

# The Paradox of Seeing the Disabled

by Chesney Woodchek

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viewing Tiffany as an outsider, as someone whose physical condition somehow elicits an exceptional response from others. As this video and others like it spread rapidly through social media, they do nothing to foster our understanding of disabilities and instead propagate the stereotype that a disabled person is helpless and incomplete. Stereotypes such as this permeate our society, manifesting in social representations of the disabled, which includes the language our culture uses to describe the disabled, and images circulated via the web that portray the disabled in demeaning ways.

There are multiple recordings of that proposal demonstrate the ways media can easily skew reality and intentions. The first video, referenced above, is one that *USA Today*, an American middle-market newspaper, cropped and edited to create a feel-good online video clip. However, there is a raw video clip available from *ABC News* that reveals Tiffany's complete response to the situation. At the beginning, Tiffany walks outside the school and then is obviously terrified by everything that is going on around her, and maybe even by the fact that she is at the center of attention. There is music playing and at least twenty-five people watching her. Tiffany is almost in tears, but the woman she is holding on to, most likely her special education teacher, tells her, "Go, go, Tiff, it's a prom-posa." Eventually, the football player comes right up to her and marches her through the herd of people with signs that announce his intentions to take Tiffany to prom. The entire time, Tiffany is cowering and hiding her face, almost in tears. No one who is a part of this situation seems to have even considered that Tiffany, who lives with Prader-Willi syndrome, may not want extra attention. The football player got what he wanted, a date to prom, but Tiffany never asked to be the star of an inspirational online video. The video of Tiffany's raw reaction contrasted with the edited video posted by *USA Today* demonstrates how media can easily crop and edit situations to make them appear a certain way. In

"He got the school to play her favorite song, he bought her flowers, classmates held up signs of support, and Tiffany Gay said yes" ("See"). These words begin a video that went viral featuring a high school girl with Prader-Willi syndrome<sup>1</sup> getting asked to prom by the school's middle linebacker. Many of us have seen videos like it circulating on *Facebook* or *Twitter* and felt inspired by the good intentions they portray. As we watch videos like this, it is easy to think, "Isn't it incredibly selfless of a football player to take a girl like Tiffany Gay to his prom? He must be a great kid." While it can appear sweet and positive, it is actually dehumanizing to Tiffany. To clarify, I do not see anything wrong with this "prom-posa" if the football player truly has selfless motives for taking Tiffany as his date to prom. The actual problem lies in how the media portrayed this event, essentially lifting the football player to the status of hero and reducing Tiffany to the recipient of his benevolent act of charity. The football player and his actions are glorified, but the audience is left

<sup>1</sup>According to Mayo Clinic's website, Prader-Willi syndrome is a rare genetic disorder that is present at birth and results in a range of physical, mental, and behavioral problems. A person with this disorder is also at high risk for obesity because he/she never feels full and instead is constantly hungry.

this case, *USA Today* chose not to show Tiffany's initial terror and discomfort, but instead to focus on how lucky Tiffany should feel as the recipient of this popular boy's attention. It is far too easy for this video and other false representations of disability to spread through social media and influence the audience's views of people with disabilities.

False representations over time lead to the formation of stereotypes and create social stigma. Andrew A. Phemister and Nancy M. Crewe define social stigma as "a socially constructed phenomenon that may serve as a reminder to persons with visible disabilities that society views them as 'different' and devalues them as a result" (33). In effect, social stigma causes the able-bodied community to "other" those with disabilities, meaning that they view the disabled as separate from "normal" society. Stigma is obvious when someone uses derogatory language to describe a person with disabilities as a "crip" or a "freak," but more often, our society others those with disabilities in subtler ways, as in the video of Tiffany Gay. The *USA Today* video stigmatizes Tiffany by portraying her as the object of the football player's good intentions and makes it seem as if she should be forever grateful to this boy for his act of kindness to her. As the video of Tiffany went viral on the Internet, it made both her and her disability hypervisible to the rest of society. Such mechanical reproduction of images of people with disabilities reduces the disabled person to a spectacle for society to gaze upon.

But the paradox of society's view of the disabled is that while a person's physically apparent disability makes them hypervisible to society, it simultaneously makes them invisible in public settings because people now see them as incapable of conventional successes and failures, and mainstream society ends up passing them over. The consequence of these perceptions of the disabled is that it fosters an environment of not only blatant, but also subtle discrimination.

Whether blatant or subtle, and regardless of intention, media representations of the disabled frequently make a spectacle of people with disabilities. The disabled person becomes hypervisible in a way that either stigmatizes or idealizes them in relation to their disability. Tiffany's perspective and actual experience of the moment are erased by *USA Today*. Yet, despite hypervisibility in media portrayals, the disabled remain invisible to the able-bodied community, marginalized by society while pursuing life goals such as going to college or getting a job. The paradox of this hypervisibility and invisibility that the disabled community experiences due to media representations and social stigma has devastating effects upon the way people with disabilities view themselves and also limits public understanding of disabled person's individual experiences and disposition.

### **Physical Disabilities, Social Stigma, and Popular Culture**

Society tends to other and devalue those with a visible disability because of pre-existing social stigma. In a study conducted by Kashina Harma, Anne Gombert, and Jean-Yves Roussey, this type of preconceived social stigma is called "social representation," which these researchers define as "the set of knowledge, beliefs and opinions about a given social object that are shared by a group" (312). Social representation, then, is shaped by a society's current norms for how people should look and act. Harma, Gombert, and Roussey conclude that "people whose bodies, senses and minds are mostly in good working order represent the social 'norm', and individuals with disabilities constitute an exception to that 'norm' and are thus regarded as 'different'" (324). People who fall outside of society's accepted norms are almost always othered by society. It is when this social distinction arises that people start to stigmatize the disabled by placing them outside of a category they would otherwise belong to. Because stigmatization is often based on physical

## Woodchek, "The Paradox of Seeing the Disabled"

appearances, it follows that the degree to which the disability is visible affects how society sees the disabled person as a whole. This assumption is supported by the results of an experiment that Harma, Gombert, and Roussey conducted in which they took a sample of multiple students' "social representation of otherness" by analyzing their answers to a free-response question. They found that the students more consistently focused on the physical attributes of disabled students than on their personality traits and concluded, "Physical appearance thus appears to carry more weight in the social representation of otherness when individuals are confronted with visible signs of this otherness" (Harma, et al., 323). So, the more visible the disability, the more "different" or removed the person with the disability appears from the so-called norms of society such as having a young, slim, and attractive body. Consequently, there is a spectrum upon which the able-bodied community views and therefore stigmatizes disabled persons dependent upon the visibility of the disability itself. When people have disabilities that affect physical appearance, such as Tiffany Gay's Prader-Willi syndrome, it frequently means they do not meet cultural standard of normality and beauty and can be stigmatized as a result. This stigmatization of the visibility of disability is the underlying factor that leads our society to both consciously and subconsciously categorize disabled persons as "other."

Portrayals of the disabled community in popular culture and media continue to strongly foster social stigma and stereotypes largely due to the general lack of education and real-life experience that most able-bodied people have with disabled people. As a result, different aspects of culture propagate false and pre-conceived notions about the disabled that then turn into stigmatization and stereotyping, which are both forms of othering. Stereotypes of disabilities are usually based on some sort of true experience with disabilities that an individual

then exaggerates or misconstrues. An example is that they are not fully human because they are not able to think, behave, or function on accepted or average societal levels. Another is that if the handicapped person somehow manages to live successfully, he or she is exceptional and deserves both attention and praise. Marilynn Phillips discusses stereotypes in relation to disabilities, saying that stereotypes often are expressed in words such as clichés, common sayings, and slogans (849). Because stereotypes are often pointed speech, they affect the way society sees and treats people with disabilities. "For example, although the phrase 'damaged goods' more often refers to products than to people, it can be metaphorically transferred from product to person in a society which idealizes commodity, uniformity, and predictability. Those failing to meet such standards are re-classified as irregulars, seconds, damaged goods" (Phillips 850). As society hears and uses terms such as "damaged good" or "irregular" to refer to a person in the disabled community, it essentially others that person, changing the way society views and interacts with the disabled.

Words have the potential to lessen people to a fraction of their whole selves by degrading them. In Phillips asked a disabled woman named Bonnie about her personal experience with stereotypes. Bonnie said that words that reduce people to their physiological parts both devalue the social self and damage the private self (Phillips 851). For Bonnie, stereotypes harmed not only how society saw her, but how she saw herself. The effect of demeaning words that foster a spirit of othering extends beyond how society views the disabled and actually effects a disabled person's own sense of self-worth. Citing Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman, Phillips concludes, "Such words and images effectively penetrate cultural consciousness, predicting social interactions" (851). The stereotypes embedded in our society through culture and media have so penetrated the public's

mind that they not only affect how the able-bodied community sees those with disabilities, but also affect how they see themselves.

Some of the social stigma that surrounds disability is due to pre-existing negative ideas about the disabled within elements of popular culture such as movies and films. In contemporary Western societies, popular culture influences audiences both consciously and subconsciously, so TV and film portrayals of social issues such as disability have a strong effect on the way that mainstream society thinks about and views the disabled. This power of TV and film could be used to increase understanding and foster an inclusive environment to bring the disabled and able-bodied communities together if these media were used in an appropriate manner. However, TV and film do a demonstrably poor job of accurately representing the disabled. Jessica Evans reports that "Studies of the representation of disabled people have shown that disabled people are habitually screened out of television, fiction, and documentary programmes or else occur in a limited number of roles" (275). It is not often that disabled people are shown in advertisements or chosen for roles in blockbuster films today; however, when they are, the physically impaired character is often shown as the villain or as representing some evil force. Classic examples of this type of cultural representation of the disabled are Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, and Erik in *Phantom of the Opera*. A more contemporary example is the character Elijah Price in *Unbreakable*. Elijah has *osteogenesis imperfecta*, is confined to a wheelchair, and not surprisingly, is the villain of the film. It is as if these films have assumed that a deformed body leads to a deformed soul. The overt association of disability with moral corruption or inherent badness is largely assumed in visual culture and affects society's notions about the disabled, which leads to their social stigmatization. As extreme as the association is between disability and corruption, it was equally extreme and harmful

when the media portrayed Tiffany Gay as a completely innocent, young girl who should feel nothing but grateful and honored by the attention she received from a football player. Movies, films, and even *You Tube* videos can falsely portray disabilities and subtly contribute to social stigmatization and stereotyping.

### **Interrogating Inspirational Stories**

However, not all cultural representations of disability are overtly offensive—much of the time the media's presentation of disabilities is destructive in a very subtle way, or spun in a positive light so that the producers and viewers may not even be aware of its dehumanizing affects. Images and videos casting a disabled person in an inspirational light are prevalent throughout social media, as well as in newspapers and daytime TV. Inspirational stories like the one about a prom-posal can reduce the feelings and thoughts of the disabled person to zero for the sake of inspiring the audience. The



*Your excuse is invalid.*

*This motivational meme was one of several "Your Excuse Is Invalid" memes that circulated around the internet in 2016 and 2017. The memes generally use images of elderly or differently-abled people to argue that (presumably) able-bodied readers have no excuse not to perform their best.*

## Woodchek, "The Paradox of Seeing the Disabled"

same distortion can happen with photos. The image on the previous page is an example of a picture that someone turned into a meme to motivate and inspire those who see it. But really, it is exploiting this boy because the meme causes an able-bodied viewer to feel better about his or her life when they compare it to the life of the disabled little boy. Thousands of viewers circulated this image and others like it through social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This image creates a spectacle of the young boy captured in the picture and reduces him from a person to a fixture of the web that can be "favorited" and "liked." While at first glance this image might seem cute and inspirational, it really is exploitative of this boy and of people with disabilities in general.

In contrast to representing the disabled as villains, inspirational portrayals seem like a step forward in overcoming social stigma and not only accepting, but celebrating, the disabled. Some news producers and heads of charities argue that because living life as a disabled person is extremely difficult both mentally and physically, our culture should honor them by looking to them for inspiration and holding them up as symbols of overcoming adversity. But in actuality, the idealization of the life of the disabled as something extraordinary fails to bring them into society, and does nothing to encourage any sort of mutual understanding between able-bodied and disabled people. Instead, it only sustains the contrast between these two communities and subtly encourages a segregated "us and them" social mentality. Stella Young, a comedian who is paralyzed and wheelchair bound, asked her audience at a 2014 *Ted Talk* to reassess how they see the disabled and challenged them not to believe the lie that "disability makes you exceptional." She said that many people think this way simply because they have only ever experienced disabled people as "objects of inspiration" (Young). Young goes on to undermine the idea that such photos are useful

because they create inspirational perceptions by categorizing them as "inspiration porn" in which the disabled person is objectified so that able-bodied people can feel better about their own lives. According to Young, "The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, 'Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person'." Having thoughts like these constitutes the very act of othering those with disabilities because we are essentially comparing our lives to the life of a disabled person and placing them in a category separate from how we see ourselves and the rest of "normal" society. Perceiving the disabled strictly as overcomers and as sources for stories to inspire us is a common, exploitative, and harmful form of othering that only perpetuates the stigma of disability.

The type of othering that occurs via media circulation of inspirational photos and stories is related to the type of othering that occurs with charities. While charities' intentions are usually to help the disabled, they often promote their projects by using demeaning images of disabled people. Charities often use sad or undignified images of the disabled to play upon people's feelings of pity and to stimulate people to give their money or time. But if feelings of pity or humanitarian acts are rooted in the thought that we are better human beings because we give to a certain charity, it is arguable that pity and altruism are linked to forms of hatred and aggression. Feeling badly about an individual's disability and giving to a charity does not solve the deeper problem of how society views the disabled. In fact, feeling that we did our part by giving to a charity often encourages us to justify ignoring the disabled people that we encounter every day.

Although it is not overtly obvious, giving to charities can in some instances do more harm than good. Evans warns that "Giving to charity is at the same time an act of kindness and an act of rejection, making the giver feel whole and

separate; these contradictory values are what makes the treatment of disabled people an arena of conflicting values" (283). While giving to a charity is socially considered a kind and benevolent act, it can also be an effective way of further stigmatizing and othering the disabled. Often the way charities portray the disabled as objects of need causes us as potential donors to look at disability from the standpoint of being able-bodied and think, What can I "do" for them? Instead of this attitude, which essentially uses giving as a way of making us feel whole, we should be thinking about how we can better include the disabled in our society by noticing them and engaging them in everyday conversations, making *them* feel whole, instead of separate and passed over.

### **Practical Implications in Disabled Lives**

Because of underlying social stigma and stereotypes, people with disabilities are often othered by society as they try to simply go about their normal lives. As much as society might claim to be inspired and in awe of people with disabilities living normal lives, studies show that people with visible disabilities are less likely to be employed than are so-called "normal," able-bodied people. Erin Martz looked at statistical predictors of employment among community college students with disabilities, finding that the odds of employment are greater if the person's disability is invisible rather than visible. She also found that employers are often affected by stereotypes due to the social misrepresentation of the disabled community as a whole. Martz concluded:

in the work setting, employers often carry stereotypical notions about employing people with disabilities such as expectations that individuals with disabilities are weak and incompetent. Hence, having a visible disability may decrease the ability of individuals to obtain and maintain employment, due to the stigmatization of visible disabilities, despite legislation such as

the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Martz 158).

The harm of potential employers viewing the disabled through stereotypes is not only that it keeps the individual from getting a job, but employers are allowing the physical aspects of individuals to overshadow their strengths as potential employees.

Something akin to this overshadowing also happens within institutes of higher education as well, especially in recruitment and admission. Sue Ralph and Kathy Boxwell analyzed UK universities' publicity materials and found that many universities are not as focused on recruiting disabled students as they are on recruiting from minority ethnic groups (383). Instead they found that "most of the images of disabled students are placed in a separate disability section and not fully included in all parts of undergraduate prospectuses" (*Ibid.*). Sadly, disability is still being represented as something "special" that needs to be separate from mainstream society. While it is absolutely true that people with disabilities do need specific accommodation, it is important that we do not other them in the process of providing it. When disabled people are not included in mainstream society, the able-bodied community is robbed of a richer and more diverse community. If social institutions continue to wrongly perceive and stereotype people with disabilities and not even give them a chance to get a job or earn an education, false views will continue to affect disabled people's ability to live somewhat normally and independently and therefore positively affect their self-perception and sense of worth.

In a society that values work, independence, health, and good looks, it is almost certain that people with disabilities will feel perpetually stigmatized and think poorly about themselves because they might not ever be able to achieve those goals. Stuart A. Read and his colleagues studied identity in relation to persons with Cerebral Palsy, a disability that is extremely noticeable; they give a definition of the makeup of

## Woodchek, "The Paradox of Seeing the Disabled"

identities, explaining that "Personal identity reflects how people see themselves as unique individuals (and in comparison to other individuals), whereas social identity refers to how people view themselves as members of meaningful social groups (and in comparison to other groups)" (1163). If the able-bodied community sees people with disabilities as people defined not by their personality or passions, but by their disability itself, this view negatively affects the way that the person with disabilities sees themselves because they feel that others will always see them as incapable and less than the "norm." Phemister and Crewe warn that viewing the disabled in these demeaning and stigmatizing ways has far-reaching consequences because it encourages some people to see other people as naturally inferior to the rest of society (35). In this case, it is the able-bodied who see the disabled community as naturally inferior.

The stigma of inferiority surrounding disability in turn affects the way that disabled people feel about and see themselves. "Stigma dehumanizes and lessens the social value of an individual because he or she is appraised as being 'marked', flawed, or otherwise less than average" (Phemister and Crewe 35). If they are constantly misconstrued, othered, passed over and ignored by society, disabled people will start to see themselves negatively and begin to question their own self-worth. People with visible disabilities are always at risk of being both objectively self-aware and stigmatized by others, and are therefore at risk of accepting false views about themselves as truth. As disabled people are othered from a society whose mainstream goals are simply unattainable to most of the disabled on a practical level, they are made to stand out. Because the disabled do not necessarily "fit in," society easily passes over and forgets them, which leads them to question their own worth to society.

### Conclusion

Instead of othering the disabled, our society should accept and celebrate people in all walks of life who may have conditions that cause them look or act differently. Instead of ignoring the disabled or perceiving them as objects of inspiration, we should focus on engaging them as fellow human beings with feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Rather than delegating the disabled to a separate sphere of society, the able-bodied community needs to work to bridge the gap with the disabled community by seeing them as equal members of society and by expanding public understanding of disabilities. A productive first step is recognizing that the disabled have emotions, ideas, and passions just like anyone else and probably could offer solutions to the problem of othering. In the case of Tiffany Gay, the situation could have been handled better if the school or the football player had simply approached her ahead of time and let her know his intentions and asked for her input and how it made her feel. Maybe she would have loved to go to prom, but would have rather skipped all the excitement of the prom-posal. Even informing Tiffany ahead of time about the intentions of the football player probably would have lessened her initial shock. In all of the viral hubbub surrounding the prom-posal, no one even stopped to ask Tiffany if this was what she wanted. It is far too easy for the able-bodied to think they already know what a disabled person thinks or wants. However, the problem could be remedied by fostering a sense of inclusivity for the disabled, especially by acknowledging and asking about the deeper qualities that make a person unique, such as their hopes, dreams, fears, and joys. It is still important to recognize the fundamental differences between able-bodied and disabled people, but individuals should learn to celebrate and learn about these differences instead of just turning aside. A paradigm shift is absolutely necessary for the health, life, and well-being of people with disabilities, and a spirit of inclusion and celebration encourage a richer and more diverse community for all of society.

Currently, the paradigm through which the able-bodied community views the disabled community is highly paradoxical in that the disabled person is almost always simultaneously hypervisible and invisible to the rest of society. People with disabilities are hypervisible because their disability is visible, making them stand out in a crowd of otherwise "normal"-looking people. Hypervisibility leads to stereotyping and stigmatization of the disabled community. Misrepresentation of disabilities in popular culture such as films, TV, and social media perpetuates the hypervisibility of the disabled. But the attention that disabled people receive from their disability causes them to become invisible in that others pass over and forget them as persons. Often, able-bodied people experience feelings of confusion or discomfort in encounters with disabled people because they do not know how to treat or respond to them. And hypervisibility paradoxically limits their visibility when disabled people try to access jobs and education. Potential employers and schools can be blinded to the strengths of someone with disabilities because of an (sometimes unconscious) acceptance of pre-conceived and erroneous ideas. As people of the disabled community continue to feel invisible, they begin to question their own societal and personal value, which can have devastating effects on their own health and well-being. The experience of a person with disabilities feeling both hypervisible and invisible at the same time is a paradox that robs society of a rich, diverse community and has deeply negative effects upon the life and happiness of people with disabilities.

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