

Understanding Positive Subjectivities Made Possible Online for Disabled People

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The ideology of individualism underlying identity and psychology's focus on a visual ontology may serve to inhibit the social value of people with disabilities. The online medium with its capacity for textual self presentation presents a potentially new environment to operate within. This study set out to explore the psychological meaning of what it meant to be online for people with disabilities. Following the tradition of discursive psychology, we focused especially on constructions of how online experience provided alternative frameworks for social positioning. Participants were recruited from various disability organisations in New Zealand and were invited to take part in an online interview. Three key linguistic resources were identified: uncontaminated judgement, exhibiting strengths, and operating independently. Embedded within these resources was the idea that the physical and attitudinal barriers, disrupting the ability of people with disabilities to display their capabilities independent of a disabled identity, are eliminated online. Consequently, being judged outside of the constraints of a disabled identity affords people with disabilities the opportunity to enjoy a more socially valued subjectivity and a more positive identity.

People with disabilities have traditionally been undervalued in society. In this paper we argue that the ideology of individualism (Sampson, 1977; 1985; 1988), along with a reliance on visual ontology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) are powerful influences that have dominated both contemporary psychology and Western culture. We also suggest these influences restrict the opportunities people with disabilities have for gaining positive social identities and may further perpetuate their marginalisation in the social world.

A Disabling Identity

Social psychology has traditionally linked notions of 'self' and 'identity' with specific social practices. Rose (1994), for example, suggests that

the social practice of individualism is regarded as being at the core of who we are. Similarly, Sampson (1977; 1985; 1988) points out that for many in the social sciences "self-contained individualism" now defines personhood. This can be encapsulated by the notion that one can possess something called an identity, denoted no less than an "essential center of the self" (Sparkes, 1997, p. 84). Independence, Watson (1998) suggests, is an integral part of identity. The ideal self is constructed as an entity in itself with distinct boundaries operating independently of others (Landrine, 1992). Shotter (1994) employs the term "possessive individualism" (p. 136) to describe the notion of individuals being the sole agent of their capacities. These characterisations mark a point in the

tension between the social and the individual, in downplaying the social elements, which are inevitably involved in considerations of who we are and what we might be capable of.

As Gergen (1991) suggests, the history of this allegiance to individualism is rooted in liberal humanism, wholeheartedly embraced at the beginning of the modern age in the 17th and 18th centuries. The ideology of individualism positions people as rational entities in full control of their destiny, with actions and achievements being directed by essentialist properties held at the core of their identity. We suggest individualism undermines the social value of people with disabilities because they frequently operate outside this ideology and outside this psychological model of identity. People with disabilities tend to operate interdependently. Differences in physical ability constrain their capacity to control the self and their environment. In some cases, particularly in relation to success and failure, the social context may wield far greater influence for people with disabilities. Focussing on independence and autonomy fails to consider our interdependent social relationships, which also powerfully impact on questions of who we are.

Goffman's (1963) pioneering work on social stigma highlighted the importance of visual ontology for stigmatising evaluations of people with disabilities. In short, a link was seen to operate between physical manifestations and intra-psycho characteristics. Any

physical deviation was potentially regarded as signifying positions of inferiority and thus became marginalised and devalued. Traditional social psychological theories have adopted this perceptually mediated ontology, resulting in the conceptualisation of physical behaviour as a root to essentialist characteristics and mental processes (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

The online medium presents a potentially new environment where participants can exist outside the conventions of a perceptually mediated reality. Cromby and Standon (1999) propose that because the online environment encourages textual self-presentation, people with disabilities can interact in a medium where physical disability may be masked. Operating online may also remove many of the physical barriers that lead to dependency. Indeed, textually mediated self-presentation may bring forth fresh possibilities for people with disabilities (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002, 2003, 2004). Free from the constraints of operating within a disabled identity, the negative attributes tied to this social category can be bypassed and replaced with a more positive, socially valued identity.

This research seeks to explore and understand the kinds of experiences available for people with disabilities online, with respect to furthering their opportunities to be positioned in interaction as socially valued members of society. As such, this work is informed by a larger body of research exploring what it means to be online for people with disabilities (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002, 2003, 2004). Having introduced the foreground of individualism and perceptually linked stigmatisation, we now address the theoretical framework informing this study.

Discursive Psychology

Discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) draws on the approach to language spearheaded by the linguistic philosophers Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1962). Discursive psychology seeks to redirect the focus of research attention toward the important psychological ways in which we make things happen with our talk and text. Rather than seeing language as merely representational,

discursive psychologists hold that language has constitutive power and, for that very reason, should become the prime site of study (Tuffin, 2005). Discursive researchers embrace social constructionism (Gergen, 1985) and regard language as constructive, highly contextualised, and inextricably involved in a wide range of social achievements.

In focussing on the linguistic, rather than what has formerly been regarded as the psychological (Wetherell, 1995), understandings of the world are revealed in patterns of language organised more broadly around metaphors and repertoires.

We have adopted Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) concept of an 'interpretative repertoire' to assist with the analysis of discursive patterns. Interpretative repertoires are built from linguistic resources or "internally consistent" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172) regularities in discourse. Hence, linguistic resources (see Augustinos, Tuffin & Sale, 1999, for examples) can be understood as the basic building blocks that provide support for the operation of an interpretative repertoire. These patterns function to summarise the kinds of explanations available in culture that people use to make sense of their experiences. Interpretative repertoires provide a means of observing how language facilitates social action (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

This study set out to demonstrate the social practices, constructed in the talk of people with disabilities about their online experience, that allow them to access a socially valued subjectivity. These social practices were identified through an interpretative repertoire organised around how online access has enabled people with disabilities to be evaluated *according to their abilities*. Before proceeding to the method and analysis, we discuss matters of identity, experience, and subjectivity as viewed through the conceptual lens of discursive psychology.

Traditionally, identity has been constructed as a static entity representing the core of a person's psychological being. Such essentialist constructions of identity may disadvantage people with disabilities because of their physical appearance, or alternative ways of

operating. In contrast, discursive psychology conceptualises identity more fluidly, as created in interaction between people through available discursive practices (Burr, 2003; Shotter & Gergen, 1994). 'Identity talk' occurs when people resort to particular categories in which to construct and position themselves. Hence, identity becomes transformed into a flexible social construct (Abell & Stokoe, 2001) that may arise from interactional business, as in the case of accepting, resisting, or challenging the boundaries of a disabled identity.

Experience is similarly built through available discursive resources and practices. Rather than being grounded within the realm of physical sensation and visual perception, a discursive framework views experience as mediated and constituted through language (Weedon, 1987). What we attend to in our experience is guided by taken-for-granted assumptions and culturally appropriate conventions for constructing accounts, justifications, warrants, explanations, and attributions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Discursive understandings of subjectivity have been informed by positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994). Central to this view of subjectivity is the claim that as social creatures we become located within social categories. These categories entail prescribed rights, obligations, and duties for operating within particular local moral orders (Harré, 1986). For example, location within a category of 'disabled person' may infer a right of dependency, and an obligation to be appreciative of others' help. Socially constructed categories and their prescribed practices constitute subject positions, which people take up in social interaction. According to Davies and Harré (1999), positioning in the course of everyday interaction constructs and constrains actions and experience.

Goode's (1984) analysis of the hospital relationships encountered by a hydrocephalic patient are illustrative here. This condition produces an enlarged skull leading to deafness, blindness, and paralysis and has been constructed by physicians as leading

to a flawed, dysfunctional life. Such constructions position patients negatively and contrast dramatically with subject positioning offered by nurses who talked about patients as possessing abilities, preferences, and the capacity to share common understandings. This functioned to position the person within a socially valued subjectivity, having the capacity to make an important social contribution to human relationships. This illustrates that subject positions are fluid as the nature of social interaction requires continual negotiation of topics and positions. Positioning theory holds that while others have the ability to position us in particular ways, we retain agency whereby we are also able to position ourselves. This further highlights one of the strengths of discursive analysis: the ability to point to the way subjectivity can be challenged and changed. In examining social practices that allow people with disabilities to access a socially valued subjectivity, this study seeks to challenge the rights, duties and obligations which impact on the subjectivity of disabled identities.

Method

Ethical approval was gained from Massey University's Human Ethics Committee and the research was conducted within the New Zealand Psychological Society's ethical guidelines (www.psychology.org.nz). Pseudonyms were deployed and any identifying information was either removed, or substantially altered.

Participants were recruited from various disability organisations in New Zealand and were invited to take part in an online interview. This led to 21 people with physical and sensory disabilities volunteering to be interviewed online via email, or another online communication program of their choice. Each participant identified as using the online medium inclusive of Internet and email facilities either daily, or several times per week. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 59 years and came from different backgrounds with varying experiences in the workforce.

The interview schedule included demographic information and a focus on online experiences. Most participants engaged in email interviews; while

two chose synchronous online communication programs using either Internet Relay Chat (IRC), or ICQ (a creative abbreviation for I seek you). Online interviews provided a number of flexible advantages for people with disabilities (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004), especially with regard to barriers of geographical distance. The literacy level required to participate online was inaccessible to deaf participants who, along with sign language interpreters, were interviewed in person.

Analysis

Preliminary coding of participants' interviews involved finding instances of patterns in their text that led to the identification of repertoires (c.f. Bowker & Tuffin, 2002, 2003). These instances were read repeatedly with particular attention paid to textual variability (Tuffin & Howard, 2001). In our analysis we particularly focussed on constructions that talked about how online access offered alternative frameworks for positioning people with disabilities in the social world.

One dominant pattern, which was evident in the data, was the way people with disabilities were evaluated positively. This talk of *positive subjectivity* included the idea that many of the social and psychological barriers, which had formerly constrained independent demonstrations of ability, were eliminated online. Freed from such stigmatising negative judgements, online communication afforded people with disabilities a rare opportunity to exhibit their value. This broad notion of positive subjectivity was constituted by three key linguistic resources: *uncontaminated judgement*, *exhibiting strengths*, and *operating independently*.

While the following analysis presents three distinct resources, we acknowledge that, textually, these work together sharing some similarities and, yet, also, presenting unique discursive features. Such resources do not come ready-made in pre-defined packages but are more usually intertwined in complex ways. Further, while our analysis seeks to unpack the ways in which participants talked about their online experience, we acknowledge that such analysis is inevitably partial. We offer,

therefore, a reading of the dynamics of the place of online interactions in the lives of people with disabilities. It is also important to note that data extracts have been copied verbatim from a variety of communication mediums, namely email, IRC, as well as a tape-recorded oral interview. These differing interview mediums produced different styles of transcribed data.

Findings

Uncontaminated Judgements

This resource is organised around the idea that the online medium can emancipate people with disabilities from prejudice. Negative reactions towards disability are absent online as participants were judged, not on their physical presentation, but rather on their textual contributions to online forums. In this first extract, from an email interview, Shaun who lives with cerebral palsy and types with his feet, talks about the advantages of being online.

I think the whole idea of being online is to exchange information. Because people can only judge you on the substance of your contributions, there is no prejudice about how you deliver because the tools are essentially the same for every contributor. This is not the same for face-to-face things because of body language, intonation etc. Certainly, being online allows someone to be able to express themselves without having to be concerned about other people's attitudes about impairments and disabilities. (Shaun)

Shaun makes the point that others' evaluations can only be based on the contribution rather than the way the contribution might be delivered. The suggestion that the tools are similar for each contributor underscores the powerful way in which all contributions are homogenised, thereby eliminating sources of prejudice. The notion of bias-free judgement online is contrasted with face-to-face settings where contextual forms of information like "body language" and "intonation" are accessible. There is a strong sense that the presence of face-to-face cues negatively influence

judgements. The inclusion of the contraction “etc” indicates further, potentially, contaminating features embedded in face-to-face interaction. The contaminating features mentioned inclusive of “etc” present a three-part list (Edwards & Potter, 1992), adding cogency and impact to Shaun’s justification for the prejudice surrounding face-to-face interaction. Such lists function to create a sense of representativeness and completeness for rhetorical effect. We assume disability, notable by its absence, may also be included.

There is a sense of equality shared by all online participants, as they are endowed with exactly the same resources (‘tools’). Shaun suggests that because the delivery tools vary outside of the medium, there is a greater consequence for confounding features to impact on people’s judgements. This is clear from Shaun’s statement about how the medium enables people to “express themselves” free of others’ judgements about disability. This extract demonstrates the *uncontaminated judgement* resource, which offers people with disabilities the ability to position themselves outside of their disability. Consequently, people with disabilities can be judged purely on the content of what they say, as opposed to the process of delivery.

The next extract, from a tape-recorded interview, also focuses on the advantages of online communication for people with disabilities as Patrick, who lives with blindness, considers the benefits for people with speech impairments.

it’s also important for people for for example who have significant speech um disabilities if they are trying to make a point verbally um sometimes those who are not tuned into listening to people with significant speech disabilities tune out um and so one of the really good things about the internet is that your words get taken seriously for what they are saying not necessarily how they’re said or who said (Patrick)

Consistent with the previous account, this is organised around a comparison of the way judgements

about people are constructed within on- and offline settings. It begins with an example of the pitfalls of face-to-face contexts for people with speech impairments, which functions to highlight the medium’s importance for people with disabilities in general. The example illustrates the difficulties in articulating a verbal point. Interestingly, rather than positioning blame with the speaker, the source of difficulty is located within those who are unable to attune to the speaker’s delivery style. The implication is that the online medium encourages people to focus purely on the content of the message. Indeed, this point is elaborated further as Patrick highlights that the content of what is said “get[s] taken seriously”. Thus, the talk is taken seriously and not undermined by extraneous factors like the style of delivery. This account shows how the *uncontaminated judgement* resource offers people with disabilities online a means of being positioned in a less judgemental, less prejudiced, and more equitable way.

The final extract illustrating *uncontaminated judgement* appears in an IRC interview. Daniel who lives with ataxia, a neuro-muscular condition affecting co-ordination and balance, is responding to a question about whether people treat him differently online.

<Daniel> *I’m treated more on the content of my writing*

<Daniel> *and less because a disabled person is writing it*

<Interviewer> *so offline, do u like it when people treat you with discretion?*

<Daniel> *I’m ambivalent to it, I prefer people to like me,*

<Daniel> *but get frustrated when the only reason those people are nice to me is because they see a ‘cripple’.*

<Interviewer> *ohh*

<Interviewer> *um online then people don’t have access to that information about whether u are a cripple, so u are valued for u?*

<Daniel> *mostly, yes*

<Daniel> *Even if they do, they respect my achievements more*

Daniel’s account provides a concise example of the *uncontaminated judgement* with emphasis placed on the “content” of Daniel’s communication within an online context, as opposed to being influenced by the visibly disabled features of his identity. The contrast with settings other than online is evident with the use of the terms “more” and “less”. Daniel draws on his offline disabled identity when he claims he has been judged on the basis of his disability rather than on any positive contribution he might make.

In accordance with the interviewer’s attempt at clarification, Daniel highlights his desire to be treated favourably on the basis of personal characteristics, as opposed to his disabled identity. Daniel admits to becoming frustrated when he sees others being nice to him on the basis of his disability. Such liking is tantamount to charity and for Daniel he would prefer to be liked for aspects of his identity which are separate from his disability. This point is reinforced toward the end of the extract where Daniel suggests that even in circumstances where online interactants have access to information about his disability, his achievements are valued more highly. This functions to position his online interactions as subjectively more empowering. There is an assumption that the judgements made online may lead to more judicious outcomes because they minimise the visibly disabled features of identity, which in other contexts may hinder the value attributed to the “achievements” of people with disabilities.

To summarise, the *uncontaminated judgement* resource enables people with disabilities to be evaluated on the basis of what they say, as opposed to the way in which they might say it. This positioning enhances a positive subjectivity for disabled people online as they talk of operating within an equitable social plane. By removing the visible features of a disabled identity, people with disabilities can be judged on the content of their communication without prejudice towards disability contaminating social interaction.

Exhibiting Strengths

This resource is organised around the notion that online, people with disabilities have the opportunity to

demonstrate their strengths which affords the promise of operating within a more positively valued subjectivity. The first extract is a response to an email question about how online technology has made a difference for Shaun's employment.

When I was first employed, by the Science Institute, we weren't connected to the Net, and so I worked in isolation. Actually, I was employed on Mainstream, in 1981, when the Government of the day wanted to do its bit for IYDP [International Year of Disabled People]. So there were no expectations on me or the job I was employed to do. So, when we became connected, I started exploring my expanded world and came across people doing the same kind of work, in Wellington, NZ, USA, Europe etc. So we swapped ideas and code and even analysed each other's software. Therefore, I was able to produce more and more and at a standard that was recognised internationally. Thus, I was recognised internationally in the field I worked in. (Shaun)

This account is organised around a positive transformation, from working in isolation to being connected to and recognised by colleagues internationally. Before online connection, Shaun worked in "isolation." As suggested in the extract, this work was perhaps not particularly valued, nor, indeed, were there particularly clear expectations for Shaun in this job.

The account then turns toward a construction of the impact of online access. Becoming connected and gaining online access make new subject positions possible. A transformation is indicated where Shaun highlights an ability to begin "exploring my expanded world." We note the sense of liberation and empowerment conveyed in this phrase. Constructing his new colleagues' diverse geographical locations strengthens the existence of Shaun's "expanded world". These locations include cities, countries, and even continents, providing a striking contrast with the isolation that existed prior to working online.

Beyond merely contacting other

colleagues, the extract illustrates how Shaun accesses new ideas and shares knowledge online. He is positioned as working *with* others, collaboratively and interactively. Thus, he becomes positioned as being more productive and the quality of what he produces affords him international recognition. Through online access, Shaun's subjectivity is transformed from working in isolation to becoming a positively valued member of his employment community.

In the next extract, from a tape-recorded interview, Patrick's account also focuses on issues of employment as he responds to a question about online access and job opportunities.

I think that the reason why it's such a significant opener of job prospects is that so often blind people are limited by other people's perceptions of blindness rather than by actually how blindness really limits us and so you go into a prospective employer um and um you might have got past the initial review stage because they've seen your cv and depending on how you feel about such things you may or may not have mentioned to them that you're a blind person but then when you actually go in for the job interview a prospective employer is confronted by a blind person and they think gosh I couldn't do this job if I were blind and so neither can he or she and they close their eyes and think how scary the world must be if you're blind and how can a blind person possibly use a computer anyway and all those sorts of things well I mean if you're a for example writing a a home based business over the internet it might be just something simple like somebody um sending someone um cassettes of meetings to transcribe and then email back as a word document um it might be a whole range of of not terribly sensational techy things but things that are all possible over the internet the um clients don't even need to know that you're blind or that you have a disability so their prejudices

don't even have to come into play (Patrick)

Patrick's account of reasons why the online medium is "such a significant" facilitator of employment opportunities accentuates the legitimacy of the justifications to follow. The word "significant" emphasises the medium's important contribution to increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Patrick then contrasts this "significance" with pitfalls in traditional methods of employment recruitment. With respect to blind people specifically, the limitations of others' "perceptions" are constructed as placing further restrictions on blind employees. In other words, the limitations of blindness are exacerbated by the erroneous perceptions held by employers. These perceptions do not accurately reflect the limitations experienced by blind people themselves, as indicated early in the extract.

Patrick's account provides a detailed scenario of how other people's negative stereotypes severely restrict blind people's access to employment. The scenario starts by arguing that blind job applicants may succeed at first because evaluation is based on written documentation. An acknowledgement is made that disability disclosure may have an impact on the outcome. Patrick holds open the possibilities of disclosure and non-disclosure and we assume that success is more likely if the applicant refrains from disclosure. Support for this interpretation occurs where disability is constructed as being exposed due to meeting in-person with the employer ("confronted by a blind person"). This confrontation results in the employer contemplating their own inability to function without sight and raises doubts about how effective a blind employee would be.

Patrick introduces the positive impact of online access to the lives of blind employees. A more positive subject positioning is offered where blind people can function effectively and produce something of value within the online medium. This effectiveness does not require technological complexity. Rather, Patrick emphasises the "whole range" of possibilities available for blind people free of the threat of "prejudices" undermining

their employability. This positions the online medium as an empowering tool for enabling and enhancing the strengths of people with disabilities.

In the next extract, conducted on IRC, Daniel talks about the advantages of online access.

Physical - home shopping, email, irc, intellectual freedom (i.e. a person may not be able to interact physically, yet that person can display their intellectual prowess online)... (Daniel)

Here, Daniel constructs advantages for online users with disabilities. Amongst the physical advantages listed, "intellectual freedom" is the one which receives some elaboration. Extreme disability is outlined where physical interaction is not possible and the online medium is constructed as providing a psychological substitute for this incapacity. Significantly, the online medium is cast as being empowering in enabling intellect to be displayed, and this contrasts strongly with the implication that, in face-to-face interaction, such intelligence may be masked by the physical demands of the interaction. This illustrates how the online medium can afford people with disabilities access to a more positively valued subject position.

Social interaction also features in the following extract, as Karen who lives with fibromyalgia, a chronic condition causing generalised muscular pain and fatigue, responds to a question in a tape-recorded interview about online experiences.

it's just being able to help other people out give them the solution to something and they come back and say that worked thanks I really appreciate that you know you giving them your um experiences and and them going and trying it out I find that wonderful as well as getting it in return (Karen)

Karen's account highlights the intrinsic reward gained from "being able" to offer something of value to others, which occurs in the form of a "solution" to another's problem. Being able to access this capability constitutes and encompasses the positive experience associated with online

access, as indicated in the phrase, "it's just being able to help other people". This demonstrates the enormous value placed on possessing the ability to help. We suggest that physical disability frequently prevents the positive subject position of being able to assist others. Importantly, the online medium offers the opportunity to access such positions. Indeed, Karen constructs this position as "wonderful".

Helping others is also constructed within a reciprocal-positioning framework; Karen is positioned as the benefactor of help, in addition to being positioned as its producer. This reciprocity becomes apparent at the end of the account where Karen mentions how she also enjoys "getting it in return". We assume this refers to the help gained from others imparting knowledge about their experiences, which may in turn assist Karen. The notable variability in the constructions of assistance (for example, "help", "giving them the solution", and "giving them your um experiences") leaves open the opportunity for a wide range of interactive possibilities. Importantly, these activities are met with positive responses from others, who indicate the success of various strategies and their appreciation. This positions Karen as possessing something valuable: the ability to engage in positive social actions which assist others. What we see emerging from this is a more positively valued identity based on the use of an interactive medium which enables interpersonal strengths and experiences to become more widely available to others.

To summarise, the *exhibiting strengths* resource operates by stipulating the conditions necessary to demonstrate the skills and abilities of people with disabilities. Utilising the online medium removes the physical and psychological barriers of operating within a disabled identity and thereby positions people with disabilities as having positive social identities.

Operating Independently

This resource constructs the online medium as enabling people with disabilities to constitute an independent subject position. Offline, participants rely on others and assume dependent subject positions. In the following

email extract, Andrew, who lives with cerebral palsy and operates via an electronic wheelchair, a computer for communication, as well as a head-pointer for moving objects, responds to a question about whether being online has made a difference.

For me being on-line has given me the freedom to find out anything I want too without relying on people. Like I can't go to a library by my self because I can't turn pages with out my head-pointer on, and it is a lot faster to get info off the net than it is out of a book or a newspaper. So yes it has made a difference being on-line then off-line. (Andrew)

Andrew constructs the positive impact of the online medium. The online medium has "given" him greater freedom, where he is positioned as more independent. He now has access to information, constructed expansively as "anything I want". Online freedom of information and ease of access is contrasted with the severe limitations encountered offline. Andrew provides an example - in order to function adequately within a library, he must rely on the assistance of another; without this assistance, Andrew's access to the library is hindered to the extent of obstruction. Juxtaposing an example of the offline barriers to accessing a common public place, with the freedom to access "anything" online independently of the involvement of others, accentuates the advantages offered through online participation. This constructs the online medium as empowering for people with disabilities, and constructs such people as more autonomous than previously.

The next email extract from Sheryl, who lives with a congenital visual impairment and ongoing effects of a head injury, also highlights the advantages of utilising online technology.

I have to depend so much on other people for help. It's really good being able to access legal info, cases etc, without having to go down and look in the library, but I really hate relying on others. It makes me feel incompetent. Email is great though. No difficulties with email and talking and enlarging programmes work well with that, so I can be totally

independent (except when I have OOS [occupational overuse syndrome] and Kate has to reply to everything for me while I rest my arm - K). (Sheryl)

This account speaks to a strong dislike of dependency. This is evident where Sheryl constructs her dependency as a matter of fact: "I have to depend". This dependency is not merely confined to a few instances but is extensive, as indicated by the phrase "so much". Dependency is constructed as a significant feature of her life and may be necessary for daily survival. We assume that because dependency is not associated with any particular context, it constitutes an important part of her experience and her subjectivity.

At the beginning of the extract, the online medium is talked about as enabling and empowering. Information is accessed without the need for a trip to the library and this is highly valued. Sheryl reaffirms her strong dislike of relying on others. Such dependency, she suggests, affects her negatively and fosters feelings of incompetence. This positions her identity within a devalued social category. Moreover, there is a sense that Sheryl has no control over this dependency, which has been bestowed upon her, unwillingly, as illustrated by the earlier construction regarding the necessity of having to depend "so much" on others "for help".

Then the narrative changes. Email is lauded as "great" and the technology required to function online operates in harmony with the email facility. Email access enables Sheryl to be "totally independent". This locates her identity outside the devalued position of dependence, incorporating into her identity a valued sense of autonomy. Finally, Sheryl acknowledges that she can lapse back into dependency when another physical condition comes into play. While it is possible for Sheryl to enjoy independence, she is aware this cherished subjectivity is vulnerable to subversion by physical constraints.

Another illustration of *operating independently* comes from Patrick, who is asked during a tape-recorded interview to identify an online experience, which was positive for him.

this whole idea of um actually me having been the one to locate

this house I think [laugh] that's the most positive experience because um you know whe when we shopped for a house before it consisted of um Margaret looking at real estate publications and picking at houses she thought we might both like and going to look at them and I felt like a much more equal partner in that process and I mean the purchase of our house is one of your the the major purchasing decision that you make [mm] so I felt like I was in some degree of control for the first time over that purchase so I think that's ah that's really significant (Patrick)

This extract begins with Patrick taking credit for having found the house that he and his partner now own. Patrick is positioned as being independently responsible for locating his family's future house, illustrated in the deployment of the phrase "having been the one". This achievement is celebrated with the construction of this event as "the most positive experience" online for Patrick. Contrastingly, the process of house buying "before" emphasises Patrick's reliance on his partner, who looks at possible houses that "she thought we might both like". This illustrates a subject position of dependency and powerlessness under which Patrick operates, without being able to participate online. Subsequently, the medium's facilitation of his independent positioning in the locating stage of the house-buying process elevates him to a "much more equal" subject position. Patrick can contribute to the relationship and to the process of buying a house.

To summarise, *operating independently* constructs the online medium as capable of addressing the dependent positioning of people with disabilities. This offers emancipation from the constraints and powerlessness involved in operating dependently. With the integration of online access, people with disabilities are positioned as independent social agents. The online medium offers the chance to move from a devalued social category of dependency and participate within a more independent identity.

Discussion

Broadly, this paper has sought to examine the language employed by people with disabilities as they talk about their experiences and themselves as participants in online communities. This exploration of cyberpsychology has further sought to analyse what this language use means for issues of identity, subjectivity and positioning. Our analysis has shown how participants have positioned themselves beyond the traditional barriers which have constrained disabled identities. Indeed, we can report on the process of accessing a more positively valued subjectivity. Participants' talk drew on three key resources.

Firstly, the *uncontaminated judgement* resource allows people with disabilities to be judged on the content of their communication rather than the process of delivery, which can be contaminated by negative judgements and stereotypes regarding disability. This resource functions to position people with disabilities on par with non-disabled participants because both have access to the same tools for communication. Being judged on the substance of the communication with extraneous factors eliminated creates a judicious and fair context for evaluation. This opens up the potential for people with disabilities to be valued for what they have to say, rather than the way in which they might say it. With the removal of visual cues to interaction, disabled people are afforded a more equitable social plane in which to operate. In turn this opens up the possibility of social interaction free of prejudice and discrimination, which enables a more highly valued subjectivity and identity.

The second linguistic resource *exhibiting strengths*, enables constructions of advantage for operating online where participants talked of having their abilities shown to advantage, without the usual prejudice associated with disability. This resource moved participants to a more highly valued sense of identity where their skills, knowledge, and experience were socially valued by others in the wider community.

Thirdly, the *operating independently* resource constructs online experience

as enabling people with disabilities to position themselves with greater independence. This subject position has mostly been unavailable to people with disabilities, but online it becomes possible to participate in this subjectivity. The ability to access independence increases freedom, control, and autonomy, and is highly valued by those who have online access.

These three resources all make reference to changed circumstances brought about through online technology. This transformation conveys a degree of technological determinism, a belief that technology is the driving force for social formation (Smith, 1994). In this regard, the online medium is constructed as making conditions available for social change. The conditions relate to the removal of evaluations surrounding a disabled identity through the absence of a perceptually mediated ontology (c.f. Bowker & Tuffin, 2002). The overwhelming reliance on visual cues in making judgements about people in face-to-face interactions is replaced by a different mode of interaction. Indeed, this analysis has shown how textual interaction allows people with disabilities to display their skills without judgements and evaluations being muddied by extraneous factors. Most positively, this textual plane contributes to disabled identities that operate outside the negative evaluations based on visible identity and traditional social stigma. Online, such constraints need not influence the experiences of people with disabilities.

The analysis also highlights the dominance of the ideology of individualism, which people with disabilities succeed in accessing. They are able to produce goods of intellectual and social capital. Moreover, these goods are achieved without reliance on others. People with disabilities are transported to agents of autonomy and independence. This must inevitably also involve positioning as more valued social identities.

Such positioning, while positive for these participants, is based on the hegemony of individualism where our personal value is linked to our personal achievements. The problem this highlights for the disabled community more generally is the failure to recognise

and value alternative, interdependent strategies of operating which are usual for people with disabilities. Options which differ from the doctrine of individualism are absent. This functions to deny difference and silence marginalised subjectivities. Cromby and Standon (1999) point out that while the anonymous nature of online communication means disability is not an issue, this limits political action by rendering invisible the very phenomenon evoking political debate and a sense of solidarity amongst people with disabilities themselves. Marks (1999) argues that making the lives of people with disabilities visible may unpackage misconceptions of disabled identities. Rather than challenging the culture of individualism, the discourses examined here may serve to perpetuate and uphold the status quo.

Despite this possible tension, however, the discursive findings highlight and illustrate that people with disabilities have social value. With particular reference to the *exhibiting strengths* resource, people living with disabilities can make valuable contributions to society. Such outcomes, rather than maintaining an oppressed and personal tragedy view of disabled people, function to reposition disability and disabled identities on positive grounds (c.f. Swain & French, 2000). The positive subjectivities created online for people with disabilities also suggest possibilities for redefining disabled identities offline. Collectively, participants' positive online experiences could be harnessed to challenge the oppressiveness of individualism and a perceptually mediated ontology by affirming disabled identities as positive social identities that are celebrated and valued because of their interdependence, difference, and diversity.

Interestingly, Shakespeare (1998) mentions the limitations surrounding traditional constructions of disabled identities, "of biomedical intervention or rehabilitation, of misery, decline and death" (p. 95) and the emergence of narrative constructions of disabled identities, enabling people with disabilities to define their own identities outside the constraints of context and physical embodiment. The largely textual nature of online communication and the

frequent lack of social context cues may provide the very conditions to empower people with disabilities to redefine themselves and their identities. The types of linguistic resources identified in this analysis may lead onto avenues for alternative narrative constructions of disabled identities, which celebrate and value their richness and complexity, as identified by Shakespeare, and Swain and French (2000).

In summary, the resources identified have enabled people with disabilities to occupy other subjectivities beyond the limitations of disabled identities. Together, these resources serve to undermine the notion of essentialist characteristics underlying social action, evaluated via a perceptually mediated ontology. Through these resources, people with disabilities are able to move beyond the limitations of a disabled body and enjoy identities and subjectivities that are based on merit rather than prejudice, that acknowledge strengths rather than emphasise weakness, and that cultivate autonomy rather than dependence.

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