

# CHALLENGING THE OPPRESSION MODEL OF DISABILITY

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In this talk I am going to challenge a reigning dogma, or ideological orthodoxy, which infests the disability world. This is the 'oppression model of disability'. Certain disability activists in the disability social movement, and their academic allies in the discipline of Disability Studies, operate from the unquestioned and unquestionable assumption that the relationships between the categories of the disabled and the non-disabled are always and everywhere oppressive.

I call this assumption a dogma or orthodoxy because the oppression model operates like an article of religious faith. The assertion that relationships between disabled and able-bodied people are universally typified by oppression is not put forward as a hypothesis to be checked out against empirical reality. It is, rather, an a priori given directing deductive investigation in a full circle that ends back always with itself. Research is conducted simply to provide illustrations of what is already known. To be accepted into the disability church, you must lay your hand on your heart and swear allegiance to the oppression model. Those teachers, writers and researchers – like me – who do not subscribe to the one true faith risk being denounced and reviled as heretics.

You may think I'm being paranoid. To justify the sweeping generalisation I've just made, here are a few indicative quotes from a wide range of disability literature. As this is an informal conference paper, not an article in an academic journal, I've just provided the name of each author, not a meticulous bibliographical reference. My intention is simply to give you an impressionistic feel of how often 'oppression' is alleged. To this end, I've put the O word in caps so it will jump off the page and grab your attention.

*The Disability, Human Rights and Society* series defines disability as a form of OPPRESSION. (*Len Barton*)

Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social OPPRESSION. (*Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation*)

Many disabled people develop a false consciousness as they internalise the OPPRESSOR'S image conveyed through language. (*Susan Peters*)

We can envisage a situation where new disability discourse replaces the state language of disability OPPRESSION. (*Marion Corker*)

It is an extraordinary denial of the socio-economic base of the OPPRESSION which disabled people experience. (*Jenny Morris*)

This prefigures the increasingly dominant view that disability is socially created as a form of institutionalised social OPPRESSION. (*Michael Oliver*)

One reason why we must resist prejudice, injustice, OPPRESSION is that they not only tend to diminish us but far more to diminish our OPPRESSORS. (*Paul Hunt*)

The reformulation of disability as social OPPRESSION rejected the traditional, paternalistic and patronising approach to social policy. (*Colin Barnes*)

Disability is a form of OPPRESSION – a complex system of restrictions imposed on people with impairments by a discriminatory society. (*Paul Ebbberly*)

Our problem is not our impairments but the institutionalised discrimination we face. It is this OPPRESSION our organisations challenge. (*Penny German*)

The discrimination and prejudice against people with disability needs to be spoken of and addressed in terms of liberation from OPPRESSION. (*Roy Wills*)

Disabled people are a minority group experiencing disempowerment and OPPRESSION at the hands of the majority. (*Keith Ballard*)

Supporting disabled people to take action at their local level enables coalitions with other OPPRESSED groups to form and develop. (*Sarah Georgeson*)

Disability, therefore, is a social phenomenon; it is a form of social OPPRESSION. (*Martin Sullivan*)

We are desperately short of quality works on the experience of disability as social OPPRESSION from within a New Zealand context. I had high hopes of Peter Beatson's book, and I have been disappointed. (*Trevor McDonald*)

The upshot of those snippets and the many others I could have quoted is that the oppression model of disability has become the master narrative for many writers in the field – a dominant ideology which you challenge at your peril. It is precisely such a challenge I wish to mount in this paper by checking the model out against social reality. In real life, as opposed to activist chic, are all relationships between the disabled and able-bodied worlds everywhere typified by oppression?

In opposition to the stark black and white dichotomy of oppressors and oppressed, I propose a seven-stage continuum:

1. Oppression – nasty, brutish and inexcusable
2. Oppression but with extenuating circumstances
3. Oppression by inattention
4. Neutral territory
5. A reservoir of public good will
6. Disability can be an advantage
7. Disabled people cause suffering to others

The first three points on this continuum might justifiably be placed under the Oppression rubric, although with decreasing relevance as we move from points one to three. At the mid-point on the continuum, we're into a no-man's-land, a neutral territory where talk about oppression is simply irrelevant. Moving from there to points five to seven, it's not just irrelevant to talk about oppression – it's downright daft.

As I unpack my seven-stage continuum, my argument will be simple. I am not – repeat NOT – denying the existence of oppression. I am merely contending that in New Zealand today it is the exception rather than the rule – the majority of interactions between able-bodied and disabled people cannot reasonably be interpreted as acts of oppression by the former against the latter. Furthermore, even in those situations where we may justifiably use the term 'oppression', we shouldn't deploy carpet-bombing tactics. In the name of intellectual honesty we must discriminate between different kinds of oppression, different degrees of oppression, different causes, motives and consequences.

Before embarking on my guided tour, I'll offer a quick working definition of what this vexatious word 'oppression' might mean. For purposes of this present talk, would you buy the following as an operational definition?

*Oppression is the infliction on others of one or more of the following:*

- *Physical pain*
- *Emotional distress*
- *Neglect*
- *Exclusion*
- *Denigration*
- *Powerlessness.*

We can wrap all those up in the one word 'suffering'. Oppression is the infliction of suffering. Note I say 'infliction', not 'experience': the reason for signalling this distinction will emerge shortly.

At the first point in my scale, full-blown oppression undoubtedly exists. No ifs, no buts, no maybes. Disabled people are at the mercy of the able-bodied - and no mercy is shown. This must be denounced and ripped out root and branch. Zero tolerance.

I'm talking about inexcusable acts of conscious cruelty. The taunting of disabled kids by their able-bodied peers. Domestic sadism and sexual abuse. Routine acts of petty humiliation, neglect and despotism perpetrated by institutional carers. The unknown sins of commission or omission inflicted on elderly patients by the staff of 'rest' homes. We are talking about able-bodied people with power over disabled ones who grossly and inexcusably abuse that power.

I feel it is for this brutal territory that we really should reserve the term ‘oppression’. However, I’m willing to concede that there is an adjacent territory – point two on my scale – where the term oppression might be legitimately employed, if with more circumspection. Here disabled people are still at the mercy of the able-bodied, and the latter inflict suffering on them. Why circumspection is needed is that there are extenuating circumstances. The able-bodied may make life hell for the disabled – but they don’t mean to.

A classic instance was the insistence in Deaf schools for a hundred years that Deaf students should be educated orally in the English language, and denied the right to practise their own, natural signed language. In hindsight this was an appalling policy, generation after generation of Deaf kids condemned to failure, as they were being educated through a medium in which they could never be fluent. But it was meant well. It was honestly believed that integration into the hearing world – an unquestioned good at the time – could be best achieved through lip-reading and vocalising. That this destroyed Deaf culture, based on signing, and condemned the Deaf in perpetuity to cultural incompetence in mainstream oral/aural society, were regrettable but inevitable corollaries.

Now, if I make you suffer with the honest intention of helping you, am I an oppressor man? I most certainly should be informed vigorously of the error of my ways, but surely I only merit the epithet oppressor if I persist with my misguided philanthropy once it has been clearly explained to me where and why I’ve been going wrong. Although ignorance is no excuse, it is a mitigating circumstance.

There are other such mitigating circumstances for certain disabled people’s feeling of oppression. For instance, we are often frustrated, and may indeed be deprived of basic services, by delay, bungling, inefficiency and impersonality in the welfare bureaucracy, both public and voluntary. It is oppressive, right enough, to be denied or have to wait for ages for assistive technology on which you vitally depend, to be subjected to intrusive assessments whenever you require services, to have to fight to obtain for your disabled child the education that is its by legal right, to get lost in the welfare labyrinth, or be shuttled endlessly between one agency and another. The system sometimes seems designed to thwart rather than assist you, and its personnel may appear inhumanly indifferent to your situation.

Your feelings might be justified – there are few government departments and service agencies that don’t need to smarten up their act and communicate better amongst themselves. On the other side of the fence, however, it must be remembered that such departments and agencies carry a large client load and by the very nature of bureaucracy must work according to formal procedures. The codes by which they must operate have been established to process abstract human categories, and in the very nature of things it is hard to be flexible enough to immediately accommodate idiosyncratic individual demands, and always to be sensitively attuned to personal feelings. It should be added that the demands and feelings of some disabled people, like anyone else, may be excessive, unreasonable or just plain bloody-minded. My point is that disabled people may well experience suffering when in thrall to ‘the system’, but the system itself was not designed with oppression in mind. Even the most efficient and humane of bureaucracies cannot always avoid hurting people’s

feelings, keeping them waiting, or making them jump through administrative hoops. Sure, many agencies and their staff should be more sensitive, flexible and accommodating, but their clients must surely at times practise tolerance and empathy for the institutional exigencies (not least of which may be straitened finances) of their service providers.

Up till now, I've been talking about situations in which disabled and able-bodied people face each other, as it were. The former are dependent upon the latter: the latter in turn are conscious of the disabled. At the third point of my scale, the situation has changed. The whole point now is that able-bodied people are simply unmindful of the existence of disability in their midst. People with disabilities may genuinely and legitimately feel oppressed – but nobody's actually oppressing us. Our suffering is simply the accidental by-product of the fact that we inhabit a world constructed by nature and by culture for those with statistically normal bodies and minds.

It is perfectly understandable that the overwhelming majority do not give much thought day and night in every action or utterance to the (often unknown) needs and interests of tiny minorities constituted by the blind, the deaf, the paraplegic, amputees, those with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities and the like. Disabled people get pushed aside, trampled on or have their feelings hurt, it is true, but that's just the way the world wags. Nobody's being deliberately cruel – people are just getting on with their own lives.

Furthermore, in many cases it's quite unreasonable to expect people to practice constant vigilance on the remote off chance that a person with a specific impairment might come their way. Is it reasonable, for instance, that every single café and restaurant in the country should put its menus into braille on the statistically remote possibility that an unaccompanied blind person might come in one day, a blind person too gormless to ask the waiter to read out the menu? Should every single house in the country be restructured on the statistically unlikely chance a person in a wheelchair wants to come in? Sure it would be nice if people were more thoughtful, but there are many occasions when disabled people of good sense just have to shrug their shoulders, sigh tolerantly and accept the fact that they inhabit a big, bustling, oblivious world that doesn't always dance to their tune.

Now we come to the fourth or mid point on my continuum. This is neutral territory, right out of the danger zone. An example. It's 1980. I'm listening with some friends to the first series of one-day cricket matches between NZ and Australia. Lance Cairns is belting ball after ball out of the grounds. Cairns is profoundly deaf. I'm totally blind. So what? he's scoring sixes. I hear exactly the same commentary as my sighted friends. Our respective impairments are on the back burner. In this neutral territory disabled and able-bodied people interact, or share the same experiences, on terms of absolute equality. Talk of oppression is totally irrelevant. We're just all people together.

Let's go one step further. We're now entering a zone where not only is talk of oppression irrelevant, it's nonsensical. At the fifth point on my continuum, the able-bodied don't oppress us – they actively go out of their way on our behalf. Is a woman who gives up her career and devotes herself single-mindedly to caring and advocating for a severely disabled child oppressing it? Am I oppressed by the many people who

donate money during blind week appeals, or by the volunteer workers upon whose unpaid labour the day-to-day services of the Foundation of the Blind depend? Are the scientists who develop anti-psychotic drugs, the inventors who devise assistive electronic technology, the doctors who perform reconstructive surgery, the occupational therapists who get disabled people into paid employment - are they oppressors? Is a government that spends over a billion a year on disability support services, and provides tens of thousands of disabled people with invalids benefits, an oppressive regime? There is a huge pool of domestic self-sacrifice, public goodwill, professional expertise and state support in this country. To dismiss all this with a sneer as charity and therefore oppressive smacks of fanaticism.

Now I'm going to take another giant step from under the shadow of oppression. At point six on my continuum, disability can be a positive advantage. It can enhance rather than diminish your quality of life. To give a trivial example: disabled people not infrequently acquire a brief, pseudo-celebrity status which most people secretly crave but few are accorded. Come last in the Round the Bays marathon, and nobody will notice you. Come last in a wheelchair and you'll be on television. It's the Andy Warhol syndrome: disabled people, if they manage even some modest achievement, are more likely to get their few minutes of media glory than their non-disabled counterparts.

More seriously, there's a blind man in this country who openly avows that having his eyes shot out during a gang rumble was the best thing that happened to him. He's now a suited Foundation of the Blind executive: sighted he reckons he would have spent his life in and out of jail. Or again, a person I once interviewed told me that on balance his broken back and subsequent lifetime in a wheelchair had afforded him a much richer quality of life - including being President of a large international disability organisation - than that of most of his able-bodied acquaintances.

Please don't think I'm being a plucky Pollyanna, playing the glad game. Being physically or mentally impaired is sometimes unpleasant, and no matter how often you count your blessings, you can't get away from that fact. That said, for some disabled people, at certain points in their lives, their impairments can indeed be assets rather than liabilities. Talk of oppression in these instances is nonsense. The disabled athlete who is elected sportsperson of the year and selected for the sporting hall of fame is not the victim of oppression.

I come now to my final and most controversial point. At the start, I defined oppression as the infliction of suffering. If this definition is acceptable, then it logically follows that some disabled people themselves, in certain circumstances, are the agents rather than the victims of oppression. They cause suffering to others.

I'm not mainly talking about the behavioural, emotional and cognitive instability associated with some forms of psychosis, which in a small number of cases leads to appalling acts of violence. Nor am I talking particularly about the sometimes inappropriate and possibly dangerous behaviour of a minority of people whose civic responsibility is reduced through intellectual disability. I'm talking more about the constant drain on household resources and the strain on family relationships that impairment can cause. Dependent disabled people have major, on-going needs that necessarily make heavy demands on those around them. Furthermore, their emotional

state, their behaviour, their modes of interacting – or not interacting – may cause extreme and chronic distress to others. At best they can be tiring to live with; at worst they put an intolerable strain on their caregivers - a strain which may destroy the whole fabric of family life.

It would be inappropriate and inhumane to blame disabled people for the suffering, even tragedies, they cause. They didn't choose to have ADHD, bipolar disorder, autism, senile dementia or whatever. They may not be able to control their own emotions and actions, are probably unaware of their destructiveness, and may well be suffering themselves. The distress they cause others is the unfortunate but inescapable by-product of their diminished moral responsibility.

The equally unavoidable fact, however, is that they sometimes do cause suffering to others. The oppression model of disability only permits itself to see disabled people as victims of the able-bodied. It is silent about the human reality that able-bodied people – particularly family members – may also be victims of disability.

In conclusion, I have argued that the reigning paradigm within the disability rights movement and the academic discipline of Disability Studies – the oppression model of disability – over-simplifies and distorts the experience of disability and the relationships between disabled and non-disabled people. Disability fundamentalists are able to sustain the pure light of their faith because the indisputable, brutal reality exists that some disabled people under some circumstances are indeed the victims of oppression. This is much less than half the story, though.

My reason for proposing a seven-point continuum in place of the oppression model is to suggest two things. First, the term 'oppression' is inappropriate as a typification of the majority of interactions between the disabled and the able-bodied world. Second, even when the experience of disability may – if often tenuously - be described as oppressive, to be intellectually honest we must discriminate between kinds and degrees of oppression, cautious about attributing motives and blame, and avoid extreme, blanket denunciations. Without such circumspection, our claim to be oppressed may well damage rather than advance the disability cause.

**Biographical note:**

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