knowledge base of disability” and this notion is knotted together with the university environment in which disability appears as little more than a myriad of undesired difficulties (Snyder and Mitchell 2006:198). This creates an intimate relation between establishing disability studies as an important form of critical knowledge production within the university, and creating accessible learning environments where teachers and students, learning communities, can thrive. The development of

disability studies must coincide with the development of a more inclusive physical and social environment. The obvious connection between access and disability studies is, however, often just that — obvious and thus undertheorized.

This paper addresses access as a fight for inclusion and participation, as well as a struggle to open accessibility as a space for theorizing and as a space of questions. Interest in improving access relies on questioning inaccessibility. This paper reveals the sort of questions that arise for disability studies scholarship in the interactional access struggles within educational environments. Without theory, the obvious, yet intimate, relation between the environment and disability studies becomes an unimaginative relation to justice and scholarship. Theorizing disability’s appearance as a justified absence, for instance, avoids turning access struggles into a boundary-building process tacitly reestablishing who is in and who is out. Questioning access discourse provides an opportunity to rethink and rewrite the meaning of access under contemporary conditions.

Using a disability studies approach informed by interpretive sociology, I will examine the ordinary ways that body/environment relations are articulated. Ordinary talk justifies the shape of daily life by relying on unexamined conceptions of disability. This provides an opportunity to explore how meanings of disability are generated. Taken-for-granted conceptions of disability are one way in which disabled people² are viewed as irrelevant and absent. This paper adds to the growing body of disability studies scholarship analyzing how the *ordinary use* of unexamined conceptions of disability reproduces the status-quo even as the material environment changes. Working at the crossroads of the material and ideological production of disability, I will reveal access not to be a synonym for justice but a beginning place for critical questioning.

I turn now to a discussion of the setting from which narratives regarding access emanate. I turn as well to a further discussion of what an interpretive sociological approach has to offer a disability studies’

2. The social model of disability (Oliver 1996; 1990) suggests using “disabled people” rather than the more popular phrase “people with disabilities.” Neither people-first language nor separating people from both their embodied differences and the social environment (as the Canadian government and WHO constantly and consistently recommend) has significantly changed the oppressive everyday meaning of disability. For an analysis of the social significance of disability labels as they constitute different relations to the politics of the body, consider, Bickenbach 1993; McColl and Jongbloed 2006; Michalko 2002; Overboe 1999; Pothier and Devlin 2005; Titchkosky 2001; 2007a. For critical work regarding the interrelation of access, disability, and education, consider Chouinard 2001; Livingston 2000; Low 1996; Opini 2006; Stienstra 2006.

interest in theorizing the interrelation of bodies, environment, and knowledge.

THE SETTING AND INTERPRETIVE METHODS OF SOCIAL INQUIRY

The setting within which I work is a twelve-story university building of 350,000 square feet. It is the third largest building on Canada's largest and arguably most diverse university campus. The building's main entrance is ramped and the building has state-of-the-art elevators, with audio indication. I began to work in this building in July 2006 and discovered that there were no washrooms meeting either university or provincial minimum disability accessibility standards. Ironically, some of these inaccessible washrooms were marked with the universal icon of access. One such icon was on a women's washroom door that opened about twenty-four inches; accessing this washroom meant nimbly squeezing through the doorway. I was disturbed by the lack of access and, in the course of daily life, I talked to many people in the building about the lack of an accessible washroom and the obviously incorrect signage. My intent was not to make this concern into a research project, nor was I covertly collecting data. I was simply attempting to live with, understand, and fix a problem.

In drawing attention to these barriers, I also was given a plethora of stories regarding the lack of accessible washrooms as well as stories explaining the posting of inappropriate access signs. I was struck by the various *stories-at-the-ready* that are part of this workplace environment and likely part of every Western(ized) work place, judging by the absence of physically disabled people from all of my places of work.³ Although accessibility features of one top-floor washroom were improved, there remained a wealth of justifications for the absence of "wheelchair washrooms," and justifications for the signs that said otherwise.⁴ The physical environment has continued to change; plans were made for a "really" accessible washroom, which has been built. As of 2007, it is in

3. For empirical documentation regarding exclusion, consider the Canadian governments' Participation Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) (Statistics Canada 2001) which shows the combined unemployment, underemployment, and nonlabour force participation rate for "persons with disabilities" to be around 80 percent. The United Nations (2003-04) has characterized the fate of disabled people around the globe as a "silent crisis."

4. I was incredulous and returned again and again to the scenes of exclusion thinking perhaps that I was wrong, that maybe my dyslexic ways got the measurements all mixed up. A professional environmental audit was conducted confirming inaccessible washrooms throughout the building.

the library on the main floor and is available during regular library hours. The narratives justifying the absence of basic access remain.

Inaccessibility is disquieting. In *Writing the Social*, Dorothy Smith (1999:8–9) says of her research that

... I have not started writing on the basis of research data. Rather, I have started with a sense of problem, of something going on, some disquiet, and of something there that could be explicated. [Inquiry] ... profits from dialogue between what we mean to say and what we discover we have said, and, of course, the work of rewriting to embrace what we find we have said that is beyond or other than our intentions.

This suggests that the daily experience of inaccessibility represents a “sense of disquiet” from which inquiry can and should spring. Such inquiry does not necessarily require the generation of traditional forms of social scientific data, but it does require attending to the ways things can be said to be as they are. Methodically engaging what I am calling the “say-able” is a way to uncover the meaning we are making of our lives together.

Thinking about the intersections of social differences in public spaces — even washrooms whose taken-for-granted status is almost necessary — is essential for gaining an understanding of how everyday embodied experiences are managed by discourses of competition for scarce resources, hetero-normative expectations, colonizing powers, and neoliberal demands. My analysis, however, focuses on stories of justification for “what is”; things said which present disability as something either to be explained by or subjugated to “what is.” My analysis of justification narratives follows a fundamental assumption of interpretive social inquiry: how people justify “what is,” is an interpretive social act. The interpretive act of justification is intimately tied to collective understandings of the meaning of what is. As an interpretive social act, justification is not merely second order to the fact of exclusion; it is our “facticity,” it is a “form of human life,” it is how we *do* exclusion as well as *generate* its everyday sensibility (Gadamer 1991:216, 220). This means that justifying “what is” *governs* our ability to imaginatively relate to our lives as embodied beings.⁵

Acknowledging the dynamic social character of justification breaks the illusion of a self-sufficient self that can secure, once and for all, the

5. For further consideration of the governance of embodiment/disability and imagination, consider, for example, Ahmed 2006; Bhabha 1994; Butler 1997; Diprose 2005; Frazee 2006; Foucault 1988; McRuer 2006; Michalko 2002; Parekh 2007; Shildrick 2002; Stiker 1999; Titchkosky 2002; 2003a; 2007b; Tremain 2005.

really good/bad, or really strong/weak, or any other final solution for “what is.” Rather than a final pronouncement on what “really” caused people to say what they said, I am interested in how we perform the meaning of our lives together as we talk about the reasons for the shape of this collective life. Examining justification as the performance of the meaning of disability raises the possibility of making something *new* of the collective from which these say-able things emanate. This is pursuing research with a purpose (Barnes et al. 2002; Barton and Oliver, 1997). The purpose of my work is to regard accessibility talk as a space of questions representing the complicated interpretive nature of our embodiment (Titchkosky 2007a).

I turn now to a discussion of everyday narratives of justification.

THE SAY-ABLE

The interpretive work of analyzing things said in the stream of daily life, the say-able, regarding the justifiable character of exclusion, requires a different relation to “data” than is usual in the social sciences. The narratives addressed in this paper are an amalgam, or a composite, of people’s justifications for the lack, in this large university building, of a washroom that met minimum accessibility requirements in 2006. An amalgam of narratives is related to Peter Clough’s (2002:8) suggestion that bringing together various narrative fragments from a given locale protects the anonymity of the speakers while allowing the theorist to “speak to the heart of consciousness.” Acknowledging Canadian Tri-council ethical concerns, my narratives harm no one since no individual is represented and the narratives stem from recollections of things said in the course of my daily life, rather than a deliberate collection of narratives (see, van den Hoonaard 2001). These narratives represent things that are say-able and treated by all involved as sensible.

Consider the following: “You know, I mean, things just weren’t built with people with disabilities in mind. That’s why there are no accessible washrooms here.” This statement represents one way to make inaccessibility sensible under contemporary conditions. This ordinary “truth claim” is a type of say-able thing that I have heard many times, in both rural and urban environments, and in reference to all sorts of structures. It is a comment so ordinary that survey data might never solicit it since survey techniques require some level of reflection. It is a say-able thing experienced within the flow, not of structured research, but only of everyday life.

I have amalgamated fragments of narratives, spoken by various people, to create five stories representing typical ways to justify the exclusion of disability. Insofar as everyday language can be understood as a “treasure house of ready-made pre-constituted types,” the “whole history of the linguistic group is mirrored in its way of saying things” (Schutz 1970:96–97), there is no need to individualize these words. My interest is simply in the say-able.

All the say-able things in these stories were stated in the presence of others, who sometimes treated them as wrong or distasteful. However, no one found anything said baffling. These are “sensible” say-ables. What interests me in this creative amalgam, is not individual identity but sheer *sensibility*. Whether these narratives are judged “good” or “bad,” all of us will find the amalgams sensible. Insofar as the say-able makes sense, we can ask what sort of sense it makes of inaccessibility. From an interpretive sociological perspective, all say-able things represent the cultural grounds of possibility from which they emanate; or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1958:214) says, every “. . . word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world.”

Examining locally produced everyday narratives justifying the exclusion of disabled people requires the social theorist to act, as Hélène Cixous (2001:6) advises, like “a little nail stuck in the gap” *between* the various things that are say-able about disability. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, feminist disability studies scholar, emphasizes the productive gap between the representation of disability and the lived actuality of disability. Our lives with disability may be informed by received representations, but they also exceed any representational confine. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2006:161) speaks of a gap requiring an ability to proceed obliquely between “reception and possession.” Meaning can be uncovered by an inquiry that acts like a little nail in the gap between received stories of justified absence and the possession of disquiet. The gap of concern here lies between the everyday reception of ways justifying the exclusion of disabled people from university environments and the conflicting versions of “normal bodies” that we come to possess in these encounters. I turn now to the stories.

FIVE STORIES

1. Some faculty and staff say that they fought hard, some twenty years ago, just to get a ramp for the front door of the building. They suggest that is probably when the signs of universal access were posted

- everywhere, including on inaccessible washroom doors. Once posted, “How were we to know any better?”
2. People say that in the distant past, human rights lawyers used to rent space to meet here. It is said that some of these lawyers were wheelchair users. This group began to push for accessible washrooms. They failed and took their meetings elsewhere. Still, the inaccessible washrooms got the universal sign of access posted on them. A lawyer wonders, “Maybe a cubicle inside the inaccessible washroom got a wider door?”
 3. Those responsible for the building say that others keep talking about how students in wheelchairs are going to come to school here, but they never show up. “Why go through the expense?” As for the signs being posted, “Isn’t something better than nothing?” Agitated by the suggestion that people are getting stuck attempting to enter these washrooms, someone pointedly reasons, “If they can’t use the washrooms *what are they doing* here anyway?”
 4. Administrators, officially responsible for making structural decisions and allocating funds, say that they are working on it. You can’t do everything in a day. In fact, maybe we need to just slow down. Thirty years ago, in good faith, the signs were put up and it is possible that, within a decade, we might be moving to a new building. “Remember,” they say, “we did secure the special fund to build a fully equipped accessible showcase classroom. Maybe some of that fund could be used to build a washroom?”
 5. All sorts of people are perplexed to find out about the inaccessibility and puzzled that those in authority do not consider the lack of a washroom meeting minimum accessibility standards to be a crisis for those working in the building. This perplexity, verging on incredulity, conditions what it means to work in this building. “My Department requested those in charge to at least take down the misleading signs. But the signs are still there. What should we do?”

Let us now proceed to be a little nail stuck in the gap between the stories we have just received and discern what kind of sense they represent.

MAKING EXCLUSION REASONABLE

When people come to notice that physical barriers prevent the participation of some people, comments about such exclusions erupt. One dominant type of comment is justification. People say, *because* of the past, *because* of the passage of time, *because* of ten, twenty, thirty years, *be-*

cause it won't make a difference, *because* we don't know what to do ... the washrooms remain inaccessible. Or ... *in order to* fight for ramps, *in order to* balance costs and benefits, *in order to* take care of who belongs, or *in order to* make plans for the future while living with a harsh paradox of the inaccessible labeled accessible ... the washrooms remain as (what) is. The reasons may not be agreeable to some and many of the reasons are unjust. Still, this situation of inaccessibility is say-able in the language of causality, that is, the taken-for-granted logic of “If A, then B” obtains in every narrative fragment. The causal language paints the radical lack of access in an ordinary hue. This ordinary hue glosses the issue of human rights, questions of belonging, and other consequences in the here and now that accompany the power to exclude. Clearly, justifying *what is* can hold at bay considerations of *what is not*.

Even if people oppose the offered reasons, it remains an unexamined “fact” of social life that it is reasonable to seek a reason for the lack of access. Giving reasons is an acceptable response, and surprises no one. Whether the reasons for lack of access are judged good or bad, the social activity of people seeking reasons makes lack of access reasonable. Thus, lack of access is a space for and of reason. An empiricist approach would consider what caused people to give this or that reason, investigate the veracity of the claims behind the reason given, or even measure the prevalence of this or that reason — none of which addresses the social “fact” that these washrooms bar wheelchair users, and that narrations of this “fact” maintain the status quo. An interpretive sociological perspective considers the productive power of the social act of reasoned justification giving. The question now is: what sort of reality, or definition of the situation (McHugh 1968), is being produced from such reasoning?

A sensible explanation makes the on-going exclusion of disabled people appear more or less ordinary; the context of exclusion seems part of a rational project. “Because of our past” and “in order to move into the future” are ways to create an ordinary sense of what is and is not going on. *Giving* reasons makes inaccessibility ordinary. All such reasoning relies upon and sustains the commonsense understanding of *disability as excludable*. Radical inaccessibility is not unique to this particular university building, and everyday uses of “because-of and in-order-to motives” are not unique to this setting (Schutz 1970). Providing such motives flavors *any* social situation with sensibility. The *particular* meaning that is achieved by these justification narratives remains a poignant question worthy of consideration. What, then, has been made sensible?

INCLUDING DISABILITY AS A JUSTIFIABLY EXCLUDABLE TYPE

The giving of reasons makes the inaccessible washroom situation sensible by relying on “including disability as an excludable type” (Titchkosky 2003b:518). The building is missing accessible washrooms and yet it is not; the building is not missing disabled people and yet it is. The building’s missing washroom becomes sensible when justified by the conception of disability as excludable. Disability is included as justifiably absent; if present, it appears in the form of an unimagined or unwanted question — “What are they doing here anyway?” In this situation, “accessibility” becomes a space for making the missing disabled people part of a reasonable exclusion.

One way disability *is* represented in everyday life is as a justifiably excluded type. This poignant paradox is not unique to my workplace. The phrase “Oh, she’s gone on disability,” attests to the structured ubiquity of the inclusion of disability as an excludable type. I am not arguing against disability insurance. Rather, I am arguing for a consideration of ordinary talk as a constitutive power in creating the meaning of people. Some ways of making disability present as reasonably excluded entail people living with disability as a justified absence. As a justifiable absence, *this conception of disability acts as a barrier* to inclusion for some disabled people. Unless the relation between environment and its participants is theorized and thereby disturbed, disability will continue to be included as an excludable type even as the physical environment changes. The discursive act of making something “justifiably absent” ultimately has much to do with how we delimit the shape of possible worlds. In Judith Butler’s (2004:2) terms, justifying absence performs, and makes present, what counts as “viable and non-viable” lives.

How does included-as-excludable appear not only sensible but also justifiable as an understanding of the lives of disabled people? Acting like a little nail in the gap between the multiple stories of justifiable exclusion provokes a reflexive engagement with the ordinary-ness of the paradox of disability as excludable type. I return to the justification narratives to find some difference in the same (Bhabha 1994); to live otherwise than ordinary (van Mannen 1990); and to offer an alternative relation to the alterity (Cixous 2001) in the discursive space that disability represents. What meanings might lie in the gaps between the most extraordinary and ordinary aspects of say-able things about disability? Accessibility talk as a space of questions requires the theorist to address the ambiguity in these sensible stories and reveal something of the cultural grounds of embodiment.

EXTRAORDINARY EXCLUSION

The narratives display different methods of justification: utilitarian cost/benefit rationality, bureaucratic sequencing of tasks, unfinished struggles and unmade decisions, and many more. While the end results might be common to these narratives, the justifying processes depicted in them are not identical. The third narrative, suggesting that disabled people are neither desirable participants nor imbued with rights, is the most obviously egregious of the stories and most in need of interrogation. Yet, I am uneasy with beginning where it seems most obvious to do so. It is with this disquieting “preliminary, inarticulate understanding,” as Hannah Arendt (1994:310) calls it, of an obvious offense as well as a need to seek the nonobvious in the obvious, that I now proceed.

Again, the third story:

Those responsible for the building say that professors keep talking about how students in wheelchairs are going to come to school here, but they never show up. “Why go through the expense?” As for the signs being posted, “Isn’t something better than nothing?” Agitated by the suggestion that people are getting stuck attempting to enter these washrooms, someone pointedly reasons, “If they can’t use the washrooms *what are they doing* here anyway?”

In this story resides a treasure house of ready-made types — there are those who belong, those who do not, and those who can explain the situation of belonging to and for all. Professors are characterized as unrealistic, but are still identified as a type belonging in the workplace. On the condition that they are not wheelchair users, professors, like students, are part of this story since they are “obviously” part of the university setting. The expectation of some professors that disabled people belong in the setting is regarded as a false expectation. Wheelchair users “never show up,” are an “expense”; they can only show up as a questionable type, that is, “what are they doing here anyway?” “They,” as a type, do not belong and so can never really be present; if present, “they” are only questionably so. Thus, “something [inaccurate universal access signs, restricted access hours] is better than nothing,” because nothing is the only alternative on offer. As partial participants, disabled students are typified as visitors who have overstayed their welcome rather than as desired or necessary members.

Interestingly, story number three does not claim that it is unrealistic to have an interest in accessible washrooms in public buildings. The inaccessible washrooms are not the targets of this justification. The targets are disabled students; their absence is justified and their presence is

made questionable. Notice also that disabled professors or staff members are not mentioned and remain unimagined types. "Students with disabilities" do not belong and are regarded as never really present anyway. Since the disabled type does not belong, there is no imagined possibility of it belonging to any of the other "ready-made types" common to this workplace, such as professor or staff member (Michalko 1999:41ff).

The third story suggests that professors have an unrealistic interest in disability since it is rare, transitory, unwelcome, not present, expensive, and only found in students of whom it is not clear "what they are doing here anyway." This story participates in an extraordinarily common belief that disability is not only rare but also nothing but limit and lack, unexpected and undesirable, or simply, "trouble" (Abberley 1998; McRuer 2007; Michalko 2008). The third narrative, then, represents an extreme example of including disability as an excludable type where exclusion is *made* normal because disability is *made* not-normal. Disability is not normal, not imagined, not welcomed, not needed, not common, not necessary, and not going to come to mind as the type for whom buildings are built or services provided.

Arguing against the inclusion of a type by invoking the type itself is straightforwardly an act of discrimination. Such open discrimination makes story three stick out as very different from the other four stories. Is there a connection between the obvious discrimination of story three and the other stories' more ordinary use of histories of the environment to narrate justifiable exclusion? What possibilities arise if we treat story three not as aberrant prejudice (a bad apple) but, instead, as the heart of the consciousness of embodiment in this setting?⁶ The third story is composed of narrative fragments said among people who did not respond as if they were confused. If people are always a "consciousness among consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty 1958:xiv), then what is said must be treated in relation to other say-able things, not as a symptom of some individual state of affairs. Individualizing the say-able treats things said as representative of a unique subjectivity or as a symptom of a warped origin. Resisting individualizing the say-able allows the interrogation

6. M. Mac an Ghail (2000:314) says that "An idealist analysis of the curriculum that reduces the heterosexist structuring of schooling to aberrant teacher prejudice is insufficient to explain the complex social interaction of white male and female teachers with black male students in racialized, male dominated institutions." I follow through on this understanding as it connects with other physical and ideological educational structures. In this way, I avoid the need to say that really it is strong or weak curriculum, or really it is good or bad physical structures that lead to the radical devaluation of disability in the Canadian educational milieu. Instead, made by culture, disability, in relation to textbooks or washrooms, is a good place to examine culture.

of the wider cultural grounds of embodiment. Let us continue, then, to explore the contradictory sensibility of these say-able things about disability.

DIS-EDUCATION

It is, of course, empirically incorrect to say that people who use wheelchairs never show up, since they do. The building is ramped. Even the obviously discriminatory third narrative acknowledges that people who use wheelchairs do show up. Still, the narratives presented here reflect an environment where justification of exclusion is achieved by saying that disabled people are somehow not present. There are other seemingly nondiscriminatory say-able things that also exemplify the understanding that disabled people are not present: “Well, I am sure those in charge of the building would stop saying such awful things, if they had to deal with people in wheelchairs.” How does making disability present as an absence make sense?

The concrete truth or falsity of the claim of absence is not what generates this talk. Saying disability is not here works with absence as a useful presence. Saying disabled people are not present, even though not empirically true, justifies a mythical absence as part of the productive sensibility maintaining what is, the status quo. The myth that disabled people fail to show up sustains what Colin Barnes (1998:65) says should by now be an unsustainable belief: “disability is a medical problem affecting a small proportion of the population.”⁷ The logical contradiction between “They never show up” and “What are they doing here, anyway?” gains its sensibility through an unrevealed conception of disability. Perhaps it is this conception that prevents a collective from experiencing the remarkable situation of including disability as justifiably absent while making the actual presence of disability not perceivable or perceivable only as a question.

Scholars have addressed the issue of the relation between conception and perception, or reception and possession, with regards to race (Ahmed 2006; Bhabha 1994; Dyer 1993; Gilroy 2000; King 2003; Parekh 2007). Paul Gilroy, for example, speaks of the connection between the percep-

7. Canadian government counts of the population of “people with disabilities” have varied between 4.2 and 3.6 million people; the majority of those counted are of working age 15–65 and the majority of these people are said to have a mild or moderate mobility or agility impairment. (HRDC, *Advancing the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities 2006*, especially appendix A). For other disability rates see, <http://www.disabilityworld.org/links/Research> (11/15/07).

tion of race and the production of racist structures. He says: "The human sensorium has had to be educated" (Gilroy 2000:252). For David Howes (1991), the sensorium consists of the culturally specific ways our senses are hierarchically ordered: in the West, for example, vision is dominant. The notion of the sensorium is similar to the phenomenological insistence that "... there is no such thing as a simple act of perception since anything we are perceiving appears against a dense backdrop of past, present and future experiences" (Weiss 2003:27; see also Classen 1993; Titchkosky 2003b, 2007a). Our way of sensing disability and making it sensible reflects the cultural education of the sensorium; it reflects the dense weave of historical experience that organizes perception and the relations among the senses.

So, the sensorium has had an education. Wheelchair users either never show up or show up as a questionable presence; they are not necessarily perceivable in the course of daily life; thus, disability is not conceived as part of the ordinary sensibility of what it means to belong in the university environment. I am not making an empirical claim that this is true for all people at all times. Instead, I am emphasizing that this is one meaning of disability operating in this workplace environment. If the presence of disability as a living absence was not already meaningful in the environment, the say-able things recounted in this paper would not strike me or you as sensible.

The education of the collective sensorium is really, playing on Gilroy's words, a dis-education. This dis-education teaches that the category of legitimate participant does not include wheelchair users. The dis-education of the sensorium includes a way to sense and make sensible the legitimate participants with their legitimated "normal" accommodation expenses: lighting, chairs, technology, privacy, directional signs, pleasing eye-scapes and, of course, a place to pee. Legitimated participants rarely confront access as a question. They can take for granted the whole massive infrastructure of and for able-ist consumption and use, which the sensorium has educated them (us) to consider normal and even natural. The plethora of disciplines studying disabled people as deficient, combined with a dearth of environmental deficit studies, are also part of the dis-education of the sensorium. The hundreds of missing students, faculty, and staff with physical impairments are not experienced as missing.

The dis-education of the sensorium leaves some people unable to imagine that disability is, indeed, missing. The sensibility of the five narratives relies on the nonpresence of disability's absence. Still, there is more to reveal about our collective dis-education through an analysis of everyday, even ordinary, say-able acts of justification.

A MOST ORDINARY STORY AND DIS-EDUCATION

Through the social act of justification, the sensorium receives a dis-education and this is the significance of the story that strikes me, and I imagine, most readers, as the most reasonable of the five stories — story number one.

Some faculty and staff say that they fought hard, some twenty years ago, just to get a ramp for the front door of the building. They suggest that is probably when the signs of universal access were posted everywhere, including on inaccessible washroom doors. Once posted, “How were we to know any better?”

This story suggests that access has been a battle that netted some changes such as a ramped front entrance. But other changes occurred too — universal access signs were posted. The story suggests that it was difficult for people to recognize the lack of an accessible washroom because there were signs that said otherwise. In a culture that makes vision dominant in the sensorium, icons indicating access in a visual manner are powerful organizers of how people orient to the environment. What keeps people from knowing better or from questioning the social location of the icon’s power? To suppose that disability “just wasn’t an issue and so just didn’t come to mind” begs the question of what makes it sensible that a disability consciousness can be kept at bay. As a way to address the questions arising from a critical relation to the reasonableness of story number one, I reconsider the actual physical location of, and thus social relation to, these visual icons of access.

In 2006, this twelve-story building had, among its more than two dozen washrooms, five washroom doors marked with the icon of access. On the main floor, the icon appeared on both the men’s and women’s washroom door. People who work and are educated in this building witnessed wheelchair users getting stuck entering the main floor washrooms because of the wall immediately confronting anyone pushing the door open. On the fifth floor, among its many busy classrooms, a men’s and women’s washroom are marked with the universal icon of access. The woman’s fifth floor washroom “accessible” door opens only about twenty-four inches. Of the population with current access to this building, many are likely to find all the washrooms a “tight squeeze.”⁸

8. Unlike these four washrooms, the final “accessible” washroom bears no sign of gender, can be found on the uppermost floor, and was made more accessible in 2007. Still, this washroom also does not meet minimum university accessibility standards. At the time of this publication, an accessible wash-

The sensorium is so well dis-educated in this environment that the missing disabled people remain invisible despite the icons of access around the building, and on posters and pamphlets advertising public events; this dis-education even reaches into the manner of bodily experience. For some people, the bodily activity of squeezing through the “accessible” doorway is not perceived, but not because this building contains a mob of aberrant prejudicial people. Something has organized the possibility of not perceiving the contradiction between the access sign and the lived experience of using the doors. This dis-education has, moreover, left people feeling like they could not know any better.

The dis-education of the sensorium has dulled the sense of bodily touch in social space (proprioception), which precludes knowing what the body could teach — these are very narrow doorways. It is possible to not perceive how the body figures in space as a matter of belonging and participation. The dis-education of the sensorium, through the ordinary daily life of working in this building, has been a powerful one. The sensorium of a legitimated participant may not sense at least one of its own bodily activities in this social space; is unable to attend to the absence of disabled faculty, students, and staff; and is not set up to press for any more access since perceiving inaccessibility has been made difficult.

Because of the dis-education the sensorium has received, there is no readily apparent knowledge of missing accessible washrooms as an emergency. There is, however, a suggestion in the fourth narrative that “maybe we need to just slow down” and to not waste time or money. In the face of disability configured as a justifiably excludable type, unexpected participant, or not really present, it is difficult to know what to do. Recall that even the lawyers in narrative two say that in the face of this *prima facie* discrimination they took their meetings elsewhere.

Richard Dyer (1993:1) says that, “How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.” That which is say-able as sensible is a form of representation. Transposing Dyer’s privileging of sight to a more generalized sense of perception, we can continue to treat access as a space of questions. Justifications not only discriminate and exclude, but also provide a variety of ways of saying that disability is an unexpected non-participant, a negligible entity. This suggests that the ordinary ways of narrating exclusion need further critical attention if we are to explore representations of nonviable and nondesirable forms of life supporting the extraordinary activity of discrimination.

room was built on the main floor of the library and is available for use during regular library hours.

DOING ORDINARY DISABILITY RELATIONS

In “On doing ‘being ordinary,’” Harvey Sacks (1984:414) says that:

A kind of remarkable thing is how, in ordinary conversation, people in reporting on some event, report what we might see to be, not what happened, but the ordinariness of what happened. . . . Whatever you may think about what it is to be an ordinary person in the world, an initial shift is not to think of “an ordinary person” as some person, but as somebody having as one’s job, as one’s constant preoccupation, doing ‘being ordinary.’

Sacks suggests that the most remarkable thing to consider is that in the goings-on of daily life we have as our job, as our constant preoccupation, ordinary ways of being ordinary in the face of what might best be characterized as extraordinary events. Why the third largest building on the largest Canadian university campus lacked a single accessible washroom up until 2006 will likely remain a remarkable mystery. Still, following Sacks, it is even more remarkable to notice the various ways of reporting “not what happened, but the ordinariness of what happened . . .” to make the extraordinary appear ordinary.

Everyday conversations perform ordinary ways to orient to or relate to happenings. Justification constitutes the meaningfulness of social existence as well as ordinary relations to it. Justifications of inaccessibility have transformed the startling, the extraordinary, or the wondrous into an ordinary event, thus achieving a sense of ordinariness for both self and others. By justifying extraordinary barriers to inclusion, we can do the *work* of appearing as an ordinary person. What does being an ordinary person taking an ordinary interest in the workplace environment entail?

Narratives of justification make it ordinary to disregard the absence of an accessible washroom as a noticeable barrier. The washroom is not missing; what is missing is any need to respond to such a barrier to participation. Justification, with its inherent lack of alarm, makes it reasonable not to notice the missing accessible washroom, and keeps the obviously incorrect signage from coming to collective attention. No one is responsible, because there is nothing to respond to — the absence has been made absent, and ordinarily so.

Still, making absence not-noticeable requires work, ordinary work, and sometimes a lot of it. Lack of alarm or of surprise, lack of a sense of emergency or even shame, all keep the nonnoticeability of missing accessible washrooms, or of access signs on inaccessible doorways, as well as the nonnoticeability of all the missing disabled students, faculty, staff, and administrators from coming to attention. It is, after all, ordinary to

not notice what is taken to be irrelevant; it is even more ordinary to not notice our own complicity in the constitution of irrelevancy. Social contexts frame the realm of the noticeable for us; it is the doing of ordinary to stay within that frame, and show others that we are doing so, doing the job of being ordinary. It is, however, also ordinary to say that one cares about disability, which glosses the contradiction of the appearance of the icon of access on washrooms without any attention to the actual social meaning of the icon.

As contradictory as it may seem, “disinterested-caring” or, better, “careless-caring,” is an ordinary way for people to relate to disability. A gesture to the act of caring, such as placing an icon of access on a door, poster, or pamphlet, is sensibly sufficient; worrying about how we care about disability would not be an ordinary way to address what is otherwise fairly irrelevant. Noticing the irrelevant is not ordinary, so “carelessly” using the universal icon of access does the work of dis-attending to disability while gesturing toward a caring inclusion (Titchkosky 2007b).

Not being alarmed in the face of radical exclusion does another interesting job on behalf of the ordinary. Ordinarity of no-alarm is achieved by attending to time. One ordinary response to building structures is as signifiers of time, attested to by the disciplines of architecture, history, art, etc. In many fights for access, “historical oversight” is a rhetorical device suggesting that nothing can be done because a building structured by old standards is too old and too expensive to change, while maintaining the ordinary sense that things would change were it not for this stifling history. This rhetoric does not work as well in the situation that I am analyzing here (which may explain the great variety of justificatory narratives at the ready.) Unlike “the building is too old” justification, the justifications for this particular building treat as given the relative access of this building, the importance of placing icons of access signs here and there, and the sense that, “Well, you know, this building is far better than most other building on campus.” These say-able things do not ordinarily fit with saying that the building is antiquated, a reflection of historical mistakes, and thus representative of the structured impossibility of inclusion of disabled people now or in the future.

A different sense of time nonetheless justifies this inaccessible state-of-affairs. It does not necessarily report on “what actually happened,” but it does normalize the ordinarity of not really noticing the lack of accessible washrooms or, in noticing, not being upset or worried. Instead of articulating “time” as a “backwards past” against which the present is too powerless to act, “time” is said to be an historical artifact. People’s efforts “over time” have made changes and will, in “good time,” effect more change. This evolutionary version of time, almost void of human

agency (let alone human rights), organizes a sense of the ordinariness of not worrying about inaccessibility. Mentioning twenty or thirty years into the past, or the need to slow down, or mentioning a decade into the future, all indicate the “not-necessary-to-notice” status of the inaccessible washroom situation. These ways of talking about washroom “time” are all the more remarkable for achieving a sense of the ordinary that transcends a sense of washroom use as an urgent and universal matter. “When you got to go, you got to go!” has become “When you got to go, you got to leave.” Speaking about a past or a future in the language of ten, twenty, or even thirty years, shows that it is ordinary to not regard this as an emergency situation; this is a situation that has evolved slowly over time and can be expected to devolve in the same way. But what is the ordinary object that is given this patient evolutionary framework?

Perhaps the object served by this patient evolutionary framework is “modern man” — it is the doing of the ordinariness of colonial, capitalist powers as these give rise to the formation of subjectivity. The modern colonizing subject, even the concept of “person” under modern conditions, needs some sort of boundary at the edges of which resides the possibility of defining and shoring up belonging and not belonging, relevancy and irrelevancy, personhood and its Other. Disability, in this instance, can be characterized as the abject underside of legitimated existence, included as an excludable type by signifying it as an always-absent presence. As a living paradox, disability is where the question of access becomes not only “Access for whom?” but, also, “Access for what?”⁹ Environmental access issues are a space where the question of what it means to be an ordinary person perceived as ordinarily belonging are implicitly worked out and sustained.

RE-THINKING THE STORIES WE ALREADY ARE

My critical engagement with who and what is “in” starts from the position that there is no good reason for disabled people to be structured out of education. Through a disability studies analysis, informed by an interpretive sociological approach, this paper used physical accessibility in educational environments to examine the social organization of disability as an absent presence included as an excludable type. Instead of treating “access” as a substantive state of affairs that an organization can possess, I imagined access as a space of say-able things where questions of embodiment can be pursued. That bodily experience is achieved through everyday talk about some other body’s absence, suggests the

9. I thank Katie Aubrecht (2007) for leading me to this question.

need for a critical and self-reflective way of living with the stories we all already tell and have already become. This self-reflective interpretive turn, gives rise to the need to examine the way we make sense of each other, to tell a different story about inaccessibility, and to learn a little bit more about the interpretive issues faced by those of us who are presupposed to be legitimate viable participants.

From my privileged position as expected participant, I was animated by a desire to not reproduce justifications of wheelchair users' absence, and so I took a special interest in how lack of access ordinarily appears of little concern beyond its rationalization. The more ordinary ways of narrating exclusion as justifiable serve as a poignant occasion for theoretic attention where representations of viable and nonviable participants can be exposed, interrogated, and, perhaps, come to be understood in new or different ways. Through an analysis of the extraordinary act of exclusion, this paper has narrated our ordinary lives together as reflective of the desire to make sensible and ordinary the ways we do not live together. Thinking through narrative fragments that justify exclusion is, of course, another way of living together. Our ordinary ways of talking about what is justifiable play a significant role in making up the meaning of lives, and the doing of ordinary life supports the extraordinary activity of discrimination.

Fundamentally, it is necessary to theoretically grapple with questions of accessibility while not reducing access to only a political-legal issue. Every fight for access (or against it) is also an interpretive space in need of theorizing since access is always tied to the production of daily life as embodied beings. Even when access is conceived of as secured the question of interpretation remains. The struggle to secure access, like the act of barring it, relies on the interpretive milieu that made possible this struggle in the first place. Theorizing the struggle for access provides for the possibility of disrupting this milieu, just as building an accessible washroom will also disrupt this milieu. This means that words that justify the exclusion of disability can be read as an opportunity to examine how disability is brought to consciousness under contemporary conditions and perhaps we can begin to re-make that which has conditioned consciousness by telling a new story about who we are.

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