

4 Discrimination II: Employment

(From 'Disabled We Stand' (1981) Sutherland, A. T., London: Souvenir Press).

The question of discrimination in employment can also be treated as an issue of access: access to work that is suited to our capabilities. (Indeed there is a sense in which all the discrimination we encounter can be seen as being about access: access to an equal and unhindered role in the society of which we are a part.) When I refer to work suited to our capabilities, I am of course thinking of work which makes full use of our abilities. I should not have to stress this point, but I do stress it, because I am unhappily aware that work deemed to be 'suitable' for us tends to take more account of our supposed incapacities. I know, for example, why Chris Pearson feels it necessary to hide the fact of his epilepsy from the local council for whom he works:

'If they were to find out I was epileptic, they wouldn't turn round and say you're fired because you're an epileptic. A, they would really protest terribly because I didn't tell them in the first place that I was an epileptic, I made a false statement. B, they would offer me an alternative job with the council. The council want to look like they're doing the right thing, keeping within the law, so they will offer you alternative employment within the council, a light job with half the wages. As it happens, where I'm working now there are two guys who have epilepsy. I made a point \ becoming acquainted with those two guys, not to tell them about, me, but I make a point of becoming acquainted with them. They've jobs, they're getting lousy money.'

Discrimination in employment is a particularly important part of our oppression, because it hinders us from acquiring the power that would enable us to bring about rapid concrete change for the better. As an economic force, we are at present insignificant; there is little possibility of our 'holding the country to ransom' - would that we could! But to threaten withdrawal of labour, one must first have labour to withdraw.

The issue also acquires an added importance from the fact that certain benefits can be claimed only by people who are in full-time employment. People with disabilities who are unable to find such employment, or who are engaged in unpaid work such as being a parent, are ineligible, as in Maggie Woolley's case:

'At, present I'm wearing a National Health post-aural hearing aid, and while it's a very good hearing aid, it's not right for my particular deafness. I need a model that's on the commercial market. In other European countries,

hearing aids are more heavily subsidised and the choice is not limited as it is here.

`When you look at people who have glasses, because they can't see perfectly, whatever lens you require you can get at a greatly reduced price on the National Health. It's not the same when it comes to hearing aids, and everybody's deafness is different, and while there aren't as many lenses, there are a variety of hearing aids on the commercial market, which are very, very expensive. But we don't have access to them unless we can afford them. If you are working full-time and you can prove to your disablement resettlement officer that a good hearing aid is vital to your work, then you can get subsidy. At present I don't have a full-time job, partially out of choice, because I have two children. One's three and the other is seven and I have to be on hand to take them to school and be at home and so on. I find that very discriminatory, because I feel my work as a mother is very important work. And it involves a lot of communication. A good hearing aid is vital to that work, because I'm communicating all the time, very important communication, because my three year old is acquiring vocabulary, acquiring language and so on. If I were married to a deaf man, he could get the hearing aid he wanted free because of his work, but my work isn't important enough. I find that really heavy discrimination.'

Discrimination over employment takes a large number of forms, but it can be crude in the extreme, as Chris Pearson discovered: `Because of my epilepsy it was difficult to get a job, because I had jobs where I had fits on the job. I was working in a builder's once, we were building these houses and I had a fit on the top floor. The boss came in, saw me while I was having a fit, and told me to get out of the yard. I came to and I was okay. He got rid of me quick. He told me to clear off. He told me I was a nutcase, those were the words he used. He said, "You're a bleeding nutcase" , . . just told me to clear out.

`Some jobs where they didn't sack me, I just cleared out once I knew that they'd found out I was having fits. I couldn't face it, so I just didn't go back.'

One should not fall into the trap of assuming that, because Chris left some jobs of his own volition, no discrimination was involved in those cases. The feelings of embarrassment at having his epilepsy discovered were themselves the result of the discriminatory attitudes which force all but the most determinedly open of people with epilepsy to conceal the condition when applying for work:

`In all I think I lost about twenty jobs, mostly through embarrassment and the fact that I never told them that I had fits. They always ask if you are fit, medically fit for the job. I'd say, oh yes. You have to say that or you don't get your job. These are cold hard facts. People say they're obliged to employ a certain percentage of "disabled" people . . Big deal, that is not on. If they don't want to take you on

they'll find some reason, unsatisfactory for the job and so on. I know this, I'm quite aware of this, I'm not a complete fool. Even today, when I go for a job I never tell them I'm epileptic.'

This tactic of finding another reason for refusing employment to a person with a disability is not only used at selection interviews, as Chris discovered when he was given the sack by a major children's charity: 'They said I was too political - I was trying to form a union. I was a packer; there was no union there, there was a lot of talk among the employees but they weren't sure how to go about it. I got involved, asked around what the feeling was among the staff, they were all for it. There was never any problem, the management weren't objecting to it, but once they found out I was an epileptic they used that to sack me.'

Chris has in the past encountered a great deal of employment discrimination, more so than most of the people quoted in this book. This is partly because he has more experience of employment; I, as another epileptic who has grand mal seizures, would presumably be liable to exactly the same discrimination, but have not encountered it because I work freelance. But the choice of such a career, with its fluctuating income, is much more easily taken by a single person like myself than by someone who, like Chris, is supporting a family. It seems to me, however, that class is also a crucial factor. It is much easier to counteract the stereotyped ideas of disability on which discrimination is founded if one possesses a middle-class background and accent, a university education and the particular type of articulacy and self-confidence that these factors produce. As also in the case of the sexist assumptions that value Maggie Woolley's work as a mother ('women's work') less than paid employment, discrimination on the grounds of a person's disability interacts with other forms of oppressive attitude.

Admittedly, it is sometimes easier for a person who has epilepsy or some other non-visible disability to know for definite that they have been discriminated against specifically on the grounds of their disability. If a potential employer is going to regard a person with a visible disability as unsuitable for employment because of that disability, that person will simply not get the job in the first place, and be left not knowing for definite whether she has been unfairly discriminated against or not: she does not have the option of concealing her disability by lying, and is thus unlikely to encounter the very clear-cut situation of being fired because the disability has been discovered.

Even where it is clear that one has been discriminated against, it is not necessarily at all easy to know what the particular reasons for that discrimination are, as Maggie Woolley explains: 'It's very difficult to talk about discrimination, because I am not just a deaf person. I am a woman, I am a single parent, and when I find myself in a situation where I'm being discriminated against, it's very difficult to

know on what grounds I'm being discriminated against. In some cases I've even thought I've been discriminated against for being well known for being outspoken. So it's very difficult to give you an example of where I've been discriminated against as a deaf person.'

Apart from being directly refused work, as in the examples already cited, we are also kept out of employment by the more roundabout discrimination of being refused the training which would make particular spheres of employment open to us. Maggie explains one reason why so few deaf people manage to become teachers in schools for deaf children: 'The guidelines put forward by the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf state that, in order to be accepted for one-year training to become a teacher of the deaf, a deaf person must have had two years' experience of teaching in a hearing school. That is an impossible thing for deaf people to do. I did it while my hearing was still good enough for me to cope.' Merry Cross encountered another type of discrimination when applying for a teacher training course on to which she was in fact eventually accepted:

'I'd sort of been accepted on the teacher training course, and the woman who was in charge of my section, which was biology, insisted that I walk from the main lecture building to the biology building, which was quite some way down a hill, to see her, because she wanted to know was I going to manage it or not. I managed it, so the potential access discrimination didn't affect me, but I was very aware of it like a threat hanging over me.'

This is an example of a very common form of discrimination which occurs when our suitability for employment, or training towards future employment, is considered. It takes the form of focusing on our presumed incapacities and demanding that we prove we can do the work in the same manner as an able bodied person would, rather than looking at our capabilities and considering whether there is a way in which we can do the work in question well - accepting that that may not be absolutely identical with the way in which an able bodied person would handle it. Maggie Woolley regularly comes up against a very clear example of this attitude:

'Jobs that I've applied for outside the deaf world: usually the question that seems to bother people is the fact that I can't use the telephone. This is a very common experience for people who are as oral as I am and are partially hearing, that the telephone is grounds for rejecting them. There are people who can use a telephone if an amplifier is fitted, and even they are discriminated against. There are deaf people working who can't use a telephone at all, they're profoundly deaf, but it's understood where they work that other people will make their calls for them, and in some cases an extension earpiece is fitted, so

the deaf person, if their voice is, intelligible, can talk into the phone and another person with the earpiece interprets what's being said.'

In cases such as this, where a person is allowed to do her job in a way that is appropriate to her capabilities, the disability is not likely to prove to be a great hindrance. But the assumption of incapability that so frequently prevents people with disabilities from finding employment may well be carried over into their working conditions even where they have been given a job for which they have applied. This is one of the major reasons why Chris Pearson chooses to keep his epilepsy secret from his employers:

'I don't really want to feel I'm being carried by people in a job. If you're an epileptic and you take a job and you tell these people and they take you on, they also make it a condition of taking you on that your colleagues who work with you must know ... And because all your colleagues are told about you, they're not just told, "Chris Pearson's an epileptic", so watch in case he has a fit, if you see him have a fit, so you know what it is. They don't say that, they say keep an eye on him, because that's what people tend to do. And before you know it they end up carrying you, or else they find you a nuisance and they resent it. It's always one or the other. Nine times out of ten if you get on with them it's always the way where they tend to carry you or make a fuss over you. You'd better not do this, Chris, I'll do it. Don't climb up that ladder. Or you may get a foreman shouting at you for climbing up the ladder. He may not be saying so in so many words, but he's getting across indirectly you've no right to be climbing that ladder, you're disabled. So once you've told an employer you've got epilepsy, you're telling an employer you're disabled, that's what you're really telling them. And your employer's telling the rest of the staff' you're disabled and you're known as disabled. And that's what I resent.'

Where a person with a disability manages to avoid such treatment and finds herself a job where the disability is accepted, other concrete benefits may well arise from the working relationship that makes this possible; it is an educative experience for an able bodied person to learn to treat a person with a disability with respect rather than disregarding her, showing a condescending 'concern' or (a subtler form of discrimination) treating her 'as a person' by studiously disregarding the fact that the person has a disability at all. This positive changed relationship is likely to be of particular value to those jobs which involve dealing with people, and perhaps particularly so with teaching. Certainly this was Merry Cross's experience:

'I don't think I'd get in now for either teaching training or educational psychology, despite the fact that I was a good teacher, because my records would show that I've had a lot of time off work.'

'I think it's wrong. I think it's better to have a good teacher who might have to be off for a while than a bad healthy one. And also, my experience was that it was a positive help to the youngsters that I taught. I was in a really desolate area and lots and lots of the youngsters needed to be needed. And I was perfect for them. And I used to have two youngsters come across every morning to carry my books into school when I lived opposite the school. I hardly ever did any of my own shopping, and it was very rarely that I had to go to someone and say would you get something for me. I usually had about five youngsters clambering round me after school every day to go and get shopping for me. There were a couple who used to come in and throw me out of my lounge and Hoover it and clean it and dust it. And they were actually much more comfortable for me to be with than the staff. Because, even if it did arise out of their own needs, they appreciated my needs and enjoyed me.'

Ironically, teaching is one area in which discrimination against people with disabilities seems to be particularly strong. And getting to be a teacher is made particularly difficult by the fact that, as with other professions, we have to overcome potential discrimination not once, but several times before being allowed access to the job we want to do. We have to acquire academic qualifications while at school (which means we have to have access to an adequate standard of tuition), we then have to be accepted on to an appropriate training course, and then we have to find a job; discrimination is likely to take place at each of these stages. And we have to do a further year's training if we want to enter a specialised area of teaching - as in the case of deaf people who know that they have a particular contribution to make to the education of the deaf children which hearing teachers are unable to make - by giving them a model of a successful adult deaf person, for example, or by using signing and fingerspelling in addition to speech.

Where, as in this case, a person with a disability wishes to teach children who have the same disability, particular resistance is likely to arise from the fact that many able bodied members of the profession will feel threatened by their presence. The bulk of the professionals who deal with people with disabilities, whether in education, the social services, charities or any other sphere, base their dealings on a dependency model in which they are the experts and people with disabilities are dependent on them for help. Consultation plays little part in this process (which is why, for example, social workers with the deaf generally use a brand of sign language which is so distinct from that actually used by deaf people as to be quite incomprehensible to them in certain cases) and the model is very deeply ingrained. I remember, for example, attending a talk by a well-known advice columnist on 'How to Live With Your Disability' (a title which, in itself, says a great deal). In the question time that followed, I rose to my feet and

disagreed with certain assumptions the speaker had made, presenting one or two of the arguments I am elaborating in this book. Her reply started, 'I can see how you might feel like that about your problem, but...'

'Your *problem*'. A revealing choice of words. Where I had made the assumptions of one familiar with the manner in which issues are customarily debated among equals, the opening words of her reply immediately redefined the situation, forcing it back into the familiar dependency model which made her the expert and me one of the disabled, waiting cap in hand to be told how to run my life.

Now we may reasonably assume that this journalist is an honourable woman, and was not consciously manipulating the situation in order to deliberately discredit what I had just said. Nor does it seem likely to me that the considerable insult to my intelligence that her words implied was intentional. But if such is the case, it would seem that the speaker must have thought her response appropriate to the situation, must genuinely have assumed that, whether she thought I recognised the fact or not, I did have 'a problem' - which would automatically disqualify me from seeing the issue in the 'objective' light she assumed for herself.

It seems to me that something very similar can occur when able bodied professionals are confronted with a prospective member of their ranks who happens to have the particular disability which they specialise in dealing with. Their attitude to the person becomes coloured by the dependency model in terms of which they are accustomed to dealing with that particular disability, and they find it very difficult to see the person as an equal. Since the job for which the person is applying would confer a recognition of equality, they tend not to get it: they are judged unsuitable. The terrible strength of this sort of discrimination is that the people who put it into practice are acting in all sincerity; they are not likely to be moved by their consciences, because they do not believe that they are doing anything wrong.

But where the dependency model is not quite so firmly rooted, and the professionals in question have some glimmerings of awareness that the methods they are using may not be entirely adequate, the possibility of a person with the disability in which they specialise proving to be independent and self-sufficient may threaten to throw their whole approach to their work into question. It is a rare person who is open-minded enough to respond to such a potential challenge by recognising the question and looking to see whether she does need to find a fresh approach. The alternative is to shy away from the threat and find a comfortable rationalisation for doing so. When people feel threatened they do not tend to behave particularly logically, particularly when (as is likely to be the case in this instance) the threat has not been consciously recognised and identified. Thus,

for example, they are likely to dwell upon the supposed incapacity produced by the disability.

And yet, when we are discriminated against for such reasons, the people who find us unsuitable for the job or training course that we have applied for do so in good faith; they think they have made a fair decision, and would deny that any unfair discrimination has taken place. We are continually viewed through the distorting mirror of other people's insecurities; they judge us unsuitable because that really is how we look to them, who do not realise how subjective their view is, or how greatly it misrepresents us.

Where an alternative reason for finding the person with a disability unsuitable exists, that may prove even more attractive, because then the threat need not be faced at all. The effect of this is that apparent discrimination on some other, unrelated, ground may conceal discrimination on the basis of one's disability. This may have been what happened to Maggie Woolley when she applied to train as a teacher of the deaf

`I'm a qualified teacher. I've had two years' experience of teaching hearing children in a comprehensive school, while I was still very slightly hearing impaired; I then later moved to further education of deaf people and spent six years teaching part-time in a further education college. I had very good references and I was thirty, I was no spring chicken straight from college; I was a very experienced person. But I was turned down.

`At the interview there was quite a lot of talk about the fact that I was a mother of two young children and I found this very odd. And I explained to them that I thought I would be quite able to cope with the course because during the whole of my motherhood period I had worked part-time. I'd done an Open University course, I'd done a tremendous amount of voluntary work and so on. But it was quite clear that this really bothered them.

`I've found out that during the year they interviewed me they did have a mother as a student who didn't complete the course, she found it too heavy going. When I wrote to the principal and complained about what I saw as discrimination against being a mother, his reply made out that the reasons for my being rejected weren't to do with my being a mother. I've since found out that, on that course, a woman who is also a parent with a young child and has also had experience and is also partially deaf did get a place. But she's not a single parent.

`And it's very very confusing. Was I discriminated against because I was deaf, because I was a single parent, because I was a mother or because of my political activism in the deaf world? I do not know.'

A different kind of threat arises from the possibility that the person with a disability may, by virtue of the fact that she has the same disability as the people, be they children or adults, with whom she is dealing, possess particular skills which the able bodied professional either does not have, or is not entirely secure in. A hearing teacher of deaf children, for example, will not normally be a native speaker of sign language, and may not be able to sign at all. This type of insecurity is by no means something that occurs solely in relation to disability; for example, when I spent a year teaching in a French lycee, I encountered quite noticeable hostility from some of the younger teachers in the English department, which, it seemed to me, sprang from a fear that the presence of a native speaker of English might reveal them to be humanly fallible in their mastery of it as a second language.

In the case of teaching, particular difficulties are likely to arise from the working relationship (with other members of staff, and more particularly with the pupils) which would *need* to exist for the person with a disability to make best use of her capabilities. A relationship that takes account of an individual's needs must inevitably be a more human relationship than one that does not, and thus lends itself less easily to the wielding of arbitrary authority. I personally, having a great distaste for any form of arbitrary authority, consider that to be excellent, something that can be nothing but beneficial to the children with whom the teacher is dealing, and it seems to me that Merry Cross's experience as a teacher, quoted earlier, bears out that supposition. But in a school system where it is believed that `discipline' is essential to education (rather than diametrically opposed to it), anything that looks as though it might diminish the teacher's control over her or his pupils will be viewed with the greatest suspicion. Certainly Merry found that her relationship with her pupils aroused hostility from other members of staff. `I got on so well with the youngsters. A lot of them were pretty uptight about that and tried to turn it into something bad.'

It seems entirely conceivable to me that this too may be a cause of discrimination against people with disabilities when they apply for jobs as teachers. And there is also the added factor that, from respecting the adult as a person rather than as an impersonal wielder of arbitrary authority, it is a small step to respecting the child as a person rather than as the victim of such authority. And I know of practically no school that believes wholeheartedly in that.²

Having dwelt upon the question of deaf people who wish to become teachers of the deaf, it is perhaps only fair for me to point out that this is an area where

particular tensions exist which are not wholly applicable to other areas of education or of employment in general. There is at present considerable controversy over the continuing use in many schools for deaf children of what is known as 'oralism' - teaching methods in which signing and fingerspelling play no part (and are usually forbidden, as being supposedly detrimental to the child's development of skills in spoken language) and a major emphasis is placed on attempting to teach even children who have been profoundly deaf from birth to communicate solely through speech and lipreading plus the use of whatever hearing they may still have. (I shall deal with this subject at greater length in the next chapter.)

Obviously, most of the specific skills that a deaf teacher could offer more fully than a hearing teacher are of no relevance in a school that is committed to oralist methods, and it is very unlikely that such a school would consider a deaf person to be suitable for employment as a teacher. But the point I wish to stress here is that, as a result of this controversy, many professionals involved in the teaching of deaf children are aware that they and their methods are strongly under attack, and that the primary source of this attack is deaf users of sign language. (Interestingly, the most vehement attacks on oralism tend to come from sign-language users who were themselves taught by oralist methods, and thus are fully aware of how isolating its effects can be.) They are therefore likely to feel particularly threatened by any user of sign language, and especially so if the person in question is known to be outspoken in her views on the subject.

Getting rid of the discrimination that prevents us from finding suitable employment easily is not going to be a simple task; as I have indicated, some of the attitudes that obstruct us are both subtle and deep rooted. But it is essential that we overcome these attitudes if we are to make the society in which we live fit for people with disabilities to live in. Equality of opportunities in employment would not merely give us individual solutions to our personal difficulties in finding work. It would enable us to start to acquire some degree of economic leverage, which would mean that our voices would be likely to be listened to rather more than they are at present. And it would enable us to start influencing the nature of our society directly, by gaining access to the roles which control its operation. Buildings would be unlikely to be inaccessible if designed by architects who were themselves wheelchair users. Children with disabilities would be less likely to let themselves be confined to a human scrapheap if they were taught by confident and supportive adults who knew what their needs and worries were from their own experience of having the same disabilities.

We are already starting to effect change in areas such as these. As we continue to fight for the employment we see ever more clearly as our right, and as our mutual

strength and confidence in our own abilities continues to grow, a great many more changes are going to occur.

² For those to whom the assumptions I have made here about the nature of education are unfamiliar, I recommend A.S. Neill's *Summerhill* (Penguin, 1968) and the works of John Holt.