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Source: *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), pp. 324-348
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195676
Accessed: 10/11/2010 10:01

Culture *as* Disability

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Common sense allows that persons unable to handle a difficult problem can be labeled "disabled." Social analysis shows that being labeled often invites a public response that multiplies the difficulties facing the seemingly unable. Cultural analysis shows that disability *refers most precisely to inadequate performances only on tasks that are arbitrarily circumscribed from daily life. Disabilities are less the property of persons than they are moments in a cultural focus. Everyone in any culture is subject to being labeled and disabled.*

> If a blind Man should affirm, that there is no such Thing as Light, and an Owl no such thing as Darkness, it would be hard to say, which is the verier Owl of the two.
>
> —Samuel Butler (1970[1759]), *Characters*, ca. 1662

In 1904, in a short story called "The Country of the Blind," H. G. Wells sounded the anthropological instinct full force.[1] A man by the name of Nunez is on a peak in the Andes, falls to what should have been his death, and finds himself dropped miraculously into an isolated valley populated exclusively by congenitally blind persons. Nunez is not particularly nice, and he senses only opportunities. He can see, and they cannot. The world is his, for, he figures, "in the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed Man is King" (Wells 1979:129). Almost instantly, Nunez runs into trouble. The Country of the Blind is of course wired for people who cannot see:

> It was marvelous with what confidence and precision they went about their ordered world. Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its kerbing; all obstacles and irregularities or path or meadow had long since been cleared away; all their methods and procedures arose naturally from their special needs. [Wells 1979:135]

Anthropology & Education Quarterly 26(3):324–348.

"Everything, you see," says Wells, showing the difficulty of a seeing person explaining a Country of the Blind, where there was no word for see, nor any words for things that could be seen. If Wells had said, "Everything, you hear," or "Everything, you smell," he might have made more sense, but not to Nunez: "Four days passed, and the fifth found the King of the Blind still incognito, as a clumsy and useless stranger among his subjects" (1979:134). From bad, things get worse until the people of the valley decide on a definition of the problem and a solution. Their surgeon says that his eyes are diseased: "They are greatly distended, he has eyelashes, and his eyelids move, and consequently his brain is in a state of constant irritation and destruction" (1979:142). The only solution is to cut them out of his head, and Nunez is forced to escape back up the mountain.

The story reads like much anthropology in this century. First, we are told of another culture, far away and isolated, and then we are asked to appreciate how smart and well adapted the people in the other culture are. It is the anthropologist's ideal setting for making two strong points: the first, that we are arrogant to think we know better than people in other cultures, and the second, that we are foolish to not appreciate how much is known by others in their own terms. We can state the anthropological instinct directly: *Not only is our wisdom not total, there is yet much to be learned from others*. H. G. Wells displays the point dramatically, and 90 years of ethnography have subsequently turned anthropological instinct into a principle of common sense in the progressive world.

The perfect unit for displaying such instinct and insight is what anthropologists call *culture*, a much-contested term that is generally taken to gloss the well-bound containers of coherence that mark off different kinds of people living in their various ways, each kind separated from the others by a particular version of coherence, a particular way of making sense and meaning. In the Country of the Blind, a One-eyed Man is confused and confusing. That is what it is like to be in another culture. With time, had he been a decent person, had he been an anthropologist, he could have learned their ways well enough to write an ethnography of their particular version of wisdom.

There is a downside to the instinctive use of the term *culture* as a container of coherence: The container leaks. Even a century ago, it was rare for a culture to be as isolated as H. G. Wells imagined. Conditions of the anthropologist's arrival were usually worked out in advance, if not by actual contact with the people being visited, then by the visitor and the visited having somehow been brought together by their respective places in the wider world order. Margaret Mead never fell down a mountain into a new tribe, for retinues of colonial officials, porters, and secretaries eased her way. Even H. G. Wells had to build a point of contact into his fiction: the people in the Country of the Blind, isolated for 14 generations before Nunez's arrival, spoke an old version of

Spanish which, minus the visual vocabulary, Nunez could use to figure out where he stood.

There is a second problem. The coherence of any culture is not given by members being the same, nor by members knowing the same things. Instead, the coherence of a culture is crafted from the partial and mutually dependent knowledge of each person caught in the process and depends, in the long run, on the work they do together. Life in culture, Bakhtin (1984[1940]) reminds us, is polyphonous and multivocalic; it is made of the voices of many, each one brought to life and made significant by the others, only sometimes by being the same, more often by being different, more dramatically by being contradictory. Culture is not so much a product of sharing as a product of people hammering each other into shape with the well-structured tools already available. We need to think of culture as this very process of hammering a world. When anthropologists instinctively celebrate the coherence of culture, they imply that all the people in the culture are the same, as if stereotyping is a worthy practice as long as it is done by professionals. Thick brush-stroke accounts of Samoans or Balinese, to stay with Margaret Mead, may give some hints as to what Samoans and Balinese must deal with in their daily life, but they can greatly distort the complexity of Samoans and Balinese as people. The coherence of culture is something many individuals, in multiple realities, manage to achieve together; it is never simply the property of individual persons.

The anthropological instinct has been perhaps most destructive when applied to the divisions and inequalities that exist inside a presumed cultural container, that is, the culture "of which they are a member," "to which they belong," or "in which they participate." The problem in assuming that there is one way to be in a culture encourages the misunderstanding that those who are different from perceived norms are missing something, that it is their doing, that they are locked out for a reason, that they are in fact, in reality, disabled. If it is distorting to describe Samoans and Balinese without an account of the full range of diversity to be found in Samoa or Bali, imagine how distorting it can be in complex divided fields like the United States.

When culture is understood as the knowledge that people need for living with each other, it is easy to focus on how some always appear to have more cultural knowledge than others, that some can be a part of everything and others not, that some are able and others not. Before entering the Country of the Blind, Nunez thought that sight was essential to being fully cultured and that having sight in a world of people who cannot see would net him the cultural capital of a king. The anthropological instinct teaches us that he was arrogant to think he knew better and foolish to not learn from his masterful subjects. The instinct gives us an essential insight, and we can be thankful that anthropology has taken its place in the human sciences. But did Nunez really have to be locked so thoroughly out of the culture of those who could not see?

Was it all his fault, or was he invited to look so bad? Need we think that the Country of the Blind had only one way to be, or that the blind and the sighted had to suffer conflict because of an irreducible biological or early enculturated difference? And what are we to make of his betrothed, the blind woman who enjoyed his illusions of sightedness and who could well understand his marginal position given that she too had been pushed aside by an appearance that included eye sockets that to the hand seemed to be full? In the Country of the Blind even a blind woman can be made disabled. In every society, there are ways of being locked out. Race, gender, or beauty can serve as the dividing point as easily as being sighted or blind. In every society, it takes many people—both disablers and their disabled—to get that job done. As Claude Lévi-Strauss put it in a classic text:

> in all their apparently aberrant modes of behavior, individuals who are "ill" are just transcribing a state of the group, and making one or another of its constants manifest. Their peripheral position relative to a local system does not mean that they are not integral parts of the total system; they are, and just as much as the local system is. To be more precise, if they were not docile witnesses of this sort, the total system would be in danger of disintegrating into its local systems. [1987(1950):17]

A disability may be a better display board for the weaknesses of a cultural system than it is an account of real persons.

Disabilities, their definition, their ascription, and their ties to social structure raise ultimate questions about cultural life which cannot be answered firmly in this article, but we can offer a reformulation of the problems involved. We do so in four sections. First, we claim that disabilities are approached best as a cultural fabrication, and to make our case we offer an account of an apparent disability, deafness, in a cultural context in which it does not count as a disability. Second, we focus on the recent popularity of disabilities in the United States as a good example of American culture at work.[2] Third, we identify three ways in which theories of culture and theories of disability have been similarly formulated with the materials of American culture, and we show their relevance to currently popular accounts of school failure. Fourth and finally, we offer a version of how two fairly new disabilities, learning disabilities and illiteracy, have been institutionalized as an active part of American education.

Above all, it must be clear by now that this article is not about disabled persons. It is about the powers of culture to disable. It is also intended to show how those now treated as disabled—from deaf and blind persons at one end of a continuum of abjection to the learning disabled at the other—are the most telling example of such an elaboration. In cultural terms, the difficulties that people in wheelchairs (or city shoppers with carts, etc.) face with curbs and stairs tell us little about the physical conditions requiring wheelchairs or carts, but a great deal about

the rigid institutionalization of particular ways of handling gravity and boundaries between street and sidewalk as different zones of social interaction. Consideration of how such small matters can be turned into a source of social isolation and exclusion is a good way to ask about the nature of culture *as* disability.

The Cultural Construction of Disability

> Human psychology may well provide the keyboard, but it is society which plays the tune.
>
> —Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure*, 1972

For the two centuries before our own, the people on Martha's Vineyard, a small island off the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, suffered, or we might say, were privileged by a high rate of genetically inherited deafness, approximately 1 person in every 155. It is easy to use the word *suffered* to evoke sympathy from hearing persons for the plight of the deaf. It is a physical difference that can count, and it is not unusual for deaf people to suffer terribly because of the way it is made to count in various social settings. It is not clear that the people of Martha's Vineyard would share the horror with which most hearing Americans approach deafness. Although it was definitely the case that the Vineyard deaf could not hear, it is also the case that they had the means to turn not hearing into something that everyone in the community could easily work with, work around, and turn into a strength. In Nora Groce's (1985) history, we are given a picture of deaf persons thoroughly integrated into the life of their community and the hearing thoroughly integrated into the communicational intricacies of sign. When surviving older members of the community were asked to remember deaf neighbors, they could not always remember who among them had been deaf, for everyone there spoke sign language, sometimes even hearing people with other hearing people.

The case of the Vineyard deaf raises questions about the nature of disability, questions that go beyond etiology to function and circumstance: *When does a physical difference count, under what conditions, and in what ways, and for what reasons?* When, how, and why: these are, of course, deeply cultural issues, and depending on how a physical difference is noticed, identified, and made consequential, the lives of those unable to do something can be either enabled or disabled by those around them. From Martha's Vineyard, there is good news: It is possible to organize a culture in which deafness does not have to isolate a person from a full round in the life of a community; not being able to hear can cut off behavioral possibilities that can be taken care of in other ways, and by everyone speaking sign, other possibilities can be explored. There is also bad news: Martha's Vineyard was not an island unto itself, but a peripheral area in a larger social field within which deafness was treated as an appalling affliction.

The easy use of the term *suffer* often carries an invidious comparison of the "disabled" with those seemingly "enabled" by the conventions of a culture. A more principled account of life inside a labeled/disabled community would show, for example, that the abjection with which so-called normals approach labeled/disabled people is one-sided and distorting. A recent advance in cochlea implants, for example, has deaf children hearing, a seeming advance to researchers, but the source of unrest in the deaf community. Outsiders to the deaf experience are surprised to find out that being able to hear is not as important as being a member of the deaf community. Similarly, sighted persons are surprised that life-long blind persons surgically given the "gift" of sight in their adult years are usually overwhelmed by the drabness of the seen world; "suffering" blindness is minimal compared to "suffering" the depression that follows the recovery of vision (Gregory and Wallace 1963).

We must not confuse our ignorance of life with a physical difference for an account of that life; nor should we forget that the particulars of our own ignorance are likely a more crucial determinant of the disabilities manifest in some lives than any differences in the physical makeup of the people.

On Martha's Vineyard, people had jobs to do, and they did them. That one person could do them faster or better than another was likely less important than that the jobs got done. In such a world, it was not important to sort out the deaf institutionally from the hearing. By almost every social measure—for example, rates of marriage and propinquity, economic success, and mastery of a trade—deaf persons were indistinguishable from hearing persons on Martha's Vineyard. There is record of an unbalanced deaf person in the community, but the order to have him committed to an institution did not emphasize his deafness as part of his problem and was, in fact, signed by a deaf person. It is possible to organize a culture in which the deaf play an equal and unremarkable role in most parts of life. On Martha's Vineyard, when it was time to institutionalize a troubled person, a deaf person could be asked to play either side of the culturally constructed divide between the unbalanced and the incarcerator, but not either side of the culturally irrelevant divide between hearing and deaf.

Unfortunately, deaf persons on Martha's Vineyard were not treated well by outsiders who could not sign, and the fortunes of the deaf declined as the island opened up to extensive tourism. That they could not hear was made worse by outsiders who pitied them, wrote them up in Boston newspapers, explained their origin in scientific tracts (one popular claim: their deafness was a result of a melancholy suffered by their mothers), called for a remedy of their situation, and suggested a eugenics program for their erasure. An irony can be found in the fact that perhaps the people best able on Martha's Vineyard to read such reports were deaf. Although most Vineyarders went to school for only

five years in the 1800s, by mandate of the state educational system, the deaf were supported through ten years of school, and when faced with a difficult reading and writing task, the hearing would often go to a deaf person for help.

In a study from inside deaf culture, Padden and Humphries state the case: "being able or unable to hear does not emerge as significant in itself; instead it takes on significance in the context of other sets of meaning to which the child has been exposed" (1988:22). It is one kind of problem to have a behavioral range different from social expectations; it is another kind of problem to be in a culture in which that difference is used by others for degradation. The second problem is by far the worse.

Making Disabilities in American Education

> A fact is like a sack which won't stand up when it is empty. In order that it may stand up, one has to put into it the reason and sentiment which have caused it to exist.
>
> —Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1922

For the past thirty years, the anthropology of education has been dominated by the question of how to talk with rigor and respect about children, particularly minority children, who fail in school. There must be something wrong with their life, goes the mainstream story—how else to talk about their not having learned to read or gained the basics of elementary mathematics? Yes, there must be something wrong with their life, but is this saying anything useful? What if the very act of saying that there is something wrong with their lives, if improperly contextualized, makes their situation worse?

Two general modes of contextualization show up. The first answers the question of what is wrong with their life by focusing on what is wrong with them: the children and often their families. Much in the name of helping, of course, these answers specify nonetheless that something is in fact wrong inside the children, something wrong in their cognitive, linguistic, and social development. Often the very existence of the inquiry and explanation of what is wrong with their life makes things worse. They have to put up not only with missing out on certain developments that come easily to the middle class, they have to be doubly cursed and taunted by middle-class researchers explaining what they do not have (McDermott 1987). Instinctively anthropologists resist such interpretations.

The second contextualization instead answers the question of what is wrong with their life by focusing on what others do to make their life so seemingly, or at least so documentably, miserable and unproductive. Instead of focusing on what is wrong inside the child, the second effort focuses on what is wrong outside the child in the world we give them. This effort is an improvement over the blame-the-victim approach and has the advantage of self-criticism in the acknowledgment that the world

given to them, the part that does not work for them in school, includes everyone involved in constructing "School" in America: school personnel, of course, and parents, and let us not forget the philosophers, curriculum designers, textbook publishers, testers, and educational researchers, including anthropologists, in other words, "Us."

American education has numerous made-to-order general categories for describing children in trouble, for example: deprived, different, disadvantaged, at-risk, disabled. The general categories in turn can invite finer distinctions. Children are said to be not just deprived, but cognitively, linguistically, or even culturally deprived. There seems to be no end to the ways that a child can be called culturally different, and over the last decade just about any recognizable behavior has been cited as an instance of a cultural difference. Also over the past decade, there has been an explosion of terms for the kinds of disabilities that can be ascribed to a child: attention deficit disorder is popular now, but we are never far from mentally retarded (sometimes "educably" so), dyslexic (and who can forget "mixed lateral dominance" and "strethosymbolia"), minimally brain damaged, emotionally disturbed, and so on.

Despite the plethora of categories, none of them should please the anthropologist, for none of them guarantees a balance point between showing how bad things are in the lives of children who need our help and showing how the problem is a product of cultural arrangements—*a product of our own activities*—as much as a product of isolated facts about the neurology, personality, language, or culture of any child. The facts, ma'am, are not just there to be described and the conditions alleviated. The "facts," as Pirandello warned, are filled with the "reason and sentiment" brought to the problem, the same reason and sentiment that leave the problem, once facted, once fabricated, once made the object of institutional expertise and budget lines, often falsely intransigent and unworkable. The urge to help invites an hysterical description of the problems, and American descriptions and explanations in turn leave the people who are in need of help actually worse off for our effort.

This article bears a strange title but one, we argue, appropriate to the situation. Culture, the great enabler, is disabling. *Culture* is generally taken to be a positive term. If there is anything people do naturally, it is that they live culturally, in groups, with goals, rules, expectations, abstractions, and untold complexities. Culture, as we say in our lectures, gives all we know and all the tools with which to learn more. Very nice, but every culture, we must acknowledge, also gives, often daily and eventually always, a blind side, a deaf ear, a learning problem, and a physical handicap. For every skill that people gain, there is another that is not developed; for every focus of attention, something is passed by; for every specialty, a corresponding lack. People use established cultural forms to define what they should work on, work for, in what way, and with what consequences; being in a culture is a great occasion for developing abilities, or at least for having many people think they have

abilities. People also use established cultural forms to define those who do not work on the "right" things, for the "right" reason, or in the "right" way. Being in a culture is a great occasion for developing disabilities, or at least for having many people think that they have disabilities. Being in a culture may be the only road to enhancement; it is also very dangerous.

The lethal side of culture can be seen at two levels. At the most general level, people in all cultures can use established cultural forms to disable each other. By established cultural forms, we mean anything from built physical structures that leave people locked out of public places, through bad school assessment systems that leave people from learning what is in some way needed, on to metaphors and tropes that deliver so consistently a view of people as less than they are. Notice that, in each case, there are two sides to the story. Those who are locked out of the building suffer because others are inside; those who are shut off from learning suffer because others are shown to be in the know; those who are degraded make possible the perceived purity of those momentarily spared. Perceptions of ability organize perceptions of disability and vice versa. We might just as well say:

> No ability, no disability.
> No disability, no ability.

Nunez could not explain to the people in the Country of the Blind that they were Blind:

> No sightedness, no blindness.

In exploring this first level, this article is not about disability as such but about the cultural fabrication and elaboration of disability. The examples that it develops are to tell us not so much about disabled persons or even about their situation in American culture, but about the workings of culture.[3]

At a second level, this article is about the development of disability as an institution and trope in American culture and particularly in American education. Over the past forty years, there has been developing in the United States a system of categorization which limits us to only two ways for a person to be. One way is to have been classified, occasionally remediated, and often mistreated as disabled. The other way is to be temporarily a half-step ahead of being classified, remediated, and mistreated as disabled. The cultural ascription of disability is an occasional and monumental event in most lives, and the members of our culture, at their worst and, horrors, *at their most cultured*, have been actively making the ascription of disability a constant event in the lives of an increasing number of persons.[4]

Disability has become a potent cultural fact for most American lives, and this is sometimes for the better and often for the worse. Decades ago,

Americans sent their children to school, and some did well and others not. Those who did not do well lived their lives outside of school without having to notice any particular lack in themselves. With or without school, people proceeded to a life of recording, filing, repairing, and selling (albeit often for different wages). Now Americans are raising special kinds of children, who go to special schools specially designed by people with other special qualities. In the process, everyone acquires a long history of successes and failures, "special" achievements of all sorts, that become part of the self that others will know.

Three Ways of Thinking about Culture and Disability

> For every society, the relation between normal and special modes of behavior is one of complementarity. That is obvious in the case of shamanism and spirit possession; but it would be no less true of modes of behavior which our own society refuses to group and legitimize as *vocations*. For there are individuals who, for social, historical, or physiological reasons (it does not much matter which), are sensitive to the contradictions and gaps in the social structure; and our society hands over to those individuals the task of realizing a statistical equivalent (by constituting that compliment, "abnormality," which alone can supply a definition of "the normal").
>
> —Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987[1950])

There are numerous ways to think about the nature of culture and disability. Within the variety, there is enough order to show that approaches to using each term, *culture* and *disability*, differ along a continuum of assumptions about the world, its people, and the ways they learn. In the present section, we distinguish three approaches to how the terms are used, and we contrast them to highlight the range of concepts available to anyone working on any phenomenon requiring them. The three approaches are presented in the order of how much of the world they take into account.

The Deprivation Approach

This approach takes up the possibility that people in various groups develop differently enough that their members can be shown to be measurably distinct on various developmental milestones. It usually starts with a stable set of tasks and uses them to record varying performances across persons and cultures. Low-level performances by members of a group are taken as examples of what the people of that group have not yet developed (for example, certain versions of abstraction, syllogistic reasoning, metacontextual accounts of linguistic behavior, etc.). A crude version of this argument has it that:

> We have culture, and you don't.

A Nunez version would have it that:

I have eyes, and you don't.

To unpack the assumptions underlying the argument, imagine that the world consists of a set of tasks, some of them difficult enough that some people are able to do them and others not. To make matters worse, there is a public assumption that, although society can care for those who lag behind, they are out of the running for the rewards that come with a full cultural competence.

By method and style of argument, this approach has been based mostly on psychometrics and has attracted the intuitive wrath of anthropologists who have argued that all groups, however interesting their differences, are essentially equivalent.

In the explanation of school failure, the possibility that some cultures routinely produce mature people with less development than adults in other cultures brought us the infamous cultural deprivation argument that had minority children failing in school because of impoverished and impoverishing experiences in their homes. From 1965 to 1980, much work went into making this position untenable in academic circles, but it has lived on in the common sense that most of us use to talk about school success and failure. Of late, much like the inherent intelligence and IQ bell-curve foolishness, it has seen a revival. Even anthropologists have produced a number of deprivationist descriptions, particularly in work with minorities in their own culture.

In American social science, there is a tendency to narrow every social and cultural theory into a psychological account of the order in people's behavior. Varenne (1984) makes the case for Ruth Benedict and others. As an instance of this process, consider Bourdieu's (1977) attempt to offer a social theory of the school as the tool of contemporary institutional arrangements. His central concept, *habitus*, referred to early habitualization, but in the American context *habitus* has been transformed into a theory of overwhelming early socialization. This leaves us with an account of persons unsusceptible to transformation through interaction, in short, persons with qualities that keep them succeeding, or not, depending upon their first steps through social structure. This is a roundabout way of escaping society and returning to individual persons as the proximate cause of their own failure.

The Difference Approach

This approach takes up the possibility that the ways people in different groups develop are equivalently well tuned to the demands of their cultures and, in their various ways, are equivalent paths to complete human development. It relies less on predefined tasks and instead focuses on the tasks performed by ordinary people, well beyond the reach of the laboratory, as a matter of course in different cultures. If it is possible to describe the task structure of varying cultures, then it is possible to discern what abilities and disabilities cultures might develop

(for example, quantity estimation skills among African farmers and Baltimore milk-truck dispatchers, calculation skills among African tailors, mnemonic strategies among Micronesian navigators using the skies for direction). A crude version has it that:

> We have culture, and you have a different one.

Nunez does not have a difference theory, but H. G. Wells does, at least in relation to Nunez.[5]

To unpack the assumptions underlying the argument, imagine that the world consists of a wide range of tasks and that some achieve competence on one set of tasks and others do well on other sets of tasks. Despite a liberal lament that variation is wonderful, those who cannot show the right skills at the right time in the right format are considered out of the race for the rewards of the wider culture. This approach is favored among anthropologists and ethnographically oriented psychologists, particularly those working on school problems among minorities.

In explanations of school failure, this account maintains that children from a minority cultural background mixed with teachers from a more dominant cultural background suffer enough miscommunication and alienation to give up on school, this despite the fact that they are, at least potentially, fully capable. This is by far the most popular language among anthropologists for theorizing about learning and schooling. It is closest to the anthropological instinct for talking about who are locked out of the system. Against a flood of deprivationist thinking in the early 1960s, the difference stand took shape to honor the lives of those who had been left out of the system and who were in turn being blamed for their failings. Where the deprivationist saw a poverty in the language development of black children, sociolinguists (e.g., William Labov, Roger Shuy) saw only a different dialect, grammatically as complex as any other language and lacking nothing but the respect of mainstream speakers of English. Where the deprivationist saw cognitive delays in the behavior of inner-city children, ethnographic psychologists (e.g., Michael Cole) showed how thinking was invariably complex once it was studied in relation to ongoing social situations. Where deprivationists saw immorality and the breakdown of the family among the poor, anthropologists (e.g., Elliot Liebow, Carol Stack) found caring behavior set against a breakdown in the opportunities available in the job market. Where deprivationists saw mayhem in classrooms, ethnographers (e.g., Frederick Erickson, Peg Griffin, Ray McDermott, Hugh Mehan) looked closely and saw tremendous order, some of it oppositional but an order nonetheless.

The gradual replacement of the deprivationist stand by a difference theory of why children from minority cultural groups fail in school represents a considerable achievement, but a temporary one. There is a delicate line that separates saying that minority children are missing

enough of mainstream culture to be constantly in trouble at school and saying that minority children are missing culture period. This is a delicate tension in the cultural difference stand, and it has been interesting how much an ethnographer with an allegiance, by way of the anthropological instinct, to appreciating children from other cultures gradually accepts mainstream criteria for measuring minority children as culturally deprived and disabled by their experience at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy.

For example, the well-crafted, ethnographic work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) teetered delicately on a line between showing how African American children were different from mainstream expectations and showing how unfortunate they were to be so different; the tension was resolved more often than not in favor of deprivation, most obviously so in a recent essay claiming that only the barest shreds of African American culture, or any other culture, could be found in the behavior of one of her Trackton children, now grown up, moved to Atlanta, alone, with no money, a few children, and few resources with which to build an active life (Heath 1990). The problem with the anthropological instinct is that in its rush to appreciate how a culture works, it invites only an account of how the culture works well. When applied to a minority community, where cases of things not working too well are unfortunately easy to document by applying mainstream standards, there is a tendency to blame the people in the minority groups for not having enough culture to have an easier and more recognizable life. There is little appreciation in Heath's account of how, inside American social structure, being poor and destitute is one of the quite normal and ordinary ways to exist (Varenne and McDermott 1986, n.d.). Being poor is a full way to be a part of American culture; it does not pay well, it does not promise much, and you have to put up with social workers and ethnographers gathering data about what you cannot do, but it is a well-orchestrated way to be a member of the culture. "It is such a Bore, Being always Poor," warned Langston Hughes (1959:131), and painful too, but it is a fully cultured position, one among a mutually well-organized many.

The Culture-as-Disability Approach

This approach takes up the possibility that every culture, as an historically evolved pattern of institutions, teaches people what to aspire to and hope for and marks off those who are to be noticed, handled, mistreated, and remediated as falling short. Cultures offer a wealth of positions for human beings to inhabit. Each position requires that the person inhabiting it must possess, and must be *known as possessing*, particular qualities that symbolize, and thereby constitute, the reality of their position *to others*. People are only incidentally born or early enculturated into being different. It is more important to understand how they are put into positions for being treated differently. Notice that, by this

approach, no group stands alone, nor even in a simple relation to more dominant other groups, but always in relation to the wider system of which all groups, dominant and minority, are a part.

This approach starts with the question of why any culture would develop an assumedly stable set of tasks and a theory of cognitive development, development against which people of named different kinds might be distinguished, measured, documented, remediated, and pushed aside. On what grounds could experts have assumed that the complex worlds of individuals in multiple relationships with each other would stand still enough to be characterized by simplified accounts of either their culture, their cognition, or the ties between whatever culture and cognition are taken to be? One version of the grounds for simplicity is that such theorizing is part of wider-scale institutional and political agendas, in particular, that it has been handy for the governments of modern, ideologically rationalistic, class-divided, industrial, and information-based states to isolate individuals as units of analysis and to record the workings of their minds for public scrutiny and control. The contemporary nation state is above all a record keeper, much more than it is a container of culture or an organizer of learning (Thomas et al. 1988). A crude version of this approach has it that:

> It takes a whole culture of people producing idealizations of what everyone should be and a system of measures for identifying those who fall short for us to forget that we collectively produce our disabilities and the discomforts that conventionally accompany them.

Neither Nunez nor H. G. Wells has such a theory. One cannot be disabled alone.

To unpack the assumptions underlying the argument, imagine that the world is not really a set of tasks although it is often made to look that way. Being in the world requires dealing with indefinite and unbounded tasks while struggling with the particular manner in which they have been shaped by the cultural process. In modern societies this has meant dealing with task definitions and display specifications that resist completion and lead to degradation. Competence is a fabrication, a mock-up, and people caught in America work hard to take their place in any hierarchy of competence displays. Being acquired by a position in a culture is difficult and unending work. The most arbitrary tasks can be the measure of individual development. Not only are cultures occasions for disabilities, but they actively organize ways for persons to be disabled.

By this last approach, culture refers to an organization of hopes and dreams about how the world should be. The same people, using the same materials and in ways systematically related to our hopes and dreams, also give us our problems. As Louis Dumont (1970[1960]) once starkly argued, racism is a correlate of liberal democracy: if "all men are created equal," then evidence of inequality requires the dehumanization

of many. Without a culture we would not know what our problems are; culture, or better, the people around us in culture, help to define the situation-specific, emotionally demanding, and sensuous problems that we must confront. There is a significant sense in which, or at least there is much analytic leverage to be gained by thinking as if:

without a money system, there is no debt;
without a kinship system, no orphans;
without a class system, no deprivation;
without schools, no learning disabilities;
without a working concept of truth, no liars;
without eloquence, no inarticulateness.

We might just as well say that culture fashions problems for us and, from the same sources, expects us to construct solutions. It is from life inside this trap that we often get the feeling that working on problems can make things worse.

Examples of the Acquisition of Persons by Culturally Fabricated Disabilities

> The world's definitions are one thing and the life one actually lives is quite another. One cannot allow oneself, nor can one's family, friends, or lovers—to say nothing of one's children—to live according to the world's definitions: one must find a way, perpetually, to be stronger and better than that.
>
> —James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 1985

Instances of culture *as* disability may be ubiquitous, but analyses are rare. We have been tempted to focus on the cultural creation and management of apparent biological disorders (e.g., alcoholism, autism, and schizophrenia) and the fabrication and handling of disorders more obviously the product of people being hard on each other in social interaction (e.g., the inarticulate, the insecure, the anorexic, the depressed, the lying and conniving, the alienated, the foolishly omniscient, and the full range of virtually every body being insufficiently gendered to current biases). Each would require a complex analysis. Sadly but not surprisingly, the ethnography of schooling is rich with accounts of teachers, students, administrators, and researchers disabling each other in fully cultural ways. The following discussion offers only two examples, the learning disabled child and the illiterate adult.

Learning Disabilities (LDs): The Case of Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam

1. Deprivation. The school world is a set of tasks, and people who share the LD label, because there is something wrong with them, cannot perform the tasks as quickly or as well as others.
2. Difference. The school world is a set of quite arbitrary tasks not necessarily well tied to the demands of everyday life (phonics, words

out of context, digit-span memory), and people who share the LD label are restricted in various institutional circumstances to operating on tasks in ways that reveal their weaknesses. The performance of LD people on other kinds of tasks, or even the apparent same tasks in other circumstances, can reveal their strengths.

3. Culture *as* disability. The world is not a set of tasks, at least not of the type learned, or systematically not learned, at school, but made to look that way as part of political arrangements that keep people documenting each other as failures. Over the past 40 years, school performance has become an exaggerated part of established political arrangements, and by pitting all against all in a race for measurable academic achievement on arbitrary tasks, school has become a primary site for the reproduction of inequality in access to resources. The use of the term *LD* to describe, explain, and remediate children caught in a system of everyone having to do better than everyone else is a case in point. Even if used sensitively by people trying to do the right thing for the children apparently disabled, the term has a political life that involves millions of people operating on little information about the consequences of their work. (See Coles 1987 for a social history of the category and demographics; see Mehan 1986, 1991, 1993, and Mehan et al. 1986 for a detailed and sophisticated account of how children are labeled.)

A group of us worked with Adam and his third- and fourth-grade classmates across a range of settings for over a year (Cole and Traupmann 1981; Hood et al. 1980; McDermott 1993). The settings included an oral test on experimental and psychometric tasks, classroom lessons, more relaxed after-school clubs, and one-on-one trips around New York City. We knew Adam well enough to notice differences in his behavior across the four settings that formed a continuum of competence, arbitrariness, and visibility:

The continuum is arranged from left to right and represents an increase of either:

Everyday life → After-school clubs → Classroom groups → One-to-one tests

1. task difficulty and cognitive competence (from mastery in everyday life events, at one end, to minimal performance on test materials, on the other);

2. the arbitrariness of the task and the resources the child is allowed to use in the task performance (from everyday life, where tasks are well embedded in ongoing relations among persons and environments and one can use whatever means available to get the job done, at one end, to tasks ripped from their usual contexts and isolated specifically to measure what a child can do with them unaided by anything other than his or her mind); or

3. the social visibility, and often measurability, of the task performance (from invisible as a problem of any kind in everyday life settings to painfully and documentably noticeable on tests).

How to understand the four Adams who show up in the different contexts? Our three approaches to culture and disability offer a framework for articulating Adam's situation.

By the deprivation approach, Adam is part of a group of people who display particular symptoms in the face of reading and other language-specific tasks. These are persons grouped together as LD. Adam is often described, by both diagnostic tests and school personnel, as having trouble paying attention and remembering words out of context. His symptoms are easily recognized, and his life in school is one of overcoming his disability. School is particularly difficult, because he is often embarrassed by what he cannot do that other children find comparatively automatic.

By the difference stand, Adam can be understood in terms of what he cannot do only if he is also appreciated for what he can do. One way to understand the continuum of scenes along which his behavior varies is that it moves from unusually arbitrary in its demands on the child to completely open to local circumstance. At the test end of the continuum, one must face each question armed only with one's head; if Adam has to remember a string of seven digits, he cannot ask for help, look up the information, or even take time to write it down. At the other end of the continuum, in everyday life, whatever is needed to get a job done is allowable; if Adam has to remember a telephone number, he is unconstrained in how he can proceed. In focusing on what Adam can do, we can see that he is fine in most of his life, and it is only in response to the arbitrary demands of the school culture that he is shown to be disabled.

By the culture-*as*-disability approach, Adam must be seen in terms of the people with whom he interacts and the ways in which they structure their activities together. Such an approach delivers an account not so much of Adam but of the people most immediately involved in the production of moments for him to be recognized as a learning problem. It turns out that all the people in his class—the teachers, of course, and all the children as well—are involved at various times in recognizing, identifying, displaying, mitigating, and even hiding what Adam is unable to do; if we include his tutors, the school psychologists, the local school of education where he goes for extra help (and his teachers for their degrees), if we include the researchers who show up to study him and the government agencies that finance them, the number of people found contributing to Adam being highlighted as LD grows large. If we add all the children who do well at school because Adam and others like him fail standardized tests, then most of the country is involved in Adam being LD. We use the term *culture* for the arrangements that allow so many people to be involved in Adam's being LD, for it emphasizes that, whatever problems Adam may have in his head, whether due originally to genetic or early socialization oddities, these would have had a different impact on his relationships with others if the culture that he inhabits did not focus so relentlessly on individual success and failure. The

culture that promises equality of opportunity while institutionalizing opportunities for less than half of the people to be successful in school is a culture that invites a category, LD, and its systematic application within the educational system. Adam is a display board for the problems of the system.

The Illiterate: The Case of Exterminating Literacy

1. Deprivation. The world is a text, and some people know how to read better than others. The illiterate are missing much of what they need to get around the world, and as a culture and an economy, we are being weighed down with unproductive workers who cannot read. That a high percentage of illiterate persons are in minority groups with a wide range of other problems shows what happens to people who cannot read and write in the modern world.

2. Difference. *Literacy* is a complex term covering a wide range of activities that differ from one context or culture to another. Its role in different societies—indeed, in our society—can vary quite remarkably, and it is not at all clear that it has positive or even uniform effects on a people, their ways of thinking, or their modes of production.

3. Culture *as* disability. *Illiteracy* is a recent term in our lives; it was introduced in England about a century ago and has been gathering increasing attention to the point where now just about any shift in the definition can leave different portions of the population outside its attributive powers, for example, the computer or mathematical illiterate. The circumstances of the application of the term *illiteracy* to persons then and now have been intensely political more than pedagogical or remedial (Donald 1983; Smith 1986). The fundamental and powerful assumptions of our culture are that:

- literacy is inherently good for the individual;
- literacy is good for a culture;
- literacy is difficult to acquire;
- literacy should be transmitted to illiterates in classrooms.

There is little comparative evidence to support any of these positions. Worse, and this is crucial, these positions may be least true in societies in which people believe them:

- the more people believe that literacy is difficult to acquire, the more they find reasons to explain why some read better than others and, correspondingly, why some do better than others in the economic and political measures of the society;
- the more people believe that literacy is cognitively and culturally transformative, the more they can find reasons to degrade those without such powers;
- the more people believe that literacy is best learned in classrooms, the more they ignore other sources of literacy, and the more they insist on bringing back to school those who have already "failed" to develop school literacy.

Although literacy can help transform a social information processing system and can be taught in classrooms, the very insistence on the truth of these facts can arrange conditions by which neither is possible.

With the help of a union local in New York City, a few of us (Shirley Edwards, David Harman, and Ray McDermott) ran a literacy program for the pest exterminators who service the city's housing projects. Half the members of the union were not fully licensed, and they faced lower pay and job insecurity until they passed a written exam. The exam was written on an eleventh-grade level, and it would have been easy to find the men simply not knowing enough to ever work their way through the materials. If we had simply followed the deprivation approach, there was much at hand to guide our way. Standardized tests were in place, and experts could be hired to handle the many levels of reading ability or spoken-English competence to which curriculum might be addressed. As lower-level city workers, the exterminators could be understood as missing many of the skills that they would need to get through the test; because they came from a "culturally deprived culture"—yes, we have culture, but they don't—one could only wonder how they could get through the day.

In our organization of the literacy program, we instead took a difference approach, which, by the counterexample of the exterminators' success in the program, gradually grew into a culture-*as*-disability stand. We assumed that the exterminators were not culturally deprived as much as they might be different from those with more education and that such differences were made most manifest on standardized tests. There was evidence that we were right, for the men had been working as exterminators for many years; if nothing else, we reasoned, they must know a great deal about exterminating. If we could appreciate what they can do, we might find a way to use their skills on a difficult paper-and-pencil test. To maximize their participation and to make the best use of their pest-control subculture, we hired exterminators who had passed their tests to teach those who had not. Yes, we have a culture, and so do they. The best way to initiate them to our test-taking culture, the reasoning goes, is on their own terms.

After weeks in the exterminator classrooms, we had more evidence that the men knew much more than anyone might have imagined, and even better, they were using it to help each other prepare for their exams. How could we have assumed otherwise? How could we have believed that they did not know? What is it about our culture that would have us believing that we knew better than they did? Were we, in effect, disabled when it came to seeing the knowledge base of the exterminators? One place to find an answer to this question is in the classrooms that enabled the exterminators to become book learners. They already knew a great deal about exterminating, but they had to organize their knowledge by its test relevance.

One practice test opened with the question, "Fumigants do not burn the skin. True or false?" Half the men answered "True", the other half, "False." A quick look around the room indicated that they all knew the answer; they all used fumigants in the field, and they had been careful not to have burned their hands off. Knowing that fumigants burn the skin is not the same as knowing the answer to the test question about whether fumigants burn the skin. The teacher addressed the problem directly: "Let me help you out with this one. Every time you get a question, true or false, if the question is false, the answer, automatically, is false. Why? Because fumigants burn the skin." His intervention is met with a chorus of affirmation. What is being taught is an approach to the test, not knowledge about the world. After answering incorrectly a question about the amount of pesticide in a particular application, "5 percent to 45 percent, true or false," a student was told, "You gonna go by the book, give or take 5 or 10 percent. Don't go by your own ideas." On the job, their ideas rarely had to be within "5 or 10 percent." Tests went by a different and, in terms of exterminator practice, a quite arbitrary standard of precision.

In the union classes, the men used "their" culture to run the classrooms, and they had a way of talking to each other that outsiders might not have managed well. They mobilized their community both in the classroom and beyond. Teachers and students who did not find it easy to operate in a classroom were found helping each other on lunch hours and weekends. Perhaps most exciting, they often said that it was not possible to fail at exterminating literacy forever. One could fail the big test, but one could take it over again and again. Every night they were told that the union would stick with them until they passed. By breaking through the constant threat of failure, they were reorganizing their access to school knowledge and simultaneously they were showing us how much we were the other half of their failure. As they became more visible as knowing people, our own surprise made more visible to us how much we had invested, even though we had organized the program to honor what they knew, in not seeing them as knowing people. They were not deprived independently of a school arranging for them to look that way. Nor were they different independently of the institutions making them different by keeping them at a distance from mainstream biases and expectations. For every disability and difference brought to the fore, there is a cultural, and invisible, order that is the background. The exterminators and their union subverted that background; they subverted the ritualized meritocracy that had everyone thinking they were different, or less than different. For a moment, they hid their possible difference in the privacy of their own assemblies and presented themselves as not different. They read and discussed the manual, and they passed the test; they subverted a system that claimed that "knowing how to take the test" is irrelevant to the testing itself.

By the dictates of the culture, in American education, everyone must do better than everyone else. Of course, this is both logically and social-structurally impossible. Failure is a constant possibility in American schools, and by the dictates of the normal curve, it absorbs about half the students along the way. Failure is always ready to acquire someone. The exterminators had for the most part been acquired by school failure. We, university people running the program, had been acquired by school success in exact proportion to the difficulties of those designated as failures: we above the norms and they below. It is not easy to get the threat of failure out of the classroom. The exterminators could handle whatever literacy came their way in the daily round: everyday literacy acquires its readers, and this includes the bug exterminators of New York City. Test literacy, on the contrary, is designed to acquire failures, that is, to identify and document illiterates, and this can also include the bug exterminators.

The story ends on a positive note. For a brief moment, their union made it possible for the exterminators to confront the tests successfully. Should a high rate of "success" threaten other aspects of social relationships on the job, then the test will be made more difficult and the old rate of failure will be reproduced. If social structuring processes in America must be fed by repeated identifications of failure in school and school-like institutions, then American education will continue acquiring people for its positions of failure. America will have its disabilities.

Conclusion

> There is a manner of obeying, which contains, on the part of the slave, a most withering scorn of the order.
>
> —Honoré de Balzac (1899[1845]), *The Peasants*

This essay has called on the ethnographic study of disabilities as a resource for rethinking the terms *culture* and *disability*. An analysis of the cultural construction of institutional occasions for the creation and display of various disabilities—deafness, learning disabilities, and illiteracy—reveals not broken persons but identifications neatly tuned to the workings of institutions serving political and economic ends through formal educational means.

The concept of culture has always had a utility to those with a sense for the patterns in the work people do in organizing their lives together. This phrasing displays for us an insistence that culture is not a property of individuals-as-conditioned; rather culture is an account of the world build over centuries for people to inhabit, to employ, to celebrate, and to contest. This shift from personal trait to agency, from *habitus* to "inhabitus," is essential when working in complex, divided societies. Careful work with those locked in "special" identifications always reveals the ingenuity of the ways that they resist the constraints that they cannot ignore, the withering scorn of Balzac's slave boy, the ways that

they resist being made into less than they could be, or less than they are (McDermott 1988). Anthropological work must begin with, but not stop with, a celebration of their resistance. For their resistance to what they cannot ignore also reveals the hegemony of all the institutions that originally constructed their problems. In the ethnographic study of disability, the subject shifts from Them to Us, from what is wrong with them to what is wrong with the culture that history has made a Them separate from an Us, from what is wrong with them to what is wrong with the history that has made for all of us, from what is wrong with them to what is right with them that they can tell us so well about the world we have all inherited.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of half this article makes up about a third of McDermott and Varenne, in press. To the people we thanked for help with the early effort, we want to add Douglas Campbell, Shelley Goldman, and Verna St. Denis for help with the present article. Thanks to Michael Cole for introducing McDermott to Nunez about ten years ago.

2. We work here with the distinction between United States and America as Varenne has developed it (1986, 1992).

3. Fortunately, the anthropological and comparative study of disability has developed its own literature of late. For rich examples and bibliography, see Ingstad and Whyte 1995 and Peters 1993. Gold and Duvall (1994) offer accounts of anthropologists working with disabilities in fieldwork.

4. There are almost 30,000 words in English for describing a person (D'Andrade 1985). Most are organized into contrast pairs, usually one with a positive and one with a negative connotation. For every word praising a person as able, there is another pointing to an absence; so goes good and bad, beautiful and ugly, hearing and deaf, smart and dumb, literate and illiterate, and so on. What one side of the contrast pair gives, the other side takes away; where one person has a possession, another has a poverty, that is to say, not just an absence of something valued, but an identifiable absence, more visible and louder than any presence. These are rich resources for keeping some people always in trouble for explicitly not having what others explicitly have, good materials for a culture constantly acquiring, sorting, and institutionalizing those who, for some moment at least, cannot be what is desired and required.

5. Wells may have been a better anthropologist in his fiction than in his relations with neighbors. In a response to James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Wells (1917) declared: "Like some of the best novels of the world it is a story of education; by far the most living and convincing picture that exists of an Irish Catholic upbringing." So far so good, but he continues: "the interest for the intelligent reader is the convincing revelation it makes of the limitations of a great mass of Irishmen," limitations that Wells is willing to specify for a page

on his way to a political stand on why there is "excellent reason for bearing in mind that these bright-green young people across the Channel are something quite different from the liberal English in training and tradition." There is reason to be "absolutely set against helping them" (Wells 1917:160). Wells may have had the same feeling about Spanish surname diacritics.

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