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**Achieving a place: A communography  
of disabled postgraduates**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
In Social Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

This study is social anthropological insider research of disabled postgraduates, students and staff in tertiary educational institutions.

This is also a study of enabling conditions for inclusion; and ways the participants build relationships between themselves and the wider community.

I consider my participants as kin. This was a joint venture - we were related not by blood, but by the very fact that we share in communities of disabled people. We are connected even if not always interacting with each other; we seldom moved in the same circles on a day-to-day basis.

These are stories of adversity, where the participants have developed successful coping strategies and made achievements, not despite their being "othered", but by living with and acknowledging their differences. These are reflections on our society where we compete in complex emotional relationships within employment and all other social institutions. The university seemed to be a psychologically safer setting probably because it is a place for higher learning and therefore all the people had a more highly developed consciousness. Even though in some cases there were some wider macro barriers, on the whole, the participants' experience was positive.

We found what we as joint participants shared in that feeling of disability was just the same as the feeling of *communitas* as students. Thinking about *communitas* (Turner, 1967), the Latin for community, convinced me that community was the central theme of this whole thesis. There are communities of practice in all organisations and institutions in society and they are used by

the participants in this study not only in developing strategies for inclusion, but also for learning. Because the university is a series of communities of practice a major theorist for this study is Vygotsky and his concept of a culture of learning. We are also indebted to the social anthropologist Lave and her colleagues for bringing his ideas to Western academia.

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Conduct for this research using human participants had the approval of the Massey University Albany Ethics Committee ... MUAHEC 02/074

## **DEDICATION**

This research is really dedicated to my parents; my Dad who passed away at the beginning of the study and my Mum towards the end. It was such a shame, I never saw myself as a sufferer, but I could always see my pain in your eyes.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
DEDICATION .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION .....	1
Cognition, the self and anthropology .....	1
What prompted the research? .....	5
Aims of the research .....	9
Presentation of the thesis .....	10
Consideration of research questions in communography .....	12
Disclosure experiences .....	13
Segregation and exclusion issues.....	13
Social and economic issues .....	14
Adaptive behaviours for acceptance and survival .....	14
Human Rights and conceptual issues.....	14
Personal adjustment/psychological factors .....	15
An explicit description of the research method and an outline of the thesis.	15
Field work.....	16
CHAPTER TWO – DISABILITY .....	18
Traditional society, health and disability .....	19
Religious influences .....	26
Science, technology and medicine .....	29
Disability consciousness and the Social Model .....	34
The word disability.....	39
Confusion and controversy.....	42
Disability summarized .....	44

CHAPTER THREE - PARTICIPANTS.....	47
Introducing the participants .....	47
Rationale to the vignettes.....	51
Angela .....	52
Arthur .....	54
Daphne .....	56
Fran.....	58
Joan .....	60
Josh.....	62
Karla.....	64
Kathy.....	67
Lesley .....	69
Lynette .....	71
Marg .....	72
Marina .....	75
Melanie .....	77
Roger.....	78
Ross .....	80
Shaun .....	82
Terry .....	85
Wayne .....	87
CHAPTER FOUR –THE RESEARCH JOURNEY.....	90
Introduction.....	90
Beginning the journey .....	93
Developing some theoretical perspective .....	94
Participating in the research culture .....	99
The meaning of culture .....	100
Insider research .....	103



Process of the research .....	110
CHAPTER FIVE - EXCLUSION.....	128
CHAPTER SIX - CONCLUSION.....	153
To summarise this thesis .....	162
APPENDICES.....	165
APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW THEMES.....	165
APPENDIX B – INFORMATION SHEET .....	166
APPENDIX C – CONSENT FORM .....	168
APPENDIX D - LETTER TO PARTICPANTS .....	169
APPENDIX E - CULTURAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THEORY .....	171
AUTHOR NOTE .....	172
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	173