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Mobility, impairment and empowerment: Subverting normalising discourses

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|---------------|---|
| Item Type | Presentation |
| Authors | Ogden, Cassandra A.;Cox, Peter |
| Citation | Working draft of research paper given at Mobility & Language / Mobilität & Sprache" conference at Universität Salzburg, Austria, 22-24 November 2013. |
| Download date | 2026-05-15 04:10:45 |
| Link to Item | http://hdl.handle.net/10034/324199 |



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Title: Mobility, impairment and empowerment: Subverting normalising discourses

Date: 23 November 2013

Originally given at: Mobility & Language / Mobilität & Sprache” conference at
Universität Salzburg, Austria, 22-24 November 2013

Example citation: Ogden, C. A., & Cox, P. (2013, November 23). *Mobility, impairment and empowerment: Subverting normalising discourses*. Working draft of a research paper given at Mobility & Language / Mobilität & Sprache” conference at Universität Salzburg, Austria, 22-24 November 2013.

Version of item: Given at conference

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/324199>

Mobility, impairment and empowerment. Subverting Normalising Discourses

Paper prepared for “Mobility & Language / Mobilität & Sprache” verbal-Workshop im Rahmen der Österreichischen Linguistiktagung Universität Salzburg, 22.-24. November 2013

(draft text only please do not cite without prior contact with corresponding author)

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Abstract

Deriving our understandings from a Foucauldian perspective, we argue that the mobile subject is not a natural, pre-social being. Rather, power relations structure our ability to choose and the choices we can make. One of the ways in which these power relations are manifest is through the micro-politics of normalising discourses. Our concern in this study is to disrupt the normalising and naturalising discourses of mobility in order to reveal the impacts these have on the differently able body.

First, the paper utilises fictional reverse narratives, combining the methods of Miner’s influential 1956 article “Body ritual among the Nacirema” (American Anthropologist 58: 3), with more recent work on the creation of “ethnographic fictions”. These narratives are designed to invert and subvert conventional assumptions about the processes of travel and the experiential dimension of quotidian mobility. The paper then explores the ways in which innovative methods of research and the communications of findings are justified and can be used to highlight the degree to which ableism underpins and permeates majority conceptualisation of travel processes. Through these narratives, space is made in which to unpack power relations and to consider the hegemony of the ‘normal’ body in mobility studies.

Introduction

The central concern of our paper is to consider how our use of conventional social scientific research methodologies serves to reinforce discourses of normalcy and the normalising process. In particular, our concern is with the unexamined assumptions made in relation to experiences of mobility; and how the requirement to stay within the confines of realism serves to perpetuate dominant imaginaries. In the sections that follow, we first present - in slightly unusual form perhaps - the findings of our shared researches into mobility practices, and then explore the theoretical discussions that reveal why we use this format to present our findings.

Findings: The Stories

Maddie’s Story

Maddie (a 24 year old female, leg-user) left her small country house full of apprehension about her job interview in the city that afternoon. Maddie relied on public transport and set off in plenty of time to catch the bus. As she wondered whether her trouser-suit would create the right impression,

her thoughts were suddenly disturbed by a sharp stabbing pain in her upper thigh. A 30 year old lady in a wheelchair was evidently in a rush and had knocked Maddie with the arm of her wheelchair. Maddie swiftly decided she may as well walk on the road. Most of her friends used wheelchairs and were always suggesting that she used one even though she may not 'need' one. Maddie liked to walk though she couldn't help notice that the pavements were clearly designed for the chairs and not for leg-users like her. The smooth surface alone was good for ease of wheelchair movement but they made walking in her stilettos very precarious.

As Maddie waited for the bus she wondered whether a speed limit should be imposed on wheelchairs. She sighed as she saw an older model bus approaching her stop, they had low roofs and catered for wheelchair users only. After an additional 15 minutes wait, an accessible bus arrived. Maddie was grateful that the new buses were coming into service but wished that the bus company would invest in new drivers who weren't scared to look up and speak to her. The driver sheepishly handed over the ticket and avoided eye contact. As she tottered to her seat Maddie thought that the two leg-user seats at the front of the bus were nothing but token gestures. Surely it wouldn't harm to make the whole bus high enough for people 'like her' as opposed to just the front section?

As Maddie dismounted (ensuring she didn't slip down the ramp in her heels), she attempted to run to catch her train which was already at the platform. Before she boarded, two stewards approached her and explained that the train was seat-less (spaces only for wheelchairs) and that she would be unable to travel on the train due to health and safety. Maddie was outraged, she needed to be in the city in time for her interview! The train steward explained that she should have pre-booked the trains to ensure a suitable carriage for her journey. "Pre-booking", exclaimed Maddie, "would mean taking the less than reliable bus service down to the nearest station and talking to a member of staff. For some reason your inept online booking facility does not allow a leg-user to book assistance". After much persuasion the steward remembered that there was one seat towards the back of the train and led her to an old toilet that they had not removed. Maddie reluctantly accepted her lot. It wasn't a comfortable journey and she feared that her trouser suit would get stained but at least she would get to the city.

Maddie gritted her teeth when she realised that the arrival platform was inaccessible. The terminated carriage reversed and pulled into another platform where she could access the exit via a lift. The familiar mantra of 'it's not my fault love, I'm sorry' made pinpointing blame very difficult and stopped her from protesting. When passing the wheelchair tunnels she noticed a poster advertising the service as 'convenient, quick, safe and cheap'. Very ironic as so far Maddie's whole journey had been inconvenient, slow, dangerous and expensive.

Maddie was deemed an inconvenience and a 'safety hazard' on all modes of transport but especially the wheelchair tunnels. She was not allowed to hire a chair as leg-users might suffer a dangerous reflex action whilst in transit, which would damage the system and put her and everyone else in danger. Maddie instead walked out onto the pollution filled streets of the city and hailed an adapted taxi which took her to her interview. 'Thank goodness they are paying for expenses' she exclaimed as she handed over five times the tunnel fee for her journey.

My story

I entered the town of Simbale by foot. I was trying to get to a job interview and was unfamiliar with this part of the country. I quickly realised that my normal footwear that served perfectly well back in

my home environment was simply inadequate. The roads in Simbale were dominated by wheelchair users and were polished daily to maintain a surface with minimal resistance. With my non-grip choice of footwear this had the effect of making me feel as though I was walking on an ice-rink and I had to walk ever so precariously to prevent me falling flat on my face. I realised I should have brought a second pair of shoes with me

After taking the best part of half an hour to walk barely half a kilometre, I gave up and decided to use the subway to get me to the interview faster. As I tried to enter the subway to the transit connections I was faced with a dilemma. The only way down was via a wheelchair tunnel, the curved sides designed for users' minimal-effort guided gliding to their destination. But only for wheeled users, which I wasn't. I decided to battle my way through the impatient wheelchair users in the concourse (who kept bumping into me in their haste to get to work) to get to the man sitting in the helpdesk on the far side of the station. The helpdesk itself was very low and I had to crouch down awkwardly to enable myself to be heard. I asked him if he had a spare wheelchair so I was able to go on the transit. 'Have you booked one?' he asked grumpily and once I told him that I didn't initially plan to use the subway on my journey today, he less than politely continued. 'Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, you are required to book at least 5 days in advance to enable us to make the necessary reasonable adjustments to our services and source a spare, especially adapted wheelchair. You'd be a fire hazard otherwise'. And with this final statement the man span 180 degrees and the shutters of the help desk closed.

I turned away and thought about my experiences: the sense of constant, low-level fear as I walked along pathways constantly jostled and intimidated by others. The repetitive aches and strains in my back as I bent to read the signage indicating where I should go, or to reach the light switches. The frustration and anger accompanying my inability to fit in. The sense of inadequacy caused by the speed of others' movement around me. Let's face it, I thought the world here is simply not designed for those without mobility upgrades. I know I'm more than capable of doing the work but even if I were to get the job here, which of course pays far more than back where I come from, could I face a relentless, daily struggle like this to get to work or go for a meal or a drink?

Problematizing social science methodology

Why are social scientists, especially those working within a largely empirical tradition, writing deliberately fictional stories? How does (science) fictional story-telling fit into a social science tradition?

Our starting point for reflection is the uniqueness of experiential knowledge. However closely we get to another person, however closely we empathise with them and their situation, we cannot experience the world as anyone else does. The uniqueness of our own individual experience is an important and fundamental recognition. Although we use the phrase, "walk a mile in my shoes", none can really do this we can, at best walk alongside.

Social scientific study of mobility practices has cast a particular gaze upon the problems of data gathering in relation to the experiences of mobility¹. New tools of video ethnography and in-vivo sampling, facilitated by digital recording technologies, allow us to record events and experience as

¹ Fincham, B.; McGuinness, M. & Murray (eds.) 2010 *Mobile Methodologies* London: Palgrave; Büscher, M.; Urry, J. & Witchger (eds.) *Mobile Methods* 2010 London: Routledge

they occur. Ride-along practices allow researchers exploring the experiences of, for example, cyclists to take participant observation to new levels. Technologies for data capture allow immediate recording of image, gps monitoring of routes, of energy use, of heart rate and surface vibration to provide a multi layered analysis of mobility practices. Participants own reactions can be captured without the distance afforded by post-activity reflection, mediated through processes of self-interpretation and self-justification.

Yet despite these innovations, a doubt remains as to exactly what these new data sets actually *mean*. What is it that this mass of information is providing? Given our earlier statement about the uniqueness of individual experience, are we gathering any more than a mass of visual and auditory information unmediated by the uniqueness of the person, each with her/his individual history and filters? Without the filtration of personal understanding and interpretation, sensory data is just data, not experience, not meaningful memory.

Accepting these potential problems, new data sources nevertheless do legitimise and allow investigation into mobile experiences in ways previously unconsidered. They do provide new data sets which can be communicated to an audience and subject to academic scrutiny – interpretation and theorisation. Herein lies the second problem: how should such information be communicated?

Writing-up results of ethnographic study we confront the problem of making critical analysis of the data gathered, constantly riding the wave of a tension between competing forces of credibility, authenticity, critical distance and comprehensibility. In particular, one always faces the problem of how to talk about the reality of the lives of subjects of study without traducing that reality and those experiences. Common practice is to include direct (anonymised) quotation of participants in order to present the ‘authentic voice’ of the participant. Leaving aside the potentially difficult ethical question of how parasitic such study is in relation to the investigated subject, the risk remains that the subject however presented is reduced to a series of data points. Indeed, the reduction of discursive products such as interview transcripts, field notes to coded themes and recognisable and transferable topics is a fully acknowledged, even essential part of the data analysis process. We even employ specific computer aided diagnostic tools to assist in the reduction separation and analysis of interview transcripts. The process is one of transforming interview transcript in into usable academic data. Even here, the expertise and the skill of the researcher are required to intervene in the subject’s own explanation, in order to identify which elements are significant and which deserve to be highlighted and selected for concentrated analysis. All the while we select and codify we risk missing both the prosodies of language and expression and even more poignantly what remains unsaid in any conversation.

In this process the interview subject is dematerialised, de-humanised, the complexity of language production is set aside. The research must ‘bracket off’ the possibility that the very process of interview creates skewed data, as each subject seeks words to express frequently non-verbal experiences and emotions, choosing those that they hope will echo and have meaning for their interviewer/ interrogator. In even the best academic study, the writer becomes interlocutor, speaking *for* the subject even when appearing to present the actual voice of the subject.

A further element to consider is the degree to which the reader of such academic papers reads them from within their own experience. Their own necessary, pre-existing prejudices (in the technical sense), shape interpretations against the norm of their own experience. In relation to the mobile

subject and the experience of mobility, there can be a profound disconnection between the mobile experience of the reader and that of the subject: is it any wonder that those who ride bicycles have principally championed studies of cycling²? Or climbers of climbing³? Prior experience and individual norms of behaviour assist our predisposition to social scientific study: indeed to do otherwise would be merely voyeuristic.

Revisiting Narrative Practices

It is to the problem of communicating the findings that we turn our gaze in the forthcoming section. Our struggle has been to work from within the confines of social scientific methods and methodology. We strive to be true to their rigour and their necessary strictures, while simultaneously confronting the impossibility of conveying to the reader experiences beyond her/his knowledge and outside of the discursive reality of wider society – itself produced and maintained under the constraints that hegemonic normalcy places on the social imaginary. Moreover, solutions and policy proposals maintain the dominant normalizing narratives as long as they are only able to draw on potential and possibilities that exist within existing norms and conceptualisations of problems and their solutions. This difficulty is perhaps most vivid when we choose to investigate those experiences which are most common, most shared, but unexamined. How do we effectively hold up to scrutiny practices taken for granted? Our first point of reference is Horace Miner's now classic paper "Body Ritual among the Nacirema".⁴ He examined everyday body practices and shocked the reader by inverting names and echoing the incomprehension of a colonialist anthropological gaze when confronted by mundane practice. In similar vein from an entirely different literature, Craig Raine's (1977) poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" provides not just a descriptive inversion but an conceptual one:

"Model T is a room with the lock inside -
a key is turned to free the world"

The reversal of the narrative gaze confronts the reader with the unfamiliarity of an everyday process, and it from this tradition we draw.

Our second theoretical point of departure is that of ethnographic fiction. Ethnographic fiction extends the conventions of ethnographic writing by consciously acknowledging the limitation of fieldwork observation and its communication through description and (excerpted) transcript to convey experiences and events (almost by definition) beyond the world of the reader. Such recorded and re-presented data can only be just that re-presentations as echoes of experiential reality. Even use of video recording is limited by the necessary specificity of the narrow gaze of the lens. What is not visible may be as important a part of the reality of the situation or process recorded.

Rather than concentrate on the reductive process of rendering the observed as a series of data points, ethnographic fiction reweaves these data sets to produce a composite, complex narrative, simultaneously both faithful to the data from which it draws, but also, overtly, not simply a direct reproduction of it. Self-consciously producing a fictional narrative allows the reader insight to

² Horton, D.; Rosen, P. & Cox, P. (eds.) 2007

³ Anderson B. (2012). The construction of an alpine landscape: building, representing and affecting the Eastern Alps, c. 1885-1914. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, vol. 29(2), 155-183

⁴ *American Anthropologist* 58:3, June 1956

another means of 'truth-telling' beyond the documentary process. (Aside from which we leave out the degree to which all documentary is also necessarily propaganda.) Data systematically and rigorously recorded through fieldwork provided the basis of a knowingly fictional narrative that allows the reader to enter into the lifeworld depicted through the imaginative and emotionally empathetic medium of narrative fiction.

Here, of course we arrive at the edge of difficulties concerning truth and fiction. The modern British (Anglo) tradition draws sharp distinction between arts and sciences as ways of knowing – both claim truth in different ways. Importantly, both are also involved in a political struggle for credibility in both public and academic discourse: a struggle in which currently legitimises 'hard scientific fact' at the expense of other verities. We however see to bridge this divide insisting on what may be expressed perhaps more properly as *Wissenschaft* – systematic study regardless of the disciplinary boundary. The recombinant insight of ethnographic fiction allows us to straddle this chasm between disciplines and research practices by remaining true to the systematic basis of all academic study.

Beyond ableist conventions

Earlier we noted that the reverse narrative and ethnographic fiction provide our starting points. Our narratives, however go beyond these two approaches. Our object of study and that which we seek to convey is the experiential lifeworld of constraint created by normalised, hegemonic practices and discourses of mobility: the constraints of an ableist world. By definition, we are seeking to convey the vibrancy and salience of experiential knowledge and insight produced by being outside of the norms of social practice. In other words, to convey to the reader or listener, perspective produced by a lifeworld completely alien to the majority of readers (and academic writers). Thus we arrive back at our starting point.

Our mobility narratives are rooted in conventional social scientific study of the experiences of mobility impaired travellers. Yet simple description has been consistently found to be grossly inadequate to convey the degree of alienation and dis-advantage and– dis-ablement produced by normalised discourses and their material manifestations in infrastructure and provision. Thus our stories do not simply reverse the narrative but negate the experiential certainties of a normalising practices. Our embrace of (science)fiction is not just intended to postulate 'what if' but to embrace a positive process of empowerment and to confront the beneficiary of normalised practices with the degree of disempowerment their hegemonic position entails.

We reiterate that these narratives are not simply formed *ex nihilo*, they emerge as negations of the real and systematic study of mobility practices and the experience those out with the hegemony of normalised mobility. The language of scientific knowledge seeks to document fact and present the 'real' world, and perhaps most problematically, claims to provide the most definitive and ultimately true account of the world. Yet if an experience cannot be understood from outside, how can any readers meaningfully comprehend that which it documents? The shift to a fully fictional reverse narrative is, therefore a means to address this final difficulty. Adopting the self-consciously unreal imaginary, we present a negation of the attempt to document reality. It is in this final negation that we can perhaps allow readers to confront and challenge their own prejudgements and unexamined expectations: prejudices that allow both individual conformity to, and the social construction of, webs of normalcy.