

Rod Michalko

The Difference That Disability Makes

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As a disabled activist and writer with a congenital visual impairment I have a particular interest in the contents of this book. And, before I go any further, it is important to point out that this is an excellent and accessible read that will almost certainly prove to be a much-valued text for students and scholars in the growing field of disability studies especially in Canada and the USA.

The Difference that Disability Makes is a masterful, mainly ethnomethodological, analysis of Rod Michalko's protracted journey from his 'homeland' of 'normal' society into the 'twilight' world of the 'visually impaired', the 'blind' and 'disabled', as he comes to terms with a progressive eye condition that results in blindness. Following in the celebrated tradition of other well known North American scholars such as Erving Goffman, Irving Zola, and Robert Murphy, Michalko utilises personal narrative and the lived experience of other disabled writers to develop a nuanced and sophisticated critical analysis of the meaning of 'disability' in contemporary western culture.

But, in contrast to several other similar accounts which, in my view, represent little more than scholarly biographies of despair that serve only to reinforce rather than challenge orthodox wisdom, Michalko employs the insights of the 'social model of disability' to deconstruct traditional stereotypes of, and assumptions about, what it means to be a disabled person living in a wealthy, well developed society in the twenty first century.

The emphasis is on 'suffering' which he informs us is an essential component of social model thinking as pioneered by British writers such as Mike Oliver (1996) and Paul Abberley (1987). Thus:

We do not suffer the conditions of our impairment as medicine and the rest of society would have it, we suffer our society. We suffer what society makes of our impairments and this is... 'oppressive' (p. 54).

Rightly, he points out that the truly emancipatory element of the social model approach is its unprecedented distinction between the biological (impairment) and the social (disability), Hence, disability, or societal perceptions of and responses to impairment, is a social creation, and like all social creations is not fixed and can be changed or re-created. This is not to say that impairment does not have physical and psychological implications, but, he notes, a social model account directs attention to the fact that these are compounded significantly by western society's intolerance and subsequent responses to the reality of the human condition: i.e. biological and intellectual difference and frailty. Developing this insight Michalko explores his innermost feelings about coming to terms with both the negative and positive dimensions of changing perceptions of self and the complexity of a disabled identity.

These include a detailed and thought provoking discussion of the gradual but intensifying realisation that, in common with other disabled people with a degenerative condition, he is no longer able to participate in hitherto enjoyable mainstream 'leisure' activities such as baseball, or work in the same way and at the same pace as 'non-disabled' peers. For example, as a 'blind' scholar working in a mainstream university, he has to have all his printed materials such as books and articles - the very

life-blood of an academic's trade - produced in accessible formats before they can be accessed and used. This involves both time and effort and is something that a non-visually impaired colleague does not have to address. Moreover, modern understandings of disability are paradoxical in that they are minimalist in orientation and many in number. They resonate in the environment, culture and society. For Michalko, therefore, 'coming out' as a disabled person is an overtly political process that involves both a psychological and a technical solution. It is a political process involving both individual and collective action.

Indeed, as will be evident from this summary, there is much to recommend in this book. It is however limited in that, in common with so many books on disability emanating from both Canada and the USA recently, it adopts what the disabled activist, writer, and founder of the social re-interpretation of disability that provided the foundation for the social model of disability referred to above, Vic Finkelstein (1996) described as an 'inside out' approach to the subject.

Consequently, much of the materiality that continues to dominate the every day lives of the overwhelming majority of disabled people and their families is missing from this analysis. Important examples include the experience and consequences of accessing inappropriate and costly medical and related services, unemployment and underemployment, relative poverty, and the stigma of an enforced dependence on welfare. Equally important, though there is a scholarly exploration of a 'disabling' culture and environment, there is no mention or discussion of the matrix of capitalist and related ideologies upon which they rest. Furthermore, whilst Michalko is clearly aware of the significance of the conceptual, and therefore, linguistic, distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability' within the context of disability studies, he uses the words 'disability' and 'disabilities' to refer to both the biological and the social throughout this book. Consequently the ensuing ambiguity of meaning is often confusing and, without careful reading, is in danger of deflecting attention away from much of the substance of Michalko's argument.

Yet despite these reservations this is a timely and useful introduction to a rapidly evolving literature and will be a welcome addition to disability studies courses across Canada and the USA.

References

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