CHAPTER 5

Social Model Theories and Non-Disabled People: some possibilities for connection

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Introduction
Social model theories explaining the oppression of disabled people in Britain today are one in a long line of socially concerned responses to the effects of the rise of capitalism and the industrialisation which accompanied, and was a principal expression of, its development. It may be argued that one of the motivating factors behind the development of social model theories – along with the oppression theories of feminists and anti-racists - has been the need to challenge previous theoretical assumptions about the one-dimensional class-based nature of power relations. Hence, disabled people from across all social classes face oppression and exclusion by a capitalist society that does not take their needs into account (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990; Barnes 1991; Thomas 1999). Although individual people with impairments may be protected from particular instances of oppression because of their class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality (Appleby 1993, 1994; Corbett, 1994; Vernon 1999; Humphrey 2000), it is equally the case that in many other situations impairment is used as the primary excuse for mainstream oppressive practices.

Given the ongoing oppression of disabled people, the further development of social model theories to support

disabled people in their everyday struggles against social exclusion is essential. The question is perhaps how best this may be achieved in today's political and social climate. However, there are hopeful signposts of a better future. Most important are the examples of disabled people's resistance to oppression, starting from the development of social model theories. Responsibility for their social exclusion has been rightly placed at the door of a normalising society which has rigidly developed and maintained structures designed to create a docile workforce (Foucault 1991; Douard 1995), and to reward those who most closely conform to socially prescribed ideal models of appearance and behaviour.

Activism has also played a crucial role in challenging existing oppressive power relations, ranging from the increasing involvement of disabled people in policy-making on disability issues at both local and national level (Campbell and Oliver 1996), through to the work of the Disability Direct Action Network (DAN) in directly challenging oppressive practice and bringing disabled people's exclusion to the attention of wider society. Equally important has been disabled people's increasing visibility in everyday life, and the active celebration of the disabled identity through factors such as the growth of the disability arts movement (Swain and French 2000) and the increasingly high profile of disability sport. Thus parallel developments at the levels of theory, of activism, and of being, have been crucial in bringing us to where we are now.

Forming alliances for change with non-disabled people: opportunities and pitfalls
In seeking additional ways of furthering the agenda for inclusion, I want to explore whether some of our struggles against oppression may be facilitated by the formation of strategic alliances with non-disabled people. I take as my starting point Finkelstein's (1996: 11) suggestion that

social change might best be achieved if disabled and non-disabled people started working together more systematically to tackle exclusion in all its forms. Thus, for example, disabled people's support alongside other local parents campaigning for the provision of safe crossing places outside schools might be reciprocated by those non-disabled people giving backing for struggles for more accessible public transport.

This argument is founded in a wider belief in social justice for all. Williams has explained the operation of stereotyping in capitalist societies as a means of dividing people against each other by concentrating on difference:

> There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. In an urban industrial society there are many opportunities for such ways of seeing' (Williams 1963: 289).

Williams was writing before the development of the disabled people's movement, and concentrates on class relations to the exclusion of other important forms of power relationship, including patriarchy. However, the process of 'othering' has been used as a tool of political, social and cultural oppression by non-disabled people against disabled people in Western capitalist societies (Hevey 1992; Shakespeare 1994). Perhaps, in seeking to develop social model responses to these experiences of exclusion, we have done just the same thing with the non-disabled other, by viewing them in the mass as oppressors. Such a strategy has actually been essential in enabling disabled people to counter discrimination, not least through developing pride and self-worth as nonconformists to impossible social expectations.

However, whilst othering those engaged in oppressive practice is an appropriate political response in some situations, there are times and places in which

engagement may be a necessary strategy to achieve change, such as where disabled and non-disabled people are co-participants on policy committees, or are seeking ways to improve physical and programme access to public venues. In such cases, finding ways of working with people who are not 'like us' may then enable us all to focus even more clearly on tackling the exclusionary structural barriers that divide us.

> To the degree that we find the formula inadequate for ourselves, we can wish to extend to others the courtesy of acknowledging the unknown (Williams 1963: 289).

We may concede that not all non-disabled people are oppressors of disabled people all the time, and indeed may be active allies in the push for change. The bigger problem, as theories of disability, patriarchy, ethnicity and heterosexism have demonstrated, lies in the structural barriers which differentially include and exclude particular groups in particular times and spaces, breeding additional socially-created divisions between individuals along the way (Foucault 1991). Hence, in seeking to develop appropriate situational alliances for change with non-disabled others, we may begin to challenge some of these wider socially-created barriers to inclusion.

The formation of 'unusual alliances' to tackle a range of exclusionary barriers may arise in many different areas, for example:

> we could link our struggles for women, for disabled people, working together for better social services, disability rights legislation, working for more equitable distribution of work within families, instead of seeing our interests as unalterably opposed (Finger 1991: 43).

Similarly, Phelan (1995: 341) has argued that lesbians may encounter particular problems about being 'out' in the community in poor neighbourhoods, but this also ties in with the wider problem of people on low incomes in getting decent housing. So, whilst acknowledging that there may be specific differences between the experiences of poor lesbians and poor straight people, it should be possible to establish a common agenda in struggling for better housing, without succumbing to the dangers of either essentialism or of over-generalisation.

I see the possibility of alliances between disabled and non-disabled people as only one thread in the development of disabled people's struggles against oppression. There will be times when disabled people need to organise alone, when the primacy of the disabled identity is of paramount importance and cannot risk dilution of energy and effort. Other dangers of a pluralist approach to bringing about change are also acknowledged. A strategy of multiple identification with people who are not 'like us' can lead to looking only at individuals (Young 1995: 195), thereby losing a sense of group identity and broad group political strategy, and also obscuring the individual's relative investments in particular identities (Rattansi 1995: 271). In campaigning for wider change, the risk also remains of disabled people's needs being overlooked or pushed to the end of the queue in favour of those with louder voices (Young 1995: 197). Hence, pluralism and coalitions as advocated by theorists and activists alike (Finger 1991; Appleby 1994; Corbett 1994; Phelan 1995; Humphrey 1999; Vernon 1999) are not unproblematic strategies.

Achieving change through consensus may also be harder, and may take longer, not least because it demands an understanding of 'the other' with whom the change is being negotiated. However, change achieved in this way is likely to be more effective and long-lasting.

Given that many disabled people already routinely engage with non-disabled people, both as activists and at the more general level of being, it may be that social model theory is lagging behind real-world practice in not addressing some of the practical issues that arise during such necessary engagements between disabled and non-disabled people (Corker 1999; Germon 1999).

Engaging with non-disabled people: some sample strategies

My own interest in this area derives primarily from my fifteen years' work experience with mainstream countryside recreation and nature conservation organisations, in which I routinely utilised social model principles in negotiating improved physical and programme access for disabled people at countryside sites across England. The social model emphasis on tackling structural barriers was central to the success of such initiatives. For countryside staff previously influenced by individualised explanations of disability, the external barriers approach was new, but it made more sense to them, not least because it made their job easier. By adopting universal design principles they could easily develop access solutions that worked for all visitors – both those with and without impairments. This reduced their anxiety about the task, and made it more likely that they would implement the suggested changes. Thus a structural barriers approach was crucial to the success of access improvement initiatives, reinforcing the point that key aspects of social model theory already have significant practical application to 'real world' situations.

However, at a personal level, as an access advisor there were other areas of practice where I felt relatively unsupported by social model theory. This was particularly true in terms of the need to develop effective communication and negotiation skills to persuade non-disabled people of the need to improve access. Before

working in this field I had never previously engaged as an equal with non-disabled people in the way that this work required, while most of the rangers with whom I had contact had never worked with a disabled person before. This meant that our early interactions were often something of an uphill struggle. In those situations it would have been helpful to have some analytical tools to help me understand and defend against the negative attitudes and potentially psycho-emotional impacts (Thomas 1999; Reeve 2002). Without such a frame of reference I often found myself absorbing non-disabled people's disablist views, and further internalising my own oppression.

Over time, however, I did develop survival strategies that enabled me both to begin to neutralise these personalised projections, and to engage in dialogue through difference with non-disabled others. These strategies are summarised below, and are offered as starting points for developing theory-level responses to the realities of engagement with non-disabled people.

a) Developing a shared agenda for change: the 'win-win situation'.

To start with a fairly obvious statement, access initiatives worked best where both parties could see that they were getting something they wanted from the project. In the difficult economic circumstances in which many countryside services were working in the 1980s and 1990s, it was unrealistic to expect that service providers would be keen to improve physical and programme access to sites without being persuaded of the benefits to them. However, in countryside settings improving access was almost never just a question of economics. Equally important was the need to recognise and make explicit the existence of a common bond between site staff and the disabled people pressing for improved access. As data from a networking workshop organised by one project showed (BT/The Fieldfare Trust 1997), the participants

were united by their love of the countryside and the desire to conserve it for future generations.

However, one corollary was that disabled people wishing to introduce their family and friends to what the countryside had to offer them would only be able to do this if physical and programme access were improved. For highly-committed countryside staff who often accepted low wages as the necessary price they paid for the privilege of working as custodians of the natural environment, the recognition that disabled people were equally though differently committed to the same cause was the key to making them understand why improving access was so important, and to valuing disabled people as equal partners in this process. In turn, disabled people's initial perceptions of site staff as ignoring their rightful claims to improved access were changed by the realisation that many staff were doing the best they could with a limited knowledge of disability issues, and that they positively welcomed disabled people's constructive suggestions on access improvements. This commonality of purpose around conserving the environment was the key to the successful implementation of change.

b) The need to acknowledge and understand pressures faced by the other party

Not infrequently, I discovered that the rangers I was working with felt undervalued compared to other employees of their organisations, whom they perceived to be enjoying a higher status and to be more likely to have their views listened to and acted on. Sometimes, indeed, it emerged that my consultancy visit had been arranged by senior management without prior discussion and agreement with the staff I was due to meet. In these situations it was especially important to establish quickly a bond with those staff. Often the most effective way of doing this was to start by asking them to talk me through what the site had to offer to visitors, in much the same

way as Freire (1997) has recommended starting from what people already know in beginning the process of change, so that you are more likely to carry them with you as the discussion develops. Almost invariably, this invitation led to what I came privately to term 'the half hour rant', during which they proceeded to provide me with a detailed account of why, although they would like nothing more than to improve access for disabled people, it wasn't really achievable for the following hundred reasons. Whilst I often found these renditions tedious in their similarity, I soon discovered that it was fruitless to interrupt the speaker or to try to engage in debate. Instead I came to recognise that this initial half-hour was a necessary space in which they were actually expressing (without always realising it) a range of negative responses to the consultancy process. These included a fear of having to engage with me as the outsider/access 'expert'/disabled person; their embarrassment that the site was not more accessible; and their concern that they personally did not have the skills needed to improve access in the ways they thought I would demand.

Faced with this situation I needed simultaneously to engage in active listening -to reassure them that I was hearing what they were saying - whilst also privately defending against internalising the negative attitudes they were expressing. This was often really hard to do, and I could only stay with the negotiation process because I knew I was getting paid to be there. This economic factor acted as a vital distancing tool by enabling me to contain these negative projections within the sphere of work-based relationships, so that I could hear their comments without letting them invade my private space and identity as a disabled person. But it was still dangerous work, and I couldn't always succeed in keeping the public and the private separate in this way.

However, at the end of the half-hour session, I would

deliberately ignore the negatives in what they had told me, and instead emphasise the positives. This meant firmly re-stating my faith in their site management skills as an engine for change, and then suggesting that we go and look around the site together. This strategy almost invariably worked, because having been given permission to air their concerns at the outset it generally cleared the air for the rangers to engage seriously with the access issues under discussion. The development of access improvement strategies then became a joint effort, combining their knowledge of the site with my understanding of wider access standards and guidelines. This enabled us to develop site-specific solutions. Unsurprisingly, access solutions developed in this way were those most likely to be successfully implemented. However, the negotiation process was often personally demanding in a way that was difficult to maintain, or even to justify at times. Also, my professional identity as a consultant made it impossible to utilise strategies such as direct action to achieve change. Instead, my role had to be one of negotiating change through dialogue and consensus. This, is one area I believe social model theory could address, by developing strategies to support disabled people in their attempts to negotiate for change with non-disabled others, and hence to reduce the problems of fatigue and burn-out that affect too many members of social movements.

c) Sharing skills and knowledge to speed up achieving change

Access initiatives were easier to develop and implement when all parties pooled their resources. I initially found this strategy the hardest one to implement because it meant putting trust in non-disabled people to act in ways that would support disabled people. From my previous experience I doubted whether they were capable of doing so without acting in a patronising way or trying to hijack projects for their own ends. However, once the common

bond of conservation had been established, the process of pooling skills and knowledge became much easier. This sometimes enabled the provision of new services that disabled people would not have achieved alone. For example, in one project disabled people wanted an accessible public transport service so they could travel independently from the city into the surrounding countryside at weekends (BT/The Fieldfare Trust 1997). The introduction of this pilot service was only possible with the backing and technical expertise of local authority public transport managers, and the provision of an accessible bus by the local bus company.

Still, it would be naïve to suggest that working together was unproblematic in all projects. Unequal power relations were always implicated in our interactions, and at times this resulted in the need for a facilitator's intervention in debates between countryside staff and disabled people. This was because the rangers were quite simply unaware of the enormity of the barriers facing disabled people, and so made real blunders in the negotiation process. For example, one ranger was enthusiastically listing all the sites he hoped the local access group would come and audit. It proved necessary to interrupt him to explain that if he wanted this to happen, he would need to fund disabled people's participation in terms of meeting their time, transport, personal support and childcare costs for the work. He was visibly taken aback, not because he did not want to pay up, but because he really had no idea of how hard it was for disabled people to get out and effect change. Thus, dialogue could only proceed through the pragmatic recognition of difference. The rangers had to be educated about disabled people's support needs, and disabled people had to realise this. On the positive side, with honesty and a willingness to learn, such discussions were an enormously powerful tool in educating non-disabled people about the reality of our lives, and hence gaining support in bringing about change.

Issues around linking theory and practice

I will now explore possible ways of developing theory in response to the activist strategies outlined above. A key finding has been that dialogue can only succeed through the pragmatic recognition of difference (Phillips 1999), and by acknowledging the reality of power relations that oppress disabled people. Even with goodwill on both sides, inadvertent mistakes and oppressive practice will still happen. In such cases disabled people will need to adopt defensive strategies to avoid internalising the oppression. Where it is not possible to come right out and explain to the non-disabled person why their behaviour is inappropriate, other self-protection defences may be utilised, ranging from mentally 'tuning out' of the discussion through to physical withdrawal and boycotting of services.

That said, where dialogue is mutually respectful, we can identify limited commonality of purpose with non-disabled people and utilise this in working together to achieve change. This finding may at first sight be hard to reconcile with implicit and explicit assumptions of an essentialist difference between disabled and non-disabled people. However, such essentialist accounts have also been pragmatic in their acknowledgement of the potential value of developing disability theory in partnership with some non-disabled theorists, notably in the field of medical sociology (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare 1999; Thomas 1999). Others have argued that areas of commonality do already exist between some disabled and non-disabled people, particularly in terms of their gender, race and sexual identities (Appleby 1993, 1994; Corbett 1994; Vernon 1999; Humphrey 2000). Such accounts have tended to concentrate primarily on the need to acknowledge the importance of a wider range of (minority group) identity politics than that associated with impairment alone.

At the level of theory, the debate has not previously been taken further to explore the possibilities that the development of situational alliances between disabled people and non-disabled members of the mainstream outside the academy might engender in promoting change. However, it may reasonably be argued that such alliances with members of the mainstream have already been important in struggles for inclusion, not only in relation to challenging barriers to countryside access or in pursuing academic engagement with non-disabled theorists, but also in other areas of social life such as education, as evidenced by dialogue and common action between disabled people, parents and teachers under the 'Inclusion Now!' banner.

In seeking to utilise examples of successful partnership-building from particular settings as wider exemplars of good practice, however, some difficulties must be acknowledged. For example, it is possible that targeted strategies for communication and negotiation with non-disabled people will be perceived as over-individualised and lacking a wider theoretical structure. Further, there is a danger that focussing on deliberation and dialogue in this way may take people's attention away from material inequality and conflict of interest, thus emphasising cultural issues at the expense of political ones (Phillips 1999: 11920). It is therefore important to reiterate that such communication strategies are always intended to be utilised as part of a more general structural barriers approach to tackling oppression, and not as a substitute for a wider ethical and political strategy. Thus it is the combined application of both economic and cultural based social model principles to specific inclusion-related problems that is most likely to produce consensual and durable inclusive provision.

Secondly, there is the related difficulty that such strategies may be seen as solely individualised responses

to atypical situations, and that as such they have no wider potential applicability. Certainly the specific way in which I interpreted and implemented the principles for collaboration discussed above in my own fieldwork will be different from the approaches adopted by other disabled people in working with non-disabled people, simply because everyone has their own ways of working and of developing such partnerships. However, alongside recognition of difference, there is a fundamental need to acknowledge the humanity of the individual non-disabled other, in those situations where we are aiming for dialogue and consensual change. Indeed, in seeking to engage with non-disabled people who had no prior experience of disability issues:

> Wherever we have started from, we need to listen to others who started from a different position (Williams 1963: 320).

Acknowledging other people's positionality in this way was sometimes personally difficult and demanding. However, I found that it was a necessary condition of engagement with those non-disabled people, just as they in turn were struggling to understand where I was coming from. This feeling of being on a journey of mutual discovery was a source of constant fear and delight throughout the negotiation process, because it required each of us to trust the other not to engage in exploitation by claiming that our own expertise was superior to theirs. Instead, it was the open sharing of skills, knowledge and experience for our mutual benefit that led to sustainable change.

Some theory-level starting points
In seeking to account for the possibility of relationships based on the mutual acceptance of difference at the level of theory, I suggest that we might usefully draw on literature from at least three areas of study. These are

theories around inter-personal communication, multiple identity, and power relations.

i) Engaging in dialogue that acknowledges difference

Phillips (1999) and Taylor (1992) have both emphasised the dangers of dialogue that only sees the person with less cultural and economic power as being different from the more powerful other. Such an exclusionary approach merely reinforces existing inequalities, and may lead to the attempted cultural and political assimilation of the individual or minority group. Instead, dialogues that acknowledge and respect people's differences from each other, and which do not require the capitulation of one party to the other, are needed.

I have found the work of the medical sociologist Arthur Frank useful here. He writes as someone who has experienced serious illness, and who is thus under no illusions as to the exclusionary effects of the individual model of illness and impairment (Frank 1991a). He nonetheless propounds an ethical approach to dialogue with the non-disabled/non-ill other that seeks points of connection through the 'the communicative body'.

> Its desire is for dyadic expression, not monadic consumption. Whether it produces joy, sorrow, or anger, it uses itself to express these. This expression takes the form of dyadic sharing. In the further contingency of this sharing, the body has the potential for more diffuse realization (Frank 1991b: 80).

Similarly, Taylor explores the 'fundamentally dialogical character' (1992: 32) of human life, and the way in which we work out who we are through dialogue and reflection with the people we share our lives with. As social beings, we do not develop our identities in isolation, but through our interactions with others. Frank's contribution is

particularly important in directly relating this general philosophical approach to the particular experiences of illness and impairment. Although his argument is made primarily in relation to the ill/non-ill binary, he also elaborates his belief that the same process may be utilised by disabled people. Throughout his work (Frank 1991a, 1991b, 1995, 2000), he illustrates the importance of illness narratives as a means of reaching out to the other, a strategy that might also be of use in demonstrating the psycho-emotional effects of disabling attitudes to a non-disabled audience. Such dialogues are not easy, but may serve a deeper moral purpose:

> Being alive is a dual responsibility: to our shared frailty, on the one hand, and to all we can create, on the other. The mutual responsibilities of the ill to express and the healthy to hear meet in the recognition that our creativity depends on our frailty. Life without illness would not just be incomplete, it would be impossible (Frank 1991a: 128).

On the face of it, this is a profoundly optimistic assertion of the development, through communication, of an increased level of mutual understanding. It explicitly demands that members of the majority learn to listen to the voices of people with illnesses and impairments as a prerequisite for mutual growth and understanding. Such an explanation makes sense to me in the context of relationship-building with countryside staff.

> Listening is hard, but it is also a fundamental moral act; to realize the best potential in post-modern times requires an ethics of listening… in listening for the other, we listen for ourselves. The moment of witness in the story crystalizes a mutuality of need, when each is for the other (Frank 1995: 25).

Developing such 'an ethics of listening' to support dialogues with the other that recognise difference, and that also acknowledge the reality of the differential effects of power relations on the various participants, would be of practical benefit to disabled people engaged in negotiating change. In the course of implementing such a strategy we might also begin to challenge the mechanism of stereotyping other people into 'masses' (Williams 1963), and thus develop new alliances for change. Frank's analysis of the communicative body is of potential value in explaining the power and possibilities of communication in our everyday lives. I believe, then, that this is one area where the further development of social model theory is desirable.

ii) Multiple identity as a means of engagement with non-disabled others

As already argued, some disability studies theorists have already elaborated areas of commonality between disabled people and members of other minority groups. Taking this argument further in terms of feminist debates, Mohanty (1995: 81) has called for members of social movements to look beyond their own experiences and explanations for oppression, and to acknowledge and utilise the intersections between the various expressions of identity politics as a means of developing future political strategy. Again, this may not be easy, even with members of other minority groups, because of the existence and interplay of cultural preferences and hierarchies in a wider context of shifting power relations. Bell-Hooks has discussed one way of overcoming such barriers in relation to her own experiences:

> We talked about the need to acknowledge that we all suffer in some way, but that we are not all oppressed or equally oppressed. Many of us feared that our experiences were irrelevant

because they were not as oppressive or as exploited as the experiences of others. We discovered that we had a greater feeling of unity when people focused truthfully on their own experiences without comparing them with those of others in a competitive way (Bell Hooks 1984: 59).

Perhaps, it is only by attempting such engagements, and taking the risk that sometimes we will get it wrong, that areas of joint political action will be identified. Certainly, in seeking to map out the full extent of disabling oppression, social model theory has perhaps underplayed the existence of areas of common experience with some non-disabled people from the mainstream, and of jointly negotiating change.

In the limited circumstances of engagement with the non-disabled other, it is helpful to draw on Mouffe's (1995) post-structural approach to developing strategies for feminist action. She argues that the deconstruction of essentialist identities is necessary for an 'adequate understanding of the variety of social relations where the principles of liberty and equality should apply.' In practical terms, therefore, she argues that we need to lose the idea of a rational subject and of unified positions in order to 'theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination', where the same person may be 'dominant in one relation while subordinated in another' (Mouffe 1995: 317-18).

Hence, it may be a mistake to assume that disabled people are always without power in their interactions with non-disabled others. For example, as a paid access consultant with expert knowledge, I sometimes had more situational power than the rangers with whom I was working. I was able to utilise this aspect of my identity in persuading them to adopt changes. Utilising the full multiplicity of our situational identities may also be a useful tool in deflecting further oppression. It enables us to

attribute particular instances of oppressive behaviour to the other's response to us as parents, employees, consultants, consumers and so on, rather than always linking it to our identities as disabled people. Such deflective tactics do not deny oppression, but they may protect us from over-problematising our identity as disabled people, a trap that it can be too easy to fall into, especially for those disabled people who are isolated from the supportive networks of the disabled people's movement.

Thus, in the particular context of engaging with non-disabled people, I argue for the use of multiple identity as both a communicative and a political tool. First, it may enable us to identify limited areas of common ground with the non-disabled other from which a dialogue through difference may begin; whilst second, it may both deflect oppressive behaviour from our identities as disabled people, and enable us to challenge some aspects of oppressive power relations by highlighting areas where dialogue through difference enables disabled people's expertise to be recognised.

iii) Destabilising oppressive power relations
In addressing the issue of power relations, dialogue needs to proceed from the understanding that, in our identities as disabled and non-disabled people, we are different from each other (Taylor 1992; Phelan 1995; Phillips 1999). The big difficulty that disabled people face is in getting to this point of having our difference acknowledged in a non-judgmental way by members of a majority conditioned to see impairment as a personal tragedy (Oliver 1990). Indeed, most of the non-disabled writers cited here do not regard disability as a form of social oppression. Disabled people have adopted a range of strategies to bring their exclusion to the attention of the mainstream. Most dramatic of these have been the direct action tactics of DAN, but other developments such as the growth of the

disability arts movement that celebrate the disabled identity (Swain and French 2000), and the increasing engagement of disabled people with non-disabled institutions to negotiate practical and inclusive changes to mainstream policy and practice (Campbell and Oliver 1996), are also slowly achieving recognition of disabled people as a political constituency that cannot be ignored. This heightened public visibility in turn has a crucial effect on the possibilities for future political change:

> the empowerment of the currently disadvantaged is often a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, more equitable social policies, for until people become active participants in the policy process, the policies adopted cannot be expected to reflect their needs (Phillips 1999: 31).

The enormity of the task still facing disabled people may be seen in legislative responses like the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 which, with its frequent use of qualifying phrases such as 'reasonable adjustment' and 'to the extent to which it is practicable', leaves us in no doubt that bringing about equality of provision for disabled people continues to be seen more as a gift conditionally bestowed by a paternalistic state onto 'those less fortunate' than an acknowledgement of our fundamental right to equality as citizens.

One option is to extend Oliver's (1996) analysis of disabled people's position in the citizenship debates. This is particularly important as the present government is prioritising disabled people's economic responsibilities as a condition of citizenship, expressed through initiatives such as 'Welfare to Work' and the 'New Deal for Disabled People'. These were designed to get disabled people off state benefits and into paid work, but there are considerable doubts that policy makers appreciate the full extent of disabled people's training and support needs in

obtaining and retaining employment (Burchardt 2000; Roulstone 2000). In such circumstances:

> We need a more adequate understanding of political and civil equality that recognizes and respects our differences. It may be… that equality of citizenship requires different groups of people to have different kinds of rights (Phillips 1999: 27).

In terms of disabled people's experience, we could interpret such differential rights in a number of positive ways. For example, disabled people at work would benefit from a universal entitlement to the personal support they need to do their jobs, without that entitlement being restricted by the availability of 'Access to Work' funding; whilst those who are not able to work should have their right not to do so acknowledged and respected, rather than being made to feel like second-class citizens (Tregaskis 1998).

In pursuing this goal, action on a range of fronts would be beneficial. For example, disabled academics have a role to play in engaging with a wider range of equality issues than those around disability, so that in the future philosophical connections are routinely made between the experience and significance of disability and of other forms of social oppression such as class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Non-disabled people's ignorance of disabling barriers may also be challenged through the use of social model-based narrative accounts of the experience of disability, as a means of educating them about the realities of the oppression that they often unthinkingly perpetuate. The efforts of disabled people both inside and outside the academy who are already engaging with non-disabled people to influence the development of more inclusive policies and practices are also key to educating those non-disabled people. For the future, however, such individualised efforts need to be

supported by wider structural changes, including a transition to a fully inclusive education system that enables all children to grow up learning to take each other's needs into account as a matter of course. In such ways might dialogue through difference become a practical everyday reality for disabled and non-disabled people.

Conclusion

I have explored some of the possibilities that exist for using social model theory as a means of making connections with non-disabled people. Whilst acknowledging that engaging with non-disabled people to bring about change is only one possible strand of political activity, I have argued that it is an area that has previously been under-theorised, with the result that disabled activists and practitioners have been left relatively unsupported in their attempts to bring about negotiated change in settings outside the academy. Having identified the centrality of issues around developing communication and negotiation skills, I have suggested that binary explanations of disability that place the disabled self in perpetual and unchanging opposition to the non-disabled other may be unhelpful in those situations where finding some common ground may be crucial to establishing a dialogue. This process helps recognise and acknowledge difference, but does not require assimilation of the minority to the majority point of view as the price to be paid for that engagement.

   In attempting to develop social model theory in relation to disabled/non-disabled interactions we may need to draw on, and further elaborate, thinking on a range of issues. Here, theories of communication, of multiple identity, and of power relations have been utilised as starting points in trying to explain some of the dynamics implicated in such interactions, and to highlight ways in which such approaches might be used in conducting

initiatives to bring about more inclusive practice. It is to be hoped that other relevant issues will be identified as theoretical debates around this area increase.

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