



Negotiating Identities, Negotiating Environments: an interpretation of the experiences of students with disabilities

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the experiences of nine students with disabilities pursuing degrees at a large Canadian university. An ethnographic approach was followed using face-to-face, unstructured interviews and a focus group to generate data. The analysis focuses on how these students negotiate disabled and non-disabled identities while negotiating the physical environment of the university campus. I argue that these negotiatory processes are necessarily interconnected and inherently contradictory.*

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of nine students with disabilities pursuing degrees at McMaster University. The analysis focuses on how these students negotiate disabled and non-disabled identities while negotiating the physical environment of the university campus. As a part of their every-day life at university, students with disabilities are engaged in rejecting deviant identities placed on them by others. These identities are reinforced by the isolating nature of an environment which constrains their interactions with others. At the same time, they must take on deviant identities in order to successfully function as 'normal' university students.

It should be noted that Bogdan & Taylor (in Ferguson *et al.*, 1992) argue that an analytic focus on deviance obscures the fact that individuals with disabilities are seen as 'normal' by those with whom they are in intimate relationships. However, I maintain that where relationships with non-intimates are concerned, students with disabilities are often labelled deviant (Goffman, 1963; Thomas, 1982). Accordingly, this paper focuses on how students with disabilities negotiate identities in the face of definitions placed on them by non-intimates in the largely impersonal world of the university campus. These three processes (negotiating environments, negotiating disabled identities and negotiating non-disabled identities) are necessarily interconnected and inherently contradictory (Thomas, 1982).

Method

Face-to-face unstructured interviews and a focus group were used as ways of generating data for this study. The sample was made up of interviews with nine university students with disabilities. Included in the interviews were students with varying degrees of mobility impairment, visual impairment, and one student with a learning disability. Of the students interviewed, three were male and six were female. Three were approximately 40 years of age and the rest were in their 20s. Only two of the students were non-white and they all came from lower-middle and middle class backgrounds. With the exception of sex, these differences are probably reflective of the university population in general. No attempt was made to stratify the sample by sex, age, class or race as my intent was not to compare the experiences of different categories of students with disabilities, rather it was to explore the experience of students with disabilities in general. Also included in the sample were interviews with two members of McMaster's staff who serve students with disabilities and have disabilities themselves. While this sample cannot be considered exhaustive it shows the range of students with disabilities attending McMaster University and ensured that enough interviews were completed to show a repetition of many themes and patterns in the data (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). Small sample size is not ultimately problematic as this research is exploratory and my intentions are to build theory not generalize at the level of populations (Yin, 1989).

The interviews took place over a 3-month period from October through December of 1992. When most of the interviews had been completed a focus group was conducted organized around a selection of major themes which had emerged throughout the interviews (Morgan, 1988).

The data analysis followed a grounded theory approach and incorporated the assumptions of the interpretist perspective which sees 'reality ... [as] ... created and social' (Ferguson *et al.*, 1992, p. 4). Contrary to the goals of description, prediction and control of the objectivist or positivist schools, the goal of this type of research is interpretive understanding of social situations (Ferguson *et al.*, 1992).

Some words about the nature of ethnographic research are in order at this point. I do not have a disability, hence my role in this study was restricted to that of the observer. While it is possible to seek empathetic understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities, it is not possible (except by extension) to participate in their world. Nevertheless, I have tried as much as possible to see the campus through the eyes of students with disabilities. On several occasions I travelled throughout the university with students and thereby had an opportunity to observe some of the environmental hazards they must negotiate in their day-to-day activities at McMaster. In addition, I have a certain amount of insider awareness (Douglas, 1976) into the world of physical disabilities as my mother has severe visual and mobility impairment. However, as interesting and informing as this kind of data can be (Becker, 1968), it is not to be confused with a perfect representation of the informants point of view. Ethnographies are something different from merely an account from the informants perspective, becoming something new in and of themselves. As Clifford & Marcus (1986) point out, 'the historical predicament of

ethnography ... [is] ... the fact that it is caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures' (p. 2).

The Setting

McMaster University currently has a student body of over 22,000 full-time, part-time, continuing education, graduate and undergraduate students (McMaster University, Office of Public Relations, 1992). Of this total, approximately 150 are students with disabilities. The number of students with disabilities at McMaster University can only be approximated as not all students with disabilities make themselves known to the Ability and Access Office. It is likely that this figure under-represents students with concealable disabilities.

The campus is very large, covering 296 acres of land. There are 44 separate buildings totalling 362,322 square meters of floor space (McMaster University, Office of Public Relations, 1992/93). While some of these buildings are equipped with ramps and elevators, there are several older buildings equipped only with freight elevators and some which have no elevators at all. Several of the buildings are accessible solely through a basement passageway which restricts students with disabilities to underground travel (McMaster University, Equity and Access Center, 1991, pp. 30–33). Clearly, issues of accessibility and non-accessibility are more complex than merely the difference between using a ramp or climbing stairs.

They slap a disabled sticker on a freight elevator and call the building accessible.... A building is only accessible if you can get in and use all the areas in it ... like the bathrooms ... like in Mills ... [library] ... it's accessible but I can't use the bathrooms ... you feel trapped once you're inside the building.

Through the Ability and Access Office McMaster University offers a variety of services to students with disabilities ranging from advance access to course materials and use of audio-visual aids to deadline extensions and extra time in which to write exams (McMaster University, Equity and Access Center, 1991, pp. 7–15). Again, practice is rarely as straightforward as policy. Several students told me of instances where they had problems making use of the services offered.

Books are a problem ... most of the text books are available on tape but it's not always the right edition and so many people use them ... they're not always in the best condition ... all the workers in Mills are really accommodating ... it's not their fault.... Volunteers tape the books ... they're usually available in September but this year it was November.

In this particular study 'the setting' is more than simply a place where interaction occurs. For students with disabilities, negotiation of the campus environment is a process inextricably linked to the processes involved in negotiating disabled and nondisabled identities.

Negotiating Environments

All students at McMaster must negotiate the physical environment of the university campus in their day-to-day activities, but students with disabilities face qualitatively different problems of mobility in their life on campus. Mobility is not only an issue of whether a student is physically able to climb stairs or walk across campus, it is also an issue of the amount of time and energy climbing and walking requires. Time is a resource that must be carefully managed if a student is to be successful at university, but students who rely on braces and crutches cannot run to make their next class.

I get tired ... it takes me longer ... but I drive across campus ... I drive everywhere ... I'm lucky ... I guess for people who don't drive it's harder ... it must be really tough.

Students with visual impairments must at the very least slow down when they approach staircases. Those who use wheelchairs cannot take shortcuts and are restricted to the number of accessible entrances. Moreover, for students with visual or mobility impairments, the number of environmental hazards on the university campus multiplies.

When asked about mobility problems on campus one student with visual impairment quipped: 'Well ... the construction ... I'm just waiting for that manhole with my name on it'. Objects left obstructing corridors become barriers to movement or outright traps for students who can't see them or step over them. People can also serve as effective barriers for students with visual and mobility impairment.

One of my pet peeves is bikes against the stair rails ... one time I bumped into a bike and it fell on me ... or when people sit under their lockers with their legs stuck out ... you'd think they'd say I'm here but they don't.

Ironically, structural additions to the campus and access to areas not open to other students (meant to increase accessibility) can be hazardous. For example, buildings considered accessible because they are equipped with a freight elevator are potentially dangerous.

Most ... [students with disabilities] ... don't have the upper body strength I do ... or the balance and I can't lift the doors ... you know freight elevators have a door like a garage ... you pull it up ... if you let go it comes crashing down ... if you're in a ... [wheel] ... chair ... it could slice you in half ... it's just not safe ... I don't know anyone who uses them ... and this chair is so light that if I try to pull ... [the door up] ... I can flip backwards ... it's happened before ... I won't use them.

The caf[eteria] isn't bad ... we can go there if you're willing to act as a break for me on that ramp ... [leading from the parking lot to the cafeteria] ... it's treacherous ... it's too steep and there's a curve halfway down and you're going so fast ... it's not safe.

That the campus is a particularly dangerous place for students with disabilities can generate fear.

I got caught once ... only once in five years ... I was in the hall and a class was letting out ... I was facing the other way and I got caught in this sea of people ... I didn't want to speak out ... I couldn't say get out of the way ... I was scared.

Following landmarks is one of the strategies students with visual disabilities use in negotiating the campus environment.

You count doors and then you know to turn ... you figure out the underground by sound ... the sound of the elevators ... the click of doors ... you know when it doesn't feel right ... you know it's the cafeteria because you smell the food ... You walk down a hall and you feel enclosed ... when you get to where the halls meet you feel open.

Despite their proficiency in using landmarks, location changes (a frequent occurrence on university campuses) prove to be another hazard for students with visual impairment.

Things move ... nothing's stable ... [classroom and office locations] ... it's disconcerting ... my husband does all the orientation for me ... he finds my classes.... Desks move ... I wish someone would tell me when they move the furniture.... You learn to be on your guard ... beware this setting changes.

While students with disabilities are by no means 'helpless' (Thomas, 1982), given the hazards and location changes ever present in the campus environment, they do at times need help. Asking for and receiving help is more problematic than it might appear. Some students with disabilities can be reluctant to ask for help and people without disabilities sometimes may not offer to help.

Independence ... [for people with disabilities] ... is pushed too far ... people end up floundering rather than asking for help ... I remember one episode when I was in an elevator with a professor and he said 'I never know if I'm supposed to help or not' ... it's unusual that he asked ... most people don't ask ... they don't want to feel uncomfortable.

Just as the road to hell is paved with good intentions, help from others may bring students with disabilities into jeopardy.

I get into more trouble from people trying to help me than from people not helping ... they think they're helping by grabbing your arm and instead they push you down the stairs ... you have to be careful who you ask for help and you have to tell them how to help you.

Another problem faced by students with visual and mobility impairments as they negotiate the campus environment is isolation. This isolation occurs on two levels; one subjective and one objective. On one level isolation is individually and subjectively perceived by students with disabilities.

I'm dependant on rides ... [special transportation for people with disabilities] ... I'm afraid of being isolated ... out there at night out by the disabled door... That's the door to Burke Science ... the designated area for Darts to come and pick us up.

On another level, students with disabilities are isolated in an objective sense when they are seen by others going in special doors, and in situations where they feel disorientated, unsafe and afraid. They are seen as moving slower and in situations where they have to ask for help. Areas on campus are acknowledged by others to be inaccessible to students with disabilities and they are seen as restricted to subterranean travel in the underground corridors. In their totality these things stigmatize students with disabilities, setting them apart from the general student population. For these students, the process of negotiation of the physical environment of the university campus is part and parcel of the process of negotiation of a disabled identity.

Negotiating Identities

It became clear early in the interviews that students with disabilities are engaged in two interconnected processes of identity negotiation in their lives on campus. Uppermost in their minds is negotiating a non-disabled identity. Their greatest desire is to be seen and treated as just another 'normal' student. At odds with this process is that, at times, it becomes necessary for them to negotiate a disabled identity.

Disabled Identities

Over-emphasizing independence for students with disabilities can be counter-productive and can lead to situations where the expectations placed on them are inappropriate (Goffman, 1963).

My very best friend has said that she doesn't see me as disabled ... but it can go too far ... people forget and they say things like let's go for a jog ... it doesn't work like that.

Likewise, in the classroom setting it may become necessary for a student to draw attention to his or her disability in order to have the same access to course material a 'normal student' would have. One student told me: 'Some profs don't understand ... they write things on the board and then point to them ... [but] ... I can't see'. Furthermore, disabilities can sometimes prove instrumental in facilitating interaction with others.

I don't like ... [guide] ... dogs ... they distance you from people ... people tend to pay attention to the dog and not to you ... you also miss the opportunity to make the friends you would by having to ask for directions.

These are examples of occasions where students with disabilities label themselves disabled. Far more common are situations where labels are placed on students by

others. During each interview I asked students how they choose to be referred to (disabled student, student with a disability, etc.). Some responses referred to the pejorative nature of most labels placed on people with disabilities.

I'll take blind over stupid ... people assume stupid ... disability is an umbrella label ... I don't find it offensive but it's negative ... I can't do this ... I can't do that.

A second type of response concerned the tendency of labels to change so rapidly that they become meaningless categories.

I don't consider myself disabled ... things change ... it used to be disabled then person with a disability ... then mobility impaired ... mobility challenged.... The latest is differently abled but what does that mean?... I mean we're all differently abled ... we all have different abilities it doesn't mean anything.

The indeterminate meaning of labels can have an homogenizing effect. According to one student: 'Some professors think that all blind people are the same ... we're not'. A further consequence is that these labels can result in the double stigmatization of students with disabilities: 'If people know you're disabled ... even if there's nothing wrong with your hearing ... they speak louder'. Finally, the meaninglessness of labels confuse others.

It's confusing for people when you're not totally blind ... they don't understand.... Like ... [one] ... professor ... he would always ask ... why can she do this and not that.

Among the issues addressed in the focus group were the types of labels placed on people with disabilities. Aside from talking about the meaningless and misleading nature of labels, the members of the focus group discussed the socio-cultural meaning of recent changes in labels. In general the members were cynical about linking changes in labels to changes in the attitudes others have towards people with disabilities. Only one member felt that new labels represented positive change.

Member 1: A professor called me differently abled ... What is that?... The labels are changing.

Member 4: [Laughing] ... I haven't changed ... I'm still blind ... they think they've done something for us.

Member 2: I disagree ... people have changed the terms they use because they're becoming aware.

Member 1: : [Nodding in agreement] ... You have a point there.

Member 3: Labels are changing their meaning.

Member 4: [Interrupts and says sarcastically] ... Right ... dumb used to mean mute ... now it means stupid.

Whether a student is labelled disabled has much to do with the nature of their disability. It is not surprising that students with visible disabilities are more vulner-

able to the labelling process than those with concealable disabilities. In Goffman's (1963) words, 'visibility is crucial' (p. 48).

The visible nature of student's disabilities often constrains the way in which others interact with them. One student put it this way: 'If you're in a wheelchair people have to look down at you ... they physically condescend to you'.

The students I spoke with were also concerned that the visible nature of their disabilities restricts their sexual identities and limits their opportunities for developing romantic relationships.

One of the biggest problems is how people view the disabled and their sexuality ... because I'm disabled I'm supposed to be asexual ... I was sitting in the cafeteria and at the table next to me was a girl and a couple of guys ... the girl was saying 'I have this friend with spina bifida and she just had a baby isn't that great' ... and the guys ... one of the guys said 'I could never have sex with someone like that' ... That's the biggest problem ... boyfriends.... I worry about it ... is a guy ever going to be interested in me for me or is it just that they feel sorry for me?

In social interaction, students with visible disabilities must maintain a delicate balance between how they would like to behave and how others expect them to behave (Goffman, 1963). For example, a student who wears braces on her legs described how she was brought to task for what she felt was 'normal' behaviour.

I wear shorts a lot ... I don't even think about it and this girl said 'I don't know how you can wear shorts' ... I said what do you mean and she said ... 'I don't have too unattractive legs and I would never wear shorts ... how can you wear them with your legs?'

Students with visible disabilities also manage another sort of tension in their interactions with others which arises out of situations where others misread the visual clues presented by the person with a disability.

I have cerebral palsy ... so my balance isn't very good ... sometimes you'll see me and I'll lurch ... people often think I'm drunk ... you know staggering around.

Understandably, students with visible disabilities frequently make efforts to conceal them and those with concealable disabilities work to keep them hidden.

According to Goffman (1963), the difference between discredited and discreditable identities is that the latter depends on the degree to which the individual can reduce stigma by controlling disclosure of their deviant identity. For instance, some students make efforts to appear 'normal' by not displaying the props associated with students with disabilities.

I try to appear as normal as possible ... I try not to be too conspicuous ... I don't carry all my tools around all the time ... I carry a small tape recorder ... a normal binder ... a normal watch ... I don't bring all my tools to class they take up two seats ... the technology's bulky.... My braille writer ... my braille books.

Another student who had a concealable learning disability had more control than other students over disclosure of his disability.

If people want to think I'm a keener that's their problem ... I don't tell them any different.... If they approach me directly and ask about the computer I'd explain it to them ... I don't want to stand out.

One student said that she felt discrimination towards people with disabilities in the work force obliged her to conceal the severity of her disability.

When I first started looking for jobs I was upfront about how visually impaired I am ... I didn't get many interviews ... I became less up front and I got more interviews ... I wrote slight visual impairment on one application ... I got the interview ... when I went in I had the white cane.... He said 'You never said you were blind....' I knew if I had told him he would have never given me a chance.

As Davis (1961) notes, having been labelled as potentially threatening 'to the framework of rules and assumptions that guide sociability' (p. 125), students with disabilities set about 'breaking-through' this identity by actively negotiating a non-disabled identity.

Non-disabled Identities

If they weren't fully aware of it before, students with disabilities come face to face with their disabled identities when they arrive on a university campus amidst thousands of strangers. As Goffman (1963) points out, 'normals really mean no harm; when they do, it is because they don't know any better. They should therefore be tactfully helped to act nicely' (p. 116). It is up to the student with a disability to help 'normals' see them as 'just ... any other student'.

Davis (1961) argues that negotiating a non-disabled identity is a three stage process of fictional acceptance, 'breaking through' to normalized interaction, and institutionalization of the normalized relationship (pp. 125–131). The hallmark of the fictionalized acceptance stage is that 'the interaction is kept starved at the bare subsistence level of sociability' (Davis, 1961, p. 127).

They've been accepting for the most part ... they help me ... they treat me just like any other student ... they let me copy their notes if I ask them.

I came here straight out of high school ... it was small and everybody knew me... everybody accepted me ... for who I am ... the way I am and when I came here ... it's been rough.... I have acquaintances I can say hi to ... people I write essays with but as for seeing people off campus ... (she shook her head to indicate no).

Institutionalized acceptance of the normalized relationship centres around the difficulty of managing a non-disabled identity 'in the face of the many small ... qualifications that must ... be made to it' (Davis, 1961, p. 130).

Some profs use a lot of overheads ... one Prof gave me large photocopies of all the over heads ... that was great ... he treated me like I was an individual who coincidentally couldn't see ... it was no big deal.... Helps to make it more normal ... that's real important for me ... to follow the learning process like everyone else ... with slight modifications.

However, as Davis (1961) cautions, 'such amendments ... are ... underplayed in the early stages' (p. 130) as asking for concessions can interfere with the student's negotiation of a non-disabled identity.

I try to be as normal as possible ... my rights shouldn't displace anyone else's ... I don't demand that the professors read the notes after they write them on the board ... I wait and ask someone to read them to me after class.

Tactics of Negotiation

Negotiating a non-disabled identity involves employing countless tactics of 'breaking through' to normalized relationships (Davis, 1961; Goffman, 1963). Among the tactics of negotiation mentioned by students were: speaking out and increasing visibility, reasoning with others, using humour, adopting aggressive or assertive attitudes, avoiding confrontations with others and distancing themselves from other students with disabilities.

In general, students saw speaking out as a method of negotiating a non-disabled identity. They also linked the concept of speaking out with the belief that increased visibility of students with disabilities would promote the integration of students with disabilities who would succeed them.

It's the attitude I find hardest ... I find a lot of people are ignorant ... maybe it's because there aren't many of us ... [disabled students] ... here maybe if there were more of us here it would be different ... they wouldn't be so ignorant ... they would know better.

Although one student felt the issue of integration of students with disabilities into the general university population was not so easily resolved. She argued that: 'even though there's more of us the stereotype still exists that the disabled belong at home'.

Another strategy many students said they used in negotiating a non-disabled identity was the tactic of reasoning with others. As one student put it: 'I tell them my point of view and I try to change their point of view.' Although about half of the students said that it wasn't their role to change everyone's attitudes.

I don't blame them for making assumptions ... I am different ... provided they're not written in stone ... if I have to work closely with someone ... I try and talk to them ... I'd tell them ... it seems that you think this and this and this ... this is the way I see it ... if the persons not important to me I just let it be ... I'm not out to save the world ... people learn more through one-to-one interaction ... not in a selfish politically correct way.

People with disabilities often use humour as a means of negotiating a non-disabled identity (Davis, 1961; Goffman, 1963).

You have to make jokes to get along.... Most people respond to humour ... as long as it's self-depreciating humour ... if I turn the joke on them they don't think that's funny ... humour breaks the ice ... it tells them it doesn't bother me why should it bother you.

However, humour doesn't always succeed. When reasoning and joking fail most of the students I spoke with said they adopt assertive or aggressive behaviours in negotiating their non-disabled identities. The students who mentioned this tactic always qualified their statements by saying they considered these sorts of attitudes to be inappropriate and ones which they reluctantly resort to.

They say sorry ... I didn't see you ... I say ... [sarcastically] ... I didn't see you either ... one time I got really mad and I swore ... the words just came out ... it's not in my nature to talk like that but they just came out.

A few of the students who participated in the interviews adopted a fatalistic approach, believing the best tactic is avoiding confrontations with others. These students felt that confronting others about negative attitudes would further stigmatize them, interfering with their negotiation of a non-disabled identity.

I'm not bitter ... if people have a problem with the disabled I'm not going to tell people they have a problem ... if someone was making fun of someone in a wheelchair I wouldn't say anything ... maybe if they were really being cruel I would but it's not my job to educate people ... if people notice I have a disability I say nothing.

Related to avoiding confrontation was an active disavowal of identification with other students with disabilities. For these students an important tactic in the negotiation of a non-disabled identity was distancing themselves from other students with disabilities. Students distance themselves from their disabled identities by expressing dislike for, attributing negative attributes to, and/or keeping physical distance between themselves and other students with disabilities (Goffman, 1963). The students who spoke with me were always careful to preface distancing remarks with the qualifier that they are not like other students with disabilities. They told me that other students with disabilities are too dependent, too self-centred, use their disability as a crutch or an excuse and/or cheat.

I'm different from most other handicapped ... I want to blend in ... my rights should never be more important than anyone else's ... I never want to earn a handicapped A ... I'd rather have a B on my own steam.

Further evidence of this desire for distance was the lack of interest if not distaste students expressed towards the idea of a support group for students with disabilities. The reason they gave for their lack of interest can be divided into two general categories: (1) that they had better things to do and (2) they felt that it would be an

unpleasant experience. One student: told me: 'I don't know ... to tell you the truth I really wouldn't want that ... I think it would be just a lot of complaining'. What is also plausible is that they felt membership in a group for students with disabilities would further constrain negotiation of non-disabled identities (Goffman, 1963).

Discussion

An irony of university life for students with disabilities is that many of their concerns: achieving academic success, making friends, expressing their sexuality, developing romantic relationships, etc., are the same concerns which occupy students without disabilities (Davis, 1961). Although given 'the repressive nature of the relationship between the disabled and the rest of society' (Thomas, 1982, p. 20), the negative baggage visible disabilities can confer should not be underestimated.

Where identity formation is concerned, students with disabilities experience three negotiatory processes in their careers at university. They negotiate disabled and non-disabled identities while negotiating the physical environment of the university campus. These processes are interrelated and inherently contradictory. In order to achieve a non-disabled identity, students with disabilities must successfully negotiate a physical environment which in its inaccessibility isolates them from interaction with others, emphasizing their disabled identities. While Thomas (1982) convincingly argues that people with disabilities are no longer to be seen as passive and helpless, the students who spoke to me maintain that they sometimes do need assistance. Asking for help in negotiating the university environment is only one of the instances where students with disabilities must negotiate a disabled identity. The price they pay is that requests for help draw attention to their disabilities and consequently their deviant identities.

Also paradoxical is that in order to be seen as 'normal', students with visible disabilities strive for independence and make efforts to reduce stigma by concealing their disabilities. Yet, in order to have access to the course materials and other rights of a 'normal' student they must ask for concessions, thereby disclosing their disabled identities to their professors and/or classmates.

Furthermore, many of the tactics employed by students in negotiating non-disabled identities prove inconsistent. Tactics like speaking out on behalf of and increasing the visibility of students with disabilities on campus, conflict with student's efforts to distance themselves from other students with disabilities. The popularity of the distancing strategy among these students indicates the degree to which they have identified with the 'normal' population (Goffman, 1963). They have become the ultimate 'other' to themselves. Yet all the students who spoke with me believe, at least on some level, they are objectively different from students without disabilities. According to one student: 'I'd like to wake up one morning and be normal ... but that's not in the cards'. Identification with the 'other' interferes with development of the in-group solidarity Thomas (1982) maintains is essential to the social integration of people with disabilities.

Equally problematic is that many of the tactics students with disabilities employ in negotiating non-disabled identities: concealing disabilities, reasoning with others,

avoiding confrontations with others, expressing aggressive and/or assertive attitudes or using humour, are strategies which operate on the individual level. It is questionable whether individual strategies alone can effectively challenge the deviant status of people with disabilities and promote social change.

The two tactics which can be considered as acting on the sociocultural level, increased visibility of students with disabilities and speaking out as a group, in this case, are also relatively ineffectual. First, it doesn't necessarily follow that increasing the visibility of a repressed group fosters integration of that group into the larger population; as continuing manifestations of racism and ethnic tension would indicate. Secondly, most of the students who participated in the interviews were loath to identify themselves with a group where membership is based on the presence of a disability. They expressed cynicism about employment equity programmes and were suspicious of the consequences of being characterized as a special interest group; believing this would have the effect of isolating them in a disabled sub-culture. However, it is possible that increased efforts on the part of university administrators to make universities fully accessible might alleviate those concerns and in the process enhance the undergraduate environment for all students.

Finally, the co-ordinator for students with disabilities at McMaster described how these students face a subtle form of social control which discourages them from organizing for change.

The students often comment that there is no ... [lobby] ... group for them ... it really intrigues me ... they want one but no one wants to start it ... maybe it's because there hasn't been a central issue ... like access to galvanize them.... Maybe if we had an issue ... we're kind of in the middle here ... McMaster has done just enough so students don't organize.

Integration of students with disabilities into the general student population is not unlike the social integration of any group seen as deviant. Likewise, solutions to the problem of integration must necessarily be the same. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest concrete strategies for change, I propose that future efforts must be aimed at the sociocultural as well as individual levels of society.

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