The emergence of an us and them discourse in disability theory

Per Solvang

To cite this article: Per Solvang (2000) The emergence of an us and them discourse in disability theory, Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 2:1, 3-20

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15017410009510749

Published online: 08 Jul 2009.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 674

View related articles

Citing articles: 10 View citing articles
THE EMERGENCE OF AN US AND THEM DISCOURSE IN DISABILITY THEORY

By Per Solvang

Abstract: The changing social position of people with disabilities can be studied through the changing importance of three discourses: (1) normality/deviance, (2) equality/inequality, and (3) us/them. The normality/deviance discourse represents questions about rehabilitation and integration. The equality/inequality discourse represents the struggle for economic welfare and equal rights. Finally, the us/them discourse represents a valuing of disability as a basis for identity formation and as a question of ethnicity. The situation for deaf people will serve as an empirical case for outlining the theory of the three discourses. The discussion points out that the us/the outsiders discourse is underdeveloped in disability theory, and possible strategies for development are outlined.

The Emergence of an Us and Them Discourse in Disability Theory

The emerging field of disability studies is contesting the underlying assumption that disability is a condition to be defined through medical concepts. This de-medicalizing strategy is taken in two ways. Firstly, disability studies tries to re-interpret disability as a political category. Disabled people are not defined mainly as a client category in the welfare state, but as a suppressed group alongside black people and women. Secondly, the field of disability studies points at the power of identification with the otherness of being disabled. Being different is preferred to integration (Oliver 1990, Davis 1995, 1997, Mitchell and Snyder 1997, Linton 1998, Shakespeare 1998, Abberley 1999). This article suggests a further conceptualization of these two main trends in disability studies.

Reviewing several disability studies texts, Tøssebro (1997: 412) concludes: 'The claim that deafness is not a disability but a problem of minority language suggests that disability may be regarded as a mixture of very different things'. From other scholars, a discourse perspective has been suggested as a main theme for the development of disability theory (Whyte 1995, Corker 1999). As an answer to these challenges, a model of three interrelated discourses will be introduced: normality/deviance, equality/inequality, and us/them. This model is a contribution to the ongoing
work, among both academic scholars and disability activists, which aims to capture what disability is about. The deaf people’s movement will be used as a case for showing some of the potential of the discourse model. However, recent trends among gay people and psychiatric patients are also considered to illustrate the potential of the model both to disability studies and to the understanding of the social construction of difference and marginalization in general. The concluding part of the paper identifies the us/them discourse as poorly developed in disability theory. Ethnicity, subculture theory and queer theory are discussed as of possible importance for further development of the us/them aspect to disability theory. However, the main conclusion is that all the discourses in the introduced model are important for the understanding of what disability is about.

Three discourses

The discourse perspective enables us to point out structures of power and knowledge. These structures characterize how a phenomenon such as disability is constructed. Discourses define what is recognized as meaningful in thinking about a phenomenon. A discourse is not based upon the existence of a certain object, such as disability. The discourse represents rules for ways of thinking that make possible the appearance of an object at a certain time and place. It does not point out deterministic relations between the powerful and the not so powerful. A discourse perspective points out powers of definition that are possible to bring out in social relations (Foucault 1972, Sirnes 1999).

The use of binary oppositions in the model takes its inspiration from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In his philosophy, the identity of a concept is given through the conceptual relations to its opposite. Every concept has to be studied in relation to its textual context. Concepts such as disability and deviance are not to be studied primarily as representations of given phenomena in the physical and social world. Disability must be understood through the relation to ability, deviance through the relation to normality, etc. (Derrida 1976, Corker 1999).
Constructions of disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Important examples</th>
<th>Core concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normality/deviance</td>
<td>Rehabilitation</td>
<td>Human sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prevention of disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Normalization policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality/inequality</td>
<td>Client role in the welfare state</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Redistribution for democratic participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political suppression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Us/them</td>
<td>Celebration of difference</td>
<td>Identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embracing stigma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The normality/deviance discourse represents questions about normalization and integration. It is grounded in a medical way of thinking. The disabled person is not primarily ill, but inevitably defective (Sirnes 1999). You have to be normal to be ill. Of course, a disabled person can have an illness, but the illness will be related to a characteristic of the body that is defined to be of a normal constitution.

Three important disability issues are strongly related to the normality/deviance discourse. Firstly, there is the rehabilitation side of medicine, which tries to adjust the disabling defect, for example, through surgery, orthopaedics or hearing aids. The second main example comes from the strategies for eliminating disability by ensuring that disabled people are prevented from being born. In the 1930s, the eugenics movement pointed out the risks to parents, using sterilization as the main tool for prevention. Today, pre-natal diagnostics gives information on potential disability, and abortion is the technology for elimination.

Thirdly, normality/deviance structures the practices of caring and special education. Normalization has come to be a core policy in the caring and educational institutions of the welfare state. This policy has replaced the former demand for segregation practices towards the disabled. It originated from two ideological standpoints founded in debates on mental retardation (Williams and Nind 1999). One Scandinavian model has pointed out that patterns of everyday living for disabled people should be as close as possible to the ordinary standards in society (Nirje 1980), and one American model has highlighted the importance of establishing and maintaining valued social roles for everyone (Wolfensberger 1989). Common to these two ways of thinking is the interest in the normal. They define the present social understanding of normality as the main issue when developing a policy for the disabled. Hence,
normalization and integration policies take place in the middle of the normality/deviance discourse, and the discussions about normalization and integration are closely related to a group of people defined by categorizations of medical, psychological and social scientific origin. This is the main reason why the normalization reforms are related to the normality/deviance discourse together with deviance-focused medical perspectives. However, this categorization is not unproblematic.

The normalization and integration reforms are often looked upon as an opposition and reaction to the medical ways of thinking about difference. In this respect, normalization also bears a strong resemblance to the us/them discourse. One example is the reforms in caring for intellectually disabled people. The normalization perspective here abolishes the medical way of thinking about intellectually disabled people as patients and reduced humans who do not have access to a sex life and experience other restrictions on how they can live their lives. This has a close resemblance to the deaf people's protest against being perceived as defective by medical regimes, and is used as an illustration of the us/them discourse. To a certain extent, normalization ideology, it can be argued, is related to the us/them discourse. However, there is an important difference between normalization policies and the identity politics of the deaf: the celebration of difference. Deaf people give positive value to people of their own kind forming collectives. The deaf community is to a certain extent a nation-like formation. This is different from normalization policies. In the Scandinavian version of normalization, communities of retarded people or other disability groups are viewed as ghetto formations, as something to be avoided. In these normalization policies, the disabled are given little space to develop a culture of their own. The main goal is to give the access to normal standards of life, as defined by non-disabled people (Nirje 1980, Tøssebro 1996). In the American version of normalization policy, the main goal is to construct social roles valuable to disabled and non-disabled citizens. Here, it is difficult to see how the disabled can develop an oppositional and provoking subculture as their own way of life. Therefore, in the discourse model, normalization is separated from the us/them discourse. Before introducing this discourse more fully, the economic side of disability will be introduced.

Equality/inequality is a materialistic and economic discourse. On a general level, the difference plays two roles. In left wing politics, difference is unwanted, but in right wing politics, difference is important for economic growth (Sirnes, 1999). In the field of disability, the materialistic discourse found in the discourse model can be found in the three versions. The first one is centred on the client role in the welfare state. To be disabled causes
problems in several areas of life, and the welfare state is expected to compensate for this. This takes place both through general changes, such as legislation on accessibility to office buildings, and through individual support, such as technical aids and pensions. This part of the materialistic discourse has been extremely important in giving the concept of disability its present meaning. Rights in the welfare state have been a main goal for the disabled persons’ organizations in most of the post-war period. Political scientist Deborah Stone (1984) has even suggested that disability is a category that has been constructed by the welfare state. When we look at the historical definition of the disability concept, we can identify a close relationship between the medical part of the normality/deviance discourse and the client aspect of the equality/difference discourse. The medical measurement of ability that lies behind the concept of disability is argued to be highly suitable for cost control in the welfare state. In a discussion of studies of disability in different cultures, Ingstad and Whyte (1995) support the importance of the welfare state in the construction of disability. Here, a main conclusion is that the umbrella concept of disability or handicap is not found in third world countries that lack a developed welfare state.

In addition, the recent interest in the welfare state among political scientists inspired by philosophical theories of justice is a part of the equality/inequality discourse. A main question among these is how it is possible to argue that the welfare state contributes to the freedom of the individual (Goodin 1988, Plant 1988). Why is it reasonable that those with lesser abilities get more resources in elementary school through programmes for special education than do ordinary pupils (Gutmann 1987)? This kind of question goes straight to the core of the materialistic re-distribution aspect of disability. The answer the moral philosophers give is a democratic interpretation of equal educational opportunity. This implies that the community must equip schools to enable all pupils capable of participating in the democratic process. Such participation is defined as a basic pre-requisite for equality. Among other things, this requires allocating more money to pupils with disabilities than to other groups of pupils (op. cit.).

The last aspect of the equality/inequality discourse to be discussed here is the issue of political suppression. A main writer representing this perspective is Mike Oliver (1990), who argues a Marxist materialist theory of disability. The development of capitalism and its mode of production are heavily suppressing disabled people and confining them to a disadvantaged position, including economic disadvantage. Productivity in work life is the main sign of human value (Sierck 1992). In the political suppression perspective,
disabled people are compared to other groups disadvantaged by modern capitalist society, such as black people and women. To improve their situation, radical changes in the social structure are needed, both economically and culturally (Oliver 1990).

The equality/inequality discourse is closely related to the two other discourses. The relationship is so strong that one can ask if it should be regarded as a discourse in its own right in this model. I do so here because the materialistic aspect is the underlying main theme in many discussions on disability. The basic idea about the welfare state is the transfer of money and material goods and services to those in need of support. As pointed out, the concept of disability is a construction of the welfare state to serve its need to distinguish who is qualified for support and who is not.

Disability studies writers point in the direction of the third discourse, us/them. This trend is most clearly visible among the American writers (i.e., Davies 1995, 1997; Linton 1998), but the direction is also suggested by British scholars when presenting a critical perspective on policy reforms defined mainly inside normality/deviance:

Integration is not a celebration of difference, but assimilationism, an anthropophagic form of social control, a form of cleansing in which the impaired other is expected to re-cast his/her identity in the image of the oppressor. The price of integration is ‘normalisation’. Disabled people are expected to reject their own bodies, adjust to carnal norms of disabled people (Paterson and Hughes 1999: 608).

Out of this criticism, we can see the contours of new ways of thinking about disability. The whole concept of disability is contested, and we get a glimpse of possible neo-tribes of dwarfs, mongols and deaf people. At least, such tribal configurations can play a part in the identity construction of disabled people.

Us/them is a discourse of identity closely related to cultural standardization; a process related to language, religion and education. Identifying, respectively, human sciences and money as main concepts crystallizing the first two discourses, we can point at identification as a main concept for the us/them discourse. In this discourse, the others are strangers in a stronger sense than deviants. Deviance is there for everybody, but the other represents a difference of a more fundamental kind (Sirnes 1999). This nationhood-inspired identity discourse is not new to the theory of deviance. In Stigma, Goffman (1968) points out that some groups do not strive for normality, but embrace the stigma, such as Gypsies and orthodox Jews. They have not internalized their position as subordinate deviants. The processes taking place
inside such groups are ones of creating cultural meaning for the position of the group and its members. Among the disabled, the deaf have been in the forefront of developing a cultural identity related to their physical characteristic, and have been challenged to communicate in soundless ways. Especially important in this process of identity construction is sign language, the way of communicating manually and visually.

It is a challenge to see how people with problems in giving voice to their own ideas could define their identity in the cultural model. One answer to this could be that the definition in the us/them discourse is not only restricted to the definitions given by the disabled themselves. It is possible that the significant surroundings of people in a very dependent situation would start defining them as part of a certain group with their own culture, rather than as people with medically-diagnosed defects in verbal and physical skills.

The Deaf²

Deaf people are an interesting case for illustrating the relevance of the discourse model. The deaf are one of the classic disability groups, and are subject to the earliest forms of special arrangements for the disabled. They were educated in special schools, according to their rights as clients in the emerging welfare state. This client status must be seen in relation to the need of the public schools, well documented in Norway, to get rid of problematic pupils. In this way, public schools wanted to make themselves attractive to the middle class. In the special schools for the deaf, pupils were educated in both theoretical subjects and practical skills. They were to become individuals able to accomplish confirmation and become Christians, to find work and not be a burden on society (Froestad 1995, Froestad og Ravneberg 2000).

The deaf have a long tradition of fighting for the recognition of their sign language in competition with the normalizing lip reading and sound-oriented oral/aural training. Typically, professionals have wanted to integrate the deaf into mainstream society by educating lip readers and verbal sound producers. The deaf themselves have interpreted this in different ways. In some periods, it has been looked upon as a re-humanization of the deaf, with their being able to use their voice and not be looked upon as mute 'idiots'. However, the strongest tendency has been for deaf people to see oral/aural training as a tool for making them second class citizens in society. They prefer sign language because it is best suited to their physical abilities and contains possibilities for communication with hearing people on terms that are more equal. The conflict about oral/aural training and visual sign language is an international phenomenon, but the
strength between the positions has historically developed very differently in different nations (Winefield 1987, Lane et al. 1996).

Internationally, there is an emerging trend of identity politics among the deaf. They protest against the role of medically-defined deviants, arguing that they are primarily a linguistic minority. Accordingly, they capitalize themselves as Deaf (Padden and Humphrey 1988, Davis 1995). We can also see the emergence of concepts such as Deaf Power, Deaf Awareness, Deaf Consciousness and culturally Deaf (i.e., a hearing person raised in a Deaf family, although this is a contested aspect in the field). There are also protests against medical treatment, especially the CI-technology. Among some deaf activists, this is looked upon as a kind of ethnic cleansing. It is seen as problematic that medicine defines deafness as something that should be eradicated. The quality of the technology is also contested. Medical doctors talk about making children hear, but deaf activists argue that the CI-technology constructs only rudimentary sound impulses of poor quality (Lane et al. 1996, Gregory and Hartley 2000). Deaf couples are also eager to have deaf children, in some cases preferring adoption to achieve this goal (Grønlie 1995, Peckford 1995).

This short outline of the deaf people’s movement stresses minor trends. That is, most deaf people have hearing children, and the reasons for adoption are varied. Biographies of deaf people present very varied relations to deaf identity politics. Some are highly supportive and contribute actively, while others are highly critical, using many oral/aural communication forms and finding deaf identity politics fundamentalist. Most deaf people have to find an identity balance between the orientation towards users sign language and to other groups of people, including non-deaf persons (Breivik 2000).

The reason for stressing the extreme cases is to point out some interesting trends, both to sociology and to disability politics. The trend of moving from deviance to culture among the deaf has shown the possibility of transferring a disability group from the normality/deviance discourse into the us/them discourse. Deaf people have shown that there is a possibility of abolishing their status as disabled in the traditional meaning of the concept and entering a status more as an ethnic group.

Normalization and integration policy reforms have been emerging from the 1970s. Discussing these, I will move from the global level and focus exclusively on the Norwegian case. While this case is, of course, heavily influenced by international trends, the policy developments are nation-specific.
In the early 1990s, all special schools in Norway were to be closed, but the deaf started to protest heavily. In their struggle to keep their special educational facilities and cultural identity, the Deaf in Norway have compared themselves to the Sami people and their rights to be educated in their own language and to have access to government support to develop their culture. In Norway, the deaf have also had some government acknowledgement for this comparison. This is clearly stated in a document to the Norwegian parliament concerning a new law on education (Odelstingsproposisjon 36 1996-97) in which the rights of the deaf are not grouped with the rights for pupils with special needs, but are placed in a section relating to the rights of pupils belonging to linguistic minorities. In matters related to school law, the deaf are not a case for special education. This does not imply that they are placed on the same footing as the Sami people, who are treated separately, but it is the next best thing. The deaf are grouped together with other ethnic groups in Norwegian society claiming special rights as linguistic minorities.

Firstly, this is an acknowledgement of the deaf entering the us/them discourse. Secondly, it shows the importance of the materialistic equality/inequality discourse. In some way, the Deaf nation must be funded, but the client role in the welfare state is no longer relevant. Here, the Sami people are a perfect match for the struggle of the deaf. They are a minority group with a growing recognition of their entitlement to generous treatment by the Norwegian authorities. Because at times they have been heavily suppressed, especially their religion and language, Norwegian people now feel remorse and consider it politically correct to give the Sami people relatively easy access to governmental funding. Regarding the question of funding, this seems to be a smart track to follow for the deaf. They will have access to government support, but not be reliant upon the client role and its inherent definition of the disabled body as being a defective body.

The case of the deaf also illustrates the contemporaneous status of the three discourses in the model, which do not necessarily follow each other in any chronological order. Their importance will differ in different historical periods, and the model illustrates that the three discourses exist side by side in the present society, as they have done in earlier periods. In this paper, the model is introduced and its potential illustrated through a discussion of the growing importance of the us/them discourse. At the same time, it is important to remember the continuing importance of the equality/difference and the normality/deviance discourses.
Freaks

The further potential for the us/them discourse is a challenging question to studies of disability. The deaf are a special case, with a separate language being extremely important in all processes of ethnic identity building. However, these tendencies are present in other groups. Davies (1995) refers to dwarf couples wanting to have dwarf children. In addition, Breivik (2000) refers to the Mad Nation group of insane people who compare themselves to the Native Americans and claim to be heavily suppressed by psychiatry.

Identity politics are emerging as a hot issue within Norwegian disability organizations. As an example, in January 1998 the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum exhibited his painting *Pissing Woman* in an uptown gallery. The painting shows a limbless woman lying naked in a deserted landscape and peeing on the ground. It immediately set off a debate. The special organization for the physically disabled (NHK) protested heavily and demanded the picture be removed. NHK and its supporters argued that the picture underlined prejudices of disabled people as being helpless. However, the umbrella organisation for the disabled (FFO) held a quite different view, stating that it would have liked to have the picture at its main offices. FFO and its supporters in the debate looked upon the picture as a celebration of the female body in all its forms, including the amputated body (*Dagbladet*, January 1998). I believe that the supporters of the NHK interpreted the picture in a classic normality/deviance discourse, viewing the portrait by Nerdrum as humiliating because they were represented as freaks with a hint of sexual perversion. They insist on being presented as normal, not special, people. The FFO perceived the picture more in an us/them discourse, looking upon it as a celebration of difference, and thus referring to the issue of identity politics.

In the film *The Elephant Man*[^5], the freak show manager is concerned about John Merrick's potential to earn an income when he is taken into the world of medicine and caring, pointing out to the physician who is 'saving' him, that 'he is a freak, you know'. In the film, the institutions of the medical normality/deviance discourse are portrayed as Merrick's great rescuers, delivering him from his dreadful life. Robert Bogdan's (1988) study of the freak show business at the turn of the century presents a different story. The freaks were artists making a living out of their physical oddities, and they developed a kind of show business subculture as part of the travelling fun fair culture. In this period, Bogdan shows that the freaks defined themselves in an us/them discourse. However, the emerging welfare state and the medical profession looked upon freak shows as humiliating. They redefined them according to the deviance/normality discourse, and

[^5]: Permission to reprint this text is granted by Dagbladet, 1998.
offered technical aids and vocational training to the participants.

In fiction, the novel *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn (1990) takes the us/them discourse to its extreme. A freak show family puts a great deal of effort into creating children different from the norm, including using radiation during pregnancy. These freaks are slightly hostile to others, 'the norms', believing them to live a poor life. The story culminates with one of the most successful of the family's children, the limbless Arthur–the Aqua boy–generating a cult following of people having their limbs removed by surgery. Several authors of disability studies texts in the North American identity-focused tradition have analyzed Dunn's novel (Adams 1996, Mitchell 1997).

Gay people

The gay movement makes an interesting comparison for the new identity politics of the disabled. Firstly, they have been fighting for de-medicalization, so that homosexuality should not be defined in medical terms as a psychiatric condition. The American Psychiatric Association took a vote on the question in 1974, concluding homosexuality not to be a sickness (Conrad and Schneider 1992). In addition, homosexuality has been removed from the WHO classification of diseases. This correlates with protests of the deaf against medicalization. It also pairs with reforms in the care of mentally retarded people. It abolishes the medical way of thinking about mentally retarded people as patients and reduced humans who do not have access to sex life, and which places other restrictions on how they live. Secondly, gays and lesbians face a dilemma between normalization and a celebration of difference. The gay movement contains two groups. The first group, the normalization-oriented straights or gays, wants a kind of assimilation when claiming rights to marriage and adopting children. The second, contrasting, group signifies their difference by using the label *queer*, and celebrate homosexuality as something different, a culture of its own. They see themselves as people predetermined to live a different life outside the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family. This situation of two opposing groups is also visible among deaf people. One group aspires to be part of ordinary society by practising lip reading and the national language based on oral communication and marrying hearing spouses. The other group is more fundamentalist Deaf, and celebrates Deafness as something special to be developed outside mainstream society. This either/or description does, of course, do violence to a heavy proportion of both gays and people in the deaf community, but the point is to identify a pattern of conflict that is of great interest for theoretical purposes. This same pattern of conflict between normality and difference was
also visible in the debate on the Nerdrum painting mentioned above.

This dilemma between identification with one’s subordinate group or with mainstream normal society is well known to the studies of disability (Goffman 1963, Yoshida 1993). However, there is a difference. In the traditional version, there is a movement between normality and deviance that is closely related to the client role. What is new is an ambivalent relationship between the traditional charity model of the normality/deviance discourse and a new celebration of disability inside the us/them discourse. To some extent, this means ambivalence between the client role and the claiming of rights as a minority group. In the case of the deaf, we can also find ambivalence purely inside the us/them discourse. Many deaf people relate to the deaf community both nationally and globally and play down their national identities. Others try to manage the identities simultaneously.

Gay people face discrimination in their work and other social arenas, and therefore regard themselves as a suppressed group. The same point is made by the British disability studies writers. Discrimination in the work life of disabled people is not only a question of a better client status in the welfare system, as this to a large degree implies medicalization. Disabled people have to be recognized as a group that society should take into consideration in all relevant decisions in architecture, planning, etc. In this way, the disability writers are defining the equality/inequality discourse along the same lines as are gay people; not primarily relating to the welfare state, but stressing the point of anti-discrimination. This also includes claims for state legislation. However, it takes place in a different manner than in the traditional way of improving client rights in a welfare system.

Further theorising

The emerging importance of the us/them discourse in the field of disability studies challenges disability theory and calls for further development of theoretical concepts. The concept of ethnicity provides an apposite paradigm. This is because, firstly, the deaf define themselves as a linguistic minority, and in Norway try to be classified with the Sami in administrative terms; secondly, the category of ethnicity is defined by the us/them relationship; and thirdly, the ethnicity concept offers alternative relations to the state. However, ethnic minorities do have different relations to the state. For the disabled, there is no question of territory, but there is a question of being acknowledged as having a distinct identity and culture not related to medically-defined pathologies. Deaf people in Norway are trying to move from being seen as defective Norwegians to being a linguistic minority among others in the
country. It will be of great interest to relate this process to classical ethnic developments such as, for example, the Ainu in Japan, who have moved from being seen as 'imperfect Japanese' to being regarded as an ethnic minority with their own distinctive culture (Eriksen 1993:125).

In addition to the concept of ethnicity, the theories of subculture developed by the Birmingham school of cultural studies are an interesting contribution. Dick Hebdige, one of the main theorists in the field, points to Sartre when defining subculture. He demands the study of subculture to 'acknowledge the right of the subordinate class to "make something of what is made of them" (Sartre) – to embellish, decorate, parody and whenever possible to recognize and rise above a subordinate position which was never of their choosing.' This pattern can be used to discuss the tendency to use stigmatized labels in identity politics. Disabled people are again calling themselves 'crips' and 'spastics', and parents of disabled children name their interest group Ups and Downs. This is just what Hebdige has suggested is the use of parody by disabled people to raise themselves up from the subordinate position given to them in the normality/deviance discourse. In this way, the theory of subculture conceptualizes the parts of the process that take place when the move into the us/them discourse is made.

Hebdige takes Althusser's idea of the suppressed as being in a 'teeth gritting harmony' with the ruling ideology, and defines subculture as '... a form of resistance in which experienced contradictions to this ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style. Specifically I have used the term "noise" to describe the challenge to symbolic order that such styles are seen to constitute' (Hebdige 1979:133). What is going on among Deaf people is a resistance to a dominating ideology representing the idea that the ability to hear is an absolute goal to which everybody is expected to strive. In this resistance movement, the rhetorical constructions of medical technology as ethnic cleansing can be said to play the same role as the damaged clothes, deliberate ugliness and swastikas of the punk movement in the late 1970s.

Gay people have been introduced as a group of interest for disabled people to be compared with. Disability studies are related both to the disabled people's movement and to academic studies of disability. We find the same pattern in queer theory, where homosexuality is related both to a social movement and to academic scholarship. One important aspect of queer theory is to re-read both works of art and literature and social life, highlighting the importance of same sex sexuality. This means a conceptualization of sexuality that sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, experienced discursively and enforced through
boundaries and binary divides (Kulick 1996, Stein and Plummer 1998).

Disability can also be studied in the queer theory type of non-individual perspective. We can see disability as an integrated part of bigger issues such as marginalization, the deserving poor and social policy, but at the same time as an umbrella term for fundamentally different processes and life problems, as Tøssebro (1997) suggests. In this perspective, the theme for research is not the disabled individuals and their social surroundings. Disability has to be studied as a social phenomenon produced in social interaction and affecting many people, not only those we usually think of as disabled. Both children and very old people have physical and mental capacities that make them in need of caring, and they become dependent on their family and the welfare state in the same way as disabled people do.

The emerging importance of the us/hem discourse must be understood in light of the present transition to modernity. In Zygmunt Bauman's version, modernity represents the support to the one and only best solution. Normality is the key word for modernity. The postmodern, then, represents a new acceptance and celebration of difference. There are different standards for what is the best and most right, 'the postmodern eye (i.e., the modern eye liberated from modern fears and inhibitions) views difference with zest and glee: difference is beautiful and no less good for that' (Bauman 1991: 255). This indicates a central theme in the debate on modernity. Do we have a greater request for standardization, or is it an emerging situation with bigger possibilities for difference and variations? This latter position points out that the individual has now become a planning office for his or her own biography and given a responsibility to choose from a range of life arenas (Beck 1986). The core of postmodern life strategy is not to have a stable identity, but to reject a fixation of identity and to be in flux and transition; it is to be a tourist in life.

Conclusion

Developing the theoretical directions outlined above, I argue that the discourse model is of great relevance. The potential of the model is most fully utilized by considering all three discourses when trying to understand disability as a social category. Disabled people will then understand themselves and fight for better living conditions in different ways. Some will place a heavy weight upon the client role and demand more medical resources and a stronger patient status to improve their situation; others will argue that the disabled are a politically-suppressed group; and some people will work with strategies of celebrating their difference and claiming minority rights. However, no groups of disabled people are able to operate in relation to only one of the discourses.
I believe that the outlined strategies and relations of power in the field of disability can be discussed more precisely using the discourse model, both among disabled people and among social scientists. However, further theoretical development and empirical studies are needed. Especially important are studies of what is taking place when disabled people and other groups labelled different try to redefine themselves inside the us/them discourse. Power will be a key concept in such an analysis. What will happen to the concept of disability will be a key question. Disability is heavily rooted in the normality/deviance and equality/inequality discourses. If the us/them discourse increases in importance, a possible result will be the fading away of the concept of disability as we know it today. At some time in the future, this journal may have to change its name.

Notes:
1 The basic idea of the three discourses has been developed by the author in collaboration with Jan Froestad and Thorvald Sirnes. The starting point was a position paper (Froestad and Solvang 1997), and the three discourses were introduced in a later article (Sirnes 1999).
2 I am heavily in debt to Jan-Kåre Breivik for information on the situation of Deaf people.
3 CI is an abbreviation for Cochlear Implant, a device implanted into the ears of deaf and hard of hearing children allowing them to hear sounds.
4 To my knowledge, there is no survey research evidence for this statement, but it is a fact widely agreed upon in Norway.
5 The picture can be viewed at www.nerdrum.com in the section on paintings from 1997.
6 The film, made in 1980, was directed by David Lynch. It tells the story of John Merrick, who lived from c1860 to 1890. He had an extremely deformed body and head, giving him a very unusual and frightening appearance. Merrick, a freak show artist, was badly treated by his manager. A physician took an interest in him, had him medically examined and arranged for him to live in a caring institution (Howell and Ford 1980).

References


Froestad, Jan and Bodil Ravneberg (2000). Educational policy, the unitary school and the construction of deviance, in Froestad, Jan, Thorvald Gran, Thor Øyvind Jensen and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (eds.): Modern Norway: State, experts and society. In press.


Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder (1997). Introduction: Disability studies and the
double bind of representation, in Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder (eds.) The body and physical difference. Discourses on disability. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan University Press.


The Author:
Per Solvang is associate professor at Department of Sociology, University of Bergen. He has published from studies on disabled peoples life histories, the social construction of dyslexia and research methodology.