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CHAPTER 10

Collectivising Experience and Rules of Engagement:
close(d) encounters in disability research

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Introduction

In the last decade, various authors have pointed to the existence of more than one social model of disability, each of which demonstrates different emphases (Priestley 1998). However, Colin Barnes (2003: 9) has recently suggested that 'in some respects, the social model has become the new orthodoxy'. Though he doesn't specify which social model, in the context of Barnes' work over the last two decades, it seems reasonable to assume that this 'orthodox' social model is that which emerged from The Fundamental Principles of Disability (UPIAS 1976). The structural and material emphasis of this document on status, rights and redistribution is clear, and is generally incorporated in 'orthodox' paradigms that guide emancipatory disability research. For example, these accounts commonly refer to the need to change 'the social relations of research production' (Oliver 1997: 18) - or, as Geof Mercer puts it, to reverse the:

traditional researcher-researched hierarchy/social relations of research production, while also challenging the material relations of research production (Mercer 2002: 233). Further,

in a recent assessment of the state of disability research, Barnes suggests that:

the social model of disability represents nothing more complicated than a focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people viewed by others as having some form of impairment (Barnes 2003: 9).

At the same time, 'orthodox' accounts are littered with references to ongoing and largely unexamined difficulties faced by disability research. These difficulties include representation, the collectivisation of experience, teamwork between disabled and non-disabled researchers, the rules of engagement in the research process, and the issue of partisanship and research ethics (for example, Campbell and Oliver 1996; Barnes and Mercer 1997; Mercer 2002). Further, though there is a growing recognition that disability oppression is institutionalised, there is little serious attempt to address insidious, indirect forms of oppression in the research context, in spite of the knowledge that they can be just as injurious in their effects as more direct forms of oppression. The common denominator in all of these issues is that they are to a very large degree concerned *with social relationships between people*, relationships that foreground issues of 'culture', 'language' and 'experience'. The question then becomes this: Are 'orthodox' paradigms of disability research sufficiently alert to and tolerant of the messiness of the social worlds of disabled people to give social relations the kind of in-depth investigation that may go some way towards resolving the difficulties they are perceived to pose?

If a paradigm, following Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 157), is defined as 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action', at first sight the answer to our question seems to be 'no'. If we take the UPIAS social model as the driving paradigm

of 'orthodox' research, 'orthodox' social modellers insist that the social model is *not* concerned with the analysis of experience or impairment (Oliver 1996; Finkelstein 2002), while others argue that it should be (Morris 1992; Crow 1996; Thomas 1999). A similar conflict exists between orthodoxy and those who are concerned with the analysis of 'cultural' and 'linguistic' barriers and processes that are implicated in the social creation or construction of disability (Corker 1998, 2001, 2003; Scott-Hill 2002, 2004). Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence within disability research *at the paradigmatic level*, to support orthodoxy's claims. That is, experience, impairment, language and culture are important and legitimate projects for disability research, but they cannot be properly or fully addressed using the 'orthodox' disability research paradigm. However, as I will show below, my reasons for apparently supporting orthodoxy are not the same as those that are commonly put forward by proponents of these claims, because I believe these claims perpetuate the discourse of individualism (Scott-Hill 2002).

It can further be argued that, for exactly the same reasons, if we uncritically support mainly feminist counter claims, what we would be proposing is the incorporation of experience, impairment, language and culture whilst leaving the underlying assumptions of the 'orthodox' paradigm intact. So, for example, while Mercer (2002: 235) suggests that 'subjective ... experiential studies too often ignore power relations and wider contextual factors', it could equally be the case that such studies do not aim to investigate these things from the perspective of orthodoxy. In what follows, I want to examine how different rules of engagement in research conversations approach the problem of collectivisation using two different disability research paradigms, which are summarised in Table 1. The first paradigm represents (how I perceive) 'orthodoxy' on the basis of the disability studies literature. The second paradigm represents my own 'take' on doing disability

research, though it has much in common with research accounts that are lumped under the rather unfortunate umbrella of 'postmodernism'. These paradigms should not, however, be interpreted as yet another reiteration of the research 'typologies' that sociologists are so fond of. Rather, in applying them, I will focus on the view that research paradigms are showing an increasing tendency to 'interbreed' (Lincoln and Guba 2000), and attempt to examine the consequences of such interbreeding for collectivisation.

Closed encounters: collectivising experience the orthodox way

At a very basic level, the success of collectivisation is a product of how different perspectives function together in an intra-textual conversation. Alvesson (2002: 168) suggests that: 'a good conversation involves a combination of consensus, variation in views and dissensus. Too much of any of these elements means that the conversation becomes uninteresting; it becomes repetitive, it comes to consist of monologues or turns into a quarrel'. Ofelia Schutte (1998: 55) also notes that 'what we hold to be the nature of knowledge is not culture-free' but is determined by methodologies and data legitimated by the rational consensus – or what she calls the 'unstated norm'. She further suggests that we might:

map the statements of the culturally different other according to three categories – readily understandable, difficult to understand, and truly incommensurable (Schutte 1998: 56).

When the degree of difficulty in understanding the position of someone who holds views that are incommensurable with our own is determined by the rational consensus, communication tends to reach closure very quickly.

Consider examples 1 and 2 below, both of which include challenges to particular positions taken by 'orthodoxy' ('truth', 'reality' and 'impairment'), though occurring at different stages in the research process.

Example 1, from the archives of the disability-research mailbase <www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/disability-research.html>

Brad: 'Larry wrote: 'Reality is not fixed, it is relative' ... wrong.'

Larry: '... Reality, as observed by any individual, is dependent upon the observers viewpoint, his/her sensory apparatus, cognitive framework, education, age, culture and so much else.'

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Table 1: Contrasting disability research paradigms

	'Orthodox' disability research paradigm	'Communicative' disability research paradigm
Disability	A social relation of dominance.	A contingent social relation.
Impairment	Socially/institutionally constructed;	Ontology: impairment is experienced perceived by others. and lived by people in a structured and regulated world.
Society	Structured, ordered and patterned on	Messy, complex and sometimes the basis of social categories. chaotic.
Individual	Passive, oppressed,	

pre-social.

(Potential) agentic,
resourceful, social.

Culture A reflection of socio-economic

The processes and resources involved relations. A coherent pattern/uniform

in situated social practice. ethos.

Language Language is either subordinate to or a

Language is productive, interactive, distraction from structures of political

creative, functional, situated and and economic domination

context-dependent. People make use (determinism). It is viewed as a simple

of language to accomplish things.

medium for the mirroring of objective reality through the passive transport of data (language represents 'reality').

Discourse Institutional: broad institutionalised

Institutional (regime of ideas or reasoning patterns with a

truth/knowledge) and local (what material practice referent and with people do in dialogue with each other power to define and structure part of in specific social settings). Language is social reality. Language is divorced

action, and conversations are viewed as from action, and conversations are

dialogic and intra-textual. viewed as dialectic and inter-textual.

Power Top-down.

Dispersed, disciplinary.

Resistance Collective resistance through the

Resistance through subversion of unity of oppressed groups.

universals and grand narratives.

Politics Consensus (internal); opposition

Relational (internal and external).

Research (external). Challenging research as an

There is an analytical separation of talk

emphasis apparatus of hegemony; reversing the

practice (the language itself), (language traditional

researcher/researched

in use) and meaning
(production of hierarchy through partisanship
with

research texts). The
support of the oppressed.

knowledge claims through
empirical material based on
care, awareness and
insightful handling of
production/ construction
processes, and care in the
interpretation of it.

Rules of

Closure and a refusal of destabilising Openness,
understanding, reflexivity,
engagement perspectives; focus on
what is (assumed

awareness of
absence. to be) present and readily
understandable.

Collectivisation Finding,
constructing or imposing

Through dialogue between
pattern and tendencies and patterns on 'reality'
on

ambiguity; trends and
variation; order the basis of predetermined
assumptions

and fragmentation;
regularities and about the nature of 'reality'.

disorder.

Implications for

Focus on social transformation at the societal level. The aim is to identify strategies for change

Research tends to result

that are both top-down and bottom-up. in the reinforcement of minority-

Research aims for social inclusion majority relations, locational

through critical awareness of complexity, integration (tokenism), and/or social

whilst recognising that social change may fragmentation.

not be immediately observable.

Brad: 'Reality depends on the superposition, or state, of the observation. We know that superposition of possible outcomes must exist simultaneously at a microscopic level because we can observe interference effects from these. [...] Indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation. That prevents us from so naively accepting as valid a 'blurred model' for representing reality.'

Larry: 'I am afraid I simply do not

understand what you are saying, I am not sure that I ever will. Today's hard science becomes tomorrow's myth. My apparatus for observing and processing that information is clearly different from yours, don't impose yours on me.'

Brad: 'I'm sorry to say the imposition is all yours. My thoughts are exactly that, mine, and just another perspective.'

Michael: 'I think this debate is getting out of hand so let's get back to, er, reality.'

Q: Is Diarrhoea social? Or Cancer, or MS, or AIDS, or a broken spine? Of course they're not. They're physical realities existing independently of thought. The subjective experience of them may vary but that's not at all the same thing as saying they in themselves are social...'

Larry: 'At this point I shall step down from the podium of this virtual debating chamber and leave space for greater minds than I to continue the debate.'

In this conversation, there is too much emphasis on

consensus, and so the exchange has a dialectical flavour. As Bakhtin (1986: 147) writes:

(t)ake dialogue and remove the voices ... remove the intonations

... carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that's how you get dialectics.

Brad's position is clearly not 'just another perspective', because it is fairly characteristic of accounts of 'truth' and 'reality' that are part of the 'orthodox' paradigm. Moreover, it represents an 'unstated norm' because this is not transparent. Instead, the 'norm' is disguised as an individual's 'thoughts' and dressed up in academic jargon - a strategy that may be lost on those list members who are not steeped in the list's history, aims and objectives, or who make other 'culturally different' interpretations of disability. It is also noticeable that Brad doesn't invite Larry to explain his 'difficult to understand' difference further, a closure that prompts Michael to further marginalise Larry's still unexamined perspective. An in-depth analysis of the archive suggests that this kind of conversation is fairly typical. The broad topic 'language', for example, has occupied a great deal of time and space on the list over the years. However, discussions tend to be reduced to matters of terminology, to revolve around the multiple meanings of words, and to be closed prematurely by 'orthodox' interventions that invite participants to revisit the ('orthodox') history of the topic. This failure to acknowledge that social relationships do not hinge simply on the meaning of words creates social distance rather than mutuality, where the need to maintain the existing consensus overrides everything else, and is built on the marginalisation of dissenting voices. The processes of collectivisation employed simply reinforce orthodoxy along with its existing majority-minority relations.

Example 2: taken from Emanuel and Ackroyd (1996: 181)

'There were two groups of disabled people on the strategy group who could not agree with each other on terminology. While people from GMCDP (Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People) preferred to use the term 'impairment' ... the profoundly deaf (sic) members of the group felt the word 'impairment' has a negative meaning and should be rejected. They preferred to talk in terms of 'difference'. They emphasised cultural and language differences rather than the existence of impairment. However 'difference' was unacceptable to the GMCDP members because it was regarded as too general and did not classify the functional range which is the basis on which oppressive societal and individual attitudes are formed. As no consensus could be reached, it was agreed to use the word 'impairment' but to include a statement outlining the deaf member's perspective.'

Once a particular voice is enshrined as a 'minority viewpoint' within a particular orthodoxy, it will always be a minority viewpoint because orthodoxies tend to take the majority viewpoint as given. This is usually reflected at every stage of the research process, including the production of the final research text. For instance, it could be argued that the above extract is an example of what Potter and Wetherall (1987) call *selective interpretation*. On the basis of predetermined ideas ('orthodoxy'), the researcher structures an account in such a way that a potential multiplicity of meanings (e.g. 'difference') is neglected in favour of what is regarded as a 'primary' meaning ('impairment'). In the production of research texts, it may also mean that such a 'primary' meaning is read from the variety, ambiguity and inconsistency of the statements in the accounts in order to preserve the 'orthodoxy'. Selective interpretation therefore views the collectivisation of experience in terms of patterns of inclusion and exclusion that are predetermined by this 'primary' meaning. Far from 'breaking down barriers', one outcome of such an approach when used consistently is

social fragmentation, often on the basis of competing social and political agendas. Again, the emphasis is on refusal of destabilising perspectives and on closure.

Close encounters: struggling for mutuality

The 'communicative' paradigm takes the view that social relations between people are notoriously messy and complex. Research that examines these issues – perhaps even all research because most research is conducted through and with people

- must therefore show 'a tolerance for ambiguity, multiplicity, contradiction, and instability' (Wolf 1992: 129).

At the heart of this paradigm is the belief that language must be taken seriously, but, as Table 1 shows, the way that language, discourse and culture are understood is very different from how they are understood within the 'orthodox' paradigm. There are three points that must be emphasised in this respect. First is the view that language *is* doing, and language practice has effects – there is no contrived divorce between speech and action. Second, the importance of *not* understanding is as critical as the importance of understanding. Therefore researchers need to be sufficiently reflexive and alert to what is not present and visible, and to note the contradictions that emerge in the research over time. Generally, though not always, this means more data rather than selective use of data, and a tight, qualitative and locally-oriented research focus. And third, it is not assumed that reaching understanding and mutuality will be easy because meaning is not always transparent and practice is context-dependent. But, as the following two examples show, these things have to be struggled for and struggle requires a great deal of time and reflexive energy. Both of these examples centre on the question of impairment. The first looks at how impairment operates in an example of teamwork between disabled and non-disabled researcher, and the second examines the consequences of not understanding the ontological character of impairment in the research

context.

Example 3: taken from Corker and Davis (2003)

This discussion took place at the end of a day's research in a mainstream school, which had been particularly frustrating for both of us. It was our practice to record all our conversations with each other, as researchers, in addition to those that we had with the disabled young people we were working with, and those that the young people had with each other and with other adults in the different social contexts under investigation. This particular conversation began with each of us stating a position in relation to a situation that we had encountered that day:

*John Isobel [one of the 'specialist' teachers] wants us to sit in the base,
next period, to stop the [other teacher]
coming in. Mairian Well that's not our role.*

The conversation became focused on meanings of the word 'stop', which we had interpreted differently. This initially led to John's insistence that he didn't mean what Mairian thought he meant, which in turn resulted in the dialogue becoming more intense.

*Mairian I think you're dodging the issue.
(laughs)*

*John But I can just. I can justify. No, but
I can justify doing it on an
academic
level. Yeah? Do you know what I
mean? I can do anything.*

*Mairian I don't think this is a I don't
think that the issues arising are
anything
to do with academic or personal
level. I said to you, you changed
the language.*

What I meant was....

John Yeah, but that's OK.

Mairian What I mean was

John Yeah, but you interrupted me when I was trying. You ...

Mairian When, when you first ... when, when you first described what Isobel said to you, you said quite clearly that she had said, 'Would we stay in there, and stop the [other teacher] going in there?' Then when you referred

...

John That's what she said....

.... to it again, a few minutes ago,

Mairian you changed the language to make it

seem as if Isobel wasn't being quite so ... you know ... insistent?

John Yeah, because that's what we do. I say words. You make an interpretation

I don't agree with, so I say it a new way. Do you know what I mean?

Mairian No.

So the first time, when I say stop, I

John don't mean we physically, or verbally

stop them. I mean that we are there. That was it. We were to be there.

Mairian Right.

John OK? If it stopped them, wasn't our choice. It was going to be the teacher's choice.

Mairian Yes. So what does that tell you?

John That tells me about the way that we hone something down so that we both agree, OK? I don't see it as bad that I change. I see it as good, because if I didn't change, you'd get what I consider to be the wrong perception of what, of what I'm saying. Do you know what I mean? If I don't change.

Mairian No. No ... what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that the two different languages actually convey to me two very different scenarios, right?

John Yeah, but they don't to me.

Mairian Now, hang on a minute....

John They convey the same to me.

Mairian What I'm saying is what does that tell you about, for example, our work with the deaf kids here?

John Don't patronise me ... I, I want to know what you think, and I'm getting angry now. OK?

Mairian Why?

John Because I think that you are being evasive. OK? You tell me what you think, never mind the kids ... what you think about me changing sentences.

Mairian Yeah.

John I mean, do you understand what I was saying? I don't know that you understand.

Mairian Put it this way. The first time I understood one

thing....

John And that is?

Mairian ... the second time I understood something different.

John Right, OK, OK. And I understand it, but what about now, what about now?

Mairian Then the, what is eh. There are two things, one, you did say very clearly that using the word stop, you said that I'd made an assumption about the meaning of stop.

John Well whatever, yeah.

Mairian OK? Now, yes of course I would.

John Yeah yeah. I'm not saying that's bad. I'm saying that's good.

Mairian No, but ...

John ... that's good.

Mairian Relating that to the kids, ok?

John Right.

Mairian There's a lot of my way, my behaviour which is very similar to theirs and not being able immediately, to look beyond the concrete, the concreteness of the word stop. So I go for the most familiar meaning. Now that's why I understand, for example, the results in the science tests and the fact that they can answer the factual questions, but they can't answer the questions so easily which ask them to think

John Right, right. Now, so yeah it's OK

Mairian and answer.

John Now ... now I'm happy. I'm happy now, because we're talking about the same thing now and that's OK.

Mairian Yeah.

John But before I wasn't sure what, what you were. When you went off to the kids, I wasn't sure what ...

Mairian No well I was just ...

John ... you were talking about

Mairian ... I was only trying to draw you out to see if you

picked that up.

John ... know it differently. The way, the way I picked it up was more in a eh visitation sense. So that when we first came here, Callum [one of the deaf kids] would respond in one way and I would get a fixed idea about him. But each time I come back it's more nuanced.

Mairian Mmm, mmm.

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John You know what I mean?

Mairian Mmm.

But I think it's the same thing,

*John because it, all the time I'm taking
him on
face value.*

Mairian Yeah.

*John But it's OK, because the next, the
next time I'm willing to change that.
You know what I mean? But I
agree that it's something that I
haven't
really picked up.*

One of the biggest problems facing the collectivisation of disabled people's experience is the particular perceptions of impairment that are employed. Impairment is not generally subject to the same kind of analysis as race, gender and sexuality, for example, in spite of the fact that many disabled people clearly feel excluded both from society and from disability theory and politics on the basis of their impairment. In spite of the growing recognition that impairment is socially constructed, 'orthodox' disability studies consistently downplays the implications of this: namely that the impairment categories in question are not

ontological categories. Impairment categories are perceived by 'orthodoxy' as operational categories that are based on 'expert' judgements about what constitutes a particular kind of divergence from 'normality'. At the same time, however, impairment is lived in and through relationships with others, and it has 'real' consequences for how the social world is perceived and for social practice. Those who argue that the presence of impairment is of little or no consequence to the ability to do 'good' disability research tend to take an acultural view of impairment, and to assume that the nature of knowledge is culture-free.

The above conversation initially bears many of the hallmarks of example 1, and there is a danger that it will have a similar outcome up to the point where John says 'don't patronise me'. But this doesn't happen because both of us invite each other to explain further, thus opening up the possibility for greater understanding, along with a collective consensus that was tolerant of our differences. Thus, in the second part of the dialogue, it becomes clear that John has been reading Mairian's responses from within his own, hearing world-view and that Mairian has been reading his responses from within her deaf world-view. What follows is a useful analysis of how this has impacted on the way that each of us was doing and interpreting research with deaf children. John's initial, unsuccessful attempts to engage with Mairian provide some insight into how impairment differences can be downplayed within the 'orthodox' paradigm – something that might have happened in example 1 if Brad and Michael had attempted to draw Larry out, and if Larry hadn't subsequently withdrawn from the debate. In this context, it is interesting that when an earlier version of the research from which example 3 is taken was sent out to journal referees in the discipline of sociology, it was read through the lens of 'orthodoxy'. The 'cause' of the communication breakdown was identified as 'gender

differences' and the second part of the conversation was expressly ignored.

Example 4: taken from Corker (2001)

[Translation of video-taped interview with Linda, aged 15years, conducted in sign language]

Mairian: So what do you think about disabled people?

Linda: About disabled people ... I like them. It must be horrible to be disabled but there is nothing wrong in it. I certainly wouldn't think or say what Glenn Hoddle said. I wouldn't do that. It's horrible and the teasing, it's not nice.

Mairian: Do you think you're disabled?

Linda: No!

Mairian: No?

Linda: Someone did say to me that deaf is disabled, is that true or not?

Mairian: I'm asking you ... what do you think?

Linda: No.

Mairian: You don't think so?

Linda: No ... what about you?

Mairian: Um ... disabled ... has many meanings and maybe when I use the

word disabled, I mean something different from you. But ... I would say yes, I think I am disabled.

Linda: (laughs) Why, you don't look disabled. You can walk naturally. Disabled people have funny walks, you know - like Kevin. They have a funny walk and they are disabled and you are deaf and are not disabled. Other people have said that you are deaf so that means that you are disabled but I think I am deaf but I'm not disabled. If you have a funny walk then you are and I am not. If I was disabled that would really upset me I think I would always wish that I could walk properly. So not being able to walk or see is disability - not me.

One area where 'orthodox' interpretivist accounts often lack explanatory power is in their failure to make explicit what is not said but which may hold the key to rendering something more readily understandable. In a visual-spatial world, looking and seeing are of central importance, but so too are the consequences of an education system that concentrates on the delivery of 'the facts' and does not value reflexivity. Deaf people are constantly juggling the apparent conflict between what they see (literally) and what they are told is 'true', but sometimes these worlds reinforce each other. Deaf studies, like 'orthodox' disability studies, often leaps to present a discussion like the one above as concrete empirical evidence that the experience of Deaf people and disabled people is so incommensurable that it cannot form a basis for collectivisation (Ladd 2003). However, if we fill in the absences in this conversation *by interpreting it from Linda's perspective*, cracks begin to appear in the concrete. Linda interprets 'disability' on the basis of what she can see – visible impairment – in spite of the knowledge that 'someone' has said to her that 'deaf is disabled'. Moreover, she appears to use the normative view that impairment is incapacity and therefore, for her, would be 'upsetting' and 'horrible' – something that being deaf is clearly not. Deaf and disabled are interpreted in terms of what she can do – see - and not in terms of what she can't do – hear – which seems logical and coherent only if the ontological character of deafness is made visible and allowed to enter this conversation.

As a researcher, even though I do not identify as Deaf, my own dependency on vision as a deaf person alerts me to this, and perhaps this gives me the advantage of lived experience over perceived experience. However, once in full view, and indeed it is referred to again and again in the Deaf studies literature, this knowledge is there for all to learn – if they choose to do so. It is interesting, therefore, that the only way that 'orthodox' disability studies can

incorporate the experience of deafness is the easy way. It assumes the experience of deafness to be a bounded, coherent pattern or uniform ethos

– as a thing rather than a process – and this renders it incommensurable. Correspondingly, it is difficult for partisans working in the research context to see that mainstreaming – as the educational ‘reality’ for most deaf children for the last 3-4 decades – might interact with impairment to produce very different ontological forms of deafness that seek a greater understanding of difference-in-dialogue. ‘Difference’ is, after all, what they live with.

Concluding remarks

Proponents of the ‘orthodox’ social model insist that it should be a conceptual tool

or heuristic device that clarifies the meaning of disability and impairment, and:

enables us to see something that we do not understand because

in the model it can be seen from different viewpoints’ (Finkelstein

2002: 13). As such, the social model amounts to a ‘multidimensional replica of reality that can trigger insights that we might not otherwise develop’ (p.13). Finkelstein’s reference to ‘different viewpoints’ suggests a degree of flexibility in how the model might be interpreted and used in practice, and, if this is indeed the case, then it seems a likely explanation of how the social model has come to mean different things to different people. But, set against this, there is the suggestion that there is one ‘reality’ than can be replicated, which arguably works against flexibility. In view of this, Finkelstein’s vision seems to be at best limited, at worst, seriously compromised by the naive view of the actuality of social practice that is taken by ‘orthodoxy’, along with its focus on defining the content of oppression in an a priori fashion. These limitations make it difficult for ‘orthodox’ social model research to identify the mechanisms or relationships that generate a disability

outcome, other than to propose that it takes the form of oppression.

Any attempt to gain critical enlightenment on these matters tends to be interpreted by 'orthodox' social modellers as threatening the unity of disabled people's political campaigns, and accused of promoting a relativistic world in which the 'fact' or 'reality' of disability can no longer be assured. The suggestion is that 'multiple definitions of different actions cannot be tolerated' if the fight for social change is to prevail (Altman 2001: 117). However, the refusal to privilege some types of accounts on epistemological grounds – relativism, as it is often called – need not be seen as a morally or politically vacuous stance, or as rhetorically ineffective. There is still the imperative to establish the claims of some versions over others. This struggle is certainly reinforced by the knowledge that normative discourse is not ephemeral but powerful in constituting social formations in ways that are oppressive for certain social groups. But the *process* of struggle can only be adequately researched, and appropriate intervention strategies formulated, where the commitment to studying disability is also a commitment to the critique of some positions, some of the ways in which power is exercised and some forms of social practice.

The 'communicative' paradigm, when applied sensitively, does not deny the existence of social structures and categories nor does it suggest that social relationships are never structured. What it does do is to urge researchers to develop an awareness of how far these structures can permeate, and to caution us that partisanship with the oppressed is not always an effective guarantee of anti-oppressive practice or social change. But this claim comes with a word of warning. Disability research needs to take the messy side of social life much more seriously and to hesitate before finding, constructing or imposing tendencies and patterns on reality. For this is what continues to happen when important differences

between research paradigms are glossed over, and it results in their widespread mis-representation and abuse. The communicative paradigm represents a more careful and reflexive approach to research that will be more appropriate for the investigation of social relations across difference. It is capable of providing us with a deeper understanding of the processes of collectivisation and, as such, may yet prove to be a useful tool in examining the mechanisms of inclusive societies.

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