

Reflections on the Social Model of Disability: The South African Connection

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I believe that there has been a far greater unrecorded South African influence on the emergence of the radical social interpretation of disability in the UK than most people are aware – and through this the social model of disability and from here into the world arena. Of course, with the long passage of time I may have got some of the details wrong but I've checked my records and dates as best I can. Here is the background as I see it (the supporting papers referred to in the text are *01 - Talk to GPs.doc*, *02 - Voice of the Disabled.doc* and *03 - Extraction from UPIAS Circular.doc*):

The origins of an idea

After I was released from prison for working with the underground ANC and SACP I was 'banned' for five years and came to the UK in 1968 with strong feelings about 'social oppression' which coloured all my thoughts and actions at the time. Despite this outlook I had not, like most disabled people, considered 'disability' from this point of view. It was only when my wife, Liz, and I joined the UK disability organisations in the early 1970s that I came to view complaints about the constrictions imposed on disabled people as similar to the oppression of South Africans under the apartheid system of segregation. This insight happened when we met Paul and Judy Hunt at the Association of Disabled Professionals' (ADP) Annual General Meeting.

At this meeting Paul questioned whether ADP policies would address all the issues of segregated 'special' provision, including those of disabled people in residential homes. He expressed his concerns in a way that immediately struck a chord, reminiscent of South Africans suffering under apartheid.

It was around this time that I looked up Nelson Mandela's *Rivonia Trial* speech:

'Africans want to be paid a living wage. Africans want to perform work which they are capable of doing, and not work which the Government declares them to be capable of. Africans want to be allowed to live where they obtain work, and not be endorsed out of an area because they were not born there. Africans want to be allowed to own land in places where they work, and not to be obliged to live in rented houses which they can never call their own. Africans want to be part of the general population, and not confined to living in their own ghettos. African men want to have their wives and children to live with them where they work, and not be forced into an unnatural existence in men's hostels. African women want to be with their menfolk and not be left permanently widowed in the Reserves. Africans want to be allowed out after eleven o'clock at night and not to be confined to their rooms like little children. Africans want to be allowed to travel in their own country and to seek work where they want to and not where the Labour Bureau tells them to. Africans want a just share in the whole of South Africa; they want security and a stake in society.

Above all, we want equal political rights, because without them our disabilities will be permanent. I know this sounds revolutionary to the whites in this country, because the majority of voters will be Africans. This makes the white man fear democracy.'

[My underline]

From MANDELA, Nelson (1978) *The Struggle Is My Life*.
London, International Defence and Aid for Southern Africa.
The Rivonia Trial 1963-4. p.174-5

After the meeting we met several times and learnt that Paul had been incarcerated in the Le Court Cheshire Home and had escaped back into the community with the help of his wife. They had long history of campaigning against segregated facilities for disabled people both in residential homes and in the community. It was during these informal social meetings that Liz and I gained insight into how ‘segregation’ had been extensively developed in the UK, systematically shunting disabled people into apartheid-like facilities. These were being resisted in a rather ‘piece-meal’ way by disabled people. In these meetings Paul and Judy, I believe, gained insight from the militancy that we brought from SA in fighting racial segregation. From them we learnt to respect the extent of the struggles that were taking place in the UK. It was during these discussions that I needed to clarify my interpretation of ‘disability’ and I began to say that ‘disability’ was best interpreted as a social relationship between a person with an impairment and the social environment in which they live, rather than just being a personal (medical) possession, condition or attribute (something that people have, or are ‘with’ as in the USA 1980s medical formulation: “person *with* disabilities”).

Paul and Judy suggested that we meet other well-known disabled people and discuss different ways of understanding ‘disability’. In about 1970 Liz and I joined Rosalie Wilkins and Selwyn Goldsmith for dinner and discussion at the Hunt’s home. Selwyn, an architect by profession, was widely consulted about design ‘accessibility’ by government. He was also recognised as a leading personality in disability organisations. During the evening Selwyn argued that because of their condition ‘cripples’ weren’t normal and couldn’t expect to be fully integrated into ‘normal’ society. This we should accept. Any provision made for us, he maintained, were ‘special’ concessions which should be gratefully received (‘reserved car parking spaces’ he regarded as an example). He did, however, canvass the acceptability of standard building adaptations, within limits, and supported arguments for a special State monetary benefit to compensate for ‘disability’.

In my response to Selwyn I realised that my interpretation of ‘disability’ presented a robust alternate to the traditional view that our impaired bodies *caused* our social disadvantages. The social interpretation of ‘disability’ also provided a much better focus for an emancipatory struggle against institutionalised prejudice which, up to that point in time, fed the maintenance of disabling social and physical barriers against people with impairments. As the evening proceeded my own views about ‘disability’ not only developed and became clearer but others added their voice to the social interpretation. I believe this was a seminal meeting which ended with the conviction that *disability itself* (i.e. not just the *disabling situation* of disabled people) was socially created. From now on I could never unquestionably accept standards set by non-disabled people, since it was these standards that made us disabled.

For me it was also the point in time when Liz and I became much more assertive about the social interpretation of disability. I believe, too, that this was the time when Paul and Judy became assertive in campaigning for a more *radical, emancipatory*, solution to our oppression. (It would be very informative to consult Judy Hunt to solicit her memory of this meeting and what it may have meant for them).

With the experience of this social evening behind me I felt more confident about expressing my views in personal contacts. The first opportunity arose in March 1972 when I was asked to give a talk to GPs about ‘disability’. I was working as a clinical psychologist and decided to use *Personal Construct Theory* (PCT) as a vehicle for the talk. I chose this approach because PCT puts emphasis on the way personal interpretations of our own circumstances (the way we *construe* events) has an impact on the choices we make to intervene (behave) in that situation. From this it follows that changing the way we interpret something can open the way to different responses to a situation. For me this was a convenient way of suggesting

that if ‘disability’ is viewed in a new way (i.e. as related to social barriers and not as a medical problem) then there could be more optimistic expectations for disabled people which, in turn, leads to different professional expectations and interventions. The talk was recorded and for the record I attach a print version of the transcript **01 - Talk to GPs.doc** (edited to make more readable but maintaining my original ideas of the time about ‘disability’). The presentation is awful, and was wholly inappropriate for the audience, but I include it here to record that this was amongst the first of times that “‘disability’ should be recognised as a social phenomena” was said to a limited public audience.

I need to record here, too, that in the 1970s ANC members in London were discouraged from taking an active and public stand in UK political and campaigning activities. The reason for this is easy to understand – (1) the SA secret police and spies posed a constant personal threat to us and our families (I had one such person in my home as I was later to learn when he went public after returning to SA), (2) as ‘political refugees’ we could be expelled if the UK government became alarmed by our activities, and (3) action in UK activities could dilute involvement in the SA struggle. For these reasons as I became involved with UK disability groups I tended to withhold my name and avoided public office. By the 1980s, however, matters had changed and I felt more relaxed about having a more public profile.

In addition to ADP I joined several local and national associations, including the Disablement Income Group (DIG). The latter was a mass organisation but had slipped into terminal decline just as I settled in the UK. Paul and Judy Hunt were active members who had concluded that DIG was failing to address the real needs of ordinary disabled people, but were a little uncertain about the way forward. In our discussions, and still fired with the SA experience, I saw no alternative to setting up a new, more militant disability group. Paul welcomed my support for what was already in his mind and he wrote to several disability organisations and national papers suggesting like-minded disabled people contact him. I attach a copy of one such letter printed in 1972 **02 - Voice of the Disabled.doc**. In this, you will see Paul refers to me (“a friend”) and uses the social interpretation of disability (“if severe disability is either to be eradicated or to become no bar to full social participation”). Mindful of my ANC commitment not to have a public profile I asked Paul not to mention my involvement. Paul’s letters, as is well known, led to the formation of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). What is not known is my involvement, and through me the SA contribution, at this very early stage in setting up UPIAS.

Following Paul’s letters in September 1972 several people responded and a lively discussion developed by means of a ‘confidential’ circular. Paul wrote the first two circulars: the first (October 1972) contained several questions for discussion and his proposed outline for the new organisations aims and policies; in the second circular (November 1972) he quoted and summarised the responses – it was here that the UPIAS name was suggested and Paul wrote a more detailed outline basis for the group which included a clear statement that the new organisation would be “formed on the basis of [our] common physical impairment and oppression by society.” Discussions in the circulars led to the December 1974 meeting when UPIAS was formally constituted. In the next circular (December 1972) I took up the issue of ‘oppression’ and the organisations name – I attach an extract from this circular **03 - Extraction from UPIAS Circular.doc** (I would like to make all the circulars available in due course after contacting former members and keeping names anonymous when desired).

The point I am making is that radical views on ‘oppression’ and the ‘social interpretation of disability’ emerged during the earlier discussions between the Hunt’s and Finkelstein’s before UPIAS began forming and then fed into the group’s internal discussions right from the beginning. By the time UPIAS was formally set up (in December 1974 – i.e. 2 years after

Paul wrote his first letters) cultural aspects of the South African revolutionary experience had fused with the UK's radical tradition into the group's discussions (where further radical ideas were added) and this synthesis emerged in its agreed Aims and Policy documents.

Towards the end of 1974 I felt that it had become important to clarify the social interpretation of disability and make this accessible in simple language to a wide readership of disabled people. This was published in 1975 (*Phase 2: Discovering the Person in 'Disability' and 'Rehabilitation'* Magic Carpet, New Year 1975). This was the first published version of my view about disability. In this paper I quoted Amelia Harris' definitions of 'impairment' 'disablement' and 'handicap' (Harris, A., et al (1971) *'Handicapped and Impaired in Great Britain'*, HMSO) which I felt was not quite right:

'Impairment' is defined as 'lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body'. *'Disablement'* as 'the loss or reduction of functional ability'. *'Handicap'* as 'the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by disability'.

It was in this paper, too, that I first presented the idea of a village populated only by disabled people where non-disabled people become disabled when they are forced to live in this environment:

"I hope this story helps to clarify what I mean by the social nature of disability".

I followed up this paper with a short paper (*'More on Phase 2'* Magic Carpet, Spring 1975) suggesting a way that Amelia Harris' definitions might be revised:

"Impairment; lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body. *Handicap*; loss or reduction of functional ability. *Disability*; the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by social relationships which take no or little account of people who have physical impairments"

In 1975, I believe (I cannot find the original papers), I wrote a series of scripts for television broadcasts spread over a year about a segregated village for disabled people who use wheelchairs – *Very Cross Roads*. In this village *they* are 'normal' and do not see themselves as 'disabled'. However, when non-disabled people come to live in the village *they* are the ones who cannot cope and become disabled. The programmes were edited into half an hour and broadcast a couple of times – the last occasion in 1985. In the opening scene I made SA apartheid the inspiration for building the segregated village where 'disabled people can have their own *separate development*'. The whole story is, in reality, an exposition of the social interpretation of disability. It is this television programme which, above all else in my view, proves the SA connection with the UK development of the social interpretation of disability!

It was later that year, November 1975, during the discussion between UPIAS and the Disability Alliance when the '*social interpretation*' and '*oppression*' are clearly and confidently mentioned.

However, It took a year, November 1976, before I completed writing the UPIAS *Comments on the discussion held between the Union and the Disability Alliance on 22nd November, 1975* and the much quoted 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' was published. I firstly quoted from the fundamental principles *written by Paul*:

"our own position on disability is quite clear . . . In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society".

And then added:

To understand this it is necessary to grasp the distinction between the physical impairment and the social situation, called 'disability', of people with such impairment.

Thus we define *impairment* as lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; and *disability* as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression. (These definitions refer back to those of Amelia Harris, but differ from them significantly).

The connection between the UPIAS *Comments*, included in the 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' document (published in 1976) and my views published in the *Magic Carpet* journals (of 1974/5) is clear. On reflection, with the passing of years, it might have been better if the contributions to the 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' publication had been signed. This would have made the South African connection to the social interpretation of disability in the UPIAS document unmistakable. (Paul Hunt and Dick Leaman made many suggestions to my draft, mostly to improve the text but a few were of substance. Paul wrote the 'fundamental principles' which he also presented on behalf of UPIAS at the start of the meeting and Dick did a heroic job in editing the taped transcript and writing the summary.)

With the added confidence of the UPIAS 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' document I prepared a monograph, 'Attitudes and Disabled People' (published in 1980) in which I wrote:

"The central thesis of this monograph is that 'disability' is an oppressive social relationship."

There are numerous references to 'oppressive social relationship' throughout the text, culminating in a quote from 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' with the definitions of 'impairment' and 'disability'.

The 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' document's anonymity in setting out the social interpretation of disability 'depersonalised' (if I can put it this way) the origins of the social interpretation. This effectively severed the clear link between the South African connection with the emerging 'social model of disability' on the world stage.

In 1980 the steering committee for a new national organisation of disabled people in the UK began work. It was agreed that the UPIAS disability definitions would be included in the constitution. Following this the *British Council of Organisations of Disabled People* (BCODP) was inaugurated in 1981 with me as its first chair.

Later that year we sent three delegates (myself included) to the newly formed *Disabled People's International* (DPI) first World Congress, Singapore. Liam McGuire, from Ireland, was responsible for the first DPI draft Constitution. This was adopted in 1981 in at the DPI Congress. It was also agreed that minor changes could be made and presented at the second World Congress. The first DPI draft Constitution had included the WHO definitions of 'impairment', 'disability' and 'handicap'. The first World Council, also meeting in Singapore, appointed Liam to Chair a committee of DPI Office Bearers which would prepare revised definitions for the Constitution based on comments made at the Congress and in response to comments from the new World Council members.

However, Liam became seriously ill and was unable to attend the second World Council meeting in Japan in 1982. He died the following year and Tony Wong, from Jamaica, took over responsibility for preparing the revised Constitution. Tony consulted widely and this was discussed in 1983 in Stockholm at the third World Council Meeting when Bengt Lindqvist (Sweden), Ann-Marit Saebonnes (Norway) and myself (UK) worked through the night before reaching agreement and submitting the new definitions to the Council. These were accepted by the World Council and included in the Constitution presented at the second World Congress in the Bahamas in 1985 where it was adopted.

The first formal definitions adopted by the DPI, therefore, had a SA input!

1981 was also the year in which Mike Oliver had his paper, 'A New Model of the Social Work Role in Relation to Disability', published in Campling, J. (ed.) (1981) *The Handicapped Person: a New Perspective for Social Workers?* London, RADAR. Referring to the UPIAS view of oppression in 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' Mike then quotes the definitions in the document. This, as far as I know, is the first publication where the *social model of disability* is clearly presented and developed in more detail. Mike followed this up with his more definitive work, *Social Work With Disabled People* (London, Macmillan), in 1983. To my knowledge this book is the most frequently quoted source for the first presentation of the social model of disability.

Conclusion

- The social interpretation of disability was the product of UK (the Hunt's) and SA (the Finkelstein's) radical experience of oppression. (I make no claim that I represented South African views in putting forward this interpretation when I arrived in the UK; but rather that I was the vehicle for the SA experience of oppression to enter into the UK ideological struggle against the systematic segregation of disabled people.)
- Although the UPIAS 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' document is taken as the reference point for the emergence of the social interpretation of disability, the concepts were formulated in the interaction between the Hunt's and Finkelstein's **before** UPIAS was set up.
- The SA experience of oppression under apartheid played a much greater role in the emergence of the social model of disability than has so far been recognised and acknowledged.