Conditions of Reciprocity: The Possibilities and Potentialities of a Feminist Perspective on Theorising Dis/ability.

The project of ableism, as I see it, is to mark the unmarked categories of 'man', 'white' and 'able-bodied', thus lessening their ability to contain us and push us aside by marking us out as 'other'. By naming the mythical 'norm' that we are traditionally evaluated against, we can see the ideologies of individualism and humanism bound up in its creation, exposing the ugliness of capitalism at its core. We will reclaim the power to critique that which we are meant to aspire to by dismantling, de-mystifying and explicating the practices and procedures of ableist normativity. Join me, if you will, on this brief journey through a *feminist* perspective on theorising disability.

> Feminism loves another science: the sciences and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partially understood. Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision. Feminism is about a critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in unhomogneous gendered social space.
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> (Haraway, 2003:35).

What I understand of Donna Haraway here and her playful use of the term 'science' is that feminism cannot, and indeed refuses to be given any single definition. Instead, what feminism(s) do is to try to give voice to the slightly enigmatic, as-yet-unfinished concepts, embracing the 'becoming-ness' of theories and knowledge positions with a view to providing a more inclusive, complex and multifarious account of the world. The inherent valuing of subjective experience, acknowledging rather than minimising or denying pain and suffering, allowing admissions of the limitations caused by impairment grants us the opportunity to say that the personal, and private, is *indeed* political. By questioning the (malestream) premise that subjectivity and personal experience have no place in the supposedly rational, 'objective' political arena, feminist perspectives on disability challenge and agitate this conservative notion.

The Social Model of disability, which was influenced largely from a radical structuralist/Marxist perspective, "has established itself as mainstream ideological underpinning, providing the framework within which the experience of disability may be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon" (Lloyd, 2001:715). However, this has been criticised for generally expressing the needs of disabled men, rather than being inclusive. The integration of personal experience would, as many feminists have argued, create a more rounded, holistic theory which would be more accessible to all. The beauty of feminist writing, in my opinion, is that it comes from the soul. Engaging with writers such as Wendell (1989;1996;2001), Thomas (1999), Reeve (2004;2006;2006), Samuels (2003), Triano (2004), Titchkosky (2001), Valeras (2010), Morris (1991;1992;1996) Montgomery (2001;2002), Thompson (2002;2005), Clapton &Fitzgerald (1990), and Crow (1992;1996) has provided me with the impetus and the confidence to explore my own, intensely personal feelings towards an acceptance of my disability and affinity with other disabled people. It has allowed me to accept parts of myself that I had previously disavowed, held out from myself as if they were not an intrinsic part of who I am. It allowed me to speak candidly about my impairments, without having to choose a side (pride *or* shame) but being open to the possibility that both can exist at the same time. Don't get me wrong – I continue to struggle with *identifying* as a disabled person and the potentially derogatory connotations that this invokes. The concept of 'coming out' as a disabled person, for me, is not a straight forward path from A-B; it is wrought with tentative false starts and haltering indecisions. However, in the main I am truly grateful to these aforementioned writers as they have shown that it is possible to have personal experience verified and valued. To invoke the rallying cry of feminists, the personal *is* political.

Feminist research is described by Dorothy Smith (1988:107; cited in Morris, 1992:159) as being a mode of research that "at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience, that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds". This, if applied justly and authentically to disabled people's experience, particularly disabled women's experience, may provide fertile grounds for interpretive styles to be used within research. Feminism, in this sense, is not just about healing the oppression of women, or to be solely concerned with tackling 'women's issues', but instead represents an alternative, revolutionary way of looking at the world (Morris, 1992). In this vein, Jenny Morris goes on to quote Liz Stanley and Sue Wise in talking about what this new affectation of research would look like:

> It occurs as and when women, individually and together, hesitantly and rampantly, joyously and with deep sorrow, come to see our lives differently and to reject externally imposed frames of reference for understanding these lives, instead beginning the slow process of constructing our own ways of seeing them, understanding them, and living them. For us, the insistence on the deeply political nature of everyday life and on seeing political change as personal change is, quite simply, 'feminism'.
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> (Stanley& Wise, 1983:192, cited in Morris, 1992:163)

This view of research as emancipatory excites and uplifts me, engendering as it does a myriad of possibilities and potentialities, particularly if it is coupled with the deconstructionist notion of maintaining a certain ethereal quality; of keeping the ball in play, never letting it settle and produce yet another 'grand narrative' collecting dust. This relates well to C.Wright Mills' work on making personal troubles public issues. By not only recounting narratives of disabled people's lives, but focusing on scrutinising the genealogies of knowledge that feed in to the production of disability, we can hope to conduct real, life-changing research. Feminist frameworks (or what I perceive to be feminist frameworks) encourage fractures, variance and a certain amount of discord. I feel that this is a way of celebrating difference instead of denying it (and, at the same time celebrating sameness as well), allowing us to embrace all the fractured and split parts of ourselves. Sheldon (1999) feels this fragmentation to be an inherently negative thing, but I don't see it in that way. She quotes Shakespeare (1996a) who identifies the issues in this debate;

> …within feminist work it is clear that a variety of positions coexist and that numerous debates and disagreements have taken place: this is the mark of a mature and sophisticated discipline, and shows that it is unnecessary (and dangerous) for there to be only one voice.
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> (Shakespeare, 1996a:115, cited in Sheldon, 1999:645).

I would tend to agree with Shakespeare; having only one recognised, authoritative voice will inevitably lead to some voices being marginalised and silenced, particularly in the case of disability where some of those voices are already struggling to be heard. I concur with Thompson's articulation of feminisms as a "vibrant, complex conversation" (Thompson, 2002:4), seeing the two theoretical fields of study not in a hierarchical position (one learning from the more powerful other), but in a side-by-side relationship, both enriching and enhancing and *discovering* from the other. The integration of disability into feminist theory can, Thompson argues, bring both knowledge positions further forward, each drawing from the other's strengths and being mindful of the potential weaknesses. By transforming (Thompson, 2002) feminist theory with the integration of disability studies, we can "deepen, expand and challenge feminist theory" (Thompson, 2002:2).

The implication here is that feminist theory has traditionally failed to engage with disability, and thus failed to respectfully tap into the reservoir of knowledge that disabled women have particularly. This may be due in part to traditional feminist insistence on control of bodies – wrestling the control of female bodies away from the oppressive forces of patriarchy. Disabled women may feel comparatively powerless in being able to perform these so called 'essential' attributes. These normative assumptions of what constitutes being a 'full' human being need reassessing, as well as what is heralded as competent, powerful and worthy of respect. Bonnie Klein (1992) perceptively states,

> I feel as if my colleagues are ashamed of me because I am no longer the image of strength, competence and independence that feminists, including myself, are so eager to project. There is clearly a conflict between feminism's rhetoric of inclusion and failure to include disability.
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> (Klein, 1992:72, cited in Wendell, 1996:93)

As Wendell (1996) notes, it is this very valuing, to the exclusion of other positive attributes, of autonomy and independence that present a challenge to disabled women's experiences feeling included into mainstream feminism. However, if feminism is combined with other forces such as poststructuralism and postconventialism, then it can be enabled to conceive of its own prejudices and begin the journey to inclusivity.

I feel that a conjunction of the forces of feminism and the forces of critical disability studies can be combined to produce a powerful censure on the structures of neoliberal society, unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions, forcing us to look again at the values undergirding *actual* citizenship. Feminism(s) has traditionally sought to question (and in some cases subvert) the order that humanism has been so successful in naturalising; my reading of critical disability studies is it seeks to do that too.

Reading authors writing about disability from a feminist perspective (such as Rosemarie Garland Thompson, Donna Reeve, Jenny Morris, Carol Thomas, Susan Wendell, Liz Crow…the list goes on) thrills and excites me. Thompson (2002) proposes that the authentic merging of both schools of thought will engender a transformation in the way we conceive the structure of society; to think critically about how we value autonomy and what that means for our relationships with each other; think about what a change, however slight, in the valuing of autonomy and independence might mean; and to think more deeply about if, how and why we perceive others hierarchically. By dredging the values of individualism/humanism to the fore to be inspected, what will be revealed? Will we want to hold on to these ways of being, or will this inspire new world orders? Framed in this way, critical disability studies when combined with a feminist outlook, brings exciting new possibilities.

Any questions?