

Politics and Language:

Understanding the Disability Discourse

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1. Overview

"I am not a disability, I'm me. I have dyslexia and I've had polio but I'm not 'a dyslexic' or 'a cripple' I'm me"
(John Swan, 14 in What it's like to be me Exley (1981)
quoted in Reiser and Mason (1991))

I do not propose in this Unit to provide a list of acceptable or unacceptable labels and terminology as this has been done satisfactorily elsewhere (Reiser and Mason 1991. 85 - 90). Nor do I intend to provide a rationale or explanation for what is or is not acceptable as I have done this elsewhere (Oliver 1990. Introduction and Chapter 1).

Instead I will ground the discussion in my own personal, professional and political experience as a disabled person. Then I will discuss the political and theoretical bases for the current controversy surrounding language use which is often subsumed within its own name 'political correctness'. Next I will move on to consider the implications for policy and practice and this will be done through a discussion of the concept of 'discourse'. Finally I will return to the politics of language.

2. The personal and the professional - naming my experience

In writing about language and disability from an insider perspective, it is important that I ground my views in my own experiences as an individual disabled person; as an academic sociologist who makes his living teaching, researching and writing about disability issues; and finally as a political activist committed to producing economic, social and political changes which will help to bring about the inclusion of disabled people into society rather than their exclusion from it.

My own personal experience as a disabled person has convinced me of the general sociological importance of personal experience, or, to put it the other way round.

"Social theories are grounded in the knowledge the theorist has gained through personal experience. Facts, rooted in personal reality, are of course utterly persuasive to the theorist. He becomes involved in, sees, experiences, such things as the French Revolution, the rise of socialism, the great Depression, and he never doubts the factuality of his experience."

(Gouldner 1975. 70)

As Gouldner concludes, I have not since doubted the factuality of my experience as a disabled sociologist and political activist.

However, in order for you to critically evaluate the factuality of my experience, I need to say a little more about my background. My professional interest in disability did not really come about until some ten years after I became disabled as the result of a spinal

injury in 1962. After spending a year in Stoke Mandeville Hospital, I spent three years unemployed and thinking I was unemployable - a perception that was reinforced by every single professional I met during that time. In 1966, purely by chance, I was offered a job as a clerk at the young offenders prison near where I lived.

Within a matter of months this had changed and I became a lecturer in the education centre of the same establishment and I remained there for six years. However, being unqualified, in 1972 I went to university and read for a degree in sociology. On completion, I remained for a further three years to undertake research and gain my doctorate.

As a postgraduate student, my interests were in the fields of deviance and crime rather than illness and disability. The positivist view dominated the academic world at this time; according to this, one did not become involved in subjects in which one had a personal involvement or interest because this made objectivity very difficult, if not impossible.

However, as a postgraduate student with a young family to support, when the Open University began looking for course tutors for its new disability course, it was one of the few occasions when disability became a positive advantage. In addition in my own research I was exploring the supposed links between crime and epilepsy (Oliver 1979, 1980) and this inevitably meant that I had to read some medical sociology because epilepsy was conceptualized as illness rather than deviance. I quickly discovered that then, as now, many medical sociologists proceed on the assumption that illness and disability are the same thing.

When I began to read some of the things that able-bodied academics, researchers and professionals had written about disability, I was staggered at how little it related to my own experience or indeed, of most other disabled people I had come to know. Over the next few years it gradually began to dawn on me that if disabled people left it to others to write about disability, we would inevitably end up with inaccurate and distorted accounts of our experiences and inappropriate service provisions and professional practices based upon these inaccuracies and distortions.

Incidentally, it was at this point in history that women were beginning to reject male accounts of their experiences and black people were vehemently denying the accuracy of white descriptions of what it was like to be black. This questioning had reverberations throughout the academic world, calling into question the whole notion of objectivity and bringing subjectivity onto the academic agenda.

As a sociologist I found myself supporting the call for a committed and partisan sociology (Gouldner 1975). As a disabled person I found myself empathizing with the position of feminists who say "... objectivity as the word men use to talk about their own subjectivity" (Rich, quoted in Morris 1992). As a disabled sociologist I found myself in the 'academic disability ghetto' but determined to render an accurate, undistorted and wholly subjective account of disability.

Central to providing subjective accounts of experience in general is taking control of the processes of naming, defining and describing that experience, as the following quote illustrates.

"In other words, social theory, coming to terms with social life, means defining, describing, or naming our experience, our historical reality for ourselves rather than living with a definition imposed upon us"

(Wallach Bologh 1991. 38)

But, in order to be able to name those experiences authentically and effectively, we need the collective strength of self-organization around us, again as women know only too well.

"Feminists and all those committed to emancipatory theorizing must challenge the dominant, oppressive and repressive cultures of these institutions by creating a space and culture, a holding environment, in which we can come to terms with our social realities and their representations. The ongoing process of creating a holding environment for ourselves and each other, a social, intellectual space for political, intellectual sociability, for reflecting on our given 'realities', strengthens and empowers us to address and challenge the oppressive and repressive nature of those realities and the representations of those realities".

(Wallach Bologh 1991. 41)

It is no accident, therefore, that central to this process for both women and disabled people is to seek to exert control over language and the way it is used.

3. Controlling language - naming our own experience

It is often assumed that the function of language is communication. While it is undoubtedly true that communication is a function of language, it is not the only one. Language is also about politics, domination and control.

"The first and most important thing to remember about discussions of language and disability is that they arise because disabled people experience discrimination daily and are denied the same rights and opportunities as the rest of the population"

(Barnes 1993.8)

These differing views of language can be seen in the recent debates about political correctness. The right wing critique of what they, right wing critics themselves have named, 'the political correctness movement' suggests that trying to take control of the naming of experience by developing non-racist, non-sexist or non-disablist language is either ridiculous or dangerous. Thus they claim that it is ridiculous for disabled people to want to be called 'the physically challenged' or 'the differently abled' and they claim that it is dangerous to try and dispense with 'scientific' labels such as 'mental retardate' in favour of those chosen by people themselves such as 'person with a learning difficulty'.

There are two points I want to make about this. Firstly the terminology that is ridiculed is usually not the terminology people use to talk about themselves - the vast majority of democratic organizations of disabled people want to be called exactly that; disabled people, not some name thought up by our critics. Secondly, in respect of danger, it is not unusual for right wing critics to use terminology like 'mind control' or 'thought police' in respect of those of us who think what we are called is important.

I myself have been called 'a linguistic terrorist' for calling a friend 'a survivor of the mental health system' rather than 'mentally ill', 'a schizophrenic' or some other more or less accurate descriptive term. At the individual level, using the terminology that individuals prefer is a matter of dignity and respect which costs me nothing and does not control my mind. At the policy level, I have the suspicion that calling someone a 'retardate' or 'a schizophrenic' makes it easier for us as a society to lock them up, drug them into insensibility, electrocute or even kill them. It is not quite so easy to do these things to a survivor of the mental health system or a person with a learning difficulty.

Of course, I am not so naïve to suggest that changing labels from the negative to the positive inevitably means that people will be treated more humanely; just that it increases the possibility. Nor am I suggesting that how we label people is all that is at stake when we discuss the roles and use of language.

In recent years, under attack from post-modernist social theory, our ideas about the role and function of language have undergone a radical shift.

"There is no master of language. Its speakers are only travellers along pathways that have emerged in the course of what is a collective and organically developing phenomenon".

(Lecercle 1990.87)

This view suggests that language cannot be understood merely as a symbolic system or code but as a discourse, or more properly, a series discourses.

The advantages of this are that discourses are treated as contingent; they arise, change and disappear. This view also understands signification or naming as action rather than as mere representation and suggests that social meanings do not constitute a single,

symbolic system. Finally, it allows for the existence of the power and inequality that exists in society to be reproduced in language use.

4. The discourse of disability in policy and practice

In order to fully understand this in respect of policy and practice, it is necessary to further develop the concept of 'discourse'. The French philosopher Foucault (1973) suggests that the way we talk about the world and the way we experience it are inextricably linked - the names we give to things shapes our experience of them and our experience of things in the world influences the names we give to them.

This concept and its relationship to language has been described as follows;

"Discourse is about more than language. Discourse is about the interplay between language and social relationships, in which some groups are able to achieve dominance for their interests in the way in which the world is defined and acted upon. Such groups include not only dominant economic classes, but also men within patriarchy, and white people within the racism of colonial and post-colonial societies, as well as professionals in relation to service users. Language is a central aspect of discourse through which power is reproduced and communicated".

(Hugman 1991:37)

A good example of this in respect of policy is the way the discourse of caring has been central to recent attempts to close down long-stay institutions of all kinds. In linking language to politics through the notion of discourse, Ignatieff argues that the discourse of welfare provision which emphasizes compassion, caring and altruism, is inappropriate when applied to a second discourse, that of citizenship.

"The language of citizenship is not properly about compassion at all, since compassion is a private virtue which cannot be legislated or enforced. The practice of citizenship is about ensuring everyone the entitlements necessary to the exercise of their liberty. As a political question, welfare is about rights, not caring, and the history of citizenship has been the struggle to make freedom real, not to tie us all in the leading strings of therapeutic good intentions".

(Ignatieff 1989: 72)

Hence the linking of caring to welfare has unfortunate consequences because it has served to deny people their entitlements as citizens.

"The pell-mell retreat from the language of justice to the language of caring is perhaps the most worrying sign of the contemporary decadence of the language of citizenship .. Put another way, the history of citizenship of entitlement is a history of freedom, not primarily a history of compassion."

(Ignatieff 1989. 72)

Thus the very language of welfare provision serves to deny disabled people the right to be treated as fully competent, autonomous individuals, as active citizens. Care in the community, caring for people, providing services through care managers and care workers all structure the welfare discourse in particular ways and imply a particular view of disabled people.

As early as 1986, disabled people in response to the Audit Commission's critical review of community care, were arguing for an abandonment of such patronizing and dependency creating language (BCODP 1986). Organizations controlled and run by disabled people including the BCOBP, the Spinal Injuries Association and the newly formed European Network on Independent Living have already begun to move to a language of entitlement emphasizing independent living, social support and the use of personal assistants.

One could provide a similar analysis of the emergence of the term 'special' in education. Arising from the concern of the Warnock Committee (DES 1978) to de-medicalise the education of 'handicapped children', as they were then called, special was the label chosen to refer to the kinds of provision these children (who were themselves re-defined as having learning difficulties) would need.

There were three reasons for this change in language; firstly to try to replace negative labels ('delicate', 'sub-normal' etc) with more positive ones; secondly to switch the focus from the child's medical to their educational needs; and thirdly, to provide a linguistic basis to enable both the provision and the practice of special education to continue. In the terms used earlier, it could be said that the Warnock Report tried to change the discourse of special education from a medical to an educational one.

It tried and failed for exactly the same reason that the discourse of care in the community failed; there are fundamental incompatibilities between care and entitlements, between special and ordinary which make both provision and practice contemporaneously difficult and ultimately impossible.

Testament to this are the personal experiences of 'special people'.

"All my life I have known that I was 'different' - special even - because the 'fact' has been brought home to me by the reactions of people around me. They either go out of their way to be nice to me, ignore me, or go out of their way

to be awful to me, and it took me a long, long time to realise that these reactions were not necessarily to do with the kind of person I was, rather with what people assumed I was".

(Gradwell 1992. 17)

Further, it has been argued that this change to a discourse of the special has also failed at the policy level because

"The phrase 'special educational needs', for example, frequently justifies the separation of disabled children from non-disabled children into segregated special schools"

(Barnes 1993.8)

Before going on to talk about the political implications of this, there is one further point needs to be made explicit; to be against the discourse of caring in welfare or special needs in educational provision is not to be against caring or against welfare or against education. It is to argue that such discourses are an inappropriate basis to develop a proper discourse of welfare provision and professional practice and that the language of the special is an inappropriate basis to develop a proper discourse about schools and teaching.

5. Politics and the power of language

Politics is not just about voting every so often but at the micro-level it is about the exercise of power in a range of personal and social relationships. As far as I am aware there have been no empirical studies of the micro-politics of the discourse of the special in education, but there has been an important study of discourse in probation practice. It asserts that

"Language is fundamental to the work of probation officers, whose task is to extract the 'truth' surrounding criminal behaviour from a number of sources including the defendant, other social workers, official records, reports, the medical profession and the police. From this variety of different and competing discourses, an official explanation of offending is assembled and a 'treatment' plan produced, which will have legitimacy in court. The linguistic rules of engagement require the probation officer to collate and translate explanations of unlawful behaviour into codes recognisable to official judicial bodies."

(Denney 1992. 135)

In this Unit I have asked not to set you any exercises but a few minutes rewriting the above quote as a special education rather than a probation discourse will illustrate the role that language can play in maintaining particulate sets of power relationships between professionals and their ... The reason for the gap is to emphasise that we do not have a

language which enables us to talk about such relationships in ways that are not structured by hierarchies and power: for example, doctor-patient; teacher-pupil; social worker-client; lecturer-student; and most recently provider-user.

Denney, following post-modernist theorists, suggests that part of the solution to this problem is deconstruction.

"The deconstruction of official discourse could provide the beginnings of a process that penetrates dominant and discriminatory conventions".

(Denney 1992. 135)

But deconstruction may make the problem disappear altogether.

Hart (1994), in an as yet unpublished study of special needs practice, draws attention to the position taken by the National Commission on Education (1993) that 'flexibility to respond to individuals pupils' difficulties may in future prove more successful than maintaining a separate category of "special" need. While coming to the conclusion that maintaining the term 'special' is untenable, she warns.

"... that simply to dispense with a concept of 'special' education, now that the distinction has been acknowledged to be untenable, would not serve the best interests of children. The former distinction needs to be replaced by a new distinction of quite a different order, which will help to establish and articulate a convincing alternative to individual-deficit ways of conceptualising and pursuing concerns about children's learning".

(Hart 1994. 270)

What this is drawing attention to is the inescapable fact that language and its use is not just a semantic issue; as has already been argued, it is a political issue as well. And a political issue at the macro-level. Probably the best example of the macro-politics of language is the struggle of deaf people over the centuries to keep their own (sign) language alive. Ladd (1990 10) refers to this as 'a battle between cultures that has parallel in those battles with aboriginal and other native cultures'.

In a recent contribution to the debate between the World Health Organisation and organisations of disabled people over their international classification scheme (Wood 1980), I make a similar point about the macro-politics of language, trying to draw parallels between the struggles of disabled people to control the language that is used to describe and classify us, with similar struggles by other oppressed groups.

"The imposition of colonial languages on the natives, Oxford English on the regions, sexist language on women, racist language on black people, spoken language on deaf

people, and so on, are all forms of cultural domination. Pidgin, dialects, slang, anti-sexist and anti-racist language and sign language are not, therefore, quaint and archaic forms of language use but forms of cultural resistance.

(Oliver, 1989)

One final point needs to be made about the political function of language. It is not enough to realise that language is a political issue simply in an overt sense of the word. Politics as the exercise of power is sometimes as much about keeping things off the political agenda as it is about ensuring that they are debated (Lukes 1974).

Thus the point about language is that it may sometimes serve to obscure or mystify issues - even the language rights as Hall graphically reminds us

"... the language of rights is frequently deployed to obscure and mystify this fundamental basis which rights have in the struggle between contending social forces. It constantly abstracts rights from their real historical and social context, ascribes them a timeless universality, speaks of them as if they were 'given' rather than won and as if they were given once-and-for-all, rather than having to be constantly secured."

(Hall 1979. 8)

Hall is also making the important point that rights are never one for all time; women and gay men and lesbians have seen some of their legal rights disappear in recent years and many women would argue that their social rights to use public transport after dark no longer exist.

The discourse of rights, both human and civil, has played a major role in disability politics in recent years and this requires us to broaden our understanding of the issues in fundamental ways. To begin with, our current segregative practices and segregated provision, which continue to dominate the education of disabled children, have to be seen for what they are; the denial of rights to disabled people in just the same way as others are denied their rights in other parts of the world.

As I wrote in a review of a recent re-appraisal of special education.

"The lessons of history through the segregation of black people in the United States and current struggles to end segregation in South Africa have shown this to be so. To write as if segregation in schools, or from public transport systems or from public spaces or inter-personal interactions in our own society is somehow different, is to de-politicise the whole issue".

(Oliver 1991)

What is both interesting and unfortunate about the integration/segregation discourse in the area of education however, has been its narrowness, both in terms of its failure to see integration as anything other than a technical debate about the quality of educational provision. Its failure to explicitly develop any connections with other debates about segregation of, for example, disabled from public transportation systems, of black people in South Africa, of blind people from public information, or of the poor from major parts of our cities, has been a major omission.

An important reason for this is that integration as a concept, has been taken over by politicians, policy makers, professionals and academics, who have discussed and debated it, divorced from the views of disabled people themselves. Even my own discipline of sociology, which has a justifiable reputation for criticising everything in sight including itself, has focused little on the exclusion of disabled people from society and its institutions (Oliver 1990).

While it is certainly true that in the early eighties sociologists played a significant role in exposing the humanitarian ideology underpinning the segregation of children with special needs and exposing the various vested interests concerned (Tomlinson 1982. Ford et al 1982), this was somehow seen in isolation from other exclusionary processes (Oliver 1985). Further, sociologists have spent less time examining and criticising the theory and practice of integration except for a questioning of the romanticism of the integration movement (Barton and Tomlinson 1984) and an articulation of its moral and political basis (Booth 1989).

What is at stake in this dispute within the integration/segregation discourse is nothing less than our view of both the nature of social reality and the role of politics in society. One view sees integration as a humanitarian response to unintended consequences in our past history which can be changed by the development of paternalistic policies. The alternative view suggests that

"Integration is not a thing that can be delivered by politicians, policy makers or educators, but a process of struggle that has to be joined".

(Oliver 1989. 143)

And in recognition of that, it is perhaps time we changed the name of the discourse to that of inclusion/exclusion rather than integration/segregation. The reason for this change is that the discourse of integration has largely been a static one about location whereas inclusion is a process which

".. fundamentally challenges the traditional approach which regards impairment and disabled people as marginal, or an 'afterthought', instead of recognising that impairment and disablement are a common experience of humanity, and

should be a central issue in the planning and delivery of a human service such as education".

(Mason and Rieser 1994.41)

6. Conclusion

In this Unit, I have not discussed the issue of language in ways that suggest that what is at stake is merely changing the labels and terminology we use. Instead I have written about language as a political issue structured by relations of power and have attempted to locate this within post-modernist social theory. I have argued that language is inextricably linked to both policy and practice and it is precisely because of these inextricable links that the right wing critics of political correctness are wrong.

We do not use language just to describe the world and name our own experiences of it. Nor does language merely enable us to deconstruct the world and the practices we engage in. It can enable us to conceptualise a better world and begin the process of reconstructing it. We can only believe that attempting to do so is 'mind control' or 'linguistic terrorism' as far as disabled people or those with special needs are concerned, if we believe that everything is fine and the worlds we inhabit do not need deconstructing and reconstructing.

If we believe that we can improve the quality of all our lives through better policy and changed practice, then we have to recognise that language has a central role to play in this improvement.

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