

Attitudes towards disability in society viewed through the lens of critical disability theory: An analysis of *Me Before You*

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Purpose: Using a recent, widely-distributed film (that provoked strong reactions and protest across the globe) as its focus, this paper attempts to illustrate the construction of disability as created by the able-bodied majority to be primarily a societal issue of inequality and social justice.

Methods: Analysis of the film is made using the component parts of Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as a framework with which to identify and disentangle factors that reveal the social construction of disability.

Results/Findings: The paper identifies factors that, combined, form a dark and potentially sinister objective conceptualisation of disability by the able-bodied that sees disability as a fate worse than death.

Discussion/Conclusions: By bringing to life through analysis the assertion that 'the personal is political', the paper suggests that maintaining a reflexive awareness of such negative portrayals of disability is an ethical obligation of counselling psychologists as ambassadors of social justice.

Keywords: Critical disability theory; counselling psychology; physical disability; social justice; difference; diversity.

Introduction

THE 2016 British-American film *Me Before You* (based on the 2012 novel written by Jojo Moyes) sparked controversy and debate over the way it portrayed disability. Andre Bazin, the French film critic and theorist, asserted that 'every film is a social documentary' (2008) in that it documents the desires of the collective unconsciousness through hiding behind existing and recognised appearances that are merely symbols – nothing is accidental, and nothing is completely fake. Cinematic realism is inherently connected to its ability to create effective illusions; the content may be unreal, but the fact that the 'dream is dreamt' is true (Bazin, 1960). This undeniably Freudian understanding of film has significant consequences for the filmmaker as they have responsibility for inventing people's desire using what already exists (Zizek, 1991). Without criticism of film therefore, the viewer risks accepting the cinematic fantasy as their own, and along with it, implicit statements with social, political and moral

consequences (Grosoli, 2012). In this light, it is unsurprising that, when viewed through a particular lens, films can provoke heated social reaction, especially when they are felt to be promoting discriminatory and oppressive attitudes to specific groups of people. *Me Before You* sparked significant protests amongst disabled communities in the UK, Australia and across the US, as well as a strong online reactionary movement on social media (#MeBeforeEuthanasia), yet the condemnation of the film was not global, and it was defended by others for its handling of the very same issues that caused offence. The intention of this paper is to explore and identify the reasons for such strong reactions, difference of opinion and/or confusion as pertinent and essential knowledge for counselling psychologists in order to be aware of issues of disability that cause affected individuals to suffer societal discrimination and prejudice. I do not attempt to offer practical solutions as to how to address these issues, as I feel it is impor-

tant to first stimulate reflexive thought and discussion in and amongst practitioners/researchers/teachers/students. As members of a profession that proudly aligns itself with the notion of social justice, it is necessary for us all to reflexively evaluate our own attitudes and assumptions in order to be able to work in a way that is reflective of the underlying humanistic philosophy of counselling psychology. Working with disability has been an overlooked yet significant area within the difference and diversity ethical framework of counselling psychology, and my hope is that papers such as this might go some way towards encouraging and aiding the development of theoretical contributions. As a trainee in the profession with a degree of acquired physical disability, I am aware that I am sensitive to issues of disability, but even so, do not always understand the reasons why I can feel uncomfortable at the way it is portrayed in the media. Thus, the writing of this paper has been as much for my own learning as it is intended to stimulate interest in others.

The paper will first briefly outline the relationship and importance of issues of difference and diversity to the profession of counselling psychology, before turning more specifically to the construct of disability. It is pertinent to note here that, whilst the focus of the current paper is specifically on issues of *physical* disability, much of the discussion can be appropriately extended to include broader constructs of disability. After introducing critical disability theory (CDT), the main body of the paper will be broken down into component parts of the theory that will each be used to analyse aspects of the film. The intention is that this will provide some explanation of the issues of power and context in the film that have caused controversy and have been understood as perpetuating the oppression and discrimination of disabled people. Additionally, the analysis will be used on a practical level to assert an anti-necessitarian understanding of disability stemming

from CDT, that focuses on the actualisation of inclusiveness rather than merely asserting abstract rights. To conclude the paper, the importance of maintaining an alert and reflexive awareness of issues of disability is discussed, as commonly held and widely accepted negative attitudes that afford some humans more value and opportunity than others subtly permeate all areas of contemporary society. If, as members of that society, we are not mindful or critical enough of such issues, we can accidentally find ourselves contributing to the maintenance and perpetration of prejudiced attitudes and social injustice.

Counselling Psychology and ‘Difference and Diversity’

Counselling psychologists are as human and as susceptible to unknowingly ingesting and regurgitating negative social constructions and attitudes of discrimination as any other member of society. However, as part of a profession that identifies itself as having a strong allegiance to the notion of social justice, we have an ethical obligation (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), 2015; British Psychological Society (BPS), 2009) to embrace issues of inequality and discrimination (in both practice and research), in order to be ‘knowledgeable about the diverse life experiences of the clients (we) work with’ (p.7, BPS, 2013). It is only with such knowledge that we can be able to effectively challenge inequitable economic, political and social practice. In order to uphold such principles, all practitioners must have a reflexive awareness of their own attitudes towards others, as well as the social contexts that might affect clients’ experience. Inevitably, in society some groups of people hold the majority of power and resources, and consequently have the ability to control, marginalise and discriminate against (oppress) others; the ‘cultural minorities’ (Lago, 2011) (although the term ‘minority’ often illustrates the amount of power the group has, rather than number of people relegated to this group). Currently, the

phrase most used to refer to and illustrate this phenomenon of social discrimination is 'difference and diversity' and is used as an umbrella term to refer to issues arising from identity politics such as race and culture, gender and sexuality, and, recently, disability. There are problems with this term that I shall return to, but in the context of the literature of the profession, I use it (sparingly) throughout the paper as one that relates to the social construction of identities and power differentials.

Disability

Disability, as a matter of difference and diversity within counselling psychology, is a biopsychosocial construct of identity (WHO, 2002) linked to issues of equality of opportunity, respect, social action and inclusion. It has some foundation in the social model of disability, which serves to highlight the negative psychological impact on the individual of their physical and social environment when it fails to accommodate their impairment. This was the first model (of disability) to be developed by disabled people, and illustrates how negative attitudes and social barriers presented by mainstream society can subject individuals to isolation and segregation, as well as discrimination and prejudice (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Olkin, 2012; Reeve, 2002). As a concept, disability is nebulous, with various definitions that stem from often conflicting epistemological and ontological standpoints (Smart & Smart, 2006; Swain & French, 2000). Within the concept itself there are also complex issues of internal variance; physical, mental or learning disability, congenital or acquired (instantly or developmentally), and the notion held amongst both disabled and non-disabled people that there might be some hierarchy of impairment (Deal, 2003). For the purpose of this paper it is used as an umbrella term that bundles together individuals with a broad range of differing impairments that become the cause of a common experience of marginalisation, discrimination and oppression from the dominant

able-bodied community. All UK counselling psychologists are obliged to practice within the legal context of the 2010 Equality Act, which also requires an awareness of wider disability issues within society. A large amount of clinical practice for most practitioners is covered by this legislation; it is not just a matter for those working overtly in the field of disability, as disability in some form or another is a natural part of human existence that (should we live long enough) would affect us all.

Currently, there is a body of literature within the profession that explores the potential challenges associated with living with learning disabilities, yet there is little recognition of the possible difficulties and impact of living in an able-bodied world with physical disability. Astonishingly, there seems to be even less acknowledgement of the impact of an acquired physical disability. Alongside any individual issues that might arise from living with disability, all individuals who are not identified as able-bodied suffer, to some degree, the effects of living in an ableist society that views disability as negative, and discriminates against it. To illustrate this, the United Nations (1996) estimates two thirds of all people with more than mild/slight disability live in poverty; they are more than twice as likely to have no educational qualifications, and less than half work. Recent government action in the UK concerning Personal Independence Payments (PIP) policy and disability benefit cuts (GOV.UK, 2017) serves to illustrate how institutionally dominant negative perceptions of disability maintain such inequity (see PSE:UK, 2017 for more), and also allow (validate?) subtle prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes to permeate all strata of culture and society.

Critical disability theory

Identity politics emerged from the 1960s Black Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements. It was an anti-authoritarian cultural and political movement that asked confrontational but pertinent questions

of a western and male dominated society about identity, inequality, repression and injustice. The movement spread during the 80s to give voice to and empower other marginalised groups such as those identified by sexual orientation and ethnicity, but disability groups have been noticeably slow to come to the arena of identity politics. The directional move was initially fiercely criticised by key figures of disability studies such as Shakespeare, Oliver, Tremain and Barnes (Devlin & Pothier, 2006) as one that risked ignoring the subjective experience of individuals in favour of a legalistic, rights-based approach. However, critical theory evolved from Marx's critique of liberal capitalism, in conjunction with developments in critical legal studies arising from more established identity jurisprudences such as feminist, race and queer theories has encouraged the move, and has resulted in the relatively recent birth of critical disability theory (Hosking, 2008), which holds issues of power and context in relation to disability as essential component parts of addressing oppression and marginalisation from the embodied experience.

By using Hosking's (2008) formulation of CDT to inform and structure the current paper, I shall conduct a contextual reflexive analysis of aspects of the film in order to procure a symptomatic illustration, reflection and interpretation of themes prevalent in the broader context of our current society. This theoretical approach to analysis will provide a normative and descriptive base for enquiry into social phenomena regarding disability, and establishes disability as fundamentally a question of politics and power(lessness), rather than one of medicine, health or compassion. The seven elements of CDT that will be used to discuss the film are; 1) the relevance/implications of models of disability, 2) multidimensionality, 3) valuing diversity, 4) voices of disability, 5) language, 6) rights, and 7) transformative politics.

Analysis

Models of disability

Historically, the dominant paradigms for understanding disability have been the essentialist medical and tragedy models, both of which objectively identify the source of disadvantaged positioning as inherent characteristics of an individual due to their identified impairment. The medical model privileges and presumes able bodies to be the desired norm, and disability as something to be pathologised. The positivist focus on diagnosis, rehabilitation and cure serves to maintain disability as deviation from normalcy, and reduces the disabled individual to a subordinate being. *Me Before You* makes a token attempt to reject the medical model of disability throughout the film by avoiding the portrayal of any biological difficulty the disabled character might experience (other than a lingering image of an adapted bath chair, description of a daily concoction of medications and a fleeting mention of pain as justification of an unbearable existence). During a scene around the dinner table where a character is interrupted and dismissed after he alludes to the desirability of attempting to cure; 'I bet if we got you on a really good fitness regime...' there is firmer acknowledgement that the paradigm exists still, but that it is outdated, by implication that the sentiment was not a compassionate, or knowledgeable one.

However, what the film does absolutely buy into is the notion of disability as tragedy, where disabled people are to be pitied as victims of devastating circumstance (Oliver, 1996). To conceptualise disability as ill-fortune necessarily creates a hierarchy of difference (Devlin & Pothier, 2006) whereby the fortunate (able-bodied) are better off, and those struck by misfortune are assumed to live wretched lives, and (if taken to its most extreme) would possibly be better off dead (the influence of the medical model is inherent to this – if there is no cure, then the condition is hopeless). *Me Before You* capitalises on and exploits this notion as a plot

device intended to evoke strong emotion and pity – before he becomes disabled, the leading male character is presented as an alpha male; rich, beautiful and with everything to live for. Despite the tag line of the film being ‘Live boldly. Live well. Just live’, the entire premise rests on the assertion that life with a disability is synonymous with misery, hopelessness and burden, as once he becomes disabled he feels his life cannot (should not?) go on, and assisted suicide is his only solution. Whilst the able-bodied people in the film attempt to play the role of saviours to this sentiment, there is no other disabled person to provide an alternative perspective, and so in his isolated experience the disabled character’s choice begins to feel logical. The fact that there is no other disabled character in the film to provide a different view becomes even more pertinent when the tormented disabled character says, ‘I get that this could be a good life. But it’s not my life. I can’t be the sort of man who accepts this.’ The implication is that the sort of person who can live with a paralyzed body can only be constitutionally inferior to a determined, strong and uncompromising one. This is compounded by the way the (always contentious) issue of suicide is broached; generally, when non-disabled people speak of suicide they are discouraged and offered support and prevention, as it is not desired. It has been asserted that the presence of disability can evoke a deep-rooted death anxiety in the able-bodied (Shakespeare, 1994; Wilson, 2003) that means it is uncomfortable to live even alongside disability, let alone with it. This is reflected in the difference in the discourse around suicide in the context of disability; the film dialogue becomes littered with words like ‘autonomy’ and ‘choice’ (principles not upheld elsewhere in the disabled character’s portrayed existence), and, disturbingly, there is no mention whatsoever of any mental health support.

Increasingly, media outlets are using the conceptualisation of disability as tragedy

as an objective ‘feel-good’ source (‘inspiration porn’) for the able-bodied community (Young, 2012). Social media is littered with memes suggesting that those with disabilities are brave, beautiful or special just for living which, when considered, is a condescending portrayal from an able-bodied perspective that locates the purpose of existence for disabled people as one to make able-bodied others feel better about themselves. *Me Before You* is another example of this; by using the victim and inspiration tropes simultaneously, it aspires to leave the audience inspired, but ultimately perceiving disability as tragedy. It is a classic beauty and the beast tale where the (disabled)beast is miserable until the (able-bodied)beauty can penetrate his icy exterior; she has potential and power, but he is destroyed and without hope. The overarching theme of the film is really about how the socially disadvantaged (yet able-bodied) lead character finds strength, reason and resources to live as a result of her relationship with the misfortunate, disabled lead character, yet whilst she can go some way towards making him happy, he can never have a full life. In fact, his refusal/inability to engage in a life with her is portrayed as an act of self-sacrifice for her benefit; ‘I don’t want you to look at me one day and feel even the tiniest bit of regret or pity... you have no idea how you’re going to feel even six months from now.’ This is a notion already hinted at in the choice of foreign film he introduces her to earlier – *Of Gods and Men* is a film about self-sacrifice in the name of moral servitude to others. Even the disabled character’s name (Will) becomes posthumously relevant in the final scenes of the film where he inspires her to have a ‘new beginning... that should buy you your freedom – live boldly... Don’t think of me too often – just live well. Just live. Love Will.’ Ultimately then, the death of the disabled character is the catalyst for the able-bodied female character to realise her potential, and propel herself forwards into a more meaningful existence.

Multidimensionality

It is necessary to acknowledge that within any social structure individuals are members of more than one socially constructed classification. This notion is formally identified and understood in intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) where oppressive forces are seen on axes intersecting with one another (as opposed to loading on top of each other) to create an understanding of the nature and implications of such disadvantaged positioning.

Of course, to be subject to discrimination as a member of a particular social classification does not mean that all intersectional axes affecting an individual will be oppressive ones. Hybrid intersectionality is a term used to describe the intersection of an axis of subordination with an axis of privilege whereby the individual may be considered to be 'singularly burdened' (Ehrenreich, 2002). This is a position occupied by many individuals who acquire their disability and is the case for the disabled character in *Me Before You*. The privileged, young, white, adult, educated, wealthy heterosexual male experiences the subordination of disability, yet clearly lives a life of privilege in all other ways. As a social commentary on disability this is problematic, as despite all his privilege, the disabled character still feels that to die is preferable to exist with disability. This, of course, is not the experience or sentiment for swathes of individuals who live with disability. Rather, disability is used as a sanitised plot device to make the audience feel sadness and pity, but not risk suffering by commenting on some of the very real experiences of the implications of living with disability in an ableist society (not many individuals who acquire disability have resources enough to have an adapted annex built with a bespoke wet-room and 24-hour personally tailored private care). A common experience of isolation as a result of disability is portrayed as of his own making ('we tried for months, but he pushed me away... you can only help someone who wants to be

helped'), yet for many people living with disability, isolation is a consequence of a lack of accessibility and consideration in the environment they are living in. To acknowledge/recognise this however, would uncomfortably recontextualise disability as a social issue for which all members of society (audience included) are responsible.

Valuing diversity

Moving away from a tragedy-based approach towards understanding disability from a human rights perspective means necessarily rejecting the privileging of 'normal' over 'abnormal', but also acknowledging and engaging with the 'dilemma of difference' (Minow, 1990); the reality that disabled people are a varied and diverse population with no singular experience of the impact of disability, and that the significance of a disability is contingent to the context in which it is experienced. The 'dilemma' is when to acknowledge and respond to physical difference, and when to ignore it. There is a danger that in attempting to be inclusionary and accepting of the notion of diversity, differences are white-washed out by the dominant group (the able-bodied) as irrelevant, bringing significant risk of rejecting/marginalising the disabled individual and disallowing their equal participation in society. Consequently, it is not possible to create universal rules as to when to factor in disability or when to ignore it, other than to always consider difference in order to identify inequality and create solutions to enable full participation and inclusion.

The potential for confusion in engaging with the 'dilemma of difference' is apparent in the film. Despite his family living in a castle with more space, wider doorways and smoother floors than most households, the disabled character is unaccountably unnecessarily segregated to annexed living quarters. Later, there is a disastrous trip to the races where the female protagonist seems intent on denying difference by parking in a

muddy field rather than designated disabled parking, with the consequence of subjecting the disabled character to a humiliating experience of charitable assistance from strangers. There is also a public altercation in a restaurant area as a consequence of her not considering his needs regarding eating. Whilst the experience of fundamental needs being overlooked may be all too commonly recognisable for the disabled viewer, they are not framed as societal issues of equality and inclusion for consideration by the privileged group, but rather as irritating problems caused by an individual's condition. A more healthy representation of embracing and responding to difference would be to identify the systemic nature of inequality, and seek solutions that enable full participation in community.

Voice

The able-bodied dominant construction of disability as something that is inherently lacking, undesired and without potential has meant that the voice of disabled people who challenge and contest mainstream representations and conceptions of disability has been historically marginalised and suppressed. This has been powerfully asserted and maintained by the argument that if the disabled voice disagrees with what the able-bodied want to hear, it can be simply dismissed as an inappropriate and unfounded response of an individual who has an unhealthy relationship to issues of disability (Titchkosky, 2003). The strong reaction from the disabled community across the world to the negative and inaccurate stereotypical portrayal of disability in *Me Before You* provoked defensive responses from the able-bodied media disputing their claims, predominantly based on the notion that some people do experience disability this way, and so their criticism is not valid. Clearly, on inspection this is a warped argument, as the protesting disabled person also lives an experience of disability, and their feelings are as valid as those the able-bodied are apparently defending, yet because

their account challenges the construction of disability that maintains the comfortable, dominant position of the able-bodied, it apparently cannot be accepted.

It is not without significance that the author of *Me Before You* has no personal experience of living with a disability, and also did not consult any disabled people when writing her book. Neither was anyone with a disability involved in the making of the film. Consequently, the portrayal of disability is one that is absolutely from an able-bodied perspective and perhaps is the reason why it is illustrated as a life of unimaginable suffering, subject to constant dependency and without value or hope. From such an ontological position, the film cannot be any more than a revealing commentary on dominant discriminatory beliefs many able-bodied people hold about disability and, as such, is deserving of any criticism and protest from the community who live with disability, embody other perspectives and are yet to have voice enough to assert their validity.

Language

Language, both written/spoken and imagery, is inherently political as it carries ideological implications that influence the conceptualisation and status of groups of people. Historically, throughout culture, religion and media, disabled people have been continuously portrayed as pitiable, valueless burdens, deficient, bad/evil or dangerous (Barnes, 1992). More recently there have been examples of positive representations of disability (e.g. the 'supercrip' paralympian who goes above and beyond the level of able-bodied people in spite of disability), yet there are still few examples of disability in culture and media as something other than extraordinary, and under-representation of the disabled community is an enduring problem (Ofcom, 2005). These problematic stereotypes perpetuate the negative and prejudiced formulations and understanding of disability, and subsequently directly

affect social attitudes. The choice to use an able-bodied actor to play a disabled character (as in *Me Before You*) is increasingly recognised as controversial. Whilst there are always arguments of logistics and practicality to hide behind, this non-actual representation illustrates a systemic and institutional intolerance to issues of disability. It also ensures that the depiction of the disabled body is always controllable and therefore never at risk of causing discomfort and upsetting the balance between evoking pity and providing inspiration.

In terms of the content of the film, it is significant that the disabled character is quite voiceless and disempowered on issues of significance other than his own death – he does not employ his own companion, and when he suggests he does not want her there, she replies it is not his decision to make. The decision to have this companion is revealed as his parents' covert and oblique attempt to get him to change his mind about suicide, as are almost all the trips he is 'taken on', often apparently against his wishes. Again, the experience of being 'not there' and talked about/for may very well be familiar to individuals living with disability, but there is no alternative perspective demonstrated or even aspired to throughout the film; everyone seems to happily accept the status quo, thus reinforcing the discourse of tragedy and a powerless, dependent and hopeless construction of disability.

Rights and transformative politics

These two final central concerns of CDT are possibly best addressed together in this paper. In terms of rights, the individual needs and interests of disabled people must be recognised as an issue of autonomy, whilst as a socially constructed group the assertion of the right to full participation in society needs to be upheld. Simultaneously, the diversity within the disabled community must also be acknowledged in order to identify and redress societal and institutional inequality. In the film, the disabled character's isolated

existence (both segregated from his family and also from all other disabled individuals) illustrates the fundamentally accepted lack of participation in society as something considered inevitable rather than something to be challenged. Arguably, his decision to end his life is illustration of a respect for autonomy, yet all other potential for autonomous decision-making is disallowed to him throughout the film. Is his death an act of autonomy? Or is it really another act that serves the interests of the able-bodied, both within the film and also viewing the film?

Any theory is explanatory and normative, but an intrinsic goal of critical identity theories is also one of transformative politics; to pursue empowerment and substantive actualization of equality in society. By using CDT as a lens through which to view and analyse contemporary media and culture, it can expose hidden motivators, and identify how social attitudes are influenced and conditioned by the portrayal of disability. Essentially, the analysis becomes one centred around power and who/what gets valued. For some individuals the notion of disability as tragedy is an accurate reflection of their experience, yet there is currently not enough screen time dedicated to issues of disability and exploring the experience of living with disability to blithely allow another mainstream film to use it as a plot 'problem' catalyst that benefits the able-bodied and is resolved only by death of the disabled individual. There is much more economic value in making a film which uses disability as inspiration porn than in a film that depicts disabled individuals wanting to live but struggling to get health/social resources to do so, as the able-bodied viewer is not encouraged to truly engage with uncomfortable evidence of discrimination and oppression in the society they live in, but instead is able to feel somehow better about themselves. However, films that construct disability as tragedy and use the pitiable character as a source of transformative inspiration for the able-bodied, perpetrate and perpet-

uate an unjust and oppressive society that recognises and values neither diversity or difference. CDT provides a conceptual framework from which to understand the relational positioning of disability in society, and to challenge the status quo by seeking fundamental transformation in the social construction of disability in the name of desiring things being other (more equal and inclusive) than they are.

Conclusion

The disabled community as a client group has historically been at the edge of awareness for counselling psychologists, despite it being a fundamental part of human existence (Reeve, 2000). There is little literature concerning disability serving the profession, and the psychological needs of physically disabled people are often misrepresented as reductive singular issues of grief, depression and/or denial (Parkinson, 2006; Reeve, 2000: 2004), or within positive psychology, of resilience and hope. In recent times, it has been widely accepted that disability is more than just a physical issue for an individual, acknowledging that there is an embedded societal oppression at an institutional level that permeates attitudes on all strata (Oliver, 1996; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the social sciences that lead the way with a more holistic perspective of the experience of living with disability, and, as a consequence, have a more developed awareness of the various forces (and felt effect) of oppression and discrimination loaded upon disabled people. In this light, maintaining a critical and reflexive awareness of issues of disability as presented in culture and the media is of paramount importance to the counselling psychology profession; it both illustrates the potential for oppressive experience for many clients, and guards against an accidental subscription to negative models that would perpetuate inequality in society, and potentially discriminate against or exclude individuals in or wanting therapy.

CDT, as seen throughout this paper, can be a useful deconstructive tool in the de-familiarisation of common practices and institutions as benevolent and humane, instead revealing common attitudes, practices and procedures that serve to classify, manage and control a-typical body-subjects (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) such as individuals with impairments. As both practitioners and community members, it is important (perhaps ethically necessary) for us all to be aware of the machinations of such widespread and embedded application of institutional power relations, as well as their consequences for the subjected objectivized individual. It has been the insidious spread of these normalising practices throughout all modern institutions that has led to the negative and oppressive everyday felt effect for disabled individuals of micro-governmentality; 'any form of activity that aims to shape, guide or affect... conduct of one's relation to oneself, interpersonal relations that involve some form of control or guidance, and relations within social institutions and communities (Tremain, 2005, p.8). Consequently, CDT can be used to effect change instantly if counselling psychologists can develop their capacity for reflexive awareness and sensitivity to such stratagem in order not to perpetuate them. Within organisational settings, practitioners who are informed by CDT can perhaps feel more confident to challenge institutional discriminatory cultural practices that maintain power imbalances. After all, to have to work (for example) in an environment that is inaccessible for disabled clients because of steps/stairs/narrow doorways fundamentally undermines the ethical instruction of counselling psychology practice.

As someone who inhabits multiple positions as (fluidly more-or-less) disabled, student, practitioner and researcher, I feel that, as with many things, change can most comprehensively be effected through education. Throughout my training there has been little discussion (or even acknowledgement)

of issues of disability unless I have instigated them. Whilst other issues of 'difference and diversity' have been thoroughly explored through engagement with research, textbooks, seminars and reflexive exercise, disability has consistently been noticeably absent from virtually all areas of training. Perhaps more disappointingly, the scant literature that is available within the discipline is predominantly written from the perspective of the able-bodied, and consequently tends to focus on issues of loss, devastation and depression, thus perpetuating oppressive attitudes prevalent in society. The potential for the application of Critical Theory to both psychology and disability offers opportunity for counselling psychologists (of any physicality) to develop their (personal or public) contribution to a more mature pluralistic approach to disability in both theory and practice.

In the writing of this paper, it has been extremely useful for me to use CDT as a framework with which to analyse a seemingly harmless film that aroused all sorts of discomfort in myself when I watched it. To be able to identify and disentangle the factors that, when combined, form a dark and potentially sinister objective conceptu-

alisation of disability as something to be used by the able-bodied (and viewed as a fate worse than death) has been enlightening for me as someone who has been repeatedly confounded by, yet sensitive to, the oppressive force of being labeled disabled. It has revealed (to me) the social construction of disability as created by the able-bodied majority to be primarily a societal issue of inequality and social justice, and brings to life the (originally feminist) assertion (McCann & Seung-Kyung, 2013) that 'the personal is political'. To be able to recognise, acknowledge and become ambassador for the truth and call to action inherent in this slogan seems fitting and apt for any member of a profession with ethical obligation to both value individual experience and challenge inequitable social, political and economic practice.

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