

The social and the subjective: defining disablement at the birth of the Disabled People’s Movement in Britain

Luke Beesley

Abstract

Recent activist memoirs and archival work has begun to challenge our understanding of the historical Disabled People’s Movement in Britain; recentring the voices of self organised groups of activists in its strategic and analytic development. This article takes advantage of the results of this work to explore the emergence of a social definition of disability during the formation of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS); the first national organisation of disabled people to form in post-war Britain.

Utilising a previously private, internal UPIAS communique from before its first conference, I show that the adoption of the social definition followed a period of extensive debate amongst activists on the nature of subjective responses to disablement and the social position of disabled people. I situate this debate in the history of UPIAS’ emergence from a critique of the existing Disability Movement, and outline both the objections raised to the social analysis of disability, alongside the counter-arguments deployed to defend it. I conclude by evaluating the success of this defence against UPIAS’ final agreed policy document.

Key words: Disability Politics, UPIAS, Disabled People’s Movement, Disability History, Finkelstein, Radical Theory.

Introduction: between the theory of the movement and the movement of theory

The last eighteen months have seen a significant upsurge in resources on the history of the Disabled People’s Movement (DPM) in Britain, albeit with little indication that Disability or Social Movement scholars have recognised the significance of newly available accounts. The summer of 2019 alone included the publication of Judy Hunt’s *No Limits* - a comprehensive history of the DPM by one of its most longstanding activists - alongside the public opening of the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People’s archives - a vast collection of papers related to Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) held at Manchester Central Library. Alongside these developments, Tony Baldwinson’s *Radical Community Archives*¹ has continued to publish internal documents from

¹ <https://tonybaldwinson.com/archives/>

historic DPOs online, allowing us a fascinating insight into the development of policies, strategy, and political theory within the early period of the DPM.

This article seeks to complement these developments with a study of how political theory was collectively contested and formulated in the earliest days of the DPM. Using Vic Finkelstein's *Are We Oppressed?* (2018) [1974], a document which collects and responds to objections to the social understanding (or 'model') of disability during the movement's formation, I seek to show that the most emblematic and controversial tenet of theory generated by the movement has a more complicated democratic history than is often imagined; one which has direct implications for evaluating its rejection in later academic accounts of disability.

The DPM in Britain exhibits a peculiar, deep seated, and extensive split on questions of theory. This division, which carries almost universally between the organisations of the movement and its academic wing in Disability Studies, is all the more stark in that it does not concern the interpretation or implications of certain pre-agreed theoretical premises or questions, but the foundational concepts and definitions used to explain the existence of disability and the position of disabled people in society. Consequent on these fundamental disagreements over the nature of disablement, there exists no vision of disability liberation, or emancipatory strategy, that is shared between the academy and activist community.

DPOs, from the most politically militant (such as Disabled People Against Cuts) to government funded service providers (such as the Kent Centre for Independent Living), hold a structuralist and materialist account of disability which emerged with the formation of the DPM in the mid 1970s. This account, somewhat misleadingly labelled as the Social "Model" of Disability, was first formulated by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS):

'(I)t is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. It follows from this analysis that having low incomes, for example, is only one aspect of our oppression. It is a consequence of our isolation and segregation, in every area of life, such as education, work, mobility, housing, etc.' (1976: 3-4)

By this definition, disability is the result of a social formation that separates impaired people from the core activities of modern civic life and the social leverage which comes with participation. While impairments - conditions of the

body or mind which can be identified by medical science - hold a material existence, their social implications rest entirely on how governments, employers, civil society, and civic institutions structure the rules of social participation. The strategy of DPOs has, therefore, been externally focussed: with the aim of identifying barriers to full integration and dismantling them through a mixture of direct action, lobbying, and the promotion of alternative forms of access to public life.

Much of contemporary Disability Studies, on the contrary, begins from the indissoluble link between impairment, disabling barriers, and prevailing attitudes in the experience of individual disabled people: a nexus within which the qualitative aspects of a physical or mental condition interact directly with the discursive practices of institutional and non-institutional sub groups (medical regimes, the family, ethnic or religious communities, the media) active in disabled people's lives. (Thomas: 1999; Shakespeare and Watson: 2002). This focus has generated a significant critique of the activist view which, at its mildest, seeks to radically revise the social definition to include explicit reference to the experience of impairment types (Levitt: 2017) or the emotional impact of disablist social practices on identity formation (Reeve: 2012). At its most stringent, it rejects the activist framework entirely, and seeks to build analytic models which collapse the categorical distinction between the body and the social through Critical Realist (cf, Shakespeare: 2006a) or Poststructuralist (cf. Tremain: 2006) methodologies.

The purpose of this piece is not to arbitrate these debates, but to explore one of their ironies. If we grant the claim that impairment and social phenomena are experienced simultaneously, then how do we explain the adherence of a democratic mass movement - numbering tens of thousands of activists at its height - to a theory that runs so contrary to their immediate lived experience? What arguments were successful in convincing people that their situation was the result of macrological social organisation and not, more obviously, a mixture of their own bodily limitations and the attitudes and intentions of those they came into contact with? Furthermore, how do we make such an explanation without diminishing the agency of lay activists by focussing exclusively on organisations' leadership or movement theoreticians?

Thanks to archival work undertaken by the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, and its subsequent digitisation by Tony Baldwinson, we are beginning to get a picture of the internal life and debates of the DPM from which to launch such an enquiry. *Are We Oppressed?* is a key resource; collecting the earliest responses and critiques of disabled activists to the social definition of disability alongside a defence, from Finkelstein, of its validity and its uses for social and political action.

The objections in this document concern the role of subjective views and experience in identifying the social position of disabled people; and in particular how much primacy should be given to the feelings, attitudes, and self-conceptions of disabled and able-bodied people in an analysis of disability. Compiled with commentary on the eve of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation's (UPIAS) first conference in the winter of 1974 - at which this definition of disability was adopted by its membership - it stands as a rare insight into exactly what activists conceived as the role of their own experience within their project, and how wavering activists were convinced of the viability of the social approach².

This article argues for two distinct but interrelated claims. Firstly, through an historical account of the formation of UPIAS in response to the professionally dominated 'Disability Movement', I argue that rigorous internal debate was integral to the UPIAS project and that, as such, any discussion of its collective policies or positions cannot be separated from their formation in internal discussion and the active assent of its membership. Secondly, I show through an exegesis of the arguments in *Are We Oppressed?* that the role accorded subjectivity within UPIAS's analysis was a matter of significant debate within its early cadre; which only subsided after both a counter-critique of proposed alternatives to the social definition, and the development of an account of subjective responses to disability that is distinct from (although compatible with) later attempts to explain divergent experiences of disablement in terms of racial and gendered oppression (Oliver: 1990 pp.73-7; Barnes & Mercer: 2003 pp.60-1).

I begin by outlining the critique of the democratic deficit in the Disability Movement developed by Finkelstein and Paul Hunt alongside their earliest theorisations of the nature of disability, and their attempt to counter such a tendency by creating channels for internal debate in the fledgling UPIAS. I subsequently outline three strains of counter-argument to the social interpretation found within internal literature and Finkelstein's responses to them. Finally, I discuss Finkelstein's own alternative account of the generation of subjective attitudinal response to disablement, before concluding with an indication of how successful these counter-arguments were by comparing the propositions raised in the internal literature with the final policy statement of UPIAS's first conference, and the proceedings of the conference itself.

² Social understanding/definition/interpretation/approach' will be used instead of 'social model' to refer to the thesis that disability is imposed on the impaired person due to the rules of social organisation. This is to avoid anachronism (as no attempt was made to model this thesis until several years after the debates that I recount), and to avoid confusions that arise from blurring distinctions between a set of definitions and their operationalisation within specific contexts in the form of a model or models (Finkelstein 2007).

Finkelstein, the social understanding of disability, and the birth of UPIAS

The impetus for the creation of UPIAS arose from a dual critique of the Disability Movement in Britain, and in particular its strategy of prioritising welfare issues over broader strategies of social integration, developed privately by Vic Finkelstein and Paul Hunt in the early 1970s. Finkelstein, a refugee and former political prisoner from Apartheid South Africa, and Hunt, a campaigner within residential homes in Britain, came to the conclusion that only a new organisation with a radically different mission to those already in existence could solve the problems they identified, and began to seek the support of other disabled people nationally for its creation.

Their first critique concerned the subject matter of disability itself, and stemmed initially from Finkelstein's period of imprisonment. Paradoxically, Finkelstein had found that South African prisons were much more accommodating to his access needs than wider South African society. In prison, he later revealed, he found the first bed he could comfortably get into (a mattress on the floor, as provided to all political prisoners) and that even the hard labour ordered on him by the court was facilitated through the assignment of 'helpers'. Conversely, the long list of prohibited activities contained in his banning order after his release 'didn't make much difference to (his) life', as the premises he was banned from (educational institutions, premises of publications, courts, etc) were places wholly in-accessible to him as a wheelchair user (2005a 1-2). From this perverse situation, and a re-engagement with Nelson Mandela's trial speech on the 'disabilities' imposed on black South Africans under Apartheid, Finkelstein began to conceive of the social exclusion of Disabled People as something rooted in the structures of the society they live in, rather than as caused by the fact of them having an impairment of the body or mind. By early 1972, Finkelstein had begun to say, in private, that disability was best understood as "a social relationship between a person with an impairment and the social environment in which they live, rather than just being a personal (medical) possession, condition, or attribute' (ibid: 2); a position bolstered by the support of Hunt.

The consequences of such a view were that the social relationships that created disability could be changed in order to eliminate the social exclusion of people with impairments; and that the contemporary focus on welfare benefits within the Disability Movement was far too limited to meet that aim. Finkelstein and Hunt attempted to convince professionals working with, and organisations for, disabled people of their position, and to alter their own practice accordingly. As Finkelstein later recalled, the results of these meetings were non-existent (2001: 5; 2005a: 2).

Secondly, Hunt and Finkelstein identified a failure of representation within the British Disability Movement. At the time of Finkelstein's emigration, the Disability Incomes Group (DIG) was the most influential Disability organisation in Britain, with significant support amongst disabled people (J.Hunt 2019: 69). As Finkelstein recounts, however:

‘Although it was started by two women, Megan Duboisson and Berit Moore (Thornberry / Stueland), who were concerned about broad social rights of disabled people and the way disabled ‘housewives’ were ineligible for any of the current disability benefits, policy became dominated by men, including some influential male academics, and they transformed the organisation into a rather narrow parliamentary lobbying group wholly focused on ‘benefits’. (...) Having started as a mass organisation, concentration on parliamentary lobbying meant that the grassroots membership soon had no clear role within the organisation and membership began to decline. In order to lobby parliament only a few experts are needed who know the issues and who can present and argue them effectively.’ (2001: 3)

To prevent the domination of the Disability Movement by a professional element, the pair decided to solicit support for building a group whose policy would be determined solely and democratically by disabled people. To this end, Paul Hunt wrote a letter to the national and disability presses in 1972 asking disabled people who shared their concerns to respond and indicate their willingness to create such an organisation (P.Hunt: 1972).

The critique of the democratic deficit within the Disability Movement had direct implications for the establishment of the social understanding as the guiding principle for an organisation. If the new organisation was not to repeat the mistakes of the DIG, it would be necessary for lay members to have real control over the organisation’s activities and strategy - including the political theory under which it laboured. It would not, then, be sufficient for Hunt and Finkelstein to attempt to get into positions of organisational leadership and then simply impose the social understanding by dictat; to be a dominant theoretical force, it would have to be accepted by the majority of the organisation’s members and be upheld by them in their campaigns. The attempts to convince prospective members began shortly after Hunt’s letter was published, and only concluded in the first conference of the organisation some two years later. As we shall see, the debate around this was rich and wide-ranging; provoking both clarifications and defenses of the initial argument from Finkelstein which are relevant to any ongoing debates of the validity of the social interpretation.

The internal circulars and the early membership: UPIAS before its first conference

That Finkelstein and Hunt held the position that disability is a product of social relations (rather than the fact of having an impairment) before UPIAS was formed is a matter of historical record; it was not, however, the starting position for those who responded to Hunt’s appeal. In order to gain organisational consensus on what the policies, aims, and analysis of the new group should be, two years’ worth of private debate were conducted by way of confidential

circulars in which those who wished to join the fledgling UPIAS were free to express their views, share news from campaigns they were involved in, and propose or criticise any prospective policy. This process culminated in the first congress of UPIAS in Winter 1973⁴, in which the Union's *Aims and Policies* document (1975) was adopted by the membership.

Between the 1972 letter to the disability presses and the date of the first conference, eleven internal circulars were distributed amongst the UPIAS membership (Baldwinson 2019: 76). Paul Hunt composed the first circular as a questionnaire to find out what correspondents believed were the most pressing issues in their lives and how they'd like the new organisation to operate, and used the second circular to collate the initial thoughts of prospective members (ibid: 21-31). From the third circular onwards, independent pieces by activists and members began to be circulated to disabled people who had expressed an interest in the organisation (ibid. 8). Only the first two of these circulars, along with *Are We Oppressed?* are currently available in their entirety. The publication of the latter marks the first time where the content of these missing pre-conference circulars is quoted at length, and is thus a vital resource for understanding who the early cadre of UPIAS were, what they believed were the priorities for the Disabled People's Movement, and how these should be met.

The document also records an important turning point in Britain's Disabled People's Movement. The text was written during August of 1974, circulated to members shortly afterwards, and contains Finkelstein's responses to criticisms raised of his and Hunt's position in the period immediately before the first conference of UPIAS (where this position would either be approved by the membership or rejected in favour of a different formulation). It is one of the last opportunities that Finkelstein had to convince the membership of the desirability of his and Hunt's view as the guiding principle for their new organisation.

Later critiques of the social interpretation and models used to operationalise it imply that this membership was already predisposed to such a view in light of their racial and gender homogeneity, their shared spinal impairments, and the prevalent influence of Marxism on their worldview (cf, Shakespeare 2006: 197-8; Lloyd 1992: 209-12). While Finkelstein himself accepts that wheelchair users were over-represented in UPIAS for 'historical reasons' (2001: 4), the members quoted in *Are We Oppressed?* don't appear to fall neatly into any kind of demographic or ideological category. In the public edition, contributors are referred to anonymously, making it difficult to identify immediately the gender (or any other characteristic) of the writer. From some explicit statements within their contributions, however, it appears that there was a greater level of heterogeneity within the membership than is often imagined. For example, while most writers quoted do not explicitly state their impairment, one author mentions being blind (48), and it is clear that the level of institutionalisation

³ The conference was split into a physical session in October, followed by a period in which members not in attendance were able to vote on UPIAS' policy documents and committee positions by post. This process ended in December 1974 (Baldwinson 2019: 9)

which members experienced at the time or writing varied - with contributors writing to the circular from residential homes (16), community living arrangements (17), and in at least one case a university (41). Marxism is only positively appealed to once by any contributor quoted in *Are We Oppressed?*; interestingly, this writer also states their involvement with a local branch of Women's Liberation (47). Explicit rejections of antagonistic political projects (18, 40), and Marxism in particular (41), are more common.

Without the names of the contributors, the full set of circulars, or a list of members, we should be cautious about extrapolating from the information presented in *Are We Oppressed?* about the broader demographic makeup of UPIAS. As the lengthiest piece of public evidence of both the positions and concerns of the early membership⁴, however, it undermines the plausibility of attempts to explain the UPIAS analysis of disablement on the basis of shared impairments or political philosophy within the organisation at its inception. This insight, alongside the sharp political disagreements that are recorded in members' contributions, mean that the fact that the Union's analysis developed in the way that it did requires a more nuanced and less mechanical explanation than the one often offered.

Alternative positions

While the first two circulars do not touch explicitly on the nature of disability itself; an extract of Finkelstein's contribution to the third circular late in 1972⁵ (2005b) gives us an early statement of the position the organisation was to express in *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1976). This appears to be the first time that the content of Finkelstein and Hunt's theoretical position was put forward to the UPIAS membership.

In this early piece, Finkelstein differentiates between impairment, handicap, and disability as three distinct phenomena whose treatment by a social organisation require different forms of intervention. Impairment is defined as the physical state of having 'an abnormality (or damage) in an individual's body which is then described and treated by medical science. Handicap is considered to be a context dependent, functional limitation which 'accrues from an impairment'. As the same functional limitations may arise from a variety of distinct impairments, Finkelstein argues that their reduction falls properly into the realm of physio- and occupational therapy, rather than the direct treatment of a medical condition.

⁴ Circular 2, by contrast, is less than seven pages in length - including Paul Hunt's editorial commentary, a discussion of the logistics of meeting in London, and two responses from people unwilling to join. The majority of members' contributions to it are rarely longer than two or three sentences (Baldwinson 2019: 24-31)

⁵ I date the initial publication of this extract according to that placed on it by the archivists of the online Disability Archive (Finkelstein 2005b). Baldwinson, in his chronology of the UPIAS circulars, estimates the date of publication at 1973 (2019: 76). It is unclear why there is a discrepancy in dating.

Disability, by contrast:

‘results when an individual is unable to participate in social relations because these very social relations are organized in such a way that the physical handicap excludes its possessor.’

Regardless of the level of medical stabilisation of a given impairment, or the reduction of a functional limitation, available to a person at a given moment, Finkelstein argues, there remains a disjunct between the level of integration of people with impairments within that society, and the level of integration that would be technically possible if society were organised differently. This takes the form of exclusion - or segregation - of people with impairments within that social totality; with degrees of severity stretching from being unable to access certain environments, to exclusion from work and leisure activities, to its purest form in the completely segregated and dependent forms of life found in residential institutions. Finkelstein described this relationship of segregation as a variety of oppression and, unlike the medical and technical problems raised by impairment and handicap, sees it as purely as a socio-political imposition on impaired people to be resolved by collective struggle.

The critiques of this view collected in *Are We Oppressed?* fall into three categories: arguments prioritising the epistemological position of the disabled person⁶; arguments from the explicit intentions of those who produce exclusionary social relationships; and one alternative explanation for the social exclusion of disabled people which I will call the ‘Attitudinal Account’.

Epistemological priority

A number of members quoted by Finkelstein object to his conclusion that the exclusion of physically impaired people amounts to a social oppression on the basis that physically impaired people do not, or can be imagined not to, recognise oppression as part of their experience of disability. If this is the case, it follows that measures to end what Finkelstein identifies as oppression aren’t guaranteed to reflect the aspirations of disabled people themselves, and are likely to be based on a falsification of their actual experience.

Part of the justification for this argument is phenomenological⁷; with members indicating that they don’t feel that the subjective threshold for feeling oppressed in their case has been met (‘Oppressed never. When I feel weighed down with impossible burdens, tyrannically severed and harshly dominated then I may agree’ (49), ‘As for me, as someone physically impaired, I don’t feel particularly oppressed, so why bother?’ (40)), with some indicating that different words would better describe their subjective state when dealing with service providers

⁶ I.e., the role of their individual experience in explaining the phenomenon of disability.

⁷ i.e., relating to their subjective interpretation of the world.

and wider society ('dreadfully upset' (40), 'it's a nuisance' (49)). It is further speculated that this view is shared by a sizeable number, if not the majority, of physically impaired people in Britain: either through the psychological effects of institutionalisation (18), the relative benefits of institutional life (lack of housework, guaranteed company, etc) (41), or from analogy from the personal feelings of the writer (40). One member argues that, if the claim that physically impaired people are oppressed is to be considered valid, its proponents 'will require a large sample of the physically impaired population to provide those experiences' (49)

Arguments from intention

These counter-arguments criticise the use of the term 'oppression' on the basis that, in common language uses of the term, there is an implication that oppression results from the conscious action of an individual, or groups of individuals, which is designed to cause harm or restrict freedom. Such an intention is difficult to prove in light of other, more plausible, explanations. As one writer has it:

'Oppression to me is something akin to malice aforethought. Something premeditated. To prove oppression we would need to prove premeditation. Our problems stem from disunity and lack of coherent voice. Our need is to put across our feelings, opinions. We know, others assume' (43)

Another contribution indicates the difficulty of proving any intentional oppression in large institutional bodies that physically impaired people interact with:

'I honestly don't think that this is the intention of the NHS or other official bodies. I don't think they intend to oppress or set out to oppress us. I think we are neglected, forgotten, and wrongly treated often enough, but I don't think it is deliberate oppression (...) I've felt they've fallen sadly short in their duty very often, and also in their understanding and the choice of persons they employ to carry out the wishes of the State and various organisations can be very poor indeed. Yet again, I have still never felt that they have set out to oppress me. (40-1)

If this critique holds, it would mean that the social interpretation, as laid out by Finkelstein, leads to an untenable conclusion, and that strategic decisions resulting from the hypothesis that physically impaired people are oppressed are unlikely to reflect the real cause and nature of their social position.

The attitudinal account

Unlike the two counter-arguments above, this account provides an alternative description of the social position of disabled people and its cause within wider society. It was originally published in the third internal circular (the same issue in which Finkelstein expressed the position outlined above), and at over-six pages is the longest single contribution quoted in *Are We Oppressed?*

The account begins from the premise that, while an impairment does disqualify someone from taking part in certain exceptional activities (the example used is participating in an Everest expedition), there are many other spheres in which the physically impaired are excluded despite there being no causal basis for this in their impairment. The writer identifies education, housing, and employment as areas where physically impaired people experience ‘mistreatment (...) without their having done anything to merit it’ (9).

Such mistreatment is characterised as discrimination, and the author asserts that its existence is caused both by an existing prejudice within the minds of some members of society, and a ‘norm conforming’ set of behaviours in others caused by a lack of accurate information on what disability means or by the existence of stereotypes of the disabled (10). These active or passive beliefs about disabled people can be caused by a number of different factors, all of which imply varying scopes of influence: some applying only to one individual at a time (as the result of a personal bad experience (11)), while others may apply to large numbers of people (such as through scapegoating (12), or ignorance of the social cost of segregating disabled people (14)); some directly cause prejudice (such as taking the existing ‘equality gap’ between disabled and able bodied people as a permanent consequence of disability (12) and developing feelings of superiority on that basis (13)), while others merely imply a feeling of unease or confusion about disabled people (such as a general ‘dislike of difference (10)).

The author proposes that changing these attitudes should be the main focus of UPIAS policy, and that its strategy should reflect the three forms in which these attitudes can be expressed: as rational or rationalised beliefs, as affective or emotional responses to a situation, and as the activity of discriminating against a physically impaired people. The first two forms, the author argues, can be combated by ‘propagating accurate and relevant information about the situation of the physically impaired to as many people as possible’ (14), while in the case of discrimination UPIAS should

‘stand firmly behind all who are the victims of discriminatory practices. People so suffering should be encouraged to resist ... if penalisation occurs - this should be publicised’ (ibid).

Finkelstein’s response: structural and systemic exclusion and the problem of explanation.

Finkelstein begins by pointing out a methodological distinction between the three arguments that contradict his claim that physically impaired people are oppressed, and the premise he and others in UPIAS use to reach the oppression claim. The former, Finkelstein argues, are predicated upon the assumption that the social position of physically impaired people can be identified and described from the first person experience of their social relationships - whether through that of the impaired person, or that of the able-bodied member of society. The latter is extrapolated from macro-economic phenomena, measurable inequality, and systematic policies of segregation within firms and institutions (6). Citing examples used by other contributors to the circular, Finkelstein points to high rates of unemployment and low pay amongst physically impaired people, lack of choice in terms of housing, limited access to education (21), and policies which charge impaired people more to travel (15) as examples which corroborate the claim of oppression.

Concluding oppression from these kind of examples does not, he argues, require any specific mental state to be held by any party, but is concluded from the nature of the aggregate relationship of the actors:

“Oppression” does not exist simply because it is in the “mind” of the doer as intention, nor to the “mind” of the done-to as a feeling. It is in the factual situation that exists between a “doer” and a “done-to.” If someone was being hit in the face, we would not have to ask him whether [they] “felt” hit before we could decide that this is what was happening to him. Nor would we have to ask the hitter whether this is what he “intended” doing. We look at the situation between the two, what is happening between them whether they admit this or not, whether they are fully aware of the facts or not, whether they are conscious of it or not. Then we decide on the reality of the situation. If physically impaired people are oppressed we have to decide whether we agree that this is a matter of fact, in spite of the “intentions” or “feelings” of anybody.’ (7-8) [gloss in original]

That there are various thoughts, feelings and attitudes which correspond to a social position, and which can be accurately described, is taken as *prime facie* true by Finkelstein (26). To be an adequate basis for analysing the social position of impaired people, and for being any kind of guide to action for an organisation, accounts based on these qualitative mental states would need to account for how and why systematic exclusion and inequality emerge within a social organisation, and how they are sustained. Conversely, an account which begins from the fact that the systematic exclusion exists, and wishes to provide guidance for social and political action, is required to account for why subjective responses to it differ and may be in tension with its analysis.

Finkelstein asserts that the existence of qualitative mental states does not imply their generalisability, and while I may be sure that I have an attitude, feeling, or

belief, it does not follow that other people share it (7). If these qualitative states are to provide a causal basis for the social position of disabled people as a whole, or an insight into its nature, they will require a grounding in phenomena that can be recognised as generalisable between subjects. Finkelstein identifies two difficulties with finding such a general or universal basis for attitudes: in its lack of support within the scientific study of mental states and behaviour; and in a modal or logical paradox which emerges from trying to explain individual mental states while maintaining their primacy over social phenomena.

As a practicing psychologist, Finkelstein is aware of the disunity within psychological research at the time of his writing, and the relative decline of its dominant schools, which rooted attitudes and behaviours within universal tendencies of the human subject:

‘Ideas such as, “norm-conforming behaviour may be based on stereotypes” and “attitudes may be ego-defensive, rooted in insecurity and inferiority” have long been suspect and we should be wary of being involved in the shop-worn concepts. Professional psychologists are at present involved in violent disagreements about the various theories of human behaviour and are divided into definite schools of thought. Each school produces arguments that prove the other schools wrong!’
(28)

If there is going to be any explanation of attitudes wide enough to account for the social position of disabled people, it is unlikely to find backing from within science that isn’t already compromised by critique. Without taking sides in these debates within psychology, and thus advocating this or that form of counselling to overcome this situation (21), accounts based on mental states and attitudes cannot simply assume a shared basis for these mental states that transcends the individual.

The second problem arises when we ask what kind of phenomena explain mental states or attitudes. If these are explained through appeals to pre-existing mental states that the subject holds about themselves or the world (such as explaining scapegoating by reference to beliefs about one’s interest, or prejudiced ideas through imagination and fear (26-7)), then they are grounded in phenomena which are equally un-generalisable and cannot be used to explain broad social phenomena. As Finkelstein puts it, ‘we wander in the fog bumping into isolated attitudes and invent connections between them’ (27).

If, alternatively, we explain the belief or attitude on the basis of an experience that a number of subjects may share, such as accounting for a negative view of disabled people on the basis of bad personal experiences (26), then the question remains ‘exactly what is happening between the “doer” and “done-to”; and who says it is a bad experience?’ (27). As the situation which generated the mental state is prior to it, and thus independent of it, it is governed by the social relationship between the parties rather than the attitude that it generates, and would need to be explained and intervened in on those terms. That is to say,

explaining attitudes about physically impaired people on the basis of collective experience would require falling back on the method proposed by Finkelstein, rather than maintaining the one held by his interlocutors.

The social account of attitudes

From the above paradox, Finkelstein concludes that an approach which holds the subjective attitudes of actors as responsible for the social position of Disabled People is not only untenable, but politically limiting and has more in common with a reactionary ideology than an emancipatory one.

“There is constant pressure on physically impaired people to talk about their feelings, their personal experiences, and their innermost thoughts. When we complain about the things that are wrong (that lead to feelings of frustration, depression, etc.), then we are said to have “chips on our shoulders”, to be “paranoid”, to have “the wrong attitude”, and so on. If we take this up, soon we are no longer talking about what is wrong, but whether our attitudes have been wrong. (...) When we argue about attitudes before real problems, then we are being “conned” (31).

This critique is repeated in Finkelstein’s later work - where its scope is extended to attack the right wing of the Disabled People’s Movement (2001: 13) -, and is not a simple determinist claim. Unlike one contributor to the circular, Finkelstein does not make the argument that the social position of disabled people is a result of society being ‘brainwashed by the media’ (2018: 17) or believing certain things because they are told to by those with vested interests. His account of attitudes and subjective responses rests, instead, on the interplay of three distinct but interrelated factors: the personal, the ‘social rules of participation’, and that which is possible within a society at a given moment.

Finkelstein identifies attitudes, feelings, and beliefs as a constituent ‘part’ of a situation - rather than its cause or simply being caused by it (29). In a discriminatory or oppressive social relationship, both oppressing and oppressed parties are capable of taking an attitude that challenges the basis of that relationship, finds reconciliation with it, or tries to find a way to turn it to their own personal advantage (32). The conditions under which the oppressive relationship arises, and the possible challenges and advantages that both parties could identify, are governed by the rules and institutions that determine how society functions. In the case of disability, Finkelstein identifies the rules of competition for profit, especially as they pertain to the labour market, as the most relevant determining factor:

‘In this situation people have to compete in the labour market for jobs in order to earn a living. When the person hires labour [they do] not want to buy labour that is physically impaired, or at least, [they are] not going to pay the same amount for

an imperfect purchase. This is a fact regardless of his “intentions” or “feelings”. When the rules of earning a living are fixed in this way then, in reality, physically impaired people are discriminated against. Consequently, we can’t get jobs, or are paid less for our work, or end up in the poorer paid, less desirable jobs. In all these cases we end up with less income and/or the quality of life is inferior. We are also deprived of choice in where we work, where we live, and so on.’ (ibid) [gloss in original]

The fact of a person’s unequal treatment or status is, Finkelstein believes, something that is bound to call forth some kind of resistance or challenge on their part. This resistance can be purely personal, taking the form of non-compliance or an attempt to find more freedom in the situation imposed on one than is initially given, or can be aimed at the structure of the inequality itself, and the set of rules and institutions which maintain it (33).

Both the scope and the intensity of this resistance is dependent on what possible avenues a person has to express it. If an individual can see no possibility of changing the situation they are in, they are more likely to try and find some accommodation with it or a purely individual solution to it. In the position of having minimal social power with little opportunity of changing one’s situation, claims that one’s unequal treatment are due to innate and permanent traits one has (an impairment for disabled people, a ‘feminine psychology’ for women, etc) can appear plausible (33-4). Conversely, if social and technological developments imply that the situation one is in could be structured differently, then the possibility exists of taking an antagonistic position to the whole of that relationship and wishing to reject it in favour of an alternative.

Citing elevators, hoists, iron lungs, and ‘housing with help schemes’ as examples (36); Finkelstein argued that such a possibility had already arisen:

‘When society has not yet achieved the technical ability to solve the practical problems (of integrating physically impaired people), so that we can compete, for example, for jobs, then prejudiced attitudes tend to remain unchanged over a period of time. However, in the 1970s we have already the “know-how” and technology to solve these problems. Consequently, a few physically impaired people have successfully integrated into society – they have got well paid jobs, adapted houses, their own families, cars, etc. (...) But, it is only rich people that get the full benefit of society’s technology. What is required is that these practical aids are provided by society to all that need them. In this respect our society denies us what is available and ignores what are perfectly reasonable requests’ (35-6)

From the perspective of what is socially possible, the segregation of disabled people is a mere ‘technical problem’ which could be solved by changing the way that a situation, or society more broadly, is structured (30). Doing so, however, would violate the existing ‘social rules of participation’ (ibid) as they are administered (knowingly or otherwise) by state, social, and market institutions.

Thus the struggle against these rules becomes, in the first instance, an antagonistic struggle against those who administer them (33) combined with an attempt to build support within the ranks of the oppressed for alternative social arrangements - or, as Finkelstein puts it, converting 'unconscious struggles' that exist on a purely individual level into 'conscious struggles' which recognise individual circumstances as part of a contested social reality (34).

Conclusion

I hope that it is clear, from the above discussion, that Finkelstein proposes a response to attacks on the social definition made on the basis of its failure to encapsulate all of the lived experience of a disabled person, and those that presume a transparent and direct link between an attitude and the outcome of exclusion and oppression. In the first case, Finkelstein argues strongly that attempting to base a universal analysis on individual experience is unsustainable; due to its collapse into a fog of competing psychological explanations or a necessary appeal to outside factors. As Finkelstein's argument for his social explanation of disability oppression aims to avoid this outcome, and explicitly focuses on a methodology that does not rely on the heterogeneity of individual experience, the lack of reference to individual thoughts and feelings in his argument hardly invalidates it.

In the second case, Finkelstein problematises the relationship between attitudes and social outcomes by interjecting the problems of power and existing social formations; which not only determine the possibility of an attitude being adopted, but equally dictate the chance it has of successfully manifesting itself in behaviour which oppresses or liberates. On Finkelstein's model, even if I and those I deal with have a positive attitude to my impairment, my low social power and the governing rules of engagement are still such that I will experience oppression. Similarly, if I have an elevated leverage, and the rules of participating in society are changed in my favour, I will experience considerably more integration in society even if outright bigotry still exists.

I leave it to the reader to decide whether these arguments convince a modern audience. The extent to which Finkelstein's arguments were successful in convincing UPIAS members is, however, shown by the repetition of his premises and conclusions in the eventual policy of the organisation. While the first policy document had been drafted by Hunt prior to the writing of *Are We Oppressed* (2001: 3), and it is thus unsurprising that there is significant crossover between the position the two developed privately and the final policy document; the extent to which the Union's *Aims and Policies* (1975) reflect this position is notable in light of the support from the membership required for its adoption.

This document ratifies the distinction between a factual or material impairment and the social disablement of impaired people; albeit without the interim concept of Handicap⁸ used by Finkelstein in his earliest writing:

‘What we are interested in, are ways of changing our conditions of life, and thus overcoming the disabilities which are imposed on top of our physical impairments by the way this society is organised to exclude us. In our view, it is only the actual impairment which we must accept; the additional and totally unnecessary problems caused by the way we are treated are essentially to be overcome and not accepted.’ (Clause 15)

Not only does this public statement of aims accept the claim that this relation of society to disabled people is ‘essentially oppressive’ and that this finds its purest expression in the segregation of impaired people in residential institutions (Clause 7), it also roots this oppression in the mechanisms of the labour market (Clause 4). It notes that this situation has no basis in material necessity, with the relevant technology and technical know-how already in existence to solve it, but in a social organisation which allocates resources to on the basis of profit rather than need (Clause 1). The existence of the capacity to solve the problem of segregation, alongside pre-existing political struggles by disabled people and their supporters, is accounted to explain both the increasing (although limited) integration of impaired people, and a partial change in the attitudes of wider society (Clauses 3 & 4). Strategically, the Union commits itself to providing political, secretarial, and advisory support to campaigns by individual disabled people, and informing other activists of their campaigns within its newsletter (Clause 18). The success or failure of strategies, it argues, are to be assessed by their efficacy and their ability to be replicated:

‘We need to learn from our failures and successes, and so develop arguments and a theory which have been proved to work - because they do actually bring about practical gains for disabled people. In this way the value of our practical experience will be multiplied many times over, as the essential lessons learned from it are made available to other disabled people now and in the future.’ (Clause 19).

Tony Baldwinson’s recent work (2019) reproduces, for the first time, the internal report of the first UPIAS conference as an appendix (47-59). Given the initial disagreement with Finkelstein’s claims that disability is an essentially social phenomenon, irreducible to subjective attitudes or interpersonal

⁸ As one UPIAS member recalls (Davis & Davis 2019), the earliest definitions discussed in the organisation were modelled on the tripartite definitions of disability, handicap, and impairment used by the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys and the World Health Organisation. As UPIAS’ analysis progressed, sharper distinctions between forms of social organisation and the disabled person’s body or mind made the second category superfluous (103-4)

prejudice, it is striking to note that these arguments were not replayed on the conference floor. The points of contention between members were in large part the consequences of this view, not the view itself. For example, the conference debated whether specialist holiday facilities should be opposed by the Union on the grounds of their segregative function, or whether they could be presumed to disappear by themselves if rights to inclusive housing and work had been won (53); and, more pressingly, whether disabled people as an oppressed group should be open to able-bodied people joining the organisation for their liberation (55). Only on three occasions were arguments akin to the objections outlined above raised: a proposal to include a reference to the ‘individual character’ of decision makers as a cause of greater integration (51), and two separate objections to the characterisation of residential homes as ‘life-destroying’ and ‘prisons’ (54-55). These interventions are recorded as being raised by one member on each occasion, and none of them gained enough support to be moved to a vote. The questions of the summer seem to have been answered for the delegates in the room, and the debate had already moved on.

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About the author

Luke Beesley is a doctoral student at the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics (CAPPE) at the University of Brighton. His research covers the history of the Disabled People's Movement and its unique contribution to radical political thought; most particularly in its engagements with Marxism and Anarchism. He has a background in radical community activism within the

Disabled People's, Migrant Solidarity, and Working Class Movements. Contact:
l.s.beesley AT brighton.ac.uk