Radical Belonging - An exploration of disability, commitment, interdependence, and care

Yates Norton and David Ruebain discuss interdependency, relationships and profound connections challenging the division arising from oppression and individualism.

Essay [1] / Yates Norton [2] June 25, 2021

We are different but similar. We are all completely human and in this sense identical, and yet we are also not. As for the authors of this piece –– one of us is much older, one Arab/Jewish, one Scandinavian/English, one disabled. Our home, work, social, sexual, professional, familial, and chosen activities are both similar and different. Indeed, we are typical of everyone. At best, the essence of this inherent contradiction –– of being both different and the same –– can engender lives characterised by commitment, care, allyship and interdependence. How is this? In our connection, our love, we have sought to explore this apparent conundrum through our respective work and understand what this means in terms of broader relationships; David principally through a background in law and policy, and Yates mainly through art and culture; but both through relationships. Through this, we have sought to explore division, oppression and alternatively unity, and we have discovered much. If we were to discuss love and relationships with regard to liberation work, we would do so unapologetically. This is because we have noted that even feeling pulled to 'excuse' expressions of love in public discourse is itself an example of a form of oppression which implies that liberation cannot be located there, perhaps because structures of oppression fear those alliances (as we will discuss). Ultimately, we contend that unity that comes through relationship-building to challenge a worldview that says that human flourishing can only best be achieved through individual and national competitive engagement.

In a particular way, disabled people have long had to consider the meaning of human connection, care and relationships; often because they have been treated not only as less-than-human but critically as dependent, which almost by definition infantilises them and militates against equality and reciprocity in relationships. The history of the disability movement in the UK (as in many other countries) is characterised by this struggle –– from the formation of DIG (the Disablement Income Group), UPIAS (the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation), Disability Alliance, BCODP (the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People), People First, BDA (the British Deaf Association) and many others; this movement grew into protests about independent living, “rights not charity", representation in the media (there were many, impactful and successful protests against events like Telethons that objectified disabled people as victims so as to raise money), employment, housing, services, inclusive education, culture and art. At heart, they were about reframing relationships (significantly, the disability movement grew to include non-disabled allies –– an example of care, commitment, allyship and interdependence).

As has been written about extensively, this activism produced the Social Model –– in summary, the radical and transformative understanding that people are disabled by society, structures, and attitudes; not (or not just) by their impairments. In developing this model, disabled people learnt from –– stood on the shoulders of –– the experience of activists in the US civil rights movement and second-wave feminism, broadening the debate to include a wider range of issues: de facto inequalities as well as legal inequalities. It also challenged attitudes towards disabled people in everything –– from work to intimacy. Over the years, many writers have developed these ideas further and also constructively critiqued the social model. For example, David T. Mitchell with Sharon L. Snyder have developed understandings of liberation, arguing that "inclusion is only worthy of this designation if disability becomes more fully recognized as providing alternative values for living that do not simply reify reigning concepts of normalcy."1

What is meant by 'inclusion?' As with many liberation movements, initial demands from disabled people were cautious and limited; constituting little more than seeking a bit more autonomy and choice (in a well explored example, the residents of Le Court, a residential home for disabled people

in the UK who challenged the home's numerous rules, were initially engaged merely in a struggle for greater control of their lives). However, greater autonomy and freedom, moving the dial a quarter turn, is not enough if power structures mean that one is always diminished and unequal as compared to another. And so from choice and autonomy, disabled people began to argue for integration –– the ending of segregation (historically, disabled people had been literally removed from society and into separate schools, homes, leisure activities, and workplaces). However, even that is one-sided –– integration is often about allowing or merely tolerating disabled people. Eventually the demand evolved to one of inclusion –– the idea that environments, activities and even relationships be constructed from the start for everybody. And perhaps as important was the realisation that this is a necessary tool of liberation for everybody. Of course, anyone can become disabled at any time (indeed if one lives long enough, one will) but fundamentally, lack of inclusion –– inequality and separateness –– is damaging for all. It fractures everyone's need for profound connection.

One of us happens to be a lawyer, so what are the limits and possibilities of the law and rights-based frameworks for disability liberation work? In many respects, the development of legal rights to protect marginalised and oppressed people has been and is critical to advancing equality. Laws can act not only as a bulwark against oppression but can provide and frame a national moral compass; a framework about ‘who we are‘. But equality law is primarily (although not exclusively) a liberal concept focused on fairness in choice and competition, mainly based on the concept of equality of opportunity rather than dignity. When it comes to liberation, it is therefore a starting point, a floor not a ceiling (although human rights jurisprudence does increasingly recognise human dignity). Moreover, legalistic approaches to equality sometimes fail to recognise the extent of the importance of relationships and interdependency, and indeed of art, culture and forms of representation.

In a recent public conversation presented in the context of a screening of Stephen Dwoskin's film, *Face of our Fear* (1991),[2] we drew on the work of Mia Mingus and her concept of ‘Access Intimacy' to further explore the difference between inclusion and integration.[3] For Mingus, inclusion and accessibility should not simply be a logistical requirement or a mechanistic set of accommodations. Accessibility is not only about justice for those who are structurally excluded but also liberation and transformation for everyone, since separation and isolation militates against interdependence and hence human flourishing. And so, for both us and for Mingus, we must focus on lived experience and connection in thinking about both rights and justice work, foregrounding our intimate and often tacit understandings and communications as a key part of liberatory work. Of course, such understandings come from long-term commitment and listening to each other that requires relationship-building, not simply service provision. As Mingus writes, the 'understanding of access needs [emerge] out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism manifests in our lives.'[4] Mingus is making a broader point about the crucial role of intimacy, attention and care in liberatory work, beyond questions of access and inclusion. However, given that accessibility and disabled people are so often treated as 'problems' requiring logistical ’solutions' Mingus is compelled to underscore this point about intimacy in relation to access and inclusion. And we share Mingus's emphasis here as well as the frustration that such basic elements of human connection have to be emphasised; it reveals the extent to which disabled people have been dehumanised.

This brings us back to a core part of our thinking –– the key importance of relationships to liberation, and that these relationships are unbounded or interdependent. Through this, we recognise how we are transformed by connection and so by definition, not the division that often comes through individualism and competition.

So what is interdependence? We posit it as the mutual reliance and flourishing that arises between two or more groups or individuals. It differs from dependent relationships and those where some are dependent and some are not. It is also different from what is often described as codependency, a pejorative concept implying the mutual meeting of emotional hurts. Importantly, it is also different from independence which, particularly in neoliberal forms of capitalism, valorises competition in most aspects of community and society.[5] In interdependent relationships, each party may be emotionally, economically, ecologically, or morally reliant on, but also responsible for and to others.

Many authors, philosophers, theologians and leaders have written and spoken about

interdependence in many cultures throughout history and we want to draw on their legacies and position interdependence as critical in our lives, both as a counterpoint to dependency and independency, but also because in many ways it maintains a principle (and hope) of profound human connection. But for disabled people it has a particular resonance, given their history of exclusion and subjugation. Interdependence directly challenges oppressive narratives and requires all of us that we not only recognise but also benefit from the full humanity of each. Keeping interdependence at the forefront of how we think through our relations with others allows us to recognise, celebrate and honour difference without creating or entrenching division. At the same time, difference, or identity can be a double-edged sword: it can be the means through which oppression is resisted by providing an identity we can cohere around, but it can also be the means through which oppression operates by classifying, marking out, separating and even controlling individuals of that identity. For this and other reasons, in recent times there has been a growth of analyses and positioning of identity politics –– political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify. There is not room here to explore the many and various movements and writers who have explored the meaning and relevance of identity (including Kimberley Crenshaw, who pioneered work on intersectionality –– the impact of two or more identities) but these ideas do raise profound questions about unity and separateness. At heart, we believe that we need to address and name oppression as it relates to people of particular identities but at the same time ensure that our identities do not define us completely.

And so we conclude that we must grapple and allow ourselves to be unsettled by these complexities in our relationships and not avoid them. Critically, this can only happen if we sustain attention and connection through commitment. And as David has said before on commitment:

I have observed that at least in North-Western Europe, particularly England and perhaps especially London, increasing weight is placed on a person's purported individual qualities - whether they are likeable or not (for which there are innumerable sub-sets: "attractive," "powerful," "witty," "morally upright," etc.). In some ways, this approach is no doubt a function of ordinary, complex human relationships - what draws us to some people and not others - but I also think that it is emphasised by an increasingly neoliberal, individualistic form of economic dominance. (By contrast, other societies, both current and in the past, give/gave more value to the collective or community and certainly less to assessment of an individual’s so-called qualities.) There are many consequences to this, including, some have argued, a rise in nationalism and populism as a reaction to atomised communities and an attempt to elevate the collective against that atomisation that accompanies individualism. That aside, I have been concerned particularly by the way that the breadth and depth of human connection can in fact be undermined by this individualism. In particular, it seems to me that the essence of "belonging" is fractured by the constant qualification of the requirement of being "liked", "attractive", "powerful", etc. Even if we are ostensibly "successful" in this competition, we nonetheless live under the threat of failure; we can easily fall off our pedestal! For me, commitment is the decision to "remain" in a relationship or community, notwithstanding the vagaries of individual factors (although I accept that they are not irrelevant and clearly there are circumstances where relationships should not continue). These ties that bind are instead based on more fundamental human connection (although not, I would stress, traditional hierarchies of race or class, etc.) - of personhood or what is often described as “common humanity”.[6]

For this reason, we have to think of our care for others as ongoing and relational –– we can never fully know someone –– but we must always strive to know someone beyond our attitudes and assumptions about them. This is never an easy or smooth journey. The closer one gets to another, the more each person's struggles are revealed, and this can make relationships more difficult. But as much as we are not expendable and cannot be treated as problems requiring solutions, we are also not easily consumable; we are never ‘finished’ as if we were a product. And to never be finished, of course, is a vital part of what it means to be alive. Using a key word in Eli Clare’s writing, we have to *grapple* with each other as complex, living beings in all our changing diversity of experiences, feelings and ways of living in and sensing the world.[7]

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- 1. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment*, (University of Michigan Press, 2015), p.18.
- 2. Thanks to Prof Rachael Garfield and Dr Jenny Chamarette of the Dwoskin Project at the University of Reading for organising this. See: https://lux.org.uk/event/dwoskin-faceofourfear [3]. Last accessed, 14 April, 2021.
- 3. Mia Mingus, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/ [4]. Last accessed, 14 April, 2021.
- 4. Ibid.
- 5. community and society.
- 6. David Ruebain quoted in the online talk, 'Rupert's Reading Session #1 with Yates Norton and Rupert Journal authors' talk available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RU5-3Tt50KQ [5]. Last accessed, 16 April 2020.
- 7. Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, (Duke University Press, 2017). See also Eli Clare's talk at Rupert, as part of the 2020 public programmes on care and interdependence that Yates curated: http://journal.rupert.lt/public-programme-archive-2020/brilliant-imperfection-amidst-the-pandemic/ [6]. Last accessed, 14 April, 2021.

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