

# **From Blindness to Visual Impairment: Terminological Typology and the Social Model of Disability**

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## **Abstract**

The social model of disability holds that persons are impaired for a number of reasons, but that it is only by society that they are disabled.

As a product of that disabling society and a key component in psychocultural representation, it is terminology on which the paper focuses. Consisting of ableism, disablement and impairment, a tripartite typology is proposed, the first phase of which is rendered outmoded, the second regressive and the third progressive. This hierarchical categorisation provides a basis for the suggestion that terminology like *blindness* and *the blind* might be rejected in favour of that which denotes only visual impairment, the progressive terminology that corresponds with insights gained from the social model of disability.

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the terminology of visual impairment has corresponded with

the individual model of disability, meaning that persons frequently have been categorised in relation to the acceptance of their limitations (Solnit & Stark, 1961). Because insights gained from the social model of disability have shifted this onus of limitation from the individual to society (Oliver, 1996b), the premise of the paper is that traditional terminology must be reassessed.

The focus will be on English terms and the references primarily Anglo-American in their geographical derivation, but the proposed typology is relevant to the international readership of *Disability & Society*. This is illustrated by the fact that in Japan, the original term *mekura* is now recognised as discriminatory and has given way to the alternative *mōjin*, which is itself coming to be replaced by *me na fujiyū na kata* and *shikaku ni shōgai no aru kata*, the Japanese equivalents of the English terms *people with a visual handicap* and *people with a visual disability* (Valentine, 2002). Similarly, in order to reduce the psychosocial burden of pejorative meanings, some Bengali women in Calcutta, India, refer to the disability of their children by using the colloquial term *inconvenience* (Rao, 2001).

To support the suggestion of a typology that reflects such terminological progress, the paper will begin by drawing a parallel between the development of impairment and female subcultures. This is pertinent because the terminology that denies the social construction of

disability frequently is patriarchal in its nature, evoking the notion that people with impairments need looking after (Clark & Marsh, 2002).

Three phases in the historical development of a female subculture have been identified: (1) the feminine phase, which is distinguished by the internalisation and imitation of the dominant modes of the dominant literary culture; (2) the feminist phase, which occurs when those modes are challenged by the declaration of minority rights; and (3) the female phase, which involves self-discovery and the assertion of identity (Showalter, 1977).

This tripartite structure can be adapted to explain terminological development toward the social model of disability as ableism, disablement and impairment. The first phase becomes distinguished by the internalisation and imitation of the ableist, disabling modes that dominate the dominant culture; the second phase occurs when those modes are challenged by the declaration of disability rights; and the third phase involves self-discovery with recognition of the fact that it is ableist ideology rather than a person's impairment that causes disability.

Analysing the terminology of visual impairment in relation to this tripartite structure, the paper will expand on the hypothesis that the first phase can be distinguished by the usage and internalisation of dominant terms like *blindness* and *the blind*; the second phase occurs when those terms are questioned, appropriated and challenged with alternatives

such as *visual handicap* and *people with visual disabilities*; and the third phase is embodied by the term *people with impaired vision*, involving self-discovery and recognition that not visual impairment but ableist ideology causes disability.

### **(i) The Ableist Phase**

When considering terminological typology the first concept of which to be aware is that of ocularcentrism, a perspective that is frequently illustrated in language and metaphor:

Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors. If we actively focus our attention on them, vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of perception and language. Depending, of course, on one's outlook or point of view, the prevalence of such metaphors will be accounted an obstacle or an aid to our knowledge of reality. It is, however, no idle speculation or figment of imagination to claim that if blinded to their importance, we will damage our ability to inspect the world outside and introspect the world within. And our prospects for escaping their thrall, if indeed that is even a foreseeable goal, will be greatly

dimmed. In lieu of an exhaustive survey of such metaphors, whose scope is far too broad to allow an easy synopsis, this opening paragraph should suggest how ineluctable the modality of the visual actually is, at least in our linguistic practice. (Jay, 1993/1994, p. 1)

In essence, ocularcentrism denotes a perspective that is dominated by vision. It is therefore notable that the word *blind* derives from an Indo-European expression of confusion and obscurity, which is also the ancestor of *blunder* (Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999). The underlying idea is of someone wandering around in darkness, an example of ocularcentrism that is indicative of what has been called the way in which the 'anti-blind prejudices of society are built into our very language' (Kirtley, 1975, p. 41). This underpinning notion of blindness-darkness synonymy is ocularcentric because it takes the visual perspective as a measure by which all others are judged. It can only be from the subject position of people with vision that darkness looks like blindness.

Nevertheless, as well as in the thesaurus entry that offers 'in the dark, benighted' as a synonym for the adjective *blind* (Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999), it is evident in many literary portrayals of people with impaired vision that derivation has a significant bearing on usage:

(1) the eponymous protagonist of *Samson Agonistes* is 'dark,

dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon' (Milton, 1671/1958, line 80);

(2) *The Cricket on the Hearth* renders Bertha 'lonely in the dark' (Dickens, 1845/1954, p. 189);

(3) *Jane Eyre* reduces Rochester's 'all' to 'void darkness' (Brontë, 1847/1994, p. 426);

(4) *The Man Who Laughs* tells how Dea's existence is 'shadowed' by 'darkness' (Hugo, 1869/1991, p. 261);

(5) 'The Gift of Sight' posits Kusum 'alone, shut in the endless darkness' of her 'blindness' (Tagore, 1898/1991, p. 259);

(6) *The Light That Failed* contains more than forty references to Dick Helder's darkness (Kipling, 1891/1988);

(7) *Blindness* makes more than thirty-five direct references to darkness (Green, 1926/1996);

(8) the reader of *Death Kit* is informed that 'the blind' have to 'walk in the dark', that Hester is 'forced to live consistently in the dark', in 'endless darkness' (Sontag, 1967/2001, pp. 25, 43, 86);

(9) in *Eden Close* Andy wonders if the eponymous protagonist can 'remember what he used to look like, after all these years of darkness' (Shreve, 1989/1994, p. 142);

(10) the narrator of 'The Langoliers' describes Dinah as a 'little girl forced to live her terror in a darkness which was almost complete' (King, 1990/1991, p. 153).

It has been argued that one of Homi Bhabha's 'most important insights' is that 'the creation of stereotypes' has to be 'repeated again and again, which implies that the stereotype is in fact unstable and requires constant reinforcement' (Macey, 2001, p. 42). Accordingly, for all of the fictional examples, the fact remains that since vision is a necessary condition of neither knowing nor believing, no degree of visual impairment can place the bearer in a world of endless darkness. The whole idea of night without day is a psychocultural construct. To accept the proposed synonymy is to do likewise with the bizarre notion that when someone without sight sunbathes in the blaze of noon, switches on a lamp, stands in the glare of headlights, a spotlight, flashlight or whatever, he or she does so in complete darkness. The reality is that the light does not cease to exist, does not, as Kipling would have it, fail, but simply remains unseen by persons whose visual impairment is total.

Predicated on such a spurious link with darkness, it is no surprise that a key problem with the word *blind* is that it denotes much that bears no intrinsic relation to visual impairment. The Encarta World English Dictionary (1999), for example, provides thirteen entries for the adjectival form alone:

**blind****blind** [blɪnd] *adjective*

- 1. unable to see:** unable to see, permanently or temporarily
- 2. unable to recognize:** unwilling or unable to understand something • *blind to the consequences*
- 3. uncontrollable:** so extreme and uncontrollable as to make somebody behave irrationally • *blind rage* • *blind fear*
- 4. unquestioning:** not based on fact and usually total and unquestioning • *blind prejudice*
- 5. lacking awareness** • *a blind stupor*
- 6. not giving a clear view:** not giving a clear view and possibly dangerous • *a blind corner*
- 7. SEWING made on underside of fabric:** hidden from sight on the underside of a fabric
- 8. without doors or windows:** without doors or windows, or not enclosing an open space
- 9. closed at one end:** closed off at one end • *a blind unused tunnel*
- 10. done without looking:** done without looking or while unable to see • *blind taste tests*
- 11. done unprepared:** done without preparation or the

relevant information • *a blind presentation*

**12.with information concealed for unprejudiced result:**

used to describe scientific experiments or similar evaluations in which information is withheld in order to obtain an unprejudiced result

**13.BOTANY without a growing point:** used to describe a plant in which growth stops because the growing point is damaged. It may be caused by pests, nutrient deficiency, waterlogging of the soil, or drought.

While the first definition pertains to people with impaired vision, the third alludes to the myth in which the angered Samson shakes to the ground an inhabited temple, defining blind rage and blind fear as so extreme and uncontrollable as to make somebody behave irrationally. Similarly, though botanical in its usage, the reference to a plant's lack of a growing point resonates with the myth in which Oedipus cuts off his generative power by gouging out his eyes, the Sophoclean drama on which the psychoanalytic synonymy between blindness and castration is predicated.

The ten remaining definitions can be divided into the categories of ignorance and concealment. In the former, a person is rendered blind to the consequence of her or his actions if unwilling or unable to understand something; to be in a blind stupor is to be lacking awareness; blind

prejudice is an attitude that is not based on fact and is usually total and unquestioning; a blind taste test is done without looking; and a blind presentation is done without preparation or the relevant information. In the second category, pertaining to concealment, a blind corner does not give a clear view and is possibly dangerous; a blind stitch is hidden from sight on the underside of a fabric; a blind wall is without doors or windows; a blind experiment is one in which information is withheld in order to obtain an unprejudiced result; and a blind tunnel is closed off at one end. In other words, of the thirteen entries, twelve are negative and only one pertains to visual impairment or people with impaired vision.

Since the dictionary also offers a number of synonyms, which, in addition to those that pertain to visual impairment, consists of insensible, screened, dim-sighted, inattentive, indiscriminating, misjudging, biased, ignorant, unwise, involuntary, obstinate, impassive, unastonished and dead drunk, it is demonstrable in the adjectival usages alone that the word *blind* means much more than visual impairment.

Consideration must also be given to definitions of the adverb and transitive verb. The dictionary provides three meanings for the adverb: (1) that which is done without prior examination or preparation, as in one should not purchase livestock blind; (2) using information from aircraft instruments without being able to see; and (3) something that is done totally or utterly, as in someone robbed her or his clients blind. Four

definitions are provided for the transitive verb: (1) to make somebody permanently unable to see; (2) to make somebody temporarily unable to see, as in someone who is blinded by the lights; (3) to make somebody unable to judge or act rationally, as in blinded by rage; and (4) to make it difficult for somebody to understand something, as in blinded by statistics. Of these seven definitions, therefore, most are derogatory and only one pertains to visual impairment or people with impaired vision.

Though fairly representative, the sample from the Encarta World English Dictionary (1999) is by no means definitive. Indeed, a more extensive study of Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1966) found one hundred and fifty-five citations under *blind* and its grammatical variants, of which only fourteen percent, one category, pertained to impaired vision (Kirtley, 1975, pp. 38-41). The remaining nine categories were summarised as:

- (1) concealment, screening, deception;
- (2) closed or closed at one end, passing only partially through, filled, empty, plugged up, blocked, covered;
- (3) defective, abortive, diseased, incapacitated, stupefied, dead, sterile, worthless, poisonous, pestiferous;
- (4) animals;
- (5) lacking intensity, luster, coloring or gilding;
- (6) ignorance, lacking mental vision, judgment or plausibility,

carelessness;

(7) unintelligibility, indiscernibility, obscurity;

(8) purposeless, fortuitous;

(9) profanity.

Again the problem is that the meanings are both multiple and pejorative, perhaps having more of a link with darkness and the traditional fear of the dark than with visual impairment.

Since it has been asserted that common metaphors such as ‘turn a blind eye’ reinforce an ‘impression of incapacity and abnormality’ (Barnes & Mercer, 2003, p. 17), that the word *blind* contains ‘moral and ethical implications’ (Davis, 1995, p. 5), it should be emphasised that there are connotations as well as denotations to consider. When the word *blind* is used as a noun and combined with the definite article, the connotation is of homogeneity. Individuality is displaced in favour of a jaded, representational construct, “the blind”. This term does not only imply the existence of a homogenous group, but of one that is antithetical to “the sighted”, deviant in relation to an assumed normalcy. Indeed, in accordance with the Derridean, deconstructive process of *différance*, the term belongs to a binary set, connoting as much about what it is not as about what it is. That is to say, the normalcy of “the sighted” depends on a notion of deviance in “the blind”, the metaphorical light in the life of the former on a notion of darkness in that of the latter.

It has been argued by one psychologist that this term *the blind* ‘places a barrier between our ability to empathize with another human being who may just happen to be unable to see, but who is otherwise embedded in the same human condition as ourselves’ (Dodds, 1993, p. 5). The paradox is that this use of the pronouns *our* and *ourselves* exemplifies the first phase in the proposed typology, implying a construct of “the sighted”, an ableist assumption that the reader of the psychological study must have unimpaired vision. Bearing in mind that Dodds’s argument is meant to be against the erection of psychosocial barriers, this is paradoxical because it reveals a prejudiced, “them and us” mentality, positing “the blind” as object in relation to the subject position of not only the Implied Author but the Implied Reader.

## **(ii) The Disablement Phase**

Illustrating the second phase in the proposed typology, the traditional scenario is sometimes subverted through a form of terminological appropriation. For example, upheld for being of particular interest to blind and partially sighted people, the informative BBC Radio 4 programme *In Touch* frequently refers to people with impaired vision by employing the pronouns *us* and *we*. This means that “the sighted” are posited as object in relation to the subject position of not only the presenter and the other contributors, but the Implied Listener. As refreshing as they might seem,

the problem with this and other such appropriations is that they maintain the binary logic of “them and us”, a logic to which the erection of psychosocial barriers is integral. For this reason the terminology cannot be categorised higher than the second phase in the proposed typology.

Despite the multitude of extraneous factors, traditional terminology is endorsed at a titular level by a number of important publications that includes *Taubblind*, *The World Blind*, *The International Newsletter of Deafblind People*, *Fighting Blindness*, *Deafblind American*, *Deafblind Perspectives* and *Blind Apple User Discussions*; as well as by a host of significant organisations that includes the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB), the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA), Action for Blind People (ABP), the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and so on.

An argument that has been advanced by the latter of these organisations is that it is a strained and ludicrous endeavour to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as *blindness*, *blind*, *the blind*, *blind person* or *blind persons* (Jernigan, 1993). Though the paper already has refuted the assertion of straightforwardness and respectability with the amassing of pejorative denotations and connotations, it should be recognised that while terms like *blindness* and *the blind* are typical of the first phase in the proposed typology, appropriation is indicative of the second. To use outmoded terminology is

regressive, but it cannot be denied that the declaration of ownership constitutes a response to ableist traditions.

That said, the NFB has gone so far as to condemn usage of person-first phrases such as *people who are blind* and *persons who are blind*, believing that while harmless' in 'occasional and ordinary speech they are totally unacceptable as a form of political correctness (Jernigan, 1993). Rather than to emphasise, the aim of person-first terminology is to reflect that the subject is primarily a person, that her or his eye condition is not an ontologically diminishing factor. For this very reason it will be classified as progressive in the conclusion. Yet, for the NFB, reference to people or persons who are blind is overly defensive, implying shame instead of true equality, portraying the blind as touchy and belligerent. The thinking is that since blindness is not a shameful characteristic, a "blind" person needs to be called a person who is "blind" no more than, say, an intelligent person needs to be referred to as a person who is intelligent. Again the problem is that the argument does not recognise the multitude of pejorative denotations and connotations that are attached to the term *blindness*.

Before considering alternative terminology it is necessary to address four criticisms that have been aimed at the whole notion of change: (1) ineffectuality; (2) confusion; (3) political correctness; and (4) irrelevance. Firstly, it has been argued that new terminology is `not likely

to be effective unless such attitudes have already improved, for without this change, the older, prejudicial meanings would simply become reattached to the liberalized vocabulary' (Kirtley, 1975, p. 41). This is true, but so is the unlikelihood that attitudes will improve through the usage of ableist terminology to which prejudicial meanings are inherent.

Secondly, it has been pointed out that at a personal level what is important is the 'speed and naturalness with which one can adapt one's language to fit one's developing thought', that until a 'form of words has been fully internalised, practised, corrected and recorrected, there will be hesitation and clumsy circumlocution' (Roaf, 1992, p. 340). For this reason it is likely to be argued that new terminology will cause confusion, but confusion is already an effect of the British registration system, which creates the juxtapositions of a blind person who can read print and a partially sighted person who cannot, a partially sighted person who requires assistance with mobility and a blind person who does not.

Thirdly, while a thesaurus entry in the Encarta World English Dictionary (1999) offers 'visually challenged' as a synonym for the adjective *blind*, the term has been used as a way of 'poking fun' at the 'current mania to stick a verbal smiley face on any human condition that deviates from the perceived norm' (Kleege, 1999, p. 10). The problem is that the charge of political correctness is made not only by persons who want to appropriate ableist terminology, but by 'those who want to retain

the right to be freely abusive' (Valentine, 2002, p. 219).

Finally, the debate remains relevant because terminology is a 'crucial' aspect of the 'language that contributes' to the 'construction of disability' (Barton, 2001, p. 170). For example, the term "special educational needs" frequently has been used to justify the segregation of children with impairments (Barnes, 1993). Indeed, since comparable terminology was employed to justify the attempted genocide of people with impairments, the 'extermination of 'around a quarter of a million disabled people' in Nazi Germany (Humphries & Gordon, 1992, p. 101), the debate is becoming increasingly relevant due to the rise of the far right in France, Italy, Austria and parts of Britain today.

When considering alternatives the first point to recognise is that, while being less loaded with extraneous meanings, as umbrella terms *the unsighted* and *the sightless* are erroneous with or without the definite article. The former implies congenital sight loss, which is not a necessary condition of persons who are registered as "blind". The latter denotes the absence of sight, but only eighteen percent of 'registrably blind' persons have nothing more than light perception (Bruce et al, 1991, p. 6), and 'only about 10 percent' have a 'complete absence of any visual experience' (Kleege, 1999, p. 14). Indeed, illustrative of the first phase in the proposed typology, if people with useful residual vision consider themselves sightless, or those with adventitious sightlessness consider

themselves unsighted, they can be said to internalise the dominant discourse.

Of the terms that illustrate the second phase in the proposed typology, the most frequently used is *visual handicap*. Derived not from cap-in-hand begging as it is sometimes thought, but from the mid seventeenth-century hand in cap betting game, the sporting implication of this term is literally that superior people are allocated a visual impairment in order that they become equal to their inferior counterparts. Due to its ascription of alterity, this evocation of compensatory powers would be disturbing in itself, but a late sense ‘switched from the idea of a superior competitor being weighed down to a newer sense of an inferior unduly burdened with a disability’ (Davis, 1995, p. xiii). The term is defined as offensive (Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999), but can be classified in the second phase of progress because it constitutes a response to, rather than an aspect of, ableism. Though difficult to imagine now, less than four decades ago the term was considered the least opprobrious alternative to ‘blindness’ (van Weelden, 1967).

Nevertheless, a decade or so later, with the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH-1), the World Health Organisation (WHO) perpetuated notions of lack and “normalcy” by defining handicap as a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, which limited or prevented the

fulfilment of a role that was normal (depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors) for that individual (Wood, 1980). The problem with such definitions will be considered later in the paper, but it is notable that this positing of impairment as the cause of disadvantage contrasts with the contention that *handicap* is meant to denote the result of obstacles that are created by social structures and attitudes (Scheer & Groce, 1988).

Other inadequate terminological responses to ableism include *visual inhibition* (Bolt, 2003) and its slightly less unwieldy variation *inhibited vision*, which have proven regressive due to the connotations of ‘someone who is repressed and awkward, as in an inhibited person’ (Bolt, 2004b, p. 133). Consequently, it has been suggested that it might be preferable to draw on the work of American disability studies, to take the term *people with disabilities* to the more specific level of *persons with visual disabilities*. The contention is that with no ascription of homogeneity or other such inaccuracies, this umbrella term could be applied to the “group” of persons who are, after all, of no particular class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, persons with and without multiple impairments, persons who, with varying degrees of severity, have numerous congenital and adventitious eye conditions (Bolt, 2004a). Denoting both subjectivity and disability, this term, *persons with visual disabilities*, challenges the dominant, ableist mode of discourse, thereby signifying the second phase of discursive progress.

The problem is that the word *disability* is itself a product of ableist ideology, that even when seized on in an endeavour to control its usage, 'the term still serves at least two masters' (Davis, 1995, p. xv). Hence, the appropriation of this term is as regressive as is that of *blindness*, constituting a response to, but not the displacement of, ableist ideology.

### **(iii) The Impairment Phase**

Progress from the second to the third phase in the proposed typology is suggested by the titles of publications such as *Visual Impairment Research*, *The British Journal of Visual Impairment* and *The Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*. For a terminological shift to be progressive, it must significantly reduce extraneous and erroneous meanings. It is therefore relevant that the following definition from the Encarta World English Dictionary (1999) contrasts so harshly with the list of thirteen adjectival usages that is provided for the word *blind*:

#### **impaired**

**impaired** [im paírd] *adjective*

**absent or lessened:** with something specified that is absent or lessened, either temporarily or permanently (*usually used in combination*) • *hearing-impaired*

According to this definition, the word *impaired* denotes nothing more than impairment and is therefore pertinent to the discourse of the social

model of disability. It enables recognition of the fact that people are not with, but frequently confronted by, disabilities.

Before considering the social model in more detail it is important to expand on the problems with previous approaches. The individual and medical models perceived and classified disability in terms of a meta-narrative of 'deviance, lack and tragedy', and assumed it to be 'logically separate from and inferior to "normalcy"' (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 2). This reification of "normalcy" and emphasis on lack were evident when the WHO defined impairment as the loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function; and, resulting from that impairment, disability as the restriction or lack of the ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range that was considered normal (Wood, 1980). Because in these terms progress involved rehabilitation if not cure, the WHO scheme was met with opposition when Disabled People's International redefined impairment as the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment; and disability as the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers (DPI, 1982). In other words, notwithstanding its implicit reification of normalcy, the DPI definition recognised the potential for progress in the removal of barriers, instead of in rehabilitation and cure, it posited disability in a causal relationship with

society rather than impairment.

The social model has been defined as a concerted shift from the emphasis on individual impairments as the cause of disability to the way in which physical, cultural and social environments exclude or disadvantage people who are labelled as disabled (Barnes, 2001). Indeed, revisions of the ICID-1 have resulted in the International Classification of Functioning and Disability (ICIDH-2, 2001), a nominal change that was accompanied by two key improvements: (1) a shift in emphasis from negative descriptions of impairments, disabilities and handicaps to more neutral descriptions of BODY FUNCTIONS, BODY STRUCTURES, ACTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATION; and (2) the recognition of environmental factors.

The latter is imperative because a person's vision might be impaired due to retinitis pygmentosa, retinal detachment, cataracts, diabetes, glaucoma, macular degeneration, tumours, an injury to the optic nerve and so on, but only when living in an ableist society, facing continual assumptions about visual acuity and impairment, will that person be disabled. For instance, a building society customer with impaired vision is likely to be disabled when her or his account statements arrive in standard print; someone who arranges to meet friends for a meal is disabled if her or his guide dog is not allowed into the designated restaurant; a person who uses a white cane for mobility is disabled if he or she walks into the overhanging branches of an unkempt

tree; and a supermarket customer with impaired vision might be disabled if he or she is not offered assistance. Pertaining to employment, housing, transport, education, training and leisure, this list of examples goes on and on, but the common factor is that disability can be avoided through some kind of social reform.

The shift away from the individual model is reflected in person-first terminology, for people with impaired vision are not necessarily disabled, but when they are so, the society in which they live is necessarily disabling. Indeed, a disabling society is itself disabled, for the thwarted potential of people with impairments constitutes the thwarted potential of that society as a whole. For example, the world of literature would be a far lesser place if the onset of visual impairment had been earlier in the careers of John Milton, James Joyce and Jorg Luis Borges. It was only because the quality of their work had already been recognised that they were able to continue working as their vision became impaired; it is very unlikely that they could have started careers as writers with severely impaired vision. From this it follows that not only authors but the literary canon will benefit from advances in the production of Braille, large print, audio books and screenreading computer software, from reading matter and a means of writing that are accessible to people with impaired vision.

Before concluding it should be emphasised that the third phase in the proposed typology is not static but progressive, that while terms like

*people with impaired vision and visual impairment* correspond with the social model of disability, there is still room for improvement. The ongoing power and profundity of insights gained from the social model of disability cannot be denied, but nor can the fact that limitation is intrinsic to the structure of any model. A cluster of perceptions will be enabled and even triggered, but the byproduct of a new focus is new marginalisation. Accordingly, the postmodernist contention is that the social model seeks to 'explain' disability universally, creating totalizing narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people's lives and knowledge (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p.14). The core of the argument is that in the past few decades the metanarrative of deviance, lack and tragedy has been troubled by perceptions gained from the social model of disability, but the grand assertion that people are disabled only by society can itself be interpreted as a metanarrative - meaning that it attempts to translate alternative accounts into its own language, to suppress all objections to what it is saying (Macey, 2001).

The counter argument is that if models are expected to explain, rather than aid understanding, they are bound to be found wanting (Oliver, 1996a). Models are constructed so that an object can be considered in different ways and under different conditions; they are artificial and do not explain anything; rather they enable the perception of something that is not understood, allowing for viewpoints that are not

available in reality and providing a multi-dimensioned replica that can trigger insights that otherwise might not develop (Finkelstein, 2001). This argument can be illustrated with reference to the assertion that the social model of disability cannot be applied to resolve some of the restrictions that are imposed by visual impairment, such as the inability to recognise people and read or emit non-verbal cues in social interactions (French, 1993). This inability to recognise people can be said to arise from a lack in verbal communication, since the dominant social convention is to acknowledge a person by speaking to her or him, but not to identify one's self nominally. The person who breaks the convention and offers her or his name when greeting people with impaired vision is thereby contributing to an enabling society. This shift away from the ocularcentric privileging of visible identity perpetuates a social convention that is not disabling to people with impaired vision.

The same might be said in response to the assertion that visual impairment imposes an inability to read non-verbal cues in social interactions, but the point about emitting these cues demands reference to the concept of ophthalmocentrism. This differs from ocularcentrism because it denotes a perspective that is dominated by not only the act but the instrument of vision, advancing notions of eyes that are sexy, innocent, hot, cold, hard, soft, kind, evil, honest, lying, windows to the soul and so on. That is to say, visual impairment might well impose an

inability to hold or make eye contact, but the privileging of this form of communication is a product of society. What this analysis demonstrates is that although postmodern theory recognises the epistemological value of experiential knowledge, indeed, of a multiplicity of 'discontinuous and fragmentary' narratives (Macey, 2001, p. 236), it cannot be denied that the social model of disability triggers insights that otherwise might not develop.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has favoured terminology that recognises a continuum of visual impairment, a spectrum that spans vision that is both unimpaired and absent. This constitutes a departure from the "them and us" terminology that is illustrative of not only the first phase but the second phase in the proposed typology. That said, it is perhaps inevitable that, even at the third phase, higher than average visual acuity will come to be represented at one end of the scale and the complete lack of vision at the other. The solution to this problem is in the recognition of the continuity by which these extremes are joined, the use of person-first terms that are indicative of the fact that the subject position is common across the spectrum - that is, to people with impaired vision and people with unimpaired vision alike. In this sense the typology corresponds with the postmodernist argument that everyone is impaired, that everyone

has and remains vulnerable to limitations, that everyone inevitably will experience functional loss and morbidity (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). Therefore the terms *visual impairment* and *people with impaired vision* are far more appropriate than are their traditional counterparts.

Indeed, the proposed typology has provided insight into usage of the term *blindness* that renders it on a par with the terms *cripple*, *spastic*, *wobbler*, *mongol* and so on, the eradication of which few would argue against (Oliver, 1996a). In so far as it does not reflect the continuum of visual impairment, the terminological typology of *the sighted* and *the blind* is simplistic and erroneous. The two constructs to which these terms apply are antithetical to each other and within the dominant, ableist discourse the former takes political precedence over the latter. This is an important point on which to conclude because, irrespective of context, irrespective of appropriation or even irony, every explicit reference to “the blind” constitutes an implicit reference to “the sighted”, a perpetuation of binary logic and its intrinsic division.

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