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What it means to be online for people with disabilities.

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## Abstract

People with disabilities have traditionally occupied stigmatised identities due to less conventional ways of operating in daily life. The online medium with its absence of visible identity markers, which have typically determined how a person is read offline, combined with the constructive potential embedded within a largely textual medium, potentially, bring together greater control and flexibility in identity construction. The online medium, therefore, may offer social benefits to people with disabilities that are not available in other contexts. This research discursively explores what kinds of experiences are available for people with disabilities online. It argues that the online medium offers alternative subjectivities for positioning people with disabilities in the social world. Discursive findings, however, also show that operating online within a disabled identity creates marginalised experiences.

Discourse analysis, underpinned by a social constructionist philosophy, which emphasises the constructive nature of language in creating experience, is utilised as a methodology for gathering and analysing data. I have adopted Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) concept of an 'interpretative repertoire' to manage the construction of discursive patterns identified in the data. Semi-structured interviews with 21 people with physical and sensory disabilities, who used the online medium daily, or several times per week, were carried out. Participants were recruited from various disability organisations in New Zealand and were invited to take part in an online interview via email, or another online communication program of their choice. Participants were met in person prior to the interviews to confirm the researcher's credibility and to build rapport.

Seven key repertoires were identified in the data, with each one organised around several discursive resources. A *choice to disclose* repertoire allows disability to become a flexible feature of identity to be revealed and/or concealed in a contextualised and occasioned fashion. The *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* repertoire enables people with disabilities to position themselves as valued members of the social world, free of the physical and psychological barriers constructed by others that surround disabled identities. A *transcendence* repertoire functions in the talk of people with disabilities by surpassing the physical, social, and psychological limitations arising from having to operate within a disabled body,

allowing far greater capacity for participation. A *participating in the world* repertoire affords people with disabilities the opportunity to be part of a wider community of relationships, people, interests, activities, and information, creating a sense of global belonging and connection. The *keeping safe* and *qualified deception* repertoires, together, enable people with disabilities to successfully manage the dilemma of participating in a medium where there is potential for substantial self-gain as well as harm. In contrast to the repertoires available for experiencing alternative subjectivities, which operate outside the oppression of disabled identities, a *disabling differentials* repertoire demonstrates the social disadvantages surrounding disabled identities online. Discursive findings are discussed in relation to disembodiment, as the online medium enables abilities to extend beyond the body, lifting the ceiling on standard ways of operating. This opens up psychological benefits as people with disabilities are afforded opportunities to access and participate within many dimensions of social life. At a collective level, political implications associated with the absence online of disabled identities are raised. Issues of technopower are also mentioned, along with future research directions. Overall, participants' constructions demonstrate how the online medium makes available a social space where people with disabilities can temporarily step outside the physical, social, and psychological constraints of operating within disabled subjectivities. This was cherished and celebrated.

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## Preface

Traditionally, the field of psychology has studied people with disabilities from a particular context. Firstly, this context has focused largely on psychiatric disabilities. Secondly, disability has been constructed as something to be cured, resolved, or minimised. In the field of psychology less emphasis has been given to studying people with physical and sensory disabilities. Similarly, there has been less interest in conceptualising disability as other than a physical and psychological deficit. This thesis privileges people with physical and sensory disabilities. Further, in deploying a social constructionist approach to research, this thesis privileges a discursive orientation to disability. This positions disability as a social practice constructed and constrained by the social context.

In addition to privileging people with physical and sensory disabilities within a discursive framework, this thesis aims to contribute to broadening knowledge about the online medium and the kinds of social experiences offered to people with disabilities. Considering the paucity of research about the social experiences of people with disabilities and the lack of discursive research carried out online, this thesis brings together these scholarly areas. This is achieved by understanding how people with disabilities are constructing their online experiences. Conducting research online about people's online experiences also highlights the legitimacy of deploying the online medium as a research context and topic, in its own right.

While this thesis is located within discursive psychology, it also intersects with cyberpsychology, disability studies, and the field of research encompassing computer-mediated communication (closely aligned with cyberpsychology). The interdisciplinary nature of this thesis is evident in *Chapter One*, which purveys the kinds of possibilities available for people with disabilities by drawing upon literature across these intersecting disciplines.

*Chapter Two* discusses my ontological and epistemological frameworks for researching how people with disabilities construct their online experiences. A social constructionist philosophy is delineated with emphasis on the importance of language in constructing social experience. *Chapter Three* discusses the benefits

of situating discursive research within an online context and specific advantages for participants with disabilities. The data collection process is described including my position and stake in the research, participants and recruitment, materials and procedures, rapport building, security issues, and ethics. My reflections on the data gathering process are considered. The pitfalls of deploying an online context for gathering interview data are also outlined.

Chapters Four to Nine provide a space in which to analyse participants' interview data. Each chapter is organised around a central discursive pattern generated from the data. *Chapter Four* begins by explaining how the discursive analysis was carried out and then moves to demonstrate the first of the discursive patterns, or interpretative repertoires identified: namely, the choice of people with disabilities to disclose their disability online and the subjective opportunities this brings. *Chapter Five* highlights the ability of people with disabilities to operate within socially valued subjectivities. Being able to transcend standard practices of operating in daily life and the highly positive experience this brings to the lives of people with disabilities is demonstrated in *Chapter Six*. *Chapter Seven* is organised around the idea that the online medium affords people with disabilities the opportunity to be part of a wider community of relationships, people, interests, activities, and information, which creates a sense of belonging and connection with the world. *Chapter Eight* moves on to look at how people with disabilities manage issues of safety and identity online, while *Chapter Nine* demonstrates how operating within disabled identities online constructs negative outcomes and positions people with disabilities as powerless and dependent.

*Chapter Ten* offers a space to bring together the research findings, firstly, through summarising these findings, which addresses one of the research aims, and, secondly, by highlighting how a majority of the discursive repertoires offer alternative subjectivities for positioning participants in the social world, thereby, addressing the second research aim. The psychological benefits of operating outside the social and physical constraints of a disabled identity are discussed, which opens up issues of disembodiment where abilities extend beyond the body, enabling access and participation within many dimensions of social life. This leads to an opportunity for incorporating philosophy underlying the social model of disability. At a collective level, the political implications of not disclosing a disabled

identity online are discussed. Technopower and issues for future directions are also considered in the final chapter.

Reflexivity is a theme that surfaces at intervals throughout the thesis. It first appears in Chapter Two with respect to analysing how I construct people with disabilities. In Chapter Three it is practised as I reflexively delineate my position and stake in the research, in addition to my reflections on the data gathering process. From another angle, reflexivity surfaces within several of the analysis chapters as I consider how my political, social, and cultural interests affect the repertoires constructed. This extends into the very way in which I have gone about analysing participants' interview data, inclusive of the partiality of my analysis, which is overviewed at the beginning of Chapter Four. Finally, in Chapter Ten, reflexivity is raised again as I revisit the partiality of my work from a variety of perspectives.

In the thesis each chapter is introduced with an abstract that provides a summary of the central issues to follow. Each of the analysis chapters also close with a summary of the central features generated from the interview data. In addition to the summary, a discussion of the analysis in relation to the available literature is incorporated in Chapter Eight. For other analysis chapters a general discussion of findings is carried out in the final thesis chapter.

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## Chapter One: Surveying Online Possibilities for People with Disabilities

*This chapter sets the stage for the thesis by reviewing online possibilities for people with disabilities from the available literature. As there is a paucity of research about the online medium and people with disabilities, I have drawn on literature pertaining to the online experiences of marginalised groups and individuals including ethnic minorities and women. This literature is gathered from a number of social science disciplines, inclusive of computer-mediated communication, cyberpsychology, disability studies, as well as broadly integrating cyberfeminism and anthropology. I deploy this literature as leverage for critically reflecting upon the potentially empowering and disempowering experiences available to people with disabilities online. In as much as this chapter purveys online possibilities for people with disabilities, it simultaneously creates a discursive space where I justify exploring the online experiences of people with disabilities.*

### Introducing the Thesis

Goffman (1963) recognised that people with disabilities occupy stigmatised identities, more so than other social groups. A pioneer in the field of social psychology, Goffman (1959) theorised that social interaction functions to present a favourable self-impression. We deploy explicit information in the communicative context in order to produce and maintain a pleasant and unexceptional identity. Identity management, as Goffman (1963) argued, is also influenced by unintentional forms of information, such as paralinguistic behaviour including facial expression and body movements. These may “leak through” into social interaction well beyond a person’s control. Despite unconventional body movements and speech sounds comprising part of the ‘normal’ way some people with disabilities operate in everyday life, such events may create a negative self-impression. As a result of a failed presentation, Goffman asserts that people with disabilities, in particular, experience stigmatised identities. While Goffman’s ideas were illuminary for the time, his work has been criticised for theoretical inconsistencies and for conforming to cultural stereotypes of disability, rather than investigating (and challenging) the social meanings tied to disabled identities (Wendell, 1996).

Contemporary understanding of disability stigma highlights that issues of power relations and hegemonic identity construction are influenced by an ocularcentric way of evaluating the world. Jay (1994) points out how visual perception may condemn a person to a particular identity. Similarly, the gaze, which is constructed from sensory knowledge, hierarchically orders bodies according to given categories of hegemonic value (Foucault, 1967, 1977/1995). Within this framework, 'normal' forms of appearance and functioning are defined and given preferential treatment. Bodies that fail to conform to these ideals are assumed to be abnormal and dysfunctional. The oppressiveness of an ocularcentric ontology, therefore, may negatively impact on people with disabilities, especially in interactions where disability is visually apparent. Importantly, this oppressiveness may impact on the very way people with disabilities experience their identity, and its associated negative stereotypes and prejudices (Abberley, 1987; Goffman, 1963; Oliver, 1990).

However, the online medium may bring forth many benefits for people with disabilities by removing them from the oppression of operating inside stigmatised identities. With the emergence of the online medium and its focus on textual self-presentation, Cromby and Standon (1999) propose that people with disabilities may have the opportunity to interact in a social space where impairment is masked. Although the anonymous nature of the online medium can lead to identity fabrication, it also allows for a degree of security surrounding a person's real-world identity markers (Bruckman, 1996a). Further, Nakamura (1995) highlights how the online medium creates unprecedented opportunities for constructing the body using any kind of description as individuals control the conditions of their self presentation. Likewise, Poster (1997) asserts that textual interaction affords users greater control over the way particular constructions are transmitted and received by others. In support of these propositions, Hyde and Todd (1996) claim that many people with disabilities who use the online medium "state that they feel in control of how they are presenting themselves to others" (p. 131). Although Miller (1995) points out that certain forms of paralinguistic data can leak into online settings, like communication style, structure, and vocabulary, details pertaining to the embodied self cannot. It is notable that in real-time contexts, however, slow typing speed may signal a physical difference in online interaction. Nevertheless, Miller argues that those with social or functional disadvantages may experience liberation online.

Conversely, the online medium may also open up alternative possibilities for people with disabilities when disability information is made available.

The point of this thesis is to discursively explore what kinds of experiences are available online for people with disabilities. Providing that users have the financial resources to access the technology and any assistive devices required, such as screen readers, scanners, and ergonomic hardware, people with physical and sensory disabilities can participate online. Considering much online interaction is textual, people with disabilities may be afforded opportunities unavailable in other contexts of daily life. What kind of possibilities does a flexible, social environment, which largely operates via textual interaction, open up for people with disabilities?

Purveying existing possibilities online for people with disabilities provides a useful backdrop from which to develop and position this research. Within the literature, there is a clear debate around the potential positive and negative impact of the online medium on marginalised identities. This debate draws on issues of autonomy and freedom available online, as well as the maintenance of offline power relations and hegemonic identity construction. This debate is deployed in the present chapter to critically reflect upon the potentially empowering and disempowering experiences available for people with disabilities online.

### Evaluating Existing Possibilities Online

#### Potentially empowering outcomes for people with disabilities

Literature (Arnold & Miller, 2000; Chandler, 1998; Miller, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Walker, 2000) investigating the freedom and autonomy surrounding identity construction in homepages may highlight particular benefits for people with disabilities. Possessing an ability to freely select and covet personal information online highlights opportunities for people with disabilities to access greater social and personal agency over the construction of their identity, than may be otherwise available when disability is visually apparent.

Walker (2000) surveyed 100 randomly selected, homepage authors who were listed on the Yahoo search engine. Compared to conventional methods surrounding identity construction in face-to-face contexts, homepage authors had much greater freedom in disclosing, withholding, and deleting personal details, as identities were carefully cultivated and refashioned. Furthermore, homepages were frequently utilised for the purpose of challenging stereotypes and defending stigmatised identities, inclusive of bisexuality and disability. The repositioning of stigmatised identities is also demonstrated in Chandler's (1998) interviews with gay authors of homepages. One author drew on the ability to construct a gay identity positively within a homepage under his "own" terms. The benefits of having agency over the way a traditionally stigmatised identity is positioned online may extend to people with disabilities and the construction of their identity in terms more favourable to the person.

In addition to opportunities for reconstructing stigmatised identities, the online medium may lead to more rewarding social outcomes. For instance, one of the authors in Chandler's (1998) study indicated that choosing a homepage to disclose his "coming out" gave readers time to process the news before reacting. Similarly, another author felt that using his homepage as a platform for "coming out" reduced the risk of rejection in a relationship, although this was also attributed to the compatibility that had developed in meeting offline prior to online disclosure. Nevertheless, the online medium may provide a more, conducive environment for social relationships to develop with people whose identities have traditionally been stigmatised. Indeed, Miller (1995) argues that limitations in the online medium for social interaction lead to more liberating outcomes. Inviting interaction through a homepage offers users the opportunity to initiate social contact without experiencing the impact of rejection, or the feeling of embarrassment from a failed presentation. In support of the online medium as an empowering social facilitator, evidence suggests that the online medium may alleviate and, in some cases, eliminate the impact of negative social encounters for people with less conventional identities.

Beyond facilitating social interaction, the online medium may facilitate the construction and extension of different aspects of the identities of people with disabilities that may be inhibited due to the visible effects of disability. Walker's (2000) research identified homepage authors' ability to construct an identity

surpassing traditional social categories like gender by locating self-descriptions within relational categories based on affiliation with specific activities, community organisations, and interest groups. Further, the dispersed location of some homepages publishing different information about the same person allowed these individuals to identify under multiple roles, affiliations, and identities. Cyberpsychologist, Turkle (1995) confirms that identity develops in homepages through a person's associations and connections. In an interview with Tebbutt (1999), Turkle deploys the notion of personality as a multi-faceted concept to help explain how the online medium enables people to highlight more diverse aspects of their identity. Further, Turkle reports how computers, inclusive of online technology, provide people with the opportunity to explore otherwise under-represented parts of their identity. Research (Arnold & Miller, 2000; Hyde & Todd, 1996; Roulstone, 1998) investigating the online experiences of people with marginalised identities supports this claim.

Interviews conducted by Arnold and Miller (2000) highlight how women academics valued the opportunity to freely promote themselves online. Through departmental homepages, women constructed academically competent and authoritative identities authenticated by their professional credentials. Women also identified the power to challenge the assumed male identity of academics by re-presenting their own gendered identity. Many, however, chose not to include a photo because it could potentially undermine the credibility of their academic status and research, demonstrating how women's vulnerability offline extends into online contexts. Nevertheless, photos on the homepages of other academic women were viewed as validating a female identity. In addition to displaying their skills and authority as academics, women gained equality with their male counterparts in status and credibility. Women gained this sense of equality by having control over their utilisation of the medium and their access to other people. Younger women academics, in particular, were aware of opportunities to access others online without limitations of power hierarchies surrounding age, academic status, and gender.

Accessing equality and highlighting under-represented aspects of a person's identity online are further evident in Hyde and Todd's (1996) pilot survey canvassing the opinions of people with disabilities about online access. The study was advertised on various bulletin boards and mailing lists frequented by people

with disabilities. By removing impairment from social interaction, respondents conceptualised the online medium as a "levelling ground" that allowed them to be treated on their merits as a person rather than as a disabled person. Further, the researchers commented that many people with disabilities who use the Internet feel they are evaluated according to their ideas and communication skills, as opposed to their impairment. Online access, therefore, may have a powerfully beneficial impact on the lives of people with disabilities.

Indeed, computer-mediated communication (CMC) may offer an empowering social experience for people with disabilities by giving them the opportunity to operate within culturally valued identities. Roulstone's (1998) research investigated how computer technology inclusive of email enables people with disabilities to access and retain employment. Interview extracts highlight the power of CMC in illustrating people's strengths and abilities, which, otherwise, may have been excluded as a consequence of the physical and sensory demands of traditional environments. For instance, a hearing impaired programmer highlighted how computers afforded him the textual inclusion of his abilities in contrast to exposing his lack of proficiency in oral communication. Similarly, a visually impaired programmer claimed, "Written communication is the biggest, most fundamental boost I've had, I can express myself" (p. 121). Access to CMC moves people away from disabling operating practices towards culturally valued identities based on competence and independence. In Roulstone's investigation, a computer consultant with polio found computer technology enabled him to sustain physical workplace demands, elevating him to an equal footing with able-bodied workers. Email facilities (supported by speech output software) enabled a blind programmer to access memos and other details regarding events in her department without expending physical energy in finding this information on foot. Further, according to a self-employed, computer consultant with cerebral palsy, "New technology allows me to say something about my ability to those who don't realize what I'm capable of" (p. 121). This led to increased employment opportunities from local firms. Thus, having access to a medium that does not distract from highlighting a person's strengths may positively impact on the future employment opportunities of people with disabilities. Other positive outcomes surrounding the online access and participation of people with disabilities are also highlighted.

## Freedom and autonomy

Theoretical perspectives in the literature affirm the liberating and empowering experiences available online (although, other research evidence and opposing theoretical perspectives demonstrate how hegemonic practices remain online, which are explored in the next sections). In the first media age of radiated communication, power disparities advantaged those with the resources and knowledge to send information while the masses passively received. In contrast, Poster (1997) holds that the Internet decentralises the tools that produce culture, placing broadcasting, filmmaking, speech, and publishing in the hands of users affording decentralised, distributed, and direct control over information exchange (Kapor, 1993). Poster mentions how the online medium's capacity to create a far more active engagement with the communication mode and information distinguishes it from and supersedes the first media age. Interactivity online extends personal autonomy as users have greater control over their social and cultural encounters (Gordon, 1999). The freedom of navigating through hypertext creates an anti-hierarchical and democratic mode of access, inviting unconstrained imagination (Andersen, Holmqvist, & Jensen, 1993).

Operating via the online medium opens up other freedoms. Jones (1995) points out that cyberspatial reality is constituted out of information and knowledge. Online, therefore, identity and hierarchy are constructed through the same process (Jordan, 1999). Chesher (1997) supports this by confirming that as a result of the collapse of spatial reality, identity online operates within an information framework. Within this constructive framework, identity comes about via the retrieval of information at a particular point in time.

Yet, just as cyberspace and its inhabitants are made from information, they also participate in the construction of this very information (Jordan, 1999). With freedom from the physical constraints limiting the sources of experience (Lanier & Biocca, 1992), identity becomes a matter of choice enacted through language alone, irrespective of body gestures, bodily form, dress, or voice pitch (Poster, 1997). This highly constructive and interactive process, as Jordan indicates, creates a dynamic relationship between the creator and created. Poster suggests the online medium may blur distinctions between authoritative voices and powerless others, which may serve to dissolve oppressive, hierarchical practices. Such autonomy and

control over production enhances the capacity to gain agency over identity construction. This may open up opportunities to disrupt the cultural hierarchy between able and disabled bodies.

Online access also offers a level of social communion unsurpassed by geography, chronology, and cultural and social relations (Green, 1997). Irrespective of ethnic and gender membership typically portrayed in face-to-face interactions, Poster (1997) claims the process used to construct the subject is more democratic online because discourse is free-flowing between participants. According to May (1994), the anonymity of CMC affords users the advantage of developing themselves via the quality of ideas expressed, as opposed to age, occupation, and socio-economic status. The online medium, therefore, as Poster argues, makes space for oppositional subjectivities to counter hierarchies of race, class, and gender previously unavailable within the public realm. Repositioning disabled identities may be possible within these oppositional subjective spaces.

Further, the online medium's surpassing of national borders gives voice to the interests of pluralist communities and an unprecedented ability to express one's ideas and opinions (Gordon, 1999). Kapur (1993, p. 53) argues that cyberspace is developing according to Thomas Jefferson's philosophy with respect to "individual liberty", "pluralism, diversity, and community." Such an outcome indicates that irrespective of cultural background, each person will have the ability to express themselves freely online (Jordan, 1999), although it is notable that having sufficient economic resources is fundamental to attaining online access. Barbrook and Cameron (1997) point out that information technologies allow for individual empowerment, personal freedom, and the disempowerment of the nation state. These claims suggest that online access may offer empowering outcomes for the identities of people with disabilities at both individual and collective levels. In summary, autonomy over identity construction, social equality in interaction, and pluralist expression cogently highlight how the online medium has great potential to emancipate people with disabilities from stigmatised identities. Despite strong arguments and research evidence surrounding the medium's capacity to create a more equitable and autonomous environment, other evidence demonstrates that social inequities and prejudice remain online.

Inequity and prejudice remain

According to Kendall (1999), dominant racial ideology prevalent offline is reflected in online discussions about race. Burkhalter (1999) holds that although there is an absence of bodily features online like skin colour, indicating a particular social identity, which have been deployed for stereotyping behaviour offline, online users still employ stereotyping practices to understand others' positions.

Burkhalter analysed messages mainly posted to an African American, and to a smaller extent, a Jewish and a Mexican American soc.culture, Usenet discussion group. Usenet constitutes an online space designated to hosting a plethora of message boards where individuals post comments or questions relevant to a particular discussion topic, which can usually be inferred by the name of the Usenet group. Messages can be posted at any time and remain in the Usenet group for others to read and respond to, at their leisure.

Burkhalter's (1999) findings demonstrate how, online, participants determine an author's racial identity according to the perspectives that the author presents within the Usenet posting, irrespective of the author's own racial identification. Moreover, online participants draw on racial stereotypes to evaluate the validity of the author's perspective. If the perspective fails to conform to a particular stereotype, participants criticise the author's stated or assumed identity as being erroneous, rather than the prejudiced beliefs they hold about a racial group. Burkhalter goes as far as to espouse that racial stereotyping may be more powerful and resilient online than offline, as participants are faced with immutable perspectives cast in text removed from physical markers. Subsequently, a person's reported identity may lead to opposition and challenge, if the person's attitudes and beliefs deviate from behavioural stereotypes.

Racial stereotypes extend to the domain of online fantasy, role-playing games where participants have access to boundless possibilities for creation. LambdaMOO is one such fantasy, role-playing arena where Nakamura (1995) carried out research on the construction of race. Within LambdaMOO, players are able to craft their own self-descriptions. Gender is a compulsory defining feature of a person's identity chosen from a range of options including two neuter identities, which are rarely tolerated as most LambdaMOO participants request the player to

"set gender" to a conventional category. Despite this preference to maintain customary gender categories online, race is entirely absent as an option for identity construction, although users can elect to construct race into their self-description. By far, the majority excludes race, apart from what may be inferred in some instances from self-descriptions of hair and eye colour. Nevertheless, Nakamura argues the exclusion of race, combined with the high prevalence of white male, highly educated, middle class participants, reported in online demographics (Cortese, 1997; GVU, 1999), both actually serve to perpetuate a default whitening of LambdaMOO. (More recent demographic statistics of online users indicate, however, that women outnumber men and greater proportions of participants are less highly educated (CyberAtlas Staff, 2002; Greenspan, 2002).)

The whitening of cyberspace has also been articulated by Kendall (1998) and Tal (1996) who believe the shedding of identity markers online, which lead to conditions of anonymity, function to "white out" features of race in the dominant interests of a normative white identity. This may have implications for an able-bodied hierarchy repressing the bodies of disabled identities when disability characteristics are inaccessible online. Yet, as Gajjala (2000) questions, why should marginalised and oppressed groups disguise their social identities to pass as members of a dominant hegemony?

The minority on LambdaMOO who choose to occupy an oppressed racial (or other) identity, like African American, Latino, and Asian have been accused of disrupting the phantasmatic reality of LambdaMOO with real life issues (Nakamura, 1995). When the issue of punishing harassers of marginalised racial identities was raised, a (narrow) majority defended the harassment because everyone had the choice to exclude racial details from their self-description. Nakamura reflects on these actions, arguing that participants condone some forms of racial passing when it supports the (non-ethnic) white hegemony, while suppressing others. Hence, even within a highly creative, textual environment, the oppression of stigmatised racial identities continues to wield its influence. Bailey's (2001) research on CompuServe's African American forum, suggesting racial anonymity is a practical response to online discrimination and prejudice towards people of colour, further consolidates the existence of inequalities and prejudice of marginalised identities online. This evidence supports the possibility of a person with a disability, who identifies within a disabled social category, experiencing stigma online, also.

Nakamura's (1995) research demonstrates that when non-white identity construction is accepted within a highly creative, textual environment online, it is the deployment of cultural stereotypes that are sustained. If race is performed in LambdaMOO, Asian identities are by far the most typical. However, rather than critically reconstructing Asian identities, which are obvious by their absence, participants accentuate racial and gender stereotypes. For instance, Asian men are re-presented as potent, exotic, samurai warriors, while submissive geisha girls and mystical beauties are drawn on to construct Asian women. In addition to exacerbating stereotyped constructions of Asian identities pervasive in popular media, these examples highlight gender stereotypes that are particularly oppressive of women. Nakamura argues that Asian-masquerading functions to suppress "real life" Asians from practising racially different identities by creating and sustaining racist discourse. Furthermore, despite the potential for dominant cultures to explore the "Other", the preponderance of stereotyped identity constructions of "Other" prohibits this. Nakamura highlights that constructing "Other" is merely carried out as a "passing" fancy. This raises, potentially, disturbing and pernicious outcomes for the online practice of other marginalised identities, inclusive of people with disabilities.

In contrast to liberal cyberfeminist views that body-free interaction online allows people to be identified via a non-gendered, non-binary ideology based on equality (Hall, 1996), gender research affirms inequality and the maintenance of oppressive identities online. For instance, findings show that women participate less, while men, men's issues, and men's communicative style dominate online discussion groups, which favour the presentation of real life identities (Ebben & Kramarae, 1993; Herring, 1992, 1996a, 1999; Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto, 1992, 1995; Kramarae & Taylor, 1993; Witmer & Katzman, 1997). Research also indicates how gender-based and gender stereotyping practices surrounding men's and women's communicative behaviour are replicated in online discussion forums (Herring, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1996a, 1993/1996b, 1999). Such results illustrate the construction of asymmetric power dynamics within formalised and factually oriented discussion forums online.

Power disparities also manifest in less formalised contexts that encourage flexible and creative practices, where there is opportunity to break free from conventional narratives. Research conducted on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) shows fewer women

are occupying positions of power (Bowker & Liu, 2001), while men are more likely to explore beyond the standard boundaries of identity construction, demonstrating cultural stereotypes of gender-role behaviour (Bowker, 2000, 2001). Further, when Pomeroy (1996) logged onto IRC under an overtly female name, he received a barrage of discriminatory messages from men, in comparison to logging on under a recognisably male name. Similarly, in a longitudinal, participant-observation study of LambdaMOO, Curtis (1996) noticed how real life females who identified as female online reported being besieged by negative and positive discrimination, inclusive of sexual harassment as well as overly attentive and chivalrous behaviour. Autobiographical, ethnographic, and experimental research corroborate discriminatory outcomes targeting the vulnerability of female identities online (Bruckman, 1996b; McCormick & Leonard, 1996; Serpentelli, 1993). To obviate adverse treatment, many women have been compelled to conceal their social identity online by adopting male or gender-neutral identifiers (Curtis, 1996; McCormick & Leonard, 1996; Serpentelli, 1993; Spender, 1995; Wylie, 1995). Such findings may indicate the potential for discriminatory responses towards other marginalised social categories, like people with disabilities who may feel pressured into withholding disability-related identity markers online. Other social practices may negatively impact on the online experiences of people with disabilities.

### Accentuating bodily forms

Due to the lack of physical representation used to distinguish and define one's identity, Hall (1996) proposes that online users accentuate cultural beliefs of masculinity and femininity to give themselves a gendered identity. Springer (1993) has observed how cyberbodies are constructed from exaggerated masculine and feminine sexual characteristics. Emphasis on physical characteristics is reflected further as Caddick (1995) argues that new technologies' concentration on physical surface features like body image serve to create marked inequalities between different forms of embodiment. Caddick points out that society's increased fetishism with the "body beautiful" actually accentuates the difference between ugliness (deformity) and beauty. Online, only selected forms of embodiment are privileged at the cost of discriminating against other bodies (Kramarae, 1995). Similarly, Clark (1995) observes that body construction online is based on the deployment of spectacular bodies endowed with the cultural augmentations of

steroid and silicon implants. The argument is made that body construction involves a return to corporeality as the values surrounding embodiment online derive from offline beliefs about desirable forms. Such cultural practices actually serve to intensify the position of disabled bodies as objects of censure and derision, which exacerbates the stigmatised construction of disabled identities. Drawing on Clark and Caddick's claims, Overboe (1999) asserts that the oppression of people with disabilities transfers to the online medium.

Even when opportunities arise to disrupt embodiment conventions, such as gender-switching, the oppression of marginalised identities continues online. Rather than creatively reconstructing the boundaries of gender, men who break with tradition and assume a female identity within textual, role-playing environments construct gender stereotypes and, thus, sustain the discrimination and persecution of women online (Bruckman, 1996b; Curtis, 1996; McCormick & Leonard, 1996; Spender, 1995). Kendall (1996) argues that switching gender, merely, reproduces existing cultural practices, while doing nothing to challenge mainstream ideology regarding gender as a social construct. Polarising cultural stereotypes of gender functions to reinforce existing power differentials benefiting the dominant hegemony, rather than challenging the status quo. Counter to technological determinism, Balsamo (1995) points out how opportunities to reconstruct the body do not, necessarily, lead to reconstructed social identities. Likewise, freedom from physical constraints of the body by no means implies "that people will exercise the 'freedom to be' any other kind of body than the one they already" (p. 229) inhabit. Rather, as O'Brien (1999) asserts, the assumption of physical features online will function as a trigger for constructing conventional social stereotypes. Hence, while possibilities exist online for people with disabilities to reposition disability as a socially valued concept, existing power dynamics may inhibit social change.

#### Maintaining the status quo

Contrary to the deterministic ideas espoused by McLuhan (1967) regarding the technological medium dramatically altering social life, a number of researchers (Edwards, 1990; Gersch, 1998; Perry & Greber, 1990; Turkle & Papert, 1990) point towards social, political, and economic structures shaping and constraining

technology. Defined as the epitome of Western masculinity (Edwards; Perry & Greber), the military (in North America) has been an influential force in developing and expanding online technology (Rheingold, 1993; Wylie, 1995). The continuation of hegemonic practices is confirmed through evidence demonstrating the online medium's social construction within a gendered and Anglo-American framework (Burkhalter, 1999; Tal, 1996; Nakamura, 1995). According to Gordon (1999), the Internet is intertwined with the social world, inextricably connected, and, simultaneously, a product of that world. Similarly, Grossman (1997) argues that rather than creating life, the Net merely reflects what is already happening in the social world. The marginalised social, political, and economic status of people with disabilities offline, therefore, may have greater opportunity for reproduction online than a repositioning of disabled identities.

Kendall (1999) goes further, stating interaction online cannot be separated from offline social and political influences. Netizens utilise their offline experiences to interpret and guide their way through online practices. People do not, necessarily, abolish a physical basis to reality in cyberspace because they enter with knowledge and experience grounded in prior social meaning and materiality (Green, 1997). Online engagement draws on indoctrination surrounding pre-virtual practices for standardising and categorising bodies, as well as ideology that assumes inequalities and relationships of difference between bodies. Green (p. 76) claims external referents are not removed from cyberspace, as they constitute human bodies situated in "organic time and space". Hence, while online participants are equally present in corporeal reality. Practices for verifying other online users' identities and behaviours illustrate the significance of embodiment, authenticity, and (physical) reality in contrast to popular beliefs about disembodiment, multiplicity, and fantasy operating online.

Due to the prevalence of gender-switching online, O'Brien (1999, p. 90) highlights many online communities deploy "gender authenticity tests" as a means of distinguishing users' real life identities. Ambivalent responses to these tests often lead to users being excluded from interaction. Such a practice has the potential to marginalise users with disabilities if authenticity tests are deployed to uphold ablest values by distinguishing between able-bodied and disabled users, and excluding those with disabilities. O'Brien argues that switching gender is accepted when there is agreement on a "natural" embodied form underlying the player's gender.

Rather than following the belief that wholly new forms will manifest online, O'Brien claims pre-existing cultural practices or "scripts" will shape social interaction. This is likely to re-establish bodies as a basis for constructing users' identity, authenticity, and reality online. This does not present empowering outcomes for the identities of people with disabilities. Slater's (1998) research on IRC's 'sexpic' trade provides further evidence in support of identity authenticity in managing online experience. An inability to verify the authenticity of others was a significant issue in participants' discourse, as was the desire to develop strategies for determining the authenticity of others and their online performances.

In summary, the evidence laid out cogently demonstrates that operating online does not challenge anti-essentialist and anti-structuralist beliefs surrounding the online medium's ability to counter traditional constructions of identity and experience. Rather, this literature supports a continuation of hegemonic practices that draw on other forms of information to discriminate against marginalised social identities. Consequently, people with disabilities may experience social stigma online despite the fact that impairment is not visually apparent. However, alternative ideas and findings suggest online participation may still offer people with disabilities benefits unavailable in any other medium.

### Reconstituting bodily constraints

Ford (2001) reflects on the implications surrounding the utilisation of computer-mediated environments by people with paralysis where users adopt graphical images to re-present themselves. Drawing on the experiences of a person with quadriplegia, Ford reports how the online medium allows users to "move" within and between different environments without physically embodied motion. Having the capacity to "move" incorporates a strong sense of ability to do something. Reconstructing the traditional concept of "movement" allows people with paralysis to (re)gain a relationship of power online, and, thereby, operate within a "normal" realm of experience. Ford goes on to mention how the online medium's interactivity permits people with paralysis to "travel" without the dependency and awkwardness of physical transportation. Further, computer-mediated environments allow people to be virtually present across multiple cultural spaces despite the confines of their physical body, including the restrictions of operating inside a paralysed body. In

summary, Ford argues that computer-mediated environments transcend the need for bodies to aspire to normal, non-disabled ideals. This suggests that it is not necessarily the reconstitution of body-identity issues that is at stake, but rather a revolutionary change in the way movement is constructed, which may, nevertheless, bring about new ways of experiencing the world for people with disabilities.

Popular conceptions surrounding the online medium indicate that weaknesses of the flesh can be left behind (Holmes, 1997a; Interrogate the Internet, 1996), as subjective experience is dislocated from its bodily framework (Green, 1997). Bailey (2001) points out how cyber-theorists have drawn on Cartesian dualism to construct online experience as a separation between the conscious mind and the material body. According to Vasseleu (1997), this brings about the realisation of a new way of conceptualising agency within a humanist framework as a person's thoughts and creative desires direct reality. This state of disembodied agency may offer many advantages to people with disabilities, whose bodies may preclude moving easily or successfully within daily life according to hegemonic power structures.

However, feminist theorists have examined the way online technology transcends the boundaries of human action and allows individuals to operate via a disembodied consciousness. Stone (1991) argues that by leaving the body behind, the voices of marginalised identities are silenced. Similarly, Smith (1997) and Traweek (1988) point out the desire to transcend the body derives from masculine ideals of superseding human capabilities. Such ideals serve to discard "the culturally marked body" (Balsamo, 1995, p. 233). Hence, disembodiment online may not, necessarily, facilitate empowerment for people with disabilities. Nevertheless, online technology may offer an emancipatory appeal by questioning the taken-for-granted nature of identity, corporeality, and embodiment (Poster, 1994). Indeed, Haraway (1989) highlights how disrupting and undermining boundaries of the flesh make room for multiple and unbounded repertoires for positioning bodies.

## Challenging oppressions

Haraway (1985, 1989, 1991) is a pioneer in the deployment of the cyborg as a means to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about identity and the body. Drawing on the cybernetic revolution and its developments into human-machine synthesis, Haraway uses the cyborg as a cultural vehicle for overthrowing world wide oppressions brought about by the duality structuring people's lived experience (Jordan, 1999). Traditional, Western dualisms have invoked the domination of women, ethnic groups, workers, and nature (Haraway, Penley, & Ross, 1991). However, using socialist-feminist and postmodern frameworks, the cyborg construction functions to disrupt this duality by providing an opposition, consciousness-raising politics to challenge large, structural hegemonies. Haraway's (1985, 1989, 1991) disruption and reconstruction of what it means to be human within a virtual environment may open up possibilities for eroding taken-for-granted distinctions between the biological and social categories of disabled and non-disabled bodies. This may lead to empowering opportunities for the positioning of disabled identities online, as well as offline.

## Unprecedented possibilities for reconstructing norms of identity

Turkle's (1995, 1996a, 1997) extensive psychoanalytic research into the way participants in multi-user domains (MUDs) can access an unparalleled ability to play with their identity and experiment with new ones indicates support for the capacity of people with disabilities to reposition themselves online. MUDs are collaborative, text-based, role-playing environments where participants construct their own identities, which challenges traditional frameworks by enabling non-human and non-gendered forms. Shared access to a database, comprising constructions of rooms, exits, and objects, is also available for participants to deploy in their co-created, social interactions. Moreover, participants are free to take part in multiple narratives constructed by multiple authors under different identities, simultaneously. Turkle collected data through participant-observation on MUDs, in-depth clinical interviews in person, and a series of informal "pizza parties".

In contrast to the commonly held notion that identity constitutes an identical relationship between a person and their character or persona, Turkle's (1995, 1996a, 1997) research shows how MUDs facilitate a fragmented, multiple, and heterogeneous framework for constructing identity. As each narrative is constructed inside a different MUD, appearing as a separate window on a computer screen, a person's identity is distributed across these diverse environments. A person's offline identity may be constructed as merely another window, which may not constitute the "best one", as stated by one participant (1996a, p. 159). The capacity to operate within diverse aspects of the self online may bring forth many possibilities for people with disabilities whose identities are often negatively evaluated offline by less conventional forms, sounds, and movements, which may constrain further judgements surrounding identity and ability. Turkle (1995, p. 318) reports on the "wonderfully liberating experience" of a MUD participant whose stuttering as a child led to difficulties in conversational participation as an adult. Yet, his MUD persona allowed him to experience a different self that successfully follows the conversational flow and no longer worries about maintaining balanced conversational turns because of the textual freedom surrounding participant-responses online. The unparalleled opportunity to experience other identities in MUDs, without the tarnish of bodily evaluations, is highlighted further by another participant.

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want really, whoever you have the capacity to be. You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words (Turkle, 1996a, p. 158).

This account demonstrates how MUDs allow users to experience reconstructed identities without the limitations of their social history. For instance, adopting a male character, finally, gave Turkle (1995) the autonomy to move freely without the imposition of constantly being approached as a woman. Turkle's research also highlights how MUDs have given people from poor areas with low status occupations a means of extending their social mobility by offering a space to create realities that surpass the constraints of social status, race, and gender. Constructing identities that challenge rigid practices governing everyday life enable

participants to extend their experiences beyond the limitations of disempowered social spaces (Turkle, 1996b). Such experiences function to transform devalued identities into empowering subject positions. People with disabilities who often operate within a marginalised subject position may gain empowerment within online environments because they can access socially valued subjectivities.

Online environments also offer people with disabilities opportunities to participate more fully, while the constraints of operating inside disabled bodies are invisible. For a participant called Stewart whose life is severely restricted due to a heart condition, MUDs open up a wider world of social experiences without the restrictions of his disability. Stewart can talk with a multitude of people and travel anywhere. He accesses a MUD located in Germany affording him the opportunity to interact with European players. Likewise, Stewart's political and economic knowledge has been acquired through his MUDding experiences. Further, Stewart has been able to access a level of relationship intimacy unavailable in other contexts. Rather than taking part in role-play, Stewart argues that MUDs enable him to access "a better version of himself" (Turkle, 1996a, p. 163). Access to MUDs allows Stewart to gain a sense of control and mastery over different aspects of his life, which would be very difficult to achieve offline due to the physical and social restrictions surrounding his disability. Turkle's (1984, 1995, 1996a, 1997) research demonstrates how people have utilised computer technology for "mastery" over identity issues.

Beyond the context of MUDs, opportunities for reconstructing identities that radically surpass the restrictions of face-to-face interaction have been reported in online computer conferencing systems. Illustrating this, Van Gelder (1991) tells of a conservative, Jewish, male psychiatrist called Sanford, who posed as a female psychologist called Julie with multiple disabilities including deafness, blindness, and severe facial disfigurement. Operating as a woman enabled Sanford to experience intimate, female, emotional disclosure, which his male subjectivity precluded. Flexible, identity reconstruction online even allowed Sanford to assume the identity of Julie's husband, who adamantly refused to allow anyone to visit Julie when she claimed to be seriously ill. The male psychiatrist was able to engage in multiple dimensions of identity creation as he assumed gendered and disabled characteristics, which demonstrates how liberating online interaction can be when a person has the opportunity to shed physically embodied limitations. It is important

to note, however, that this example highlights a person in a socially privileged position exploring a marginalised identity, which may be safer than someone from a marginalised group, like disability, exploring a socially privileged identity. Nevertheless, the immortal ability to move from one body to another, as well as engage in different bodily dimensions of gender, ability, age, and ethnicity demonstrates the unprecedented nature of identity (re)construction online. This may indicate profound, identity altering possibilities available to people with disabilities online, leading them to temporarily step outside disabled identities and experience subjectivities formerly inaccessible offline.

To help explain people's interest in utilising the online medium for exploring identity issues, Turkle (1995, 1996a, 1997) draws on Erikson's (1950, 1958, 1963) notion of a psycho-social moratorium in reference to "time out" from the consequences of a person's actions. This "time out", made possible through the textual nature of interacting online, frees people to explore new ideas and experiment with identity, as well as develop themselves through new steps of mastery. The capacity for online environments to provide a reflective space for thinking about identity (Tukle, 1995, 1996a) may also open up novel avenues for the deconstruction and reshaping of disabled identities.

Turkle (1995, p. 263) reported how a woman called Ava who had recently acquired a disability as a result of a car accident was able to move beyond the physical and conceptual limitations surrounding her disability and reconstruct herself as "whole-in-her-incompleteness". During Ava's recuperation after losing her leg, she began participating in MUDs, creating a one-legged character for herself with a removable prosthetic limb. The friends she developed on MUDs accepted her disability and found agreeable ways of managing it in social interaction. Ava's romantic involvement with one player who accepted her virtual disability led to Ava's self-acceptance of her disabled body offline. Beyond providing access to alternate identities, the exploration of identity online offers opportunities for social and personal development (Berman & Bruckman, 2000; Bruckman, 1996b). Turkle (p. 261) goes further to argue that the flexible construction of identity online actually serves to facilitate "a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity." This provides support for the online medium affording people with disabilities, in particular, empowering social outcomes without removing disability from their identity repertoire. While unparalleled opportunities for the creative reshaping of the

identities of people with disabilities are made possible online, as textual communication is privileged over visual media, Heim (1991) claims that without meeting face-to-face ethical principles governing behaviour may languish.

#### Ethical practices languish

According to Heim (1991), the face has been the primal means of mediation as the physicality of another's eyes establishes trust. CMC leaves out the experience of the human face, reducing an ethical awareness. Heim (p.76) argues that such outcomes may lead to "an amoral indifference to human relationships." When the acts of deception involving the male psychiatrist who switched gender were brought to light, Van Gelder (1991) reports how participants who had developed close relationships with Julie felt deeply betrayed. Further, the virtual rape and mutilation of two players in a MUD community provides an extreme example of the inherent danger associated with engaging in a medium where other participants can easily manipulate the environment for deviant purposes (Dibbell, 1994). There is a possibility that other powerless people in society, inclusive of those with disabilities, may feel that their wellbeing and security is, also, threatened online.

#### Losing social contact

Heim (1991) goes on to point out that online interaction loses the immediacy of human interdependence, severely restricting the quality of human contact. A person with quadriplegia feared he would become so dependent on the online medium for social interaction that it would eradicate all physical contact, furthering the social isolation he already experienced (Ford, 2001). As a result, his disability would fade into oblivion and, with it, the social acceptance of operating inside a disabled body. Research (Kraut et al., 1998; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000) has investigated whether online usage creates negative social outcomes.

In a longitudinal study of US households conducted by Kraut et al. (1998), greater online usage led to increases in depression and loneliness, and a decreased number of social contacts. Similarly, in a study carried out by Sanders, Field, Diego, and Kaplan (2000), social isolation and depression amongst adolescents was found to be linked with greater online usage. These findings indicate that

online access may actually lead to adverse social outcomes for people with disabilities who may already experience social disadvantage because of mobility barriers and the stigma surrounding disability. Moreover, the reliance on general technological aids to assist people with disabilities in daily life may further undermine potential benefits surrounding their online experiences.

### Creating further dependency for people with disabilities

Corker and French (1999) argue that Western individualism has positioned people with close, functional relationships to technology unfavourably, because of the cultural need to position identity as something independent and autonomous. The negative focus on technology constructs a particular impression of people as mechanical slaves of their cultural climate, as opposed to active agents able to negotiate their position within their social and cultural sphere. Hence, Corker and French go on to point out that technological solutions can be seen as being, in part, responsible for the oppression of people with disabilities. Similarly, Baudrillard (1988) asserts that the expertise of people with disabilities in the use of motor and sensory aids actually functions to advance them in the process of mutation and dehumanisation required for online adaptation. Hence, people with disabilities may feel more alienated from the social world online than in other contexts. Nevertheless, the online medium opens up new contexts for contesting and reshaping socially defined categories (Lawley, 1993).

### Collective empowerment for disabled identities

Poster (1995) argues that due to the absence of identity markers that divide and alienate interaction, online conversations have greater potential for opening up discussion on topics that might typically be avoided, considered controversial, or socially taboo. The democratic and anti-hierarchical nature of CMC, combined with the anonymity of the online medium provides conditions for levelled discourse where relationships of power can be negotiated and redefined (Blair, 1998). Research demonstrates how the online medium enables people with disabilities to challenge others' conceptions about disability, reconstructing disabled identities in their own terms.

Singer (1999) investigated how people with autism were able to challenge psychologists' invalidation of their disability, which linked autism with a childhood trauma or sexual repression. By going online and interacting with similar others, people with autism were psychologically empowered to validate autism as an identity in and of itself, without the need to draw on negative medical constructions for justifying their way of being. In connecting with others online, users with autism gained practical empowerment through exploring medication options, comparing what works, and discovering the best practitioners available. Further, online communication enabled users to interact freely, removed from the limitations resulting from human sensory overload, common in face-to-face contexts.

Similarly, Sack (2000) has found that online capacity for communication across a large and geographically dispersed audience has made possible opportunities for mobilising individuals with chronic illnesses that are unrecognised by medical professionals and insurance organisations. The online medium also offers a social space, giving isolated individuals access to similar others and a means of sharing social and political values. Lobbying insurance and medical authorities to recognise the validity of health claims made by people with chronic illness is possible online through the development of collective power and identity. The online medium's capacity to foster supportive environments has also been reported to enhance the social and psychological adjustment of disabled identities (Bowker & Tuffin, 2001a).

In addition to gaining empowerment through the validation of disabled identities online, opportunities exist to radically alter the very construction of these identities. Avery (1998) conducted an ethnographic study of mailing lists for 'parents' of children with disabilities; a marginalised group in society who experience, alongside their family members with disabilities, similar forms of prejudice and discrimination. Observations on one of the mailing lists identified a strong focus for moving beyond the construction of disability as an oppressed experience. Instead, members chose to re-conceptualise disability within a social framework, attributing the oppressed experience of disability to society's disabling interpretation of people with difference. This reconstruction of disability corresponds with Oliver's (1990) social model of disability, which espouses that the disabling experience of impairment is created through society's inability to accommodate difference. Utilising this alternative construction led to more empowering subjectivities for

parents, and their children with disabilities, as parents positioned their children as precious and valuable members of society. This re-positioning of a disabled identity within a socially valued subjectivity provides convincing support that the online medium offers fruitful and empowering outcomes for people with disabilities, within as well as beyond the immediate social context.

Moreover, on a pragmatic level, online access has the capacity to bring the full rights of citizenship into the repertoire(s) of disabled identities. Computer-mediated facilities available online afford people with disabilities independent access to information, education, goods and services, political forums, and meaningful interpersonal contacts (Asher, 1995; Avery, 1998; Williamson, Bow, Stillman, & Schauder, 1999). Avery points out that by having access to all these dimensions integral to social life, people with disabilities may be able to operate within a competent and socially valued cultural space, permitting them more productive and fulfilling lives. While the online medium brings forth many possibilities for diversifying and extending the subjective experiences of people with disabilities, it is difficult to evaluate what kind of social change, if any, is manifesting online.

### Webs of power

Loader and Keeble (2000) point out how the social values embedded in the way online technology is designed and implemented will determine whether the medium ultimately perpetuates power inequities. Members of the upper echelons of society including leaders in corporate enterprise, government, university, and the military still maintain control over the way information and communications technology are governed and managed (Sclove, 2000). Yet, the public at large, who are affected by the technology and pay for it, have little avenue for effective representation at the design and policy development stages (McChesney, 1999). In an online public forum with the developer of a popular, online interactive game, Ford (2001) reports inquiring about the possibility of constructing a “wheelchair user” character among the choices available for game players to operate within. Although a “wheelchair user” choice had been considered, it was deemed too complex and time consuming to invest resources on. Beyond the economic and political interests highlighted by this exclusionary decision, Ford argues that it constrains the social choices available to online participants, thereby, reinforcing dominant ideologies

surrounding identities and bodies. This positions people with disabilities as even more marginalised online, than offline, because their very identities are unavailable.

Jordan (1999) argues that technology is constructed within relations of technopower where certain values become integrated into the hard wiring that users end up adopting as they operate within the available technological resources. Command features, software options, and the abilities accessible to people in cyberspace predetermine their very opportunities for participation because the monotony of particular software companies and program designs circumscribe experience. This is particularly the case for people with physical and sensory disabilities who rely extensively on assistive technology aids to navigate their way around, including scanners, screen readers, and ergonomic hardware, which must be compatible with the online interface. Beyond having technology that works online, people with disabilities may not have access to the technological knowledge, or cultural competency (c.f. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of cultural capital) to fully participate. Chesher (1994) asserts that access to online technology as well as the skills to operate within it will function to duplicate existing class divisions and perpetuate dominant ideologies. Hence, people with disabilities may be adversely affected by their inability to operate under standard practices for navigating their online experiences.

### Defining and Justifying the Research Context

This review of the literature indicates that, although the online medium has facilitated the reconstruction of conventional social categories used to define people, like race and gender, it has also been seen to reinstate these categories for structuring social discourse (Bayer, 1998). Consequently, while opportunities may exist for people with disabilities to extend their social experiences in diverse and empowering ways, ideological, structural, and practical barriers may delimit these positive outcomes. Yet, very little research has actually explored what kinds of experiences are available online for people with disabilities. Much of the literature focuses on marginalised identities, inclusive of women and ethnic minorities, which may offer useful analogies for interpreting the experiences of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, only a pilot survey of people with disabilities

(Hyde & Todd, 1996) and a paucity of other studies investigating the online medium's effect on people with paraplegia (Ford, 2001), chronic illness (Sack, 2000), and autism (Singer, 1999) have been considered. This highlights the need to explore what other kinds of online possibilities are available to a broader range of people with disabilities.

Beyond contributing to gaps in the literature, the purpose of this research is to take advantage of the new media age as another research context and topic, in its own right. The online medium with its, often, textual form of communication may provide a new social context in which to understand experience where people have greater control over their participation and positioning in social interaction. As Shilling (1993, p.3) highlights,

We are ... living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them ... the body is becoming increasingly a phenomenon of options and choices ... developments have advanced the potential many people have to control their own bodies.

For people with disabilities, whose identities may be marginalised offline because of the visibility of their social and physical difference, the online medium may offer unprecedented opportunities for operating within wider identity frameworks that are no longer constrained by prejudice and discrimination towards disabilities. Therefore, online developments may bring forth many possibilities for positioning and reconstructing the identities and bodies of people with disabilities (Bowker, 1999a, 1999b).

This thesis discursively explores the experiences available to people with disabilities online, demonstrating possibilities for constructing alternative subjectivities for this social group. Discursive findings, however, also, show how the marginalised positioning of people with disabilities offline is reproduced online. These outcomes, as well as the philosophy underpinning my research approach, and my method of gathering data are delineated in the following chapters.

## Chapter Two: Being Philosophical About Studying People

*This chapter talks about the philosophical ideas central to the way I theorise and study what it means to be online for people with disabilities. Here, I discuss my ontological and epistemological frameworks for researching the constructions of the online experiences of people with disabilities. Both frameworks are inextricably linked as how a person theorises the social world inevitably directs the type of investigative approach they use to study it, as evident in this chapter and throughout this thesis. In outlining these frameworks, I also initiate discussion on the importance of language as central to my ontological and epistemological field of reality. As a means of distinguishing more clearly my means of conceptual and methodological philosophy, I begin by describing an approach to constructing people that has dominated psychology and much of the social world.*

### Traditional Approach to Constructing People

The traditional approach to constructing people in the discipline of social psychology has been guided by specific social practices. Rose (1989) suggests that at the heart of traditional psychological constructions of the person is the social practice of individualism. The notion that one can possess something called an *identity*, denoted as no less than an “essential center of the self” (Sparkes, 1997, p. 84), encapsulates this. Underlying traditional identity theories in psychology, such as trait, role, and humanistic theories, is the idea that there exists a true and defining feature of the self, which controls a person’s thoughts and actions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Conceptualising people on the basis of essential characteristics can be traced back to the Enlightenment period (Hall, 1992) where people were understood to be in possession of inner fundamental entities. These entities provided a convenient means of summing-up a person. Indeed, as Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson, and Rogers (1995) point out, psychology is a product of the modern age where human action is conceived to be governed by essential qualities. Not surprisingly, within this individualist construction of people, independence and agency have been influential.

To be independent is considered an integral component of a person's identity (Watson, 1998). Gergen (1997) points out how the self is firmly grounded in notions of autonomy and independence, extending to the belief that "dependency is the antithesis of personhood" (Seymour, 1998, p. 79). Shotter (1989, p. 136) employs the term "possessive individualism" to describe the notion of individuals being the sole agent of their own capacities, eliminating any onus on society. Responsibility for personal failure and success resides within the individual. People have become positioned as rational entities in full control of their destiny with actions and achievements being directed by essentialist properties held at the core of their identity. This conception of people has its roots in liberal humanism, which came into force during the beginning of the modern age in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gergen, 1991). Pancer (1997) also suggests such conceptions have been spurred on by an individualist movement derived from American idealism. Focusing on independence and autonomy fails to consider, however, the interdependent relationships between people and their existence within a socially dependent world.

The individualist practice of identity with its agentic and independent components has become a dominant force within society, governing the way we think about ourselves (Rose, 1989) and others. Constructing people in this way advantages an individualist framework, while marginalising the social. Constructing people on the basis of essentialist qualities, also, infers the existence of entities stable across time, which possess some kind of abstract materialism. The implications of this psychological construction of people may not be that helpful for some groups in society. Similarly, the practical techniques used to study human action may not be beneficial. On the contrary, an individualist construction and the traditional techniques used for understanding human action and experience may actually be disempowering for the social positioning and psychological well-being of certain categories of people, whose places in society are often marginalised. People with disabilities along with women, children, ethnic minorities, and lower socio-economic groups comprise such categories. The next section aims to highlight the disabling practice of using a material foundation, manifesting in physical action and appearance, to conceptualise people. It begins by deriving social psychology's emphasis on a material reality within a cognitive realm.

## Privileging the material over the social: Assumed ontology

Mainstream social psychological constructions of people are grounded in notions that essentialist characteristics and mental processes underlie human action and experience. Further to the point, both of these abstractions are tied to a material reality within some externally given world. Most recently, theorising from cognitive psychology, which has incorporated topics like memory, perception, categorisation, attitudes and attribution, has strengthened this conceptual framework in social psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Central to cognitive psychology is the idea that mental processes and cognitive representations underlie theorising about the social world. It is perceived that psychological phenomena can be reduced to cognitive constructions. Furthermore, all cognitive representations derive from perceptual processes. These processes have their roots in a perceived *material* reality. Speech and voice are considered material manifestations of thought, giving privileged access to mental consciousness, the self, and personhood (Sampson, 1989). What is present and observable is privileged over absence. Traditional social psychological theories have adopted this ontology. Hence, people's constructions of the social world, as well as psychological conceptions of people in the world, are premised on an external reality that has a material existence. Restricting constructions of social action and experience to cognitive operations and representations marginalises the social. What is actively going on in interaction between people is hidden from view. Language, the social ingredient embodying our interactions, is eliminated from the research sphere. Together, this cognitive framework based on an essentialist reality presents some interesting developments for the psychological constructions of people with disabilities.

Typically, the discipline of social psychology has gone about constructing people by conceptualising physical action as a root to essentialist characteristics and mental processes. This leads to an inextricable link between physical manifestations, on the one hand, and intra-psychic characteristics, which draws closer to a naturalistic characterisation of inner qualities and mechanisms. The assumption follows that those whose physical manifestations deviate from the norm may be faced with defining characteristics that are inferior. The current psychological practice of limiting constructions of people to individualising processes suppresses constructions based on the social. The physical manifestation of some people may not allow them to comply, however, with the

autonomous and independent standard advocated by an individualising framework, even though they may function more effectively as socially interdependent beings. This leads to a dangerous situation in which those who fail to live up to current ideals of physical performance, laid down by individualism, are considered ontologically unstable.

In following this theoretical line of conceptualising human action, which judges outward performance as a marker of intra-psychic processes occupying a material reality, a person's physical representation (including their bodily strengths and weaknesses) has the capacity to become the primary means of self-definition. This can extend to accounting for a person's social, political, and economic circumstances (Shilling, 1993). Not surprisingly, Shilling has pointed out that the implications of such theorising can lead to biological factors explaining and justifying social inequities. The notion that the oppressive social circumstances of people with disabilities arise from their physical disability exemplifies this essentialist conceptualisation of people. A person's material manifestation - their outward physical or sensory disability - becomes denigrated to some defective, intra-psychic attribute. This can then be deployed to define and, therefore, limit a person's identity and social experience.

Sampson (1989) argues that interpreting social problems as psychologically derived places the burden of responsibility for fixing the problem on the person. The individual is seen as the cause of and accountable for their defective state (Higgins, 1992), reducing them to a non-social and static being (Shilling, 1993), as well as a separate and independent entity void of a socially dependent existence. Sampson highlights that privileging the material derived from the psychological preserves present discrimination by failing to consider the effects of wider social structures. This focus on the material manifesting essentialist qualities resonates within popular culture too. For instance, psychologising about people's actions using explanations based on internal characteristics has become common practice in society.

Featherstone (1991) reports how a particular construction of the person has emerged in consumer culture. This construction is based on the body's exchange value manifested by the body's ability to represent the ideals of beauty, health, and fitness. Kirk (1993) suggests that the shape and size of a person's body has

become a marker of their success and self-worth. The physical manifestation of the person as a root to essentialist qualities can now determine a person's very social value. Fox (1997) acknowledges that correlations have been found between people's self-esteem and physical self-worth ( $r = 0.6$ ), as well as physical attractiveness and physical self-worth ( $r = 0.7$ ). Physical embodiment has become a means of constructing and measuring culturally defined qualities of people in popular culture.

Due to a decline in religious and political influences, Shilling (1993) suggests the human body has now become the landscape upon which to build a complete sense of self. According to Fox (1997), Seymour (1998), Shilling, and Sparkes (1997), a person's physical manifestation has developed into a medium for communicating the whole self. This raises serious ramifications for the value placed on bodily landscapes that do not communicate culturally prized values. By placing high market value on physically competent bodies as symbols of essentialist ideals, Safillios-Rothschild (1970) points out how those who deviate are faced with negative and devalued self-concepts. Sparkes argues that some bodily manifestations become valued more than others like able-bodied over disabled.

Bodily materiality is the vessel, then, for translating essentialist constructions of human action and experience. At the expense of the social, bodily materiality privileges essentialist constructions of people based on materialist notions of an intra-psychic reality. Yet, these essentialist constructions are *socially* and *culturally* defined. Consequently, they change according to history, geography, and contemporary social practice. From this ontological perspective of conceptualising human action, contemporary essentialist constructions are of great concern, as they limit possibilities for thinking about people in our social world. In particular, the implications of essentialist constructions for people with disabilities are devastating because their bodily materiality quite often deviates from the 'norm'. It is also of considerable concern from an epistemological viewpoint, in terms of the kinds of values incorporated into knowledge generating practices for studying people, inclusive of people with disabilities.

## Privileging the material over the social: Assumed epistemology

Psychology has traditionally adopted the epistemology of the natural sciences. This is founded on positivism, defined as an uncritical adherence to the scientific method as the only reliable means of accessing knowledge (Harding, 1986; Vaughan & Hogg, 1995). Knowledge based on subjectivity and interpretation becomes relegated to mere opinion (Polkinghorne, 1983). Positivist knowledge supports two forms of inquiry only: namely, empiricism and logic, although greater importance is placed on the former in many of the social sciences (Giddens, 1977). Harré (1981) and Polkinghorne state that empiricism considers knowledge claims based on what can be known from sensory experience. According to Giddens, the organisation and structure of this knowledge manifests through the material form of the experience itself. This is judged via our sensory perception. Material formation is afforded superior status over the social, deemed as the only reliable way to seek out knowledge of the social world.

Gergen (1997) points out that in assuming the beliefs of the natural sciences, psychology considers there to be an external world containing material causes and laws that underlie all social phenomena. These causes and laws materialise through the physical events observed via sensory experience (Harré, 1981). A person must remain secure in the practices of the natural sciences to discover the materialisation of these rules for determining social phenomena. This involves removing all subjectivity from the research sphere (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Goals for investigating the social world are premised on impartial, objective, and value-neutral research (Gergen, 1997; Harding, 1986; Reason & Rowan, 1981). This serves to eliminate what is subjective. Further, reducing social interaction to measures of independent, numerical scores eliminates nuances in social meaning. This provides for objective, value-neutral research outcomes. The more detached the researcher is from participants and the social dynamics of the research context, the greater chance of guaranteeing objective and bias-free data. Language, however, is not removed from this practice of objectivity.

Within this objectively structured world, language is conceptualised as being a simple referent of something materially experienced (Harré, 1981). As such, it represents a value-neutral medium, which uncomplicatedly reflects a material

reality. Constructing language as a conceptually neutral act, corresponding to factual reality, allows for truth statements to be made (Hughes, 1990). In furthering this aim for objectivity, psychology has used language to develop a protocol for the scientific study of human action. As a result, Hughes highlights how language is deployed to construct formal and quantitatively defined structures in which to organise knowledge about the social world. Operational definitions like independent and dependent variables are components of this quantification.

Using measurements of physical action and experience, accessed via independent and dependent variables to test for the material existence of psychological constructs, upholds the belief in empirically grounded knowledge. This is knowledge that privileges the material existence of social phenomena, as observed through sensory experience and conceptualised through quantitatively defined, linguistic practices. By using empiricism to seek out deterministic causes governing the social world and reducing life to statistical variables, which can be represented independently of one another, the intersubjective nature of the social is obscured from study. Pursuing the epistemology of the natural sciences privileges the material, or physical dimension of our social world, at the expense of ignoring other dimensions of social phenomena.

In considering the epistemological and ontological frameworks outlined so far, what exists in material form, as perceived by our senses, corresponds with some pre-defined conceptually given reality. Our social world is defined and, hence, limited by those processes, events, and objects conceptualised a priori. By default, this suppresses the development of alternative theoretical viewpoints. The belief that the scientific method is the only reliable means of accessing knowledge, also, suppresses other knowledge practices. Present hegemonies of knowledge and their associated conceptions of reality are retained, thereby, restricting the potential for alternative modes of thought to gain currency. Consequently, this positions people within a non-progressive framework, unable to achieve social change beyond what has already been defined by dominant authorities. Ultimately, this provides for a disabling route to conceptualising and studying people. What follows is a description of epistemology and ontology that can be used to research how people with disabilities are constructing their online experiences. It radically transforms traditional theoretical and methodological practices in social psychology.

## Not Just Another Research Method: A ReOrientAtion to Psychologising People

Discursive psychology offers a very different ontology for constructing people. Instead of developing theories about people based on their physical and psychological make-up, discursive psychology considers the nature of people to be a discursive product of their social activities. Discursive psychology considers that what is deemed real *is* socially constructed in different physical locations in time, under varying political systems, and within diverse social and cultural practices (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

To elaborate this further, we are all part of a particular historical era surrounded by a particular social network. As such, what we say is not only moulded by, but is constructed *out of* these very influences. Hence, our actions and experiences are inextricably connected to our immediate social network, which adopts cultural understandings of the social world. Likewise, “generating hypotheses about social situations involves constructing meaning from one's own cultural experience” (Cherry, 1995, p. 17). As members of the culture of academia, social psychologists are socialised in pursuing intellectually respectable lines of enquiry about social phenomena. According to Gergen (1973), what is socially and psychologically relevant about a given person is manufactured within the cultural environment where such social, psychological subject matter evolves. In other words, action and experience, as studied within the domain of social psychology, are socially constructed.

Building on the insights of symbolic interactionism, Gergen (1997) and Sparkes (1997) point out that identity is conceptualised as a construction of social interaction. How we come to understand and know about our world is constructed in meaningful interaction with others. “We learn who we are and our place in the world through our relationships with others” (Seymour, 1998, p. 51). We inform one another how *to be* through our discourse (Shotter, 1989). How we talk about ourselves depends on the textual resources available within a particular historical medium. These resources are negotiated in daily interaction. The identity(s) of people with disabilities illustrates this process of social construction well.

Disability is a multidimensional identity that is specific to culture and history, is socially constructed, and is mediated by time of onset, nature of impairment, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and the multitude of roles,

expectancies, aspirations, and perceptions that each individual incorporates into the self. Socially constructed...refers to reciprocal interactions between the self and others that...contribute to the dynamics of self-perception and self-actualization (Sherrill, 1997, p. 257).

How we construct ourselves in interaction with others comes to define the expectations, and, hence, the limitations of what we can achieve and how we can function. From a reflexive standpoint, in highlighting the socially constructed nature of disability, authors such as Corker (1998), Schneider (1988), Sparkes (1997), and Watson (1998) have helped bring about the notion of a socially constructed world. In particular, I would like to draw attention to Higgins' (1992) construction of disability. Higgins points out that "disability is what we have made of physical, mental and emotional variation. We make disability, not merely respond to it. Through individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal activities we create human variation and give it...profound meaning" (p. 8). Through our culturally specific ways of carving up the social world, meaning has been created out of physical, psychological, and social deviation. Foucault's (1972, 1978/1990, 1977/1995) work, which considers the relationship between knowledge, power, and social practice, becomes relevant here.

Knowledge embodies - power - embodies action

Rather than delineating each work separately, I will highlight the central themes of Foucault's (1972, 1978/1990, 1977/1995) works conjointly. Foucault's works incorporate the notion of 'discourse'. As Gavey (1989) points out, this is based on the idea that our system of communication is situated in linguistic structures organised around metaphors and repertoires that use the taken-for-granted meanings available within a given social and cultural context. In tracing the historical discourses of knowledge, Foucault argues that each discourse privileges a specific understanding of how to behave or act in the social world.

Central to Foucault's thinking is the notion of power as exercised through social practice, as opposed to power being rooted in essentialist psychological characteristics of individuals. As soon as we give voice to a particular version of understanding, we empower that version to be practised over other versions. By structuring social phenomena according to a version of understanding, we immediately create divisions of meaning in which some phenomena are accepted

by the social order because they fit within that prescribed version of understanding. Phenomena that deviate in some way from the dominant version are marked as unacceptable. Higgins' (1992) conceptualisation of disability incorporates this idea of difference being created and assigned particular meaning out of prevailing social practice. In demonstrating how knowledge privileges specific forms of social action, Foucault studied differing productions of people across transitions in history.

Accordingly, the transition from traditional to modern society was linked to the emergence of the theory of population, which offered a way of conceptualising people demographically in terms of their differential characteristics. Knowledge about population made possible certain forms of social action. Concepts were defined and instruments were created to construct and measure varying aspects of people. The management and control of people became significant. Sexology emerged as a topic of consequence because the size of a population could be manipulated and controlled according to its sexual practices. Sexual practices that increased the population and, thereby, furthered the country's capabilities for generating wealth, were favoured by the ruling order and deemed acceptable by the State. Sexual practices that did not further the goals of the ruling order were defined and outlawed. Constructing a hierarchy of behaviours brought the notions of 'normality' and 'abnormality' into human thinking and, therefore, practice, producing relations of dominance and subordination.

Tracing productions of people across different points in time, also, demonstrated how people are constructed *within* relations of power. Moving from traditional to modern society displaced coercive control by the monarchy for disciplinary power within the people. People became responsible for controlling their own actions to ensure these actions conformed to current social practices. In doing so, people became products of social control. Institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools, and workplaces define and regulate these forms of social control through their daily practices. Like Foucault, Sampson (1990) and Burr (1995) highlight that social psychology is one such institution that controls people through disciplinary power. Describing ourselves in terms of accounting for, or justifying our actions can be linked to psychologising practices of morality (Shotter, 1989).

By studying the different productions of people, Foucault was able to show how people are embedded within relations of power, which positions them in certain

ways. This controls how they can function and what they can achieve, according to available social practices. Foucault moved away from the notion of power, as an essential structure, to power as exercised through the production of everyday social practices

Power is not only attained through the privileging of specific versions of understanding, but it is also exercised *by* the individuals themselves through their social actions; it is, therefore, constituted *in* social action. This leads to the suggestion that just as an individual can obey institutional practices by conforming to prescribed social acts, they can also be empowered to deviate from them by challenging dominant forms of action. Indeed, as reflected in Foucault's work, by privileging deviant constructions of our social world, the positioning of marginalised people can be greatly advanced.

Discursive psychology offers an ontological position and epistemological strategy for accessing alternative constructions of people, which can position them in enabling rather than disabling ways using empowering social practices. Unlike traditional social psychology, which has been influenced by modernism, discursive psychology has its roots in the postmodern age, which considers reality flexible, mutable, and multiple, and the self - a fluid, collaborative, and evolving process. Here, what is conceivable is limited only by a person's imagination (Gergen, 1989).

A postmodern-discursive ontology has parallels with the kinds of ontological dimensions operating online, where the context and topic of this research is located. Removing the correspondence between representation and reality within the context of computer-mediated environments (Poster, 1997) and within the construction of digital information contests traditional meaning-making. Poster (1995) argues that uncertainty between the text and its referent undermines fixed notions of reality, as simulation, according to Vasseleu (1997), makes 'the real' redundant. This leads to a greater potential for knowledge creation, as the medium itself encompasses the entire means of creating and communicating reality (c.f. McLuhan, 1987). The digital production of information may also contribute to a greater potential for knowledge construction.

Traditionally, information has been transmitted through analogue representations requiring a parallel connection between a sign's physical form and its cultural

meaning. In contrast, digital code, which provides the building blocks for online communication, reduces information to the level of binary bits, allowing, as Chesher (1997) argues, for possibilities to become realities. In contrast to an ocularcentric way of constructing knowledge, digital re-presentations can be created according to how individual participants present and perceive their social world. The medium's capacity to reconstruct traditional forms of knowledge may offer people with disabilities (and other marginalised groups) the opportunity for increased political and social empowerment.

Following an enabling ontological framework for conceptualising people, it is worth discussing suitable practices for studying human action limited only by a person's socio-cultural understandings. *Enabling* epistemology for studying how people with disabilities position themselves online is outlined below. It begins by considering the significance of language.

How important is language? Extremely.....

Traditionally, psychology has conceptualised language as a tool that allows the researcher to gain access to fundamental, intra-psychic properties underlying the human soul, which govern outward physical actions. However, an alternative psychological approach, espoused here, views language as operating in far greater capacity than this. Any interpretation of an event or object is not only mediated by language, but is also constituted by that very language. Gavey (1989) highlights how events and objects in our social world are made sense of through the discourses we use to interpret them. Not only does language give us access to how individuals structure their social world, the medium of communication itself creates these social and psychological constructions governing how we operate. In other words, the way we understand human action and experience is inextricably linked to the ways in which our understandings are linguistically selected (Garfinkel, 1967; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Shotter & Gergen, 1989).

As Edwards and Potter (1992) argue, discursive psychology rejects the notion that language can neutrally reflect life. It challenges the idea that words objectively describe our existence and that such existence can be independent of our relationship with the social world. Language, through its very nature of being

created by people in any given culture, to communicate shared meanings and social practices evolving from that culture, is caught up in the idiosyncrasies of that particular place. This challenges the notion that there can be absolute objectivity and truth. No knowledge is free from politics, power, or situated ideological values (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Sale, 1999). Hence, as Gavey (1989) indicates, positivism becomes one cultural standpoint amongst many that researchers can deploy to understand the social world.

The subjectivity of our social existence and experience is created in language. It is this subjectivity located in the intersubjective processes going on through social interaction that discursive psychology focuses on as the topic of human understanding (Burman & Parker, 1993). Subjectivity is not something that needs to be controlled, or eliminated from the research enterprise. What is (inter)subjective; what is differentially interpreted and negotiated in social interaction becomes the focus of study and analysis (Gavey, 1989). Language, whether it is in the form of verbal or written communication, hieroglyphics, Sign, or Braille, is the nominative system of meaning within the social world. As Burman and Parker, and Corker (1998) point out, meaning is never fixed. Instead, meaning constantly evolves and transforms according to the (inter)subjective activities going on within the social sphere.

Ideology is also constructed through language. Billig et al. (1988) utilise the notion of “lived ideology” to explain how people adopt common, or taken-for-granted assumptions of their society in order to understand their own experiences and relate these experiences to others. Ideologies are created out of the language practices available in the social world, and, hence, become deeply rooted within a person's consciousness (Billig, 1997).

Deriving from our taken-for-granted, common sense interpretations, ideology also has the effect of manufacturing understandings as natural and, thereby, unquestionable, rendering alternative views inaccessible (Billig, 1997). Indeed, Cherry (1995) argues that the point at which we construct a specific social event is also the moment when we restrict the realisation of that event. Drawing on culturally appropriate explanations to reinterpret social phenomena, by default, discriminates against and *eliminates* all other forms of interpretation. Ideological practices, by their very nature of being constructed in the language practices of a

culture, are defined and, therefore, limited by what is acceptable and common knowledge.

Billig (1997) highlights how the discipline of social psychology, as constituted in language, is built from the current ideologies of society. If language constructs individuals' social and psychological realities through current ideology, understanding the nuances and less subtle workings of language use can provide social psychologists with a direct means of investigating the construction, organisation, and function of psychological processes (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). What follows is a delineation of how one might go about doing this.

### A useful strategy for studying people

Discourse analysis (DA) offers one method for studying people that recognises language, as an observable medium of action, is constructed out of social interaction. DA has its roots in speech act theory, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and poststructuralism (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Within this framework, language is treated as a form of social action (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Austin, 1962); it makes things happen and does things; as such, it is considered a *social practice*. DA is interested in how people use language to achieve particular social tasks (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This “involves developing *hypotheses* about the purposes and consequences of language” (Wetherell & Potter, p. 170, emphasis in the original). To elaborate on this, the concepts of language function, variability, construction, and organisation, which structure discourse, will be explained. Each, also, offers a strategy for approaching an analysis of discourse.

DA involves identifying how language functions within varying discourses. For example, language functions to achieve fundamental psychological actions like explaining, attributing, justifying, accounting, identifying, and categorising, which people use to structure and make sense of their experiences (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Discourse analysts are interested in more than the immediate function of language, as derived from the influence of speech act theory and ethnomethodology.

In explaining broader aspects of language function, it is worth highlighting what Bakhtin (1986) has identified as the *dialogic* quality of language. What this means is that our discursive interactions are made up of a series of responses. These responses may directly relate to the topic at hand in the immediate social interaction. They may also constitute utterances deliberately made to counteract or support ideologies proclaimed by other speakers, which are not necessarily present within the local interaction, but, nevertheless, are available in the wider social and political arena. In association with a poststructuralist contribution to DA, the meaning of our interactional utterances must also be understood within the wider cultural and social context where they emerge. Consequently, DA considers more than the immediate tasks to be achieved by speakers in social interaction. DA provides an understanding of the social and political effects achieved by certain discourses, including the type of subject positions offered (Wetherell & Potter, 1988), whether powerful or powerless. Shotter and Gergen (1989) note how we understand ourselves depends on how we are *positioned* in discourse. By delineating the function of discourse, analysis can access the structure of oppressive forms of discourse, and how these can be undermined.

As Wetherell and Potter (1988) mention, how a discourse functions can be accessed through a study of its variability. Based on the notion that what we say is governed by the immediate interactional sequence in which we are positioned, our linguistic needs will fluctuate according to what is talked about in conversation. As such, functions of our discourse will change as well. Therefore, by analysing the fluctuations in function, or *variability*, within a discourse, we can seek to understand when particular constructions are deployed, and for what purpose, thereby, seeking to understand their function. In addition to emphasising the variable nature of discourse, it is also important to consider how discourse is organised.

As noted by Widdicombe (1993), language achieves things through its particular organisation. It is sequentially organised in the sense that what is told is structured in a specific order, which influences meaning. As opposed to hidden cognitive processes occurring beneath the social sphere, Widdicombe points out how language is organised via culturally accepted practices of meaning-making, emerging from the immediate social and cultural context. Functional, variable, and organisational aspects of discourse all contribute to discourse's constructive nature.

The constructive nature of discourse is highlighted through the notion of selection. When I speak, I have at my disposal a rich repertoire of possible discursive moves. The specific constructions I end up adopting have been drawn from a wide range of options because they suit the particular tasks I want my talk to achieve. Discursive studies looking at how sexism is justified and socially practised within radio stations (Gill, 1993), and how racism in Australia (Augoustinos, Tiffin, & Sale, 1999) and New Zealand (McCreanor, 1997) is accounted for and legitimised through accepted discursive conventions demonstrate speakers' abilities to select particular linguistic versions, as opposed to others. Indeed, as we go about describing the social world and our relationship to it, we are exercising our rights as discourse users. We utilise certain words and phrases to build up a particular picture of reality, which inevitably eliminates other ways of describing events in our social world. Emphasis on construction conveys how the realisation of our experience is determined by the linguistic selections that we deploy to interpret them (Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

In further delineating a discursive approach to analysis, it is important to be aware that when reading discourse there is no ultimate interpretation (Gavey, 1989). All analysts, like all speakers, interpret the world from their own situated position, whether it be scientific, liberal humanist, or conservative right-wing, to name a few. Likewise, there is no unitary or 'true' meaning that can be discovered in the discourse underlying a speaker's voice or writer's prose. All forms of communication are historically and culturally mediated. Further, as Gavey highlights, analysts' readings of discourse constitute the readings themselves, since all levels of understanding and interpretation are limited and, simultaneously, are made accessible by what is contextually meaningful within a given time. Finally, it is worth noting that DA does not aim to deny the existence of internal psychological states. Rather, it questions whether the traditional psychological approach of constructing intra-psychic concepts is the *only* valid way to go about understanding and researching human action and experience (Billig, 1997).

In dealing with the actual analysis of discourse, I have adopted Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) concept of an 'interpretative repertoire'. Interpretative repertoires constitute "internally consistent" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172) regularities in discourse, which manifest across and within individuals' talk. In other words, they form the patterns in people's use of language. These patterns can be distinguished by the differences in construction of speakers' talk. They function to summarise the

kinds of explanations available in culture that speakers draw upon to make sense of everyday interactions. As such, they allow a person to observe how language facilitates social action (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Although not consciously defined by the speakers themselves, they evolve through the analyst's framework of interpretation. Through the process of nomination they become transformed into a definable existence, taking on a static and fixed dimension. It should be acknowledged, as Frewin and Tuffin (1999) point out, that while isolating the repertoires used in discourse acts to re-present them as bounded and detached entities, theoretically, repertoires still remain conjointly connected to the text. According to Burr (1995), 'interpretative repertoire' emphasises the flexibility in linguistic resources available to speakers. This contrasts with Parker's (1992) use of the term 'discourses', which suggests that the patterns identified in language take on a stable and assumed existence, independent of the speakers using them. As a consequence of deploying the concept of interpretative repertoire, I also acknowledge that my analysis is positioned within a relativist field of understanding aligned with discursive theorists such as Edwards and Potter (1992), Potter and Wetherell, and Wetherell and Potter. This positioning occurs in contrast to a critical realist standpoint, such as that taken up by Parker, and Parker and Burman (1993). However, both standpoints are located within a social constructionist conception of language. In deploying a social constructionist philosophy to guide my research and its emphasis on language through DA, it is highly relevant for me to indulge in some reflexive analysis of my own discursive practices, around the construction of participants with disabilities. This also extends to incorporate how I have constructed deaf participants. The following section focuses specifically on these areas of definition and, hence, construction.

### Being reflexive about constructing people with disabilities

Throughout this entire project I am actively constructing people with disabilities in the social world. This occurs from the way in which I re-present particular kinds of actions talked about by participants in my analysis, to the disability examples I have drawn on in this very chapter to construct disabled identities, which are, namely, oppressed identities. Consequently, my involvement in this project has led to a reproduction of the oppression of people with disabilities, although my analysis

of the interview data shows participants' capacity to challenge oppressive practices surrounding their identities and ways of operating in the social world.

Nevertheless, throughout this thesis, I have selected the phrase *people with disabilities* to construct participants. I have deployed this construction because I have an interest and desire to position my participants as *people*, first and foremost. I believe that such a construction demonstrates their valued status as equal members of society without immediately imposing a disabled identity label with all the negative associations this kind of label holds. With this argument in mind, my construction of participants with disabilities may be positioned within a liberal-humanist subjectivity.

Simultaneously, however, the carrying out of this construction also undermines the very significance of disability. Indeed, as Oliver (1990) argues, placing disability second functions to create disability as an appendage to a person's identity. He goes on to point out that such a construction fails to acknowledge the reality of disability as experienced by those who construct disability as fundamental to their identity. Deploying a *person first - disability second* construction creates a division between disability and people by positioning them as separate and isolated entities. Rather, Oliver advocates for the phrase, disabled people, to show how a person and their disability are intimately connected, as well as to demonstrate the increasing need for disabled people to be accepted in the social world. The former argument, in particular, fits well with social constructionist philosophy as it acknowledges how experience is inextricably tied up with the way a person is constructed and, hence, positioned in the social world. In contrast, other disability activists and researchers, such as Higgins (1992), alternate between different constructions of disability for the purpose of showing how disability is socially constructed in a myriad of ways through interaction between disabled and non-disabled people.

Similarly in the spirit of social constructionism, I am using *people with disabilities* as a discursive resource for repositioning disabled people by constructing them as people without, necessarily, the barriers of operating solely within a disabled subjectivity and the associated prejudice and discrimination this carries. By focusing on disabled participants as people who also happen to operate differently, I aim to re-present them as valued participants in the social world, who have more

than one identity resource to access and utilise. As a member of a society that continues to discriminate against disabled people, positioning participants in this way may go some way towards the empowerment of people with disabilities. Hence, constructing participants as people with disabilities may function to highlight their similarity with non-disabled others, as *people*, in addition to their points of diversity with regard to being *people with disabilities*.

Within the broad construction of people with disabilities, from a reflexive standpoint, it is also important to highlight how I have identified people who are deaf in this thesis. In contrast to other disability groups, there is a common understanding amongst deaf people that being deaf does not constitute a disabling condition within deaf communities because people who are deaf operate within a different culture. This cultural difference centres on Sign language. This language utilises a different structure and mode of communication compared with English, as well as other textually based languages, which have dominated the social world and to a lesser extent, oral languages. Due to this cultural difference, many deaf people do not identify with having a disability. This cultural difference is reflected in the literature (Corker, 1998; Higgins, 1992; Wendell, 1996) where people who are deaf are positioned as *Deaf* with a capital D. This acknowledges and respects their status as a linguistic minority sharing a culture based on Sign language. Deaf people only become disabled when they are communicating with hearing people. I acknowledge and respect deaf participants who construct themselves as culturally different.

However, in this research, people have taken part on the basis of identifying as having a disability. Further, my position, as a hearing person, functions to create a disabling environment for deaf participants. Research carried out online with deaf participants is not excluded from this. Indeed, English, the primary language of communication online, is a second language for deaf people. This serves to marginalise and disable them. Therefore, in the interests of my research about people with disabilities, I have constructed participants as deaf without the cultural convention of deploying a capital D to recognise deaf people's marginalised and disabled status within the social world and, more specifically, within the online medium. (Chapter Three delineates how deaf participants' online communication difference is dealt with in the data gathering stage of the research.) Before going any further, it is worth discussing some of the criticisms directed at DA.

## Dealing with relativism and agency

In delineating thirty-two problems with DA, Parker and Burman (1993) include the issue of relativism. How can one make a stand on something and, therefore, take up meaningful direction when there are infinite numbers of competing frameworks to understand people's talk, all of equal value? This construction positions DA dilemmatically. It fails to realise the point of DA. The objective of DA is not to take up unified positions on issues. It also does not aim to use these monolithic positions to secure progress. Progress occurs on an entirely different plane within an entirely different epistemology. DA pulls apart what we take for granted, opening it up to argument and debate. There are no limits on what we can study. Nor are there barriers on what insights can be gained from understanding human actions. There are no behavioural models we have to comply with in order to access knowledge about people. Progress is made through the diversity of conceptual tools we can acquire to interpret human action. Our knowledge and understanding is limited only by the explanations we have available. Knowledge is fluid and labile; it changes and transforms according to the accepted moral and political values of the time. DA recognises all this.

Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter (1995) argue that just as knowledge is culturally and historically bound, it is also conflictual and disputable. What is considered appropriate and right at one event in time will change and contradict accepted practices at another, depending on the moral and social ideologies available. Further, daily interactions are sites where contestation and dispute occur. People enter interactions to debate and *contest* (as well as affirm) what 'is' according to their social and historical points of view. Conflict and debate are central to human action and experience (c.f. Billig et al., 1988). DA acknowledges this, arguing that such inconsistency should be made accessible for analysis. Influenced by postmodernism, people are conceptualised as fluctuating entities. Taking up unified positions, then, becomes less useful because all positions become bounded and, ultimately, contested.

In criticising relativism, Parker (1992) also claims that DA avoids the reality of oppression and domination. By limiting the realm of reality to discourse, we fail to legitimise actual inequality and structures of power that govern and underlie the social world. Again, this argument misinterprets the point of DA. It fails to conceive

the social world in terms of a social construction; as being inextricably caught up in our descriptions of it (Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson, & Rogers, 1995). To reiterate, DA takes the view that everything we can know about (and not know about, for example, “I have *no* opinion about extra-terrestrial life forms”) is immediately created in discourse. Our experience of reality happens in the particular way we conceptualise it. Discourse brings about this conceptualisation, whether it be through the medium of pictography, Sign, Braille, spoken or written communication, or extra sensory perception. Discourse is not limited to linguistic elements alone. As indicated by Laclau and Mouffe (1987), it incorporates linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena. Rather than viewing the discursive approach in opposition to realism, Edwards et al. (1995) find it helpful to conceptualise a discursive approach as a critical stand to all research, or a “meta-level” (p. 101) approach to knowledge that can analyse both realist and relativist practices. To say that DA denies reality misconstrues and contradicts the ontological foundations of its approach. It is, as one (like Edwards et al.) might say, an oxymoron.

Last but not least, I turn to the problematic nature of agency in DA. This can be constructed in the question, “How can you be the agent of your actions if your experiences and knowledge are bounded by discourse?” Yet, just as we are products of discourse, Burr (1995) highlights that we are also *manipulators* of it. If discourse exercises power (Foucault, 1972, 1978/1990, 1977/1995) and we can manipulate discourse, then, we can exercise empowerment and, therefore, agency by (i) identifying oppressive subject positions in discourse, (ii) challenging them, and (iii) reformulating them. It is important to elaborate on the concept of subject positioning, otherwise termed positioning, which has been touched on in various ways throughout this chapter. Subject positioning is central to the way I analyse participants’ data. Positioning theory leads to the carrying out of agency discursively.

### Subject positioning

In explaining this concept, Davies and Harré (1990), Van Langenhove and Harré (1994), and Harré and Van Langenhove (1991) begin by drawing on role theory to demonstrate how people are located within socially constructed categories, where social structures have prescribed certain rights, obligations, and duties for

operating within these categories, according to a given moral order (Harré, 1986). For example, locating a person within a disabled category may infer a right of dependency, and an obligation or duty to be grateful and appreciative of others' help. Socially constructed categories and their associated practices constitute *subject positions*, which people take up in varying ways in social interaction.

According to Davies and Harré (1990), subject positions may be created interactively in which a person is positioned by others, or reflexively where a person may position themselves in the course of everyday interaction. Further, Van Langenhove and Harré (1994) point out how the co-authored process of daily interaction means that as a person positions themselves, they, simultaneously, position others. This occurs because the nature of social interaction creates mutually determined relationships in which the very construction of one position serves to rhetorically position another. This may be illustrated in the case of a moral system based on power relations in which positioning oneself as dominant always locates another in a subordinate position. Similarly, positioning oneself as competent may rhetorically position someone else as incompetent within a moral system based on competence relations.

The way a person is positioned, whether reflexively or interactively in conversation, constructs and constrains their actions and experience. Illustrating this, I utilise Goode's (1984) analysis of the relationships encountered in hospital by a person with hydrocephalus: a condition where spinal fluid accumulates producing an enlarged skull leading to deafness, blindness, and paralysis. From a distant, medico-clinical context, this person with multiple disabilities was constructed by their physician as flawed and dysfunctional. This construction served to position them in a derogatory way, locating them within an inferior social category. In contrast, this same person had developed a closer and more personal relationship with their nurse who talked about them as possessing abilities, preferences, and the capacity to share common understandings. This functioned to position the person within a socially valued arena, with the capacity to make an important social contribution to human relationships. Each of these subject positions - socially inferior and socially valued - create different rights and expectations for this person to occupy. While the physician's construction severely inhibited this person's right to access educational training, the construction deployed by the nurse created expectations for participation in education and opened up broader avenues for

daily living outside of an institution. Goode's analysis demonstrates how subject positioning can powerfully impact on a person's life opportunities, as well as a person's social value and their sense of personhood.

Goode's (1984) analysis also highlights how people are positioned in multiple and contradictory ways in everyday life. On the one hand, the person with multiple disabilities was positioned by their physician as inferior. Yet, their nurse positioned them within a valued social category. In addition to occupying more than one identity category, each category possessed divergent characteristics. Positioning theory allows for and recognises that people are often placed within contradictory and multiple subject categories, which they negotiate and resist throughout daily life (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994).

In contrast to role theory, Davies and Harré (1990), Van Langenhove and Harré (1994), and Harré and Van Langenhove (1991) argue that positioning theory allows people to gain agency over their subject positioning by formulating their own, as well as challenging and resisting prescribed subject positions assigned to them in the course of everyday interaction. Wetherell (1998) clearly delineates how agency is practised and managed in positioning in everyday life. Utilising the insights of Laclau (1993) and Mouffe (1992), Wetherell argues that agency can be defined in pluralistic terms rather than in terms of a unified entity. Within the social world, people have at their disposal a plurality of discursive moves, or subject positions, from which to experience themselves. These subject positions are never fixed, as the nature of social interaction requires a continual displacement of topics and positions. Within this continual interchange a person has the ability to orientate, or organise their positioning within the social world. This can be demonstrated in the way speakers modify and reformulate accounts made about their actions by other speakers. This constant adjusting of accounts about people actioned *by* the people themselves illustrates the very agentive processes happening in discourse.

Schneider's (1988) work provides an example of agency deployed by a person with epilepsy. Schneider's research highlights the way in which parents' concerns and anxieties over their children's welfare and safety functioned to position people with epilepsy within a dependent subject position. This position of dependency was reinforced through medical constructions of epilepsy, which defined epilepsy as a

high-risk factor in many areas of daily life. However, such constructions were utilised by a person with epilepsy as personal challenges to overcome, demonstrating how people can take on assigned subject positions and reformulate them for their own social goals, in order to challenge dominant practices and authorities. Having identified and responded to the criticisms of DA, it now seems appropriate to consider DA's strengths.

### Summing Up the Points of Good

Although time consuming and labour intensive (Parker & Burman, 1993; Wetherell & Potter, 1988), in addition to the inaccessibility of much of the discourse used to delineate DA, the approach possesses several advantages for studying social psychological phenomena. As Gill (1993, p. 91) points out, DA "offers both a practical and theoretically coherent way of analysing a whole variety of ...texts." Wetherell and Potter mention that extracts of talk, or text accompany interpretative claims made. This allows others to judge the validity of analysis, as well as offer alternative interpretations if needed. Subsequently, DA provides a clear delineation of how its theoretical lines of enquiry are produced and supported. The consistent practices of re-reading texts multiple times for meaning and backing up interpretations with data extracts demonstrate the kinds of systematic processes involved in carrying out DA.

Further, DA does not demote language to some kind of indirect route, or deviant path to psychological phenomena. Neither does it consider language as a secondary source of data, which is less pure in form due to contamination by the social context and political ideologies of the time or place. As Gill (1993) and Wetherell and Potter (1988) point out, language is considered as a *primary* source of social psychological activity. Language is produced directly by the participants themselves, is a meaning based system accessible to all, shared by both the researcher and the researched, and is readily available throughout everyday human contexts. Subsequently, social experience can be analysed in its everyday form, rather than having to resort to contrived situations (laboratory experiments), or to forcing people to fit their responses into the researcher's pre-defined categories (questionnaires). Hence, DA provides a very practical approach to research. Ultimately, DA privileges the linguistic and the social over traditional

psychological theorising (Wetherell, 1995). By using material that comes directly out of immediate social situations, DA also gives power to the way people, themselves (albeit, re-interpreted by the researcher) account for their actions and conceptualise reality (Widdicombe, 1993).

Finally, DA allows for a deconstruction of ideology (Gill, 1993). Ideology is not just waiting there to be understood in a straightforward fashion. It is deployed by people to serve certain social and psychological functions. By investigating how people construct current ideology, we can get a better idea of how oppressive and disempowering constructions can be undermined in order to create positive social change (Billig, 1997; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Identifying powerless discursive positions can lead to a reorientation of a person's social and personal ideology in a contemporary psychological world. Moreover, the social constructionist conception of reality is useful because it allows for the possibility (real and imagined) of all available subject positions. Outcomes are not limited by traditional social psychological theorising: *everything* is possible. Together, these benefits highlight DA's great application for enabling people.

### Turning to the Research Inquiry

Having accounted for the philosophy of my approach to studying people, it now seems entirely appropriate to delineate further the aims of this research, which are twofold. Firstly, this research aims to analyse the discursive practices of people with disabilities around accessing and engaging with the online medium. Secondly, the research aims to discuss whether the online medium is providing alternative ideological frameworks for positioning people with disabilities in the social world. As such, this research aims to do much more than capture the online experiences of people with disabilities. Likewise, it aims to do more than constrain people's understandings about their experiences through a questionnaire. On the contrary, this research intends to understand the way people with disabilities construct their online experiences by focusing on interpretative repertoires deployed by people with disabilities, themselves. Investigating how people construct their experiences online gives access to the particular kinds of ways people are positioning themselves in relation to another social medium. Chapter Three moves on to

consider the utility of the online medium for gathering data about people with disabilities.

### Chapter Three: Using The Online Medium For Discursive Research About People With Disabilities

*This chapter outlines and debates the utility surrounding an online context for data collection. It begins by discussing the benefits of situating qualitative research within an online context and the specific advantages for participants with disabilities. This chapter also brings to the fore ethical issues surrounding access to and the analysis of readily available data in online communities. In light of ethical dilemmas surrounding naturalistic data collection, an alternative approach is offered, which utilises online interviews with people with disabilities about their online experiences. Reflexively, I delineate my position and its impact on the research. This is followed by a description of the data collection process, including participants and recruitment, materials and procedures, rapport building, and security and ethics. Chapter Three ends with a reflexive analysis of gathering data within an online context.*

#### The Suitability of Online Research

“There are no ‘traditional’ methods for studying the World Wide Web or...anything Internet related,” according to Jones (1999a, p. xi). This opens a wealth of opportunity for qualitative research practices (Sharf, 1999) inclusive of DA. Fernback (1999) has even argued that interpretative methodologies are best suited for studying online communities. This is not surprising considering the amount of naturalistic data available online, which is already present in an accessible format for analysis.

Naturalistic data in textual format occurs across a wide range of online settings, highlighting the medium’s particular suitability for DA. At an asynchronous level where there are considerable time delays between speakers, different kinds of discussion forums exist including bulletin boards. These have become precursors for other asynchronous facilities like Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists. Email provides a very convenient and popular form of asynchronous communication. In the case of synchronous, or real-time communication, users can access chat rooms, which are available through applications like IRC and ICQ (a creative abbreviation for I Seek You). Outside of these avenues, data can be sourced through a variety of websites including personal homepages.

In addition to the accessibility of online data for DA, the textual nature of interaction means that contextual details of the communicative event may be embedded in the dialogue. The textual data produced online incorporates many dimensions of social interaction (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Cybertext may be grounded in the immediacy of the situation (Denzin, 1999) where the contextual location of the conversation is constructed. Hence, as Mann and Stewart point out, textual data may include a construction of participants' relationship with the social situation and the researcher (in cases where the researcher participates in the dialogue of study). Depending on the format in which communication is sent and received, temporal and other context-related details may also be accessed through cybertext. At another level, textual data contains the active work of discussion as it is pursued in interaction. The inclusiveness of cybertextual data provides an extensive landscape for interpreting social experience and carrying out DA.

The arrival of the online medium within recent decades may offer an opportunity for alternative subjectivities to gain exposure. Costigan (1999) points out that the medium's ability to foster communities, which are simultaneously closely connected, diversified, and geographically distant may bring forth entirely different social constructs. Participants from distant locations and diverse cultural backgrounds may come together for group interaction. The interactional feature of online communities becomes accessible for analysis due to the textual nature of CMC. Making available the interactional dynamics between people via a textual medium presents an adaptive context for both discursive and social psychological topics to be studied. Moreover, the potential for alternative social constructs and subjectivities may offer increased opportunities for reconstructing the social positioning of people with disabilities.

Beyond utilising the online medium as a site for studying social psychology and alternative subjectivities, the medium can be conceptualised as a legitimate research tool for gathering data about how people operate in the social world. Drawing on the insights of Pauly (1991), Jones (1999b) suggests that if we conceptualise online communication as a social practice, it can help in our understanding of how we structure and produce cultural forms of meaning-making. Discursive research offers particular advantages in this regard because it is concerned with how language functions as social practice. Hence, there may also

be some benefit in understanding the online medium through a discursive approach.

It is worth considering the integration/differentiation debate with respect to gathering data online and the utility of a discursive approach. Traditional CMC research has gone about investigating online experience as something distinct from other forms of interaction (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Walther, 1996; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994). Rather than conceptualising the online medium as an independent social space, a number of researchers have highlighted the importance of studying online activity in association with everyday life (Benedikt, 1991; Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Kendall, 1999; Sterne, 1999). Deploying a binary interpretation of on- and offline interaction offers a narrow method of understanding (Jones, 1999b). The notion that you can somehow cut off a part of your life and experience it independently of what has happened before, or in other contexts, is unrealistic according to Horn (1998). Discursive research is interested in understanding everyday social practices and, hence, situates analysis within this arena, allowing me to consider the construction of online events incorporated with other contexts. At the same time, the flexibility associated with a discursive approach gives voice to alternative interpretations, inclusive of allowing me to access conceptualisations of online activities that are differentiated from other contexts.

In addition to evaluating the theoretical and conceptual suitability of DA for understanding online interaction, gathering data online may afford some logistical and practical benefits for researchers and participants. In the case of researchers, the textual format of naturalistic data occurring in mailing lists, newsgroups, chat rooms, and other online settings removes the need to transform discourse into an accessible format for qualitative analysis. Inevitably, this eliminates the labour and cost involved in transcribing, as well as removing the additional complexity of focus group transcription. Consequently, there is no need to consider the impact of transcription bias. CMC's ability to produce a verbatim account of an interaction ensures data accountability (Mann & Stewart, 2000). The popular practice of archiving online messages in mailing lists and newsgroups means that researchers may not even need to be members of these communities to access data, or carry out naturalistic studies of online discourse.

Similarly, there are a number of advantages for participants. Providing that participants (and researchers) have access to the necessary hardware and software, the expenses associated with participating in online research are generally limited to telephone connections and subscriptions to Internet service providers. Further, the online medium facilitates a user-friendly research setting. Participants are afforded much flexibility because they can engage in the research at their own pace, time, and location. This contrasts with the intrusiveness of face-to-face methods of data gathering. More importantly, the flexibility surrounding online data gathering may aid participation for those with disabilities. Indeed, physical co-ordination, mobility, and speech capacity no longer hold up barriers towards participation. Irrespective of physical ability, the textual nature of online interaction affords people with diverse operating techniques the capacity to become involved. Hence, the online medium may offer an ideal and equitable environment for conducting research about people with disabilities.

Providing that an online terminal is located in a participant's locale, the ability to contribute to discussions from the vicinity of one's own surroundings allows participants to interact in an environment conducive to their needs. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) support this idea in relation to interviews by arguing that the best strategy involves interviewing people in their own environments because people are more at ease in familiar social settings. Situating discourse within a familiar physical location may enhance participants' disclosure, and, hence, the richness of the data gathered. Additionally, gathering research data in an environment conducive to participants' needs furthers the capacity of socially marginalised groups, like people with disabilities, to interact within a physically safe space (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

When carrying out asynchronous communication over a long duration, participants may even experience a degree of positive affirmation for their participation. Research shows that when asynchronous conversations occur over a period of time, users may gain positive interpretations of their interlocutor (Walther, 1996). Over-estimating positive interpretations about the other, combined with the ability to control how one is presented online, can create "feedback loops" that are mutually affirming. Consequently, participants as well as researchers may be rewarded for producing online data.

The online medium may also facilitate greater disclosure of personal information, offering further benefits to both the researcher and participants. This brings about the contentious debate surrounding the communicative richness of the online medium, which is worth considering in delineating the suitability of carrying out online research. Certainly, some research argues that lack of visual and aural stimuli in CMC presents an impoverished form of interaction compared with the richness of face-to-face communication (Giese, 1998). Lack of social context cues have been claimed to create psychological distance between conversants, such as depersonalisation, leading to disinhibited actions like flaming (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992).

Nevertheless, theoretical evidence supports the notion that people are better able to construct their intimate thoughts on a computer screen than face-to-face. Reduced visual cues diminish the possibility of evaluation by others (Matheson & Zanna, 1990). This leads to feelings of disinhibition, which affords users greater freedom to express themselves without fear of judgement. Researchers investigating relational development online argue that synchronous CMC offers an immediate and dynamic form of dialogue, which may elevate users' awareness of others (Colomb & Simutis, 1996; Ruedenberg, Danet, & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1995; Yates, 1996). Increased awareness may narrow psychological distance between speakers and increase a feeling of joint involvement (Murphy & Collins, 1997). Consequently, this can lead to greater disclosure. Boshier (1990) also claims that release from fear of judgement, in association with one-to-one conversations via asynchronous online communication, may increase disclosure of personal details. Findings from an investigation of cybersex confirm the online medium's ability to enhance self-disclosure. Hamman (1997) found participants admitted they would be prepared to disclose intimate details about their cybersex activities in an online setting but not face-to-face. The absence of physical presence indicators may minimise negative consequences surrounding the nature of online interaction, enabling participants to feel more comfortable about personal disclosure online. This may offer a more conducive, discursive space for participants, as they are less inhibited by the researcher's physical presence. Other research supports this view.

Mann and Stewart (2000) point out that the informality and anonymity of online communication gives people permission to talk more openly. Matheson (1992) argues that the online medium facilitates a closer connection with users' personal

feelings, beliefs, and values. Users' ability to reflect on their thoughts and reactions is enhanced as an outcome of the intimacy facilitated via the informality of typing onto a computer screen. The degree of anonymity afforded participants online brings forth additional opportunities. The anonymity of communication means that participants can discuss sensitive issues and challenge dominant ideology without fear of judgement. This may increase the potential for alternative subjectivities. Further, Mann and Stewart mention how the benefits of anonymous communication for researchers may increase access to socially marginalised communities such as people with disabilities.

To summarise, the first section of this chapter has delineated some of the central arguments in support of conducting research online, with particular emphasis on qualitative data gathering. The extensive variety of naturalistic data available, combined with the textual nature of interaction, offers a wealth of opportunity for discursive research and social psychology. Various practical benefits were also considered, especially with regard to involving participants with disabilities. In addition, two relevant online debates - integration/differentiation and communicative richness - were raised with discussion outcomes supporting the suitability of carrying out (discursive) research online. While there is vast potential (in addition to many benefits) for carrying out discursive research online, the particular settings where online data is available raise new and complex ethical issues (Thomas, 1996).

### Ethical Dilemmas

Much of the controversy surrounding the ethics of studying online interaction rests on whether the contexts in which the interaction occurs are public, or private in nature. Waskul and Douglass (1996) argue that online texts are both publicly private and privately public. Physical dimensions of location are altered online, as with other non face-to-face mediums. The context where conversation occurs may not correspond with the physical locations of participants. For instance, participants can engage in an online forum from the intimacy of their bedroom, or through an online terminal in a public library. Further, while an online forum may be accessible to the public, the activities engaged there might be confidential to the participants. Public access does not guarantee public disclosure. These interpretations dissolve

the taken-for-granted boundaries between a public/private dichotomy. Online contexts evolve within a particular social context, and are shaped by the cultural norms and values of members (Herring, 1996c; Waskul & Douglass).

Furthermore, the blurring of public and private boundaries within many online contexts has not been incorporated into approved codes for recording and analysing data. For instance, the American Psychological Association's (APA) most recent draft of its ethical principles and code of conduct (2001, October 21) exempts psychologists from gaining informed consent where data constitutes naturalistic observations within a public place. This neglects to consider virtual contexts where public and private boundaries merge.

Copyright law may compound the issue further. With the lack of informed consent required when using publicly available material under the APA ethical code, copyright law has, similarly, ruled that material incorporated into a new published work can be duplicated, for research purposes (Harper, 2001). However, full credit must be given to a source when direct quotations are used (Herring, 1996c). Further, Eysenbach and Till (2001) argue that using another's discourse without quotation may actually exploit the author's intellectual property, especially if the author sought publicity rather than privacy. In addition to neglecting the simultaneous public and private dimension of online contexts, legislation may also hinder the ethical practice of protecting participants' identities by acknowledging the text's author.

The adequacy of deploying pseudonyms to protect participants' identities presents another ethical issue that should be considered when gathering discursive data online. The online medium is well known for its ability to grant users a degree of anonymity. In maintaining the anonymity of participants in research write-ups, Waskul and Douglass (1996) argue that researchers need to conceptualise anonymity as a socially constructed condition. In this regard, anonymity becomes mediated in social interaction, rather than becoming a state of being residing in the individual. While the anonymity associated with a participant's offline identity may be contained by engaging in an alternate persona, this same persona may emerge as an identifiable character within an online community, easily recognised through textual structure and style. Merely altering the name of a participant may not actually protect the confidentiality of an online identity. For instance, certain search

engines are capable of indexing newsgroup postings. Subsequently, the originator of an anonymous quote from a newsgroup with temporal identifiers removed may be sourced by anyone who searches for its location using a search query (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

The degree of intrusiveness must also be taken into account when evaluating the ethical risks involved in gathering discursive data from online communities (Waskul & Douglass, 1996). Much disdain has been directed at researchers who 'lurk' in online forums in the hope of gleaning interesting data for analysis. Beyond merely annoying participants in online forums, the intrusiveness of research has the added potential of causing harm and jeopardising the safety surrounding personal disclosure within online support groups (King, 1996). Online data gathering can be so disruptive as to destroy the supportive functioning of online communities (Reid, 1996).

Beyond carrying out discursive research on naturalistic data readily available within online communities, ethical dilemmas may be encountered when gathering data via online interviews. In this regard, Mann and Stewart (2000) claim that the main methodological barrier against online data collection techniques pertains to an inability to ascertain the authenticity of respondents' data. Walther (1992) goes so far as to point out that when researchers acquire interview data from members of virtual communities, who adopt an online persona, responses may take the form of elaborate fabrications. Turkle (1995) has also pondered over the methodological dilemma raised by virtual reality in relation to online interviews. If participants choose not to reveal any identifying details in online investigations, it may be difficult for researchers to secure informed consent. Turkle used online interviews only with those whom she had met in person.

Gaining informed consent from participants is even problematic when dealing with the ethics of naturalistic data gathering. Waskul and Douglass (1996) highlight how obtaining informed consent from the authors of online postings can be troublesome when a community's membership is in constant flux. Further, requesting informed consent may be particularly cumbersome if the email addresses attached to messages posted are no longer valid (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). The task of publicly notifying an online community about acquiring informed consent for studying their online interactions may impact heavily and potentially endanger participants' safety

in personal disclosure. In summary, gathering data online presents a number of ethical dilemmas and pitfalls, which influenced the kind of data gathering approach I chose in this study. The relative newness of the online environment for social interaction, combined with the relative novelty associated with conducting research online, led to a very considered and cautionary response to gathering data.

### The Present Study

Instead of carrying out discursive research by gathering naturalistic data, my research deployed online interviews. Rather than accessing accounts from online postings, participants were interviewed online about their online experiences. Online interviews eliminated the ethical dilemma of jeopardising members' anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy when analysing freely available extracts posted to a community. There was also an associated contextual advantage. Interviewing online meant participants were integrally engaged with the environment where the topic of the interviews was located. Hence, more immediate engagement with the topic of discussion could be facilitated as the topic of the interviews was aligned with the context in which the interviews were conducted.

Reflexively, here, I seek to delineate my position and its impact on the research. I am a disabled woman with a hidden disability. Due to the general invisibility surrounding my disability, I often pass as a non-disabled person, and, hence, find myself being treated as a non-disabled individual. Subsequently, I have not, typically, experienced oppressive social reactions from others and, neither, have I found barriers in accessing physical structures, information, or social interaction. Yet, I choose to identify with disability because it has dramatically impacted on my life. My disability has altered the way I view the world from the point of influencing my direction in life and the activities I engage in, to the people I feel an affinity with and the values I hold. I recognise a bond with other people with disabilities. This is particularly apparent in areas of medication, pain management, and the complexity of dealing with everyday tasks when experiencing physical limitations. It is here where these facets of my life bind my identity to disability. Conversely, there are numerous occasions where disability has no place within my life.

Bringing together both of these positions creates a fluid identity in which I am caught between two worlds; I am at once a member of both disabled and non-disabled communities. As a researcher, this is useful because I have the flexibility to alternate between positions of oppression and empowerment. Positioning myself within dual camps also affords me the opportunity to stand back and reflect on the interviews from more than one perspective. In carrying out this reflexive delineation of my ontology within the research sphere, it is also important to declare my stake in the research.

I have an investment in the research, as the end product will equip me with a socially and educationally valued qualification. In this sense, the research is a path to my own self-enhancement, which may lead onto greater financial reward through employment. However, my interests lie deeper than this. As an active member of the disability movement in New Zealand, I uphold principles of empowerment and self-determination. The idea of investigating how online technology impacts on the lives of people with disabilities appeals because of the medium's potential to challenge oppressive constructions of disability. Hence, I declare I am interested in demonstrating how the online arena makes a positive difference for people with disabilities. Further, as a researcher who identifies with disability, I am actively disrupting the hegemony of non-disabled researchers' control over knowledge constructed about people with disabilities. This power imbalance has been addressed by other disabled and non-disabled researchers alike in New Zealand (c.f. Boyles, 1994; Lang, 1994).

### Outlining the Process

The following section outlines my approach to collecting interview data. It begins by explaining the types of participants targeted and the process of recruitment. Materials and procedures used are then described, which are followed by strategies deployed to develop rapport with participants who were taking part in online interviews. This section also gives space to deal with the importance of ethics in conducting online research. Strategies for securing participants' safety, anonymity, and confidentiality are offered.

## Participants and recruitment

The research targeted people who identified as living with a physical disability, inclusive of chronic illness and/or a sensory disability. In clarifying what is meant by the term 'disability', the World Health Organization (2001, p.1) defines it as "an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions." My extensive links into various organisations representing people with physical and sensory disabilities permitted greater access to these groups over other groups in the disability sector, such as communities representing people with psychiatric disabilities. Subsequently, the choice of participants was also constrained by my access to particular groups. Additionally, my unique position of identifying with a physical disability enhanced the recruitment process by providing a point of similarity with participants and their communities.

In conjunction with explaining the rationale for deploying participants living with physical and sensory disabilities, there were also valid reasons for involving participants with different disabilities as opposed to a specific disability group per se. It was important to gain a broad and inclusive range of discursive constructions about the online experiences of people with disabilities. Incorporating a heterogeneous group of people with disabilities provided an opportunity for giving voice to a wider variety of constructions shared by members of diverse communities. Of relevance, however, is the argument that people living with the same disability may construct completely different experiences of their disability, in addition to other aspects of their life. Further, a person's identification in a disability community may not be governed solely by the nature of their disability (Beatson, 2000). Conversely, while people may be living with a disability, I argue that not all will, necessarily, choose to affiliate with a disability culture, or community. Nevertheless, in this research, deploying a heterogeneous group of people living with disabilities opened up the potential for accessing a broad range of discursive constructions about the online experiences of people with disabilities.

Another reason for deploying participants with different disabilities links with the cultural and philosophical movement of postmodernism - integral to discursive research. From the point of view of postmodernism, difference is actively celebrated. With respect to this study, disability provides a social, physical, and conceptual epitomisation of difference. Beatson (2000) qualifies this further in

proposing that disability's embodiment of divergence and multi-vocality is actually symbolic of postmodernism. Hence, in honouring the notion of difference, I chose to access a heterogeneous group of participants with disabilities. This also functioned to advantage disability stakeholders in the research by extending participation to a diversified pool of people with disabilities.

Several procedures were available to recruit participants. In the first instance, a media release was distributed by the Communications Unit at Victoria University of Wellington (1998). This led to information about the research being publicised nationally and locally through various forms of media including *The Dominion* ("Scholarship will help in research," 1998); *The Evening Post* (Brock, 1998); *New Zealand Education Review* (Gerritsen, 1998); *Cook Strait News* (Baker, 1998); and *Future Indicative*, a radio programme (Gourley, 1998). Secondly, a number of disability organisations advertised details about the research as a result of the media release. Disability organisations known to me included the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind (Healy, 1999); the Assembly of People with Disabilities ("Research," 1999); the Arthritis Foundation of New Zealand ("1998 June Opie fellowship," 1999); the New Zealand Crippled Children's Society whose services extend to adults with disabilities ("Champions," 1999); and the Motor Neurone Disease Association of New Zealand ("Victoria student wins June Opie", 1999).

Thirdly, I chose to extend the opportunity for recruitment beyond the efforts of the media. This involved making personal contact with the Deaf Association of New Zealand as well as several disability organisations that had already utilised the media release. A further avenue for accessing participants encompassed the researcher's social networks. This was even more fruitful when successfully recruited participants provided additional contacts, hence, demonstrating the effect of snowballing as mentioned by other researchers (Burgess, 1991; Mann & Stewart, 2000; May, 1997).

The recruitment process led to participation in the research by 21 people with physical and sensory disabilities. Physical disabilities included cerebral palsy encompassing varying degrees of severity affecting speech, mobility, and co-ordination; brain injury; ataxia, a neurological disability resulting in lack of balance and co-ordination; shy drager syndrome, a rare neurological disability causing

degeneration in both the central and autonomic nervous systems; motor neurone disease, a degenerative muscular condition; fibromyalgia, a chronic condition causing generalised muscular pain and fatigue; and poliomyelitis, an acute musculo-skeletal condition. Sensory disabilities included deafness, visual impairment, and blindness. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 59 years and came from different walks of life with varying experiences in the workforce. Participants' primary occupations ranged from being a cleaner and gardener, apprentice carpenter, and car-groomer to a lecturer, legal advisor, chief executive officer, company director, consultant, local business manager, librarian, receptionist, secretary, counsellor, copy-typist, pastor, community programme co-ordinator, and an early childhood carer. Three participants were tertiary students and a third was in secondary school. Each participant used the online medium inclusive of Internet and email facilities daily, or at least several times per week.

## Materials and procedures

Each participant received an information sheet by email or hard copy (see Appendix A), which fully outlined the research purpose, expectations of participants including their rights and responsibilities, issues of confidentiality and anonymity, information about the researcher, and relevant contact details. Once participants had read the information sheet, they were then required to respond further if they wished to take part at which time they would be sent a consent form (see Appendix B). Consent forms clearly stated the conditions of participation in the research and sanctioned participants' agreement to take part. Informed consent via hard copy was authorised when participants signed and dated the consent form. For emailed consent forms, participants authorised their participation by sending the online consent form back with the words "agreement confirmed" in the subject line. (Refer to Appendix B for electronic and hard copy versions of the consent form.) Deaf interviewees received a simplified version of the information sheet and consent form to accommodate their literacy levels, as English was a second language.

The interview schedule comprised six sections grouped around different themes (see Appendix C). Section one covered a broad set of questions surrounding online access including how participants' interest in the online medium evolved, online usage, and the usefulness of online resources. A further question gauged

participants' opinions about the need for government to subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities. The second section pertained to being online and encompassed issues to do with online interactions. Section three dealt with the issue of having a disability online and whether it made a difference. The final set of questions relating to the online medium considered specific positive and negative experiences, as well as the kind of advice given to other people with disabilities who were considering participation in online communication. The remaining interview sections focused on participants' background details including aspects of their disability and life history. Although the interview schedule was followed, there were many instances where questions deviated from the schedule in order to pursue other potentially fruitful lines of inquiry. Further, questions about the same issues were asked in different ways throughout the interview. Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest this affords respondents the opportunity to access a range of repertoires for conceptualising their experience, as well as bringing together consistencies and contradictions.

Participants were given the choice of several online communication facilities, or any other communication program of their choice for conducting the research interviews, providing that I could gain access to these. Interviews were largely conducted via email, with one participant choosing Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and another deciding on ICQ (a creative abbreviation for I seek you). Several participants noted the financial advantage in using email because costs were incurred only when sending and retrieving, and not while responses were being constructed. The comparatively high degree of literacy required to participate in online interviews due to the textual nature of online communication meant the online setting was inaccessible to three deaf participants. Consequently, these interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting via tape-recorder. Two of the participants requested Sign language interpreters to be present during the interview to translate English into Sign and vice versa. On two other occasions, tape-recorded interviews were also employed due to the sheer difficulty in accessing participants for email interviews. (See Appendices A and B for information sheets and consent forms used in the tape-recorded interviews for deaf and other participants.)

Interviews conducted via email consisted of several questions being sent off with participants replying in their own time at their convenience. For the synchronous,

non-email options, interviews tended to cease after the first, or second interview section for reasons such as tiredness, communication lag, network disconnection, as well as constraints on participants' time. These interviews resumed at a later date. Tape-recorded interviews were generally conducted in participants' homes, although, on one occasion it took place at my residence at the participant's request. Due to the diversity between communication programs and interview mediums, the duration of each interview varied enormously. Tape-recorded interviews lasted on average two hours; electronic interviews extended over weeks and months.

Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim without consulting standard conventions such as those outlined in Parker (1992) and Potter and Wetherell (1987). Most of the research data was gathered via online interviews. Hence, the only linguistic conventions required constituted those created by the participants themselves. Imposing a separate formatting structure for the tape-recorded interviews would create unnecessary disjunction and inconsistency between interview data gathered on- and offline, leading to complications in the reading of text. Therefore, outside of a verbatim convention for displaying data irrespective of the context in which that data was gathered, no other linguistic conventions were used.

### Building rapport

Several strategies were utilised to develop rapport with participants. Developing rapport was considered particularly important when conducting interviews with virtual strangers in a purely textual, non-visual medium. Firstly, participants were met in person prior to the interviews. Meeting in person afforded me the opportunity to acknowledge appreciation of participants' commitment to the research. However, meeting in person was not possible with every participant due to substantial geographical barriers. Subsequently, a further technique was deployed for building rapport. In each interview, I initiated self-disclosure by beginning with a one-page overview of my life history. Likewise, information sheets given to participants mentioned details about my disability and motivation for the research.

In addition to these strategies for rapport building, areas of similarity spanning participants' and my experience were highlighted. Where relevant, this occurred throughout the interviews and during pre-interview contact. Drawing attention to convergence in experience and outlook, as opposed to differences, helped foster a sense of familiarity and relational bonding with participants. This brought fruitful gains in terms of building a comfortable relationship between the role I played as researcher and the position of participants. Creating a closer connection between both parties reduced the inherent power hierarchy between participants and myself (c.f. Harding, 1987). Throughout the recruitment process, where useful, my experience and identification with disability were also drawn on as a point of gaining participants' trust, and as a means of ensuring my integrity as the researcher.

### Security and ethics

There were a number of procedures I followed to uphold ethical principles and maintain security over participants' data. Firstly, ethical approval for the research was gained from Massey University's Human Ethics Committee. Further, the research was conducted within guidelines of the New Zealand Psychological Society. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary with participants being afforded the opportunity to decline involvement. Throughout the interviews, participants could decline to answer questions and withdraw from the study at which time email communication, or electronic logging of interviews if conducted through synchronous online communication, would cease. Likewise, interviews recorded on tape would cease. One participant withdrew from an email interview after completing five interview sections due to the physical and mental exertion required to participate. Although it was tempting to follow-up with the participant about the last interview section at a later date, I respected the participant's request and did not make contact. Upon completion of my analysis, a three-page summary of the research findings was emailed to each participant. (Refer to Appendix D for a copy of this summary.)

A number of strategies were deployed to secure participants' safety, anonymity, and confidentiality throughout different stages of the research. Early in the research, an encounter with an email virus, I unknowingly distributed while

disseminating an information sheet through an electronic mailing list, highlighted the need for more robust security practices. McAfee virus detection software was installed throughout the duration of the research including the writing-up. Software products produced by McAfee were considered to be the most robust security products available. A McAfee personal firewall was also installed for the duration of the research. A firewall prevented others from accessing the hard drive of my computer while it was connected online. This maintained participants' anonymity and confidentiality during interviews conducted via synchronous online communication. The firewall also protected the storage of participants' interview data whenever I was connected online by blocking anyone from accessing my hard drive. This functioned to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality throughout the entire research process.

However, the majority of interviews were conducted by email, which lends itself to an insecure information route. Although I ensured that to the best of my ability the research data I sent and received was free of viruses, it was not possible to maintain participants' security when they sent and received data. Even though encryption software is freely available, which distorts email messages en route until the intended recipient retrieves them, this requires compatibility in encryption software between corresponding parties. Nevertheless, participants were informed about this security option for email interviews. For the synchronous communication programs utilised to conduct other interviews, security features were embedded in the software to eliminate third party interference. Additionally, each online communication program allowed participants to negotiate their own security status from a range of specifications.

Respect for participants was demonstrated in other ways throughout the research. Pseudonyms were deployed to ensure participants' anonymity during the write-up. Any identifying information that appeared in any of the interviews was either removed, or substantially altered. Once each interview was complete, participants were sent a copy of their transcript to read through and make any additions, alterations, or exclusions as desired. Participants were given three weeks to a month to complete this. In most instances, participants did not send any amendments within the allocated timeframe, which I understood to be indicative of participants' satisfaction with the transcript. The exercise itself empowered participants to make any changes if desired and played a significant role in

retaining the integrity of the interview and securing participants' ownership of their data.

The security of the materials and equipment used to house participants' data was another important issue. Electronic interview data was stored on the hard drive of my computer, which no one else accessed. For safe keeping, a copy of the interviews was also stored on floppy disk. The computer and floppy disks, in addition to the interviews recorded on tape, were all housed in a locked room, which only I could access. On completion of the project, electronic copies of the interviews including the taped interviews, which were transcribed directly into a word processor, were retained in a secure place for future research (potentially, involving comparisons between the results of this study and other studies). In contrast, interviews recorded onto tape were wiped. Participants were informed that research findings might be published and presented at conferences. However, participants' anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained, as all identifying information would be removed from any excerpts used.

### A Reflexive Analysis of the Data Gathering Process

It is important to be reflexive in the research process as any methodology acquired for gathering data can constrain knowledge construction (Jones, 1999a). Moreover, in relation to studying the online medium, Jones (1999b) points out that expectations surrounding what the Internet should be, can further prejudice the research narrative. Accordingly, the final section of this chapter offers a reflexive analysis of the data gathering process utilised in studying online discourse about the Internet. It is not possible to reflect upon every aspect of data gathering due to limitations in space and time. Consequently, for the sake of communicative expedience, central issues are delineated.

Conducting the interviews across different mediums and communicative contexts raised new issues. As a researcher, I found it difficult asking questions of a sensitive, or personal nature online versus face-to-face. Interviews conducted in person involved a definite time boundary of two or three hours to encompass the entirety of the interview schedule and any follow-up queries, as well as other points of interest. The restriction on interaction meant a sense of urgency in acquiring

information, leading to a strong desire to fully exhaust each topic area, irrespective of how well acquainted I was with participants prior to and during the course of the interviews. In contrast, online interviews carried over a duration of weeks, months, and even past a 12 month period on occasion. The longitudinal approach for online interviews and the delay between sending questions and receiving feedback, in the case of email interviews, meant I had more time to deliberate over participants' reactions. There was ample time to consider a range of possible interpretations, including the degree to which questions could be received in a negative, or adverse manner, the impact of this adversity on the interview context such as my professional standing as the researcher, and, hence, my relationship with participants. At times, this resulted in a rather agonising process when creating and sending questions via email, especially questions of a sensitive, or personal nature.

There were other differences associated with conducting interviews across different mediums. For instance, relational development took longer to achieve in online interviews compared with face-to-face (c.f. Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). This influenced my ability to raise sensitive and controversial issues in the context of online interviews. Meeting participants in person prior to beginning these interviews, where possible, greatly eased any difficulties in this regard. It is worth considering the issue of relational development in the context of my research. While research shows the social benefits of operating within a medium that conceals embodied details (c.f. Chapter One), my difficulty with developing areas of relating online where embodied details were absent may indicate *my* prior social knowledge (Green, 1997) and its reliance on embodiment to conduct social interaction. Further, because the face has been the primal means of mediation as the physicality of another's eyes establishes trust (Heim, 1991), not conducting interviews face-to-face may have disrupted my security in maintaining ethical principles governing interaction (c.f. Chapter One). This lack of security may have impacted upon my capacity to confidently carry out online interviews.

Relational development also varied according to my relationship with participants. Some were casual acquaintances, although one participant was a close friend, while others were complete strangers. This had a bearing on the extent to which I explored issues with participants, how I phrased particular questions, and how confident I was in carrying out the interviews, which improved on interview experience. There was also variation in the duration required for carrying out each

interview. However, the longitudinal approach taken for online interviews occurred at considerable frustration to the researcher because there was no certainty surrounding when participants would respond. In this respect, tape-recorded interviews were far more convenient due to their ability to gain a sense of closure on the interview within a set timeframe. Nevertheless, online interviews provided a very convenient and, potentially, empowering means for participants to engage with the interview topic because participants had control over when, where, and how they responded to the researcher.

Theoretically, conducting interviews across different mediums may lead participants to form their ideas within divergent cultural structures as dictated by the protocols of the specific medium. Some may even argue that this brings about contextually different kinds of discursive resources, which may radically alter the nature of analysis, in addition to causing unnecessary perplexity. However, as pointed out by discursive theorists (c.f. Parker, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), discursive constructions deployed by individuals are products of a particular social climate. Although nuances in mediums may alter constructions, the social ideologies of the historical era dictate the kinds of linguistic repertoires used. This does not deny the possibility that on- and offline interviews with the same person will be different. Rather, the primary aim of a discursive approach is about accessing the broad range of discursive constructions available to participants (not replicating interview conditions). Therefore, conducting interviews within on- and offline arenas may extend the available discursive positions people with disabilities use to negotiate their online experiences because of the differences in orientation between face-to-face and online settings. For instance, online settings afford participants the ability to immediately engage in the online context they are speaking about. Conversely, in face-to-face settings, users may be removed from the immediacy of that experience and, hence, may reflect differently on their activities and experiences in cyberspace.

It is important to acknowledge that the data gathered in the IRC interview was less useful for carrying out DA. The participant's responses often constituted stilted phrases of very few words, forming incomplete and, in some cases, incoherent sentences. Consequently, I needed to clarify my understanding constantly by reconstructing their ideas with greater explanation and clarity, which led to much of their discourse merely confirming my interpretations. This was inadequate for DA.

The other online interview situated outside an email context was conducted via ICQ, a chat environment very similar to IRC. Yet, in this context, the participant frequently constructed complete sentences, eliminating my need to re-present their ideas within the context of the interview. In addition to the online context governing the adequacy of data, participants' online conversational style may also be important to consider when gathering online data for DA.

Additionally, although two interviews conducted with deaf participants, recorded and transcribed the discourse from a Sign language interpreter, I was not in a position to verify the accuracy of the interpreter's translation, and neither was anyone else, unless the interviews were video recorded. However, this was deemed too disruptive. To ensure reliability of translation, interpreters did acknowledge when they made mistakes, which were distinguished in the interview transcripts.

Besides dealing with the dilemmas surrounding interviews conducted across different mediums, problems developed within a single medium. Online communication can create gross misinterpretations of simple textual utterances due to the narrow bandwidth, which removes many paralinguistic modes of information from the interaction, such as intonation, gestures, and facial expression (Hamman, 1997; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Stone, 1995). Hamman argues that the ease with which misinterpretations can occur online is a methodological concern. Throughout the process of gathering online data, I negotiated a fine line between insufficient information and information overload. Managing this methodological dilemma required a meticulous attention to detail. To aid with clarity, additional questions were embedded in brackets next to some questions for the purpose of reducing ambiguity and improving specificity. Nevertheless, misunderstandings did occur on occasion.

As a discursive researcher, there was another methodological dilemma. The inclusion of additional questions to reduce ambiguity and improve specificity, simultaneously, functioned to narrow participants' interpretations and, thereby, constrain their responses. Inevitably, this served to restrict the discursive resources chosen. However, in order to minimise participants' confusion and eventual frustration, specifying the meaning of interview questions seemed necessary.

Participating in online interviews did involve a degree of technical knowledge for participants, as well as for me, the researcher. Indeed, Sudweeks and Simoff (1999) point out that every communication channel (whether mediated by text or vocal output) requires specific knowledge about how to operate within that context. This includes knowledge of the typical communicative conventions, like turn-taking and preliminary phatic conversation, as well as the technical skills needed to access and deliver information. To communicate online, participants needed to know a comprehensive selection of computer operations in order to negotiate their way around programs like IRC, ICQ, and email applications. Literacy in dealing with computers and online communication facilities was essential. Subsequently, the option of providing participants with a choice of online communication facilities was useful in this regard.

The first language of deaf participants, which was not incorporated in the online interviews, was also accommodated in the research by conducting face-to-face interviews with Sign language interpreters. Although lack of proficiency in communicating via the online medium was considered for deaf participants, not offering face-to-face interviews as a general option may have hindered participation in the research by other people with disabilities.

Other points of reflection regarding the use of online data for DA relate to the inaccessibility surrounding the evolving and fluctuating process of participants' online experiences. Breen (1997) notes that as the speed at which information is transferred electronically increases, we lose touch with how this information has been created and constructed; we lose touch with the political and social climate from which this discourse emerged. Therefore, the historical journey from which participants' knowledge evolved is removed from analysis. Participants' online experiences were constructed at a particular point in time. Information surrounding events that happened prior to the interview, as well as those that appeared after were not available. The interview data constructs a mere snapshot of the experiences participants encountered, thereby, failing to highlight the fluctuating and evolving nature of what it means to be online. Jones (1999b) supports this in noting that the Internet produces communication in an essentially material form. This disguises its evolving presence.

Further aspects of the interview context were also inaccessible for analysis. Pacagnella (1997) suggests that the inability of online discourse to inform researchers about the physical context in which communication takes place, whether at a keyboard in a bedroom, or in a public venue, disadvantages the analytic richness of using DA for online research. Similarly, other information like the duration for typing messages and delays in responding time between speakers in synchronous and asynchronous facilities is eliminated from online transcripts. Mann and Stewart (2000) suggest that this kind of detail could help convey the dynamic nature of online interaction.

However, utilising a discursive approach did offer a valuable research strategy. When I first embarked on this study, I held a strong view of participants' online experiences as distinct from other experiences, thereby, constructing a strict dichotomy between on- and offline interactions. As the research interviews progressed, I experienced a change in this interpretation. Consequently, my new and evolving construction between participants' on- and offline experiences incorporated a relationship of increasing fluidity and interconnectivity. The data gathering process certainly enhanced this change. Moreover, the theorising process embedded within a discursive methodology, which minimises the tendency to constrain participants' responses according to the researcher's framework because participants' data has greater opportunity to shape analysis, greatly contributed to this reorientation.

In addition to providing a comprehensive overview of the data gathering process utilised, this chapter argues online interviews are an effective and highly appropriate approach for accessing discourse about the online experiences of people with disabilities. The suitability of online data gathering for DA, and vice versa, has been delineated in considerable depth. Secondly, the ethical advantages of gathering online data via online interviews have been debated at length. Despite the pitfalls embedded in the process of conducting this research, reflections on the process highlight how these pitfalls were managed and, in some cases, resolved.

From here the thesis moves to the analysis of the data gathered online. The interview data is organised around seven key repertoires. These are outlined as follows: *choice to disclose* (Chapter Four), *accessing a socially valued subjectivity*

(Chapter Five), *transcendence* (Chapter Six), *participating in the world* (Chapter Seven), *keeping safe and qualified deception* (Chapter Eight), and *disabling differentials* (Chapter Nine).

## Chapter Four: Choice To Disclose

*In this chapter, how the interview data were analysed is delineated, from the preliminary coding to the discursive patterns, or repertoires developed. This chapter then offers a construction of one of the seven repertoires identified in participants' data - a choice to disclose repertoire, which was organised around three key resources: relevance, anonymity, and normality. Embedded within each resource is the idea that the presence or absence of disability is constructed as a feature controlled by the individual. Positioning identity within a subjectivity removed from disability was made possible through these resources and was valued by participants.*

### Interpretation and Analysis of Data

Having gathered the interview transcripts, I was faced with the task of making sense out of 214 pages of data. My approach for making sense began with reading and re-reading the transcripts to look for patterns in the data (Tuffin & Howard, 2001). By doing this, I hoped to become immersed in the issues participants talked about (Gill, 1996). Importantly, my readings of the interview transcripts were influenced by my interests in the kinds of possibilities the online medium makes available to people with disabilities. Indeed, one of the aims of the research, as mentioned in Chapter Two, pertains to understanding the discursive practices of people with disabilities around accessing and engaging with the online medium. This led me to focus on issues of change brought about through online access. As a consequence of the vast nature of ideas constructed in the data, I also found it useful to manage my reading by deploying an analytic framework surrounding the online medium's positive and negative impact on the lives of people with disabilities. Both of these strategies were utilised in managing *making sense* of participants' transcripts.

My strategies for managing participants' interview transcripts were also concerned with the way constructions positioned people with disabilities. This integrates another research aim, presented in Chapter Two, regarding whether the online medium offers alternative ideological frameworks for positioning people with disabilities in the social world. Given the inaccessibility of physical form online,

focus was drawn to the ways people with disabilities negotiated their subjectivities and identities. Particular emphasis was placed on looking at alternative discursive repertoires available online for constructing the experiences of people with disabilities.

To gain a greater sense of involvement in what participants were saying, I felt it necessary to construct several broad headings, under which I generated a vast number of issues from the data. These headings, accompanied by a number of associated issues, are listed as follows: identity construction (12), managing disability identity (37), dangers of participating online (5), conceptualising online technology (7), utility of the online medium (36), and disadvantages (6). As a consequence of the huge scope of issues and ideas generated, and the restrictions of time and print space for shaping their construction, I chose to limit my focus. This led to the development of a limited number of broad repertoires, each of which, by their expansive nature, encapsulated quite a few of the issues and ideas I had generated. I decided after an approximate duration of two years to finish my analysis and, thereby, set my analytic limit, at which time I had shaped (and constrained) seven repertoires from the data.

The repertoires were largely organised around the alternative subject positions made available through online access and participation, which enabled people with disabilities to operate outside the norms and constraints of disabled bodies and disabled identities. Conversely, one of the repertoires differed, in that it was organised around the online perpetuation of a disabled subjectivity, which was based on disabling differentials involved in operating online within a disabled body and identity. Preliminary coding of participants' interviews involved finding instances of patterns in their text that led to the development of the repertoires. These instances were read over and over again in order to develop a clear explication of each. In some cases, this process involved removing some instances that did not fit into the immediate repertoire. These particular instances were left to shape other repertoires, although, due to the limitations in the scope of this research these repertoires have not been constructed here.

As a result of the broad nature of the repertoires I constructed, each one deployed several discursive resources. These worked to show in more detail how the repertoires operated in the talk, or text, of participants. While the resources

comprising each repertoire are constructed as separate and distinct, it is worth noting that my analysis presents a simplified version of their operation. To some extent, the resources are interconnected and merged, sharing some similarities and, yet, also, presenting unique discursive features. Although illustrative examples of the resources comprising each of the seven repertoires are given only, these resources were frequently drawn on in participants' accounts.

Similarly, it is important to point out that while a pattern of talk is being named as a repertoire for conceptual ease at the analytic level, data do not come ready-made in pre-defined packages of repertoires. Rather, texts typically run together in complex and convoluted forms. It is the job of the analyst to find strategies for identifying and distinguishing the separate structures that form repertoires.

The extracts presented have been chosen for illustrative purposes as they offer clear examples of the linguistic resources that my analysis aims to highlight. Each extract is supported by my analysis, which may be regarded as simply a form of reading of which many versions may be possible. In this regard, the partiality of my interpretation is fully acknowledged. Further, as most extracts have come from online interviews where participants type their own responses, data have been copied verbatim from the text typed by participants online. Therefore, any spelling and grammatical errors, as well as ellipses have been retained in the extracts. Words in square brackets have been added to provide explanation of any abbreviations participants used. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities.

### Choice to Disclose Repertoire

Amongst the issues generated in the data was the idea of disclosing disability online, which was talked about as a matter of choice. This kind of talk became defined as a *choice to disclose* repertoire (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002a, 2002b). The analysis constructed in this chapter aims to address the issues surrounding the management of disability disclosure online, which offers opportunities for repositioning the subjectivities currently available to people with disabilities in the social world.

The following extract provides an example of the *choice to disclose* repertoire, as Sarah, who lives with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair most of the time, responds to a question about whether having a disability makes any difference online.

- 1 No it doesn't make a difference, but I don't have to bring it up if I don't want
- 2 to! where as most of the time meeting someone in person the disability is
- 3 spoken about at some stage. Online you can chose not to even bring it up.
- 4 (Sarah)

Embedded within this repertoire is the idea that the presence or absence of disability is constructed as a feature controlled by the individual. Disclosing disability is cast as purely a matter of choice. This is contrasted with the inevitability of disability arising in face-to-face interactions, where Sarah has no choice, or control in the matter.

Within the broad *choice to disclose* repertoire, three key resources were identified: *relevance*, *anonymity*, and *normality*. *Relevance* is built around the idea that disability becomes appropriate to disclose when it is specific to the context of conversation; otherwise it has no place online. The concept of *anonymity* opens up possibilities for equity in identity disclosure, in which non-disclosure of disability is freely sustained until such time as personal details are constructed and made available to others. Finally, the *normality* resource is organised around the notion of being on par with the able-bodied, in which non-disclosure is conceptualised as a participatory right that people with disabilities can access, while offline they have been denied this subject position. Embedded within each of these resources is the idea that the presence or absence of disability is constructed as a feature controlled by the individual. These resources were drawn on singularly and in various combinations to account for non-disclosure. The next extract provides an example of the first of these three resources as Bridgette, who uses a wheelchair and lives with cerebral palsy, responds to a follow-up question about how the online medium opens up access to people without disabilities.

#### Relevance resource

- 1 It is nice to be able to sit in the privacy of my own home, go on-line &
- 2 communicate with a stranger .... if my typing speed is queried I say I am new

3 at this! On-line my disability is HIDDEN if I choose it to be. Why should I  
4 reveal such personal info when there is no need to? (Bridgette)

This account highlights that exposing personal details including (for example) age, gender, and disability may have no place within the context of online communication. Throughout this account the choice to refrain from revealing disability is linked to its rightful positioning as a personal feature of Bridgette's identity. The issue of relevance is constructed around the question of need, with Bridgette declaring that disclosure of personal information is unnecessary. Further contributing to the irrelevance of disability disclosure is the communicative context: an online conversation with a stranger as indicated in line 2. Presenting the other as a stranger reminds the reader of the precarious and inappropriate nature of disclosing private details, which could threaten personal security. Situating disability within the private domain of one's intimate being highlights its lack of contextual relevance.

A notable feature of Bridgette's account in line 3 is the statement, "On-line my disability is HIDDEN if I choose it to be." This construction creates a dichotomy between online and offline worlds, suggesting that outside of cyberspace disability is a conspicuous aspect of identity. Moreover, the sentence indicates that Bridgette has little or no control over the management of this aspect of her identity offline. Online, Bridgette has the option of disclosing her disability, or refraining from doing so. In addition to the availability of choice in this matter, it is noteworthy that Bridgette is prepared to engage in minor deception in order to maintain her non-disabled identity. This is apparent from the admission that questions about typing speed are countered with a claim of newness to the medium, as indicated in lines 2-3, and presumably the implication that Bridgette is still learning to type. Interestingly, this deception results not merely from technological determinism, but involves the choice to present a non-disabled identity. This construction allows Bridgette to maintain an identity removed from disability. Online, physical difference moves from a fixed and static dimension whether disability is hidden or exposed, to a fluid and labile characteristic, withheld or produced as occasioned. The use of capitals for 'hidden' may indicate a celebratory tone.

In the next extract, the *relevance* resource is also utilised when Daphne, who lives with cerebral palsy and operates with a speech impairment, talks about the flexibility of identity construction online.

- 1 Be cautious about disclosing too much about yourself. Enjoy the fact that
- 2 "on-line" you can be whatever you want to be...your disability need not be an
- 3 issue. People will treat you as an equal. (Daphne)

Consistent with the previous extract, caution about revealing personal details is apparent. The creative potential implied in the phrase, "you can be whatever you want to be" in line 2 exudes a level of freedom and flexibility in identity construction. In Daphne's case, I read this as an ability to present a non-disabled identity. The potential to present oneself outside the realm of a disabled identity becomes realised with the benefit of being treated equally. Through the online medium, disability is no longer, necessarily, an issue and ceases to have immediate relevance. In casting disability as irrelevant to online interactions, participants are able to engage with others on a basis that precludes judgements being made about their disability. As Daphne notes in line 3, others treat her as an equal.

The following extract, again, illustrates the way in which the issue of relevance is managed in accounts. Specifically, Shaun, who lives with cerebral palsy and types with his feet, shows that disclosure is only relevant when topics are being discussed that are themselves related to disability.

- 1 I think it's only relevent when you need to establish your credibiity to talk
- 2 about a subject relating to disability. For example, people don't need to know
- 3 that I have a disability if I am contributing to an analysis of the last All Black
- 4 test, fine wines and food, movies, raising teenagers etc because it has no
- 5 relevance. What might be more relevent is my gender, age, race, socio-
- 6 economic status, parental status, academic background, where I live, who I
- 7 know etc etc etc. (Shaun)

For Shaun, disclosure is important for verifying his entitlement to contribute to discussions on disability related subjects. For other subjects, and he provides an illustrative list as evident in lines 3-4, which includes sport, food, entertainment, and parenting, disability disclosure is constructed as being of no relevance. This point is underscored by the suggestion that other personal features may have greater relevance to the discussion of such topics.

## Anonymity resource

While the *relevance* resource speaks specifically to the issue of disability, anonymity encompasses all personal details. Within this resource, disability is one of a large number of potential features that participants disclosed, withheld, or possibly even fabricated in order to present a chosen identity. Bridgette highlights the positive aspects of being anonymous online.

- 1 Quite often they dont know I have a disability - so there is an anonomous
- 2 element available to me, that is good! No need to explain or be at the brunt of
- 3 poeple's asssumptions ... in some cases I do reveal my disability,
- 4 describing myself, and people are quite accepting, probably cos they cannot
- 5 see me and thus dont get the full impact of my disability. (Bridgette)

Anonymity is relished by Bridgette who describes it in positive terms, as evident in line 2. Specifically, she defines anonymity in terms of not revealing a salient aspect of her offline identity. Non-disclosure is justified because of the prejudice experienced when disability information is made available, as indicated in lines 2-3 by the phrase “at the brunt of poeple's asssumptions”. Anonymity means that explanations and assumptions no longer need to be dealt with as part of routine interactions. Importantly, anonymity is made available through the online medium and standard assumptions of normality. Cybercitizens enter the medium at the same level of anonymity, and, unless information to the contrary is provided, assumptions of normality prevail. Unsettling these assumptions requires an act of identity construction, which relies on specific information about disability. As Bridgette suggests in line 1, it is usually the case that her disability remains undisclosed.

Due to the anonymity of the medium, Bridgette's subject position can move away from disability. Even when disability is revealed, the effects of prejudice are mitigated because the textual medium precludes any visual cues denoting appearance. This alters the subjectivity of disability, even when the veil of anonymity has been removed. As Bridgette indicates, people are more accepting of her. She accounts for this because visual access is unavailable. The following extract provides another example of this resource.

- 1 The online medium can be as anonymous as you like, in terms of how much
- 2 personal information you divulge about yourself [...] my preference is not to

3        mention disability [...] But, offline my impairment is pretty in-your-face and  
4        hard to deny or disguise. (Shaun)

In this account, the *choice to disclose* repertoire is situated within the resource of *anonymity*, as anonymity is equated with freedom to conceal, or reveal personal details. Furthermore, this choice is constructed as a matter of personal preference. The opportunity to experience anonymity, a subjectivity rarely accessible to people with disabilities, is made possible through features of the online medium.

The relationship between anonymity and the online environment is constructed in such a way that the medium affords the opportunity, but the person has ultimate control over this. This provides people with agency over their anonymity and the identity they present to others. Shaun illustrates this with the phrase in line 1 “as anonymous as you like.” Although participants are governed by the facilities accessible through the medium, namely anonymity, users are also active agents in its operation via their ability to select personal information for public presentation. Having access to this selective ability contrasts considerably with the (lack of) choices available offline.

Finally, in lines 3-4 Shaun talks about the tangible and inescapable nature of physical difference offline. His use of the term “impairment” highlights the exceptional circumstances offered online where a person has control over how disability is managed and received. This serves to highlight the constructive identity possibilities available online. A third example of the *anonymity* resource is provided as David, who lives with blindness, responds to a question about the advantages of going online for people with disabilities.

1        Apart from the fact that it facilitates communication for people with sensory  
2        problems, it probably helps overcome isolation. You have a ready-made  
3        'family' - in fact, many potential families - at your fingertips, in which you can  
4        participate with ease and (if necessary) anonymity in a way that some  
5        disabilities preclude. (David)

David mentions many positive features of online communication. The medium is cast as being facilitative of communication, assisting in reducing isolation, and providing ease of access to multiple social networks. This construction demonstrates participants' ability to situate a disabled identity within a subject position, which, in the past, may have been inaccessible to many people with

disabilities. This positioning is based on the notion that initial online entry ensures that all participants remain as anonymous as they choose. Clearly, some disabilities obstruct the freedom that people without physical differences have to simply become part of the crowd. The matter of 'necessity' in line 4 is read as suggesting that participating with ease rests on the ability to present anonymously.

### Normality resource

This resource is organised around the idea that non-disclosure provides people with disabilities a means of assimilating into 'normal' culture. The idea of normality is taken as synonymous with able-bodied forms of identity and interaction. The following extract comes from Sally-Ann, who lives with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. She is answering a question about whether people respond to her in a better way online.

- 1 Yes, I have found this to be so. I am able to regain what others would
- 2 consider normal control. My computer allows me to do ordinary things without
- 3 my disability getting in the way. When I think it is necessary or important for
- 4 some reason I will let them know. I value being able to exercise that right and
- 5 choice as it is not one I can exercise in my daily life. Being online enables
- 6 me to enjoy the world as others do and it also means for the most part I can
- 7 take a break mentally from disability. A luxury I reckon. (Sally-Ann)

In this extract, disability is constructed around a resource of *normality* as indicated by the phrase in line 2 "normal control." The remainder of the account elaborates on what is meant by this. On first reading, the sentence in lines 2-3, "My computer allows me to do ordinary things without my disability getting in the way" suggests on the one hand that normality is being positioned within the domain of physical ability. Defined purely in operational terms, a person's ability to accomplish tasks is freed from the hindrance of physical and functional difference. Such a construction locates disability within a subject position based on corporeal incapacity and dysfunctional performance.

The context in which the construction occurs, however, also alludes to another interpretation. Sally-Ann's account is conceptualised in response to how she is treated differently online. Hence, her account is constructed to address issues surrounding interactional dynamics as opposed to notions of the online medium compensating for physical disparities. Within this context "normal control" refers to

ultimate control over disability disclosure. Disability becomes positioned as an element of choice where power over access and admission become the sole domain of the individual, rather than being constructed as some unruly obstacle, which interferes with the smooth flow of daily life. Having the autonomy to decide when a person's vulnerable components of personhood are relevant to introduce into an interaction is conceptualised in line 4 by Sally-Ann as a participatory "right" that has typically been inaccessible to people with disabilities. The taken-for-granted and 'normal' nature of this subject position is cherished by Sally-Ann who is now able to participate on an equal footing with 'the norm'. Traditionally, people with disabilities have been locked out of this subject position. Yet, online they have the opportunity to utilise this as another identity resource.

Of notable interest is Sally-Ann's construction of her online interaction as being akin to taking a 'mental break' from disability, evident in line 7. This idea of getting outside a person's disability, which may also lead to operating outside a disabled identity, suggests that subjectivity is being placed outside physical dimensions. By positioning her disability within a mental realm, Sally-Ann is able to step outside the usual physical and mental constraints, which disability presents in most social interactions. Cultural ideology posits a division between dimensions of the physical and mental. This duality positions time-out from the psychological existence of disability, in contrast to time-out from the corporeal presence of physical difference. This selective construction challenges the assumption that the speaker is choosing to deny disability online. Instead, Sally-Ann's account highlights that from a conceptual perspective only, disability does not need to be accessed. She does not have to think about it, so she is afforded a conceptual holiday. Having the opportunity to temporarily leave disability behind highlights how not having access to this choice constrains a person's experience of the world. Consequently, having access to this new subject position opens up new resources for positioning disability within an empowering and liberating social arena.

The closing sentence in the account functions to further justify Sally-Ann's engagement in the activity of withholding disability related details. Deploying the term "luxury" in line 7 demonstrates that being able to remove the conceptual presence of disability in social interactions is something Sally-Ann regards very positively. Such a description casts this particular subject positioning as both rare and highly valued. I read this positive evaluation as justifying non-disclosure and

note that what may be regarded as luxurious for people with disabilities is merely taken-for-granted by the able-bodied.

In the next extract, Daphne explains that the medium operates to position her as normal in the sense of being able to interact with others on an equal footing.

1       Because the nice thing about the Internet is that you are "on a par" with  
2       everyone else and can be treated as being "normal" - your disability isn't an  
3       issue. Also, people may feel awkward or disinterested if they have no  
4       understanding or experience of disability. Although CP is an intrinsic part of  
5       who I am, there is more to me than just that. As someone who spends a lot of  
6       time in the disability sector, it's nice just to get away from it sometimes.  
7       (Daphne)

Daphne considers that one positive feature of online interaction is being treated the same as others, as evident in lines 1-2. This treatment lays a foundation for normal interactions where disability has no part to play. Indeed, Daphne draws on the *relevance* resource in lines 2-3 to frame her disability as a non-issue. The manner in which Daphne discusses normality is notable, as she pointedly highlights "normality" as a negotiable social construct. In working up a justification for non-disclosure, Daphne provides a commentary in lines 3-4 on how disability may impact on "people" who are naive with respect to disability. Their potential awkwardness and, or, disinterest may be prevented by non-disclosure. While not wishing to deny her own disability, or a disabled identity, in line 5 Daphne constructs disability as merely a part of her full identity: "there is more to me than just that." This "me" involves many parts and disability is merely one of the features that collectively make up a psychological self.

Finally, in lines 5-6 Daphne notes that she is immersed in disability related activities. Being able to distance herself from this is something that she clearly values, as it provides a marked contrast. The online environment allows her to explore non-disabled aspects of her identity, while disability is pervasive in many aspects of her offline activities. Daphne's extensive involvement with disability offline justifies its non-disclosure online.

## Summary

Through the operation of the *choice to disclose* repertoire, disability becomes a flexible feature of identity to be revealed, and/or concealed in a contextualised and occasioned fashion. This flexibility affords people with disabilities control over disability disclosure. Such flexibility and control have not typically been available in social interactions. The textual nature of online communication provides new opportunities in this respect. Each of the resources permits people with disabilities to position themselves within an identity removed from disability.

The *relevance* resource is built around the idea that disability becomes relevant only when invoked by the specific context of talk. Disability disclosure was talked about as a personal detail that simply had no place in the usual discussions participants engaged in. In this respect, disability was one of a number of identity details, which were disclosed as appropriate to the subject under discussion. This resource allows people with disabilities to withhold operating within a disabled identity when disability is irrelevant to the social context.

The *anonymity* resource provided another opportunity for people with disabilities to be positioned within a non-disabled identity. This resource comes about through the online medium, whereby, participants are equally afforded anonymity, until such time as particular details are constructed and made available to other participants. This resource was drawn on to account for non-disclosure and to highlight the creative potential for identity construction.

Accessing the opportunity to be positioned within an identity removed from disability was also made possible through the *normality* resource. This resource was organised around the notion of being “on par” with the able-bodied. The features of the online medium invoked a standard assumption of normality. Puncturing this standard was entertained at the cost of invoking prejudice, and this was deployed as an argument for maintaining non-disclosure. *Normality* positioned choice over disclosure as a participatory right, available to all. This right has been withheld from people with disabilities in other contexts. Yet, online it becomes accessible. The right to deploy the *normality* resource enables people with disabilities to be positioned outside a disabled identity. This subject positioning has been inaccessible within other contexts. Constructing non-disclosure as a right

detracts from the assumption that people with disabilities are denying the existence of disability. Likewise, the *relevance* and *anonymity* resources drawn on allow people with disabilities to be positioned within a non-disabled identity without having to dispute the physical existence of a disabled identity.

Reflexively, constructing the *choice to disclose* repertoire has allowed me the opportunity to discursively engage in the idea of having flexibility over identity construction. The capacity to control the construction of a person's identity and, thereby, open up possibilities for moving between constructions of social identities has been of great personal interest. This fascination and interest has emerged in and has been the basis of previous research on chatroom users' ability to reconstruct their social identity (Bowker, 2000, 2001; Bowker & Liu, 2001). Being endowed with the capacity to gain a flexible level of control over the construction of a person's identity creates an awareness of liberating opportunities for me. This allows me to step outside the rigidity of being circumscribed by one category of social identity.

In summary, this analysis highlights opportunities for people with disabilities to experience radically different subject positions, which operate outside a disabled subjectivity. The prejudice encountered when a disabled identity was made available justified non-disclosure, sustaining the practice of non-disabled identities. In conjunction with deploying the aforementioned resources, the online medium enabled the possibility for engaging in non-disabled identities. Through the nature of online communication, features of identity are positioned as flexible constructions that can be withheld, or negotiated within the routine of social interaction. The environmental context and the way people with disabilities have chosen to deploy particular features of this context bring together opportunities for experiencing empowering subject positions. Each of the resources liberates users to access subject positions removed from disabled identities. The following chapter demonstrates how another repertoire, defined as *accessing a socially valued subjectivity*, operates in the talk about the online experiences of people with disabilities.

## Chapter Five: Accessing Social Value

*This chapter seeks a space to construct a second repertoire from the interview data. Amongst discursive patterns generated at a broad level was the notion of enabling people with disabilities to be positioned according to their abilities. This talk became defined in terms of an accessing a socially valued subjectivity repertoire (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002c). Embedded within this repertoire is the idea that the physical and attitudinal barriers disrupting the ability of people with disabilities to display their capabilities independent of a disabled identity are eliminated online. Consequently, being judged outside of the constraints of a disabled identity affords people with disabilities the opportunity to exhibit their value. Within the accessing a socially valued subjectivity repertoire, three key resources were identified: uncontaminated judgement, exhibiting strengths, and operating independently.*

### Uncontaminated judgement resource

This resource is organised around the idea that the online medium can emancipate people with disabilities from the prejudice tied to a disabled identity. Contamination from others' negative reactions towards disability is absent online. By removing the interference of disability, people with disabilities can be judged purely on the content of their expression. In this first extract, Shaun talks about the advantages of being online for people with disabilities.

- 1 I think the whole idea of being online is to exchange information. Because
- 2 people can only judge you on the substance of your contributions, there is no
- 3 prejudice about how you deliver because the tools are essentially the same
- 4 for every contributor. This is not the same for face-to-face things because of
- 5 body language, intonation etc. Certainly, being online allows someone to be
- 6 able to express themselves without having to be concerned about other
- 7 people's attitudes about impairments and disabilities. (Shaun)

In line 1, information exchange is constructed as the “whole” purpose for accessing the online medium. This helps disassociate online activity from a social context by focusing purely on the transactional processes surrounding interaction. Constraining the purpose of online interaction to one of information exchange provides a useful backdrop for going on to talk about the advantage of online access in relation to bias-free outcomes.

In line 2, Shaun makes the point that other people's evaluations can only be passed on the "substance" of the information constructed. How a person goes about delivering that information is unavailable for judgement. What is meant by the term "deliver" is elaborated on in relation to offline contexts. In lines 2-5, the notion of bias-free judgement online is contrasted with face-to-face settings where contextual forms of information like "body language" and "intonation" are accessible. There is a strong sense that the availability of face-to-face features may contaminate the delivery of information because of the resulting prejudice. The inclusion of the contraction "etc" indicates further, potentially, contaminating features embedded in face-to-face interaction. Interestingly, the contaminating features mentioned inclusive of "etc" present a three-part list, thereby, adding cogency and impact to Shaun's justification for the prejudice surrounding face-to-face interaction. Edwards and Potter (1992) have identified how three-part lists function to create a sense of representativeness and completeness for rhetorical effect. I assume that disability, which is notable by its absence, may also be included in Shaun's three-part list.

There is a sense of equality amongst online participants as they are all endowed with exactly the same resources, and, hence, abilities to deliver information. This is not the case offline. An assumption is made that because the delivery tools vary outside of the medium, there is a greater consequence for confounding features to contaminate the communication process. This assumption is made clear in lines 5-7 where Shaun states how the medium enables people to "express themselves" free of others' judgements about disability. This extract demonstrates the *uncontaminated judgement* resource, which offers people with disabilities the ability to position themselves without interference from their disability. Consequently, people with disabilities can be judged purely on the content of what they say, as opposed to the process of delivery.

Similarly, the following extract also focuses on the advantages of online communication for people with disabilities, as Patrick who lives with blindness considers the benefits for people with speech impairments, specifically.

- 1 it's also important for people for for example who have significant speech um
- 2 disabilities if they are trying to make a point verbally um sometimes those
- 3 who are not tuned into listening to people with significant speech disabilities
- 4 tune out um and so one of the really good things about the internet is that

5        your words get taken seriously for what they are saying not necessarily how  
6        they're said or who said (Patrick)

Consistent with the previous account, this is organised around a comparison of the way judgements about people are constructed within on- and offline settings. It begins with an example of the pitfalls in face-to-face contexts for people with speech impairments, which functions to highlight the medium's importance for people with disabilities in general. The example constructs the difficulties faced when someone wants to express a point, but is severely constrained by the available resources for delivering that point. Interestingly, the source of difficulty is located within those, other than the speaker, who possess an inability to attune to the speaker's style of delivery, rather than positioning blame within the person performing the delivery. Subsequently, in order for others to gain access to the speaker's message, the online medium offers something to assist in this regard because it allows people to focus purely on the content of the message. Indeed, this is qualified further in line 5 as Patrick highlights that the content of what is said "get[s] taken seriously". Hence, the meaning of the words become paramount, as opposed to being undermined by other factors like the mode of delivery, or the person doing the delivering. This account shows how the *uncontaminated judgement* resource offers people with disabilities a means of being positioned within an equitable process in which to be judged, compared to other contexts.

The final extract demonstrating the *uncontaminated judgement* resource appears in an IRC interview. Daniel, who lives with ataxia, a neuro-muscular condition affecting co-ordination and balance, is responding to a question about whether people treat him differently online.

1        <Daniel> I'm treated more on the content of my writing  
2        <Daniel> and less because a disabled person is writing it  
3        <Interviewer> so offline, do u like it when people treat you with discretion?  
4        <Daniel> I'm ambivalent to it, I prefer people to like me,  
5        <Daniel> but get frustrated when the only reason those people are nice to me  
6        is because they see a 'cripple'.  
7        <Interviewer> ohh  
8        <Interviewer> um online then people don't have access to that information  
9        about whether u are a cripple, so u are valued for u?  
10       <Daniel> mostly, yes  
11       <Daniel> Even if they do, they respect my achievements more

In lines 1-2, Daniel's account provides a concise example of the *uncontaminated judgement* resource. More emphasis is placed on the material "content" of Daniel's communication within an online context, as opposed to being influenced by the visibly disabled features of his identity. There is an assumption that this outcome occurs in contrast to other contexts outside of an online setting. This is evident in the deployment of the comparative forms "more" and "less", indicating other outcomes exist from which Daniel's online experience is being evaluated. Consequently, it can be deduced further that a disabled identity offline has greater precedence over others' judgements, to the extent of undermining the impact of the "content" of Daniel's writing.

In accordance with my attempt at clarification, Daniel, in line 4, highlights his desire to be treated favourably on the basis of his personality, as opposed to his disabled body. The visual exposure of Daniel's disability is positioned as the cause of others' charitable responses towards him. In connection with my last question in lines 8-9, Daniel argues how even in circumstances where online interactants have access to information about his disability, his achievements are valued more highly. This functions to position his online interaction within an empowering subjectivity. There is an assumption that the judgements made in online interaction may lead to more fair and judicious outcomes because they minimise the visibly disabled features of identity, which in other contexts may hinder the value attributed to the "achievements" of people with disabilities.

To summarise, the *uncontaminated judgement* resource allows people with disabilities to be evaluated purely on the merit of their message, as opposed to its format of delivery. This positions people with disabilities within an equitable social plane where they have parity with non-disabled people. By removing the visibly apparent features of a disabled identity, people with disabilities can be judged on the content of their communication without others' prejudice towards disability contaminating social interaction. Consequently, the *uncontaminated judgement* resource constructs the social conditions necessary for people with disabilities to be judged fairly.

## Exhibiting strengths resource

This resource is organised around the notion that poor expectations about the abilities of people with disabilities to perform are maintained within offline contexts. Once online access is made available, however, people with disabilities are able to display their abilities and operate within a socially valued subjectivity. The first extract demonstrating this resource follows a question about how online technology has made a difference for Shaun in relation to employment.

1       When I was first employed, by the Science Institute, we weren't connected to  
2       the Net, and so I worked in isolation. Actually, I was employed on  
3       Mainstream, in 1981, when the Government of the day wanted to do its bit for  
4       IYDP [International Year of Disabled People]. So there were no expectations  
5       on me or the job I was employed to do. So, when we became connected, I  
6       started exploring my expanded world and came across people doing the  
7       same kind of work, in Wellington, NZ, USA, Europe etc. So we swapped  
8       ideas and code and even analysed each other's software. Therefore, I was  
9       able to produce more and more and at a standard that was recognised  
10      internationally. Thus, I was recognised internationally in the field I worked in.  
11      (Shaun)

This account is organised around a positive transformation in Shaun's experience, which occurs once the organisation he works for gains online access. Before online connection was acquired, Shaun worked in "isolation." This construction creates a causal relationship between working in isolation and the absence of online access. Shaun's negative situation is accentuated further by the charitable nature of his employment, indicated by the phrase, "the Government of the day wanted to do its bit for IYDP", which created an absence of expectations surrounding Shaun's abilities.

The account then turns toward a construction of the impact of online access. Shaun can be positioned beyond the limitations of working in isolation. Moreover, it is online access that makes this new subject position possible. Consistent with an earlier part of the account, this construction utilises a causal sequence of events. Shaun's capacity to access others working in the same area is conditional on the introduction of online access in the workplace. A transformation in experience is indicated in lines 5-6 where Shaun highlights an ability to begin "exploring my expanded world." I note the sense of liberation and empowerment conveyed in this phrase. Constructing his correspondents' diverse geographical

locations substantially strengthens the existence of Shaun's "expanded world" as a corollary of the medium. These diversified geographical locations surpass mere cities, to countries, and even continents, reinforcing the notion of Shaun's expanding world.

Beyond merely contacting other colleagues, lines 6-8 demonstrate how Shaun is able to access new ideas and share knowledge online. Together, these opportunities remove him from having to be positioned in isolation and allow him to attain a far more productive subjectivity. Furthermore, the products Shaun creates are of an international standard, affording him international recognition within his profession. Online access is constructed as the social driver allowing these changes in work capacity and positioning to gain fruition. Access to the online medium provides the environmental conditions required to transcend operating in isolation. By associating the online medium with Shaun's increased work capacity and ability to create products valued internationally, Shaun's subjectivity is transformed. He moves beyond working "in isolation" to becoming an agent of social value. More importantly, online access offers an affirmation of his skills that far exceeds the early expectations surrounding Shaun's work performance.

In the next extract, Patrick's account also focuses on issues of employment as he responds to a follow-up question about online access opening up job opportunities.

1 I think that the reason why it's such a significant opener of job prospects is  
2 that so often blind people are limited by other people's perceptions of  
3 blindness rather than by actually how blindness really limits us and so you go  
4 into a prospective employer um and um you might have got past the initial  
5 review stage because they've seen your cv and depending on how you feel  
6 about such things you may or may not have mentioned to them that you're a  
7 blind person but then when you actually go in for the job interview a  
8 prospective employer is confronted by a blind person and they think gosh I  
9 couldn't do this job if I were blind and so neither can he or she and they close  
10 their eyes and think how scary the world must be if you're blind and how can  
11 a blind person possibly use a computer anyway and all those sorts of things  
12 well I mean if you're a for example writing a a home based business over the  
13 internet it might be just something simple like somebody um sending  
14 someone um cassettes of meetings to transcribe and then email back as a  
15 word document um it might be a whole range of of not terribly sensational  
16 techy things but things that are all possible over the internet the um clients  
17 don't even need to know that you're blind or that you have a disability so their  
18 prejudices don't even have to come into play (Patrick)

Consistent with the previous extract, this account also incorporates a comparison of employment opportunities within and outside of an online context. Patrick provides a reconstruction of my question. Beginning in line 1 with “the reason why” the online medium is “such a significant” facilitator of employment opportunities serves to accentuate the legitimacy of the justifications to follow. The word “significant” emphasises even further the medium’s important contribution to increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Patrick’s construction then contrasts this “significance” with pitfalls in traditional methods of employment recruitment, which limit outcomes to later demonstrate the benefits of an online alternative.

With respect to blind people specifically, the limitations in “perceptions” about blind people’s abilities are positioned within others, presumably, those who are not blind. These “perceptions” are not held by blind people. Moreover, these “perceptions” do not accurately reflect the limitations experienced by blind people themselves, as indicated in line 3. The employer is constructed as ill informed and holding a naïve perspective, while blind people are positioned as knowledgeable about “how blindness really limits us”. Positioning blind people with superior accuracy in knowledge may indirectly function to validate a blind person’s experiential account, as in Patrick’s case, respectively.

Lines 3-11 offer a detailed scenario of how other people’s negative stereotypes severely restrict blind people’s access to employment. The scenario starts by arguing that job applicants may succeed at first because evaluation of their ability is determined by written documentation, rather than by, presumably, the physical exposure of a disabled identity. An acknowledgement is made that disability disclosure may have an impact on the outcome. Although it is unclear in lines 5-7 whether absence or acknowledgement of disability offers success, based on the point of argument and sequence of events, I make the assumption that success will occur if the applicant refrains from disclosure. The next construction in lines 7-8 supports this as the topic turns towards barriers raised because of the visual ontological framework used to judge potential candidates. I consider this ontology evident in lines 7-8, where disability is constructed as being exposed due to meeting in-person with the employer. The scenario continues by providing a hypothetical construction of non-disabled employers’ negative evaluations surrounding blind candidates’ lack of ability in the workplace. The destructive

consequences associated with offline recruitment are constructed to reinforce the disadvantages, and, thereby, accentuate the opportunities available online. Consistent with Shaun's account, Patrick also constructs a lack of expectations surrounding the abilities of people with disabilities as constraining their employment opportunities.

In line 12, Patrick's account dramatically changes as he introduces the positive impact of online access to the lives of blind people in employment. Akin with the previous account, Patrick's is also organised around a positive transformation in subject positioning where people with disabilities can exhibit their productivity and value. A general example of how blind people can function effectively and produce something of value within the online medium is offered. This contrasts with the lack of performance expectations held by employers within a traditional workplace context. Moreover, to function effectively online there is no requirement for the materials produced to be technologically complex, or sophisticated. Rather, Patrick emphasises the "whole range" of possibilities available for blind people free of the threat of "prejudices" undermining their employability. This positions the medium as an empowering tool for exposing the strengths of people with disabilities.

The next extract further illustrates the *exhibiting strengths* resource, as Daniel talks about the physical and ideal advantages of online access for people with disabilities in an interview conducted on IRC.

- 1 <Daniel> Physical - home shopping, email, irc, intellectual freedom (i.e. a
- 2 person may not be able to interact physically, yet that person can display
- 3 their intellectual prowess online)...
- 4 <Daniel> Ideally - controlling the home appliances remotely
- 5 <Daniel> home security.... exciting, but not there yet

Here, Daniel constructs two categories of advantages attractive to online users with disabilities. Amongst the physical advantages listed, intellectual freedom is highlighted in line 1. A more explicit explanation of what is meant by this term is provided, which functions to renegotiate its meaning. A situation is given where a person with a disability is unable to participate adequately due to physical limitations. However, the online medium is offered as a psychological substitute for this incapacity. While people with disabilities may be unable to display their physical abilities, their mental capacity is actually unconstrained and liberated

online. Furthermore, this mental capacity is extended to incorporate the ability to attain a sense of mastery over an attribute, which is illustrated in line 3 by deployment of the phrase “intellectual prowess”. This demonstrates how the online medium can afford people with disabilities access to a socially valued subject position. I note that the particular significance of this advantage may be suggested relative to the general lack of explanations offered for other items listed. Daniel’s construction offers a concise example of the practice of accessing a subject position, which is socially valued.

The *exhibiting strengths* resource also features in the following extract as Karen, who lives with fibromyalgia, a chronic condition causing generalised muscular pain and fatigue, talks about the good experiences she has had online. Being able to help others is constructed as a positive outcome resulting from online access.

- 1 it’s just being able to help other people out give them the solution to
- 2 something and they come back and say that worked thanks I really
- 3 appreciate that you know you giving them your um experiences and and
- 4 them going and trying it out I find that wonderful as well as getting it in return
- 5 (Karen)

Karen’s account highlights the intrinsic reward gained from “being able” to offer something of value to others, which occurs in the form of a “solution” to another person’s problem, respectively. Being able to access this capability constitutes and encompasses the positive experience associated with online access, as indicated in the phrase situated in line 1, “it’s just being able to help other people”. This demonstrates the enormous value placed on possessing an ability to help. It could be deduced that the physical incapacity faced by many people with disabilities prevents them from engaging in subject positions where they can assist others. The online medium, however, may offer them an opportunity to access these positions, which Karen cherishes. Indeed, in line 4 Karen finds it “wonderful” to be able to exhibit her strengths in the form of knowledge gained through her experience, which is then utilised by others.

Being able to help someone out is also constructed within a reciprocal-positioning framework, in the sense that Karen can be positioned as the benefactor of help, in addition to being positioned as its producer. This reciprocity becomes apparent at the end of the account in line 4 where Karen mentions how she also enjoys

“getting it in return”. I assume that “it” refers to the help gained from others imparting knowledge about their experiences, which may in turn assist Karen. Even though there is mention of the potential for reciprocation, this is not an expectation. Rather, Karen constructs the activity of helping as something unconditional without social obligation, which is freely pursued at the individual’s discretion. A sense of boundlessness may be indicated by the range of constructions for assistance, which include “help”, “giving them the solution”, and “giving them your um experiences”. The absence of direct specifications surrounding the act of assistance allows this activity to occupy wide-ranging possibilities. Together, these features construct the ability to engage in assistive acts as something liberating and empowering, because Karen is positioned as the agent of something valuable, which is given freely without limitations. Karen’s strength, and, hence, her social value, is constructed with respect to others’ gratitude and appreciation of her assistance, as evident in lines 2-3. This last extract functions to broaden the boundaries surrounding the *exhibiting strengths* resource by constructing the capacity to engage in acts of helping as a socially valued subject position.

To summarise, the *exhibiting strengths* resource operates by stipulating the conditions necessary to demonstrate the skills and abilities of people with disabilities. Utilising the online medium removes the physical and psychological barriers of operating within a disabled identity. As a result, people with disabilities are positioned as agents of social value. The online medium is constructed as being integrally involved in this.

#### Operating independently resource

The final resource embedded in the *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* repertoire positions the online medium as a source of remedy, allowing people with disabilities access to an independent subject position. Without the medium, users are forced to operate via dependency on others. In the following extract, Andrew, who lives with cerebral palsy and operates via an electronic wheelchair, a computer for communication, as well as a headpointer for moving objects, is responding to a question about whether being online has made a difference.

1 For me being on-line has given me the freedom to find out anything I want  
2 too without relying on people. Like I can't go to a library by my self because I  
3 can't turn pages with out my head-pointer on, and it is a lot faster to get info  
4 off the net than it is out of a book or a newspaper. So yes it has made a  
5 difference being on-line then off-line. (Andrew)

In lines 1-2, Andrew constructs the positive impact, which the online medium has made. There is a sense that the online medium has “given” him a great opportunity, which he is now the benefactor of. It has afforded him the “freedom” to be positioned independently of others. There is a celebratory tone reflected in “the freedom” endowed upon Andrew in line 1. Further, the medium is positioned as the cause of this freedom and is responsible for enabling Andrew to access “anything” he wants, independently of others. “Anything I want to” emphasises the expansive, abundant, and boundless nature of what is available through online access. In line 1, “For me” further emphasises the medium’s importance for Andrew.

The sense of freedom available online is contrasted against the severe limitations encountered offline. Andrew provides an example of these limitations in lines 2-3. In order to function adequately within a public space, namely a library, it is vital that another person assists Andrew in the operation of the tools necessary to carry out rudimentary tasks, such as in the turning of pages. Without another person’s assistance, Andrew’s access to this public place is hindered to the extent of obstruction. Juxtaposing an example of the offline barriers to accessing a common public place with the freedom to access “anything” online, irrespective of the need to involve others, accentuates the advantages offered through online participation. Subsequently, this functions to position the medium as an empowering solution.

Beyond eliminating the barriers to participation in the social world, there is greater efficiency in utilising the medium to access resources as opposed to securing resources from conventional artefacts like books or newspapers. This enhances the superiority endowed in the online medium. The final construction in lines 4-5 affirms without a doubt the medium’s usefulness and positive impact.

The next extract from Sheryl, who lives with a congenital visual impairment in addition to ongoing effects of a head injury, also highlights the advantages of utilising online technology.

1 I have to depend so much on other people for help. It's really good being able  
2 to access legal info, cases etc, without having to go down and look in the  
3 library, but I really hate relying on others. It makes me feel incompetent.  
4 Email is great though. No difficulties with email and talking and enlarging  
5 programmes work well with that, so I can be totally independent (except  
6 when I have OOS [occupational overuse syndrome] and Kate has to reply to  
7 everything for me while I rest my arm - K). (Sheryl)

Sheryl's account is organised around a strong element of dislike towards having to rely on others to operate adequately. This is evident in line 1 where Sheryl constructs her dependency. There is a sense that she has been forced to operate this way, as illustrated in "I have to depend". This dependency is not merely confined to a few instances but is extensive as indicated by the phrase "so much". Together, these ideas create a notion that Sheryl's dependency is a significant feature of her life and may be necessary for daily survival. I make the assumption that because the dependency is not associated with any particular context, it constitutes a broad construction of Sheryl's experiences, and, therefore, her subjectivity.

In lines 1-3, the online medium may be presumed to offer a source of remedy for Sheryl's dependent subjectivity. Yet, in line 3, Sheryl reaffirms her dislike of relying on others, which suggests that even though the medium allows her to access resources without having to physically access the place where the resources are located, there may still be a degree of dependency involved in the way she operates. Nevertheless, accessing the online medium for the purpose of overcoming physical barriers is highly valued.

In conjunction with constructing the value Sheryl holds in the online medium, line 3 is deployed to more powerfully reinforce the adversity and frustration she experiences in being reliant on others, as indicated by inclusion of the word "hate". Justification for Sheryl's strong feelings of resentment are given in line 3 where dependency is constructed as causing Sheryl to experience an incompetent subject position. This positions her identity within a devalued social category. Moreover, there is a sense that Sheryl has no control over this dependency, which has been bestowed upon her, unwillingly, because of the earlier construction in line 1 regarding the necessity of having to depend "so much" on others "for help".

In line 4 the narrative changes. Having access to an online communication facility, namely “email”, emancipates Sheryl from being confined to a socially devalued subject position constituted through incompetence. Further, email is constructed as more than a satisfactory solution. Indeed, it presents a “great” answer to her problem and, as a consequence, adverse outcomes are eliminated when Sheryl uses email. Other tools required to function online also operate in harmony with the email facility. Email access enables Sheryl to attain a “totally independent” experience. This locates her identity outside the devalued position of dependence, incorporating into her subjectivity something of high social value.

Interestingly, the final comment in Sheryl’s account indicates that total independence may not be achievable in some circumstances, namely, when she experiences occupational overuse syndrome where “someone else” is required to type her correspondence. I make the assumption that this scenario applies to the very construction of this extract, as indicated by Kate’s initialised signature “K” in line 7. Inclusion of this additional information elevates Sheryl’s opportunity for independence through online access within an even more cherished subjectivity because it is vulnerable to subversion by physical constraints. Another example is given of the *operating independently* resource where Patrick highlights the significant benefits associated with operating via the online medium for a blind person.

1        this whole idea of um actually me having been the one to locate this house I  
 2        think [laugh] that’s the most positive experience because um you know whe  
 3        when we shopped for a house before it consisted of um Margaret looking at  
 4        real estate publications and picking at houses she thought we might both like  
 5        and going to look at them and I felt like a much more equal partner in that  
 6        process and I mean the purchase of our house is one of your the the major  
 7        purchasing decision that you make [mm] so I felt like I was in some degree of  
 8        control for the first time over that purchase so I think that’s ah that’s really  
 9        significant (Patrick)

This extract is organised around the online medium’s facilitation of Patrick’s ability to operate independently, and the degree of personal agency this affords him, which he values highly. In line 1, Patrick is positioned as being independently responsible for locating his family’s future house, illustrated in the deployment of the phrase “having been the one”, as opposed to the inclusion of others. Use of the word “actually” accentuates the authenticity of Patrick’s independent involvement and control over the event. By drawing attention to the actuality of this

situation, I argue that the construction functions to bring about comparison with possible events where Patrick has no real, independent involvement in decision-making activities. Consequently, I make the assumption that independent positioning afforded through the online medium is very highly valued, which is celebrated in its construction as “the most positive experience” online for Patrick. Justification for the significance of this experience is given by utilising an example of the traditional house-buying process.

In contrast with Patrick’s ability to access an independent subject position, house buying prior to the medium’s facilitation constituted his partner having control over stages of the process. A three-part list is constructed in lines 3-5, which emphasises Patrick’s lack of involvement more persuasively. The extent to which Patrick is barred from the process is most compelling when his partner takes control over deciding what houses they would “both” prefer. This demonstrates the subject position of powerlessness under which Patrick operates, without being able to participate online. Subsequently, the medium’s facilitation of his independent positioning in the locating stage of the house-buying process elevates him to a “much more equal” subject position. Patrick can contribute to the relationship on an equal playing field. With respect to house buying, this was not possible prior to gaining online access.

The medium’s valuable impact is constructed further in Patrick’s account. “For the first time,” Patrick’s experience is positioned within a framework involving the possession of “control” over a step in the house-buying process. The process constitutes “a major purchasing decision” within Patrick’s life. Possessing “some degree of control” over this process validates the enormous significance it is attributed, as illustrated in lines 7-9.

To summarise, the *operating independently* resource constructs the online medium as the tool responsible for remedying the dependent positioning of people with disabilities. This offers people with disabilities emancipation from the constraints and powerlessness involved in operating dependently. With the integration of online access, people with disabilities are positioned as independent social agents. The online medium affords them the ability to move away from a devalued social category of dependency and participate within an independent practice of personhood. This subjectivity is valued.

## Summary

The analysis demonstrates how people with disabilities are able to position themselves within a socially valued subjectivity, free of the physical and psychological barriers constructed by others that surround disabled identities. The *uncontaminated judgement* resource allows people with disabilities to be evaluated purely on the basis of the content of their communication rather than the process of delivery, which can be contaminated by others' negative judgements toward visible features of a disabled identity. This functions to position people with disabilities on par with non-disabled participants because both have access to the same tools for communication. Being judged on the substance of the communication, with extraneous factors eliminated, creates a judicious and fair context for evaluation. This may open up the potential for people with disabilities to be valued for their strengths. Indeed, Daniel's account constructs the view that, even in circumstances where online interactants have access to information about his disability, his achievements are valued more highly. Subsequently, the *uncontaminated judgement* resource provides the conditions necessary for positioning people with disabilities within a socially valued subjectivity.

The *exhibiting strengths* resource utilises the lack of ability resulting from offline contexts as a point of leverage for constructing the advantages of operating online. In contrast with offline contexts, access to the online medium allows people with disabilities to demonstrate their capabilities free of the prejudice tied to a disabled identity. Consequently, the *exhibiting strengths* resource furthers the goal of positioning people with disabilities within a socially valued subjectivity because these people become agents of social value as they exhibit their strengths. Participants construct examples of positioning themselves within this agency with respect to becoming the producers of valuable social and economic goods, such as electronic "code", technical skills, "intellectual prowess", being "recognised internationally", and creating "solution[s]" to problems. The online medium is constructed as being integrally involved in positioning people with disabilities within a socially valued subjectivity.

The third resource, *operating independently*, functions to extend the online medium's influence further by constructing the online context as a source of remedy from the limitations of operating within an offline environment. Akin with

the *exhibiting strengths* resource, the *operating independently* resource deploys the dependency resulting from offline contexts as a point of leverage for constructing the advantages of operating online. Free of the limitations embedded in operating offline, the online medium enables people with disabilities to position themselves as independent operators. This new subject position has not been available to people with disabilities, but with online access people with disabilities can participate in this. Being able to access an independent subject position exudes a degree of freedom and control. The celebratory constructions conveyed in accessing this sense of freedom and control suggests such experiences are rarely encountered, and, hence, are highly valued.

From a reflexive standpoint, I have drawn on *access* constructions throughout many areas of this thesis. This extends from a functional level of gaining access to the online medium, to accessing positive experiences online at a conceptual level through to *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* from a theoretical level, as evident in this repertoire. In addition to the notion of having the capacity to access facilities, experiences, and identities, this particular construction of access has another layer of meaning relevant within a disability context. More specifically, the notion of accessibility embodies positive connotations surrounding disability-friendly environments, which successfully accommodate the diverse needs of people with disabilities. Deploying constructions organised around accessibility serve to enrich the affirmative associations of the online medium, integrating within its construction an understanding of greater participation. This is made possible because of the very capacity to achieve access. Beyond the online medium, having the ability to gain access is not typically a subject position engaged by people with disabilities. Lack of access and exclusion are taken-for-granted subject positions integrated within a disabled subjectivity. The very construction of *access* challenges the taken-for-granted nature of assumed features integral to a disabled subjectivity and, instead, functions to reposition the kinds of actions and resources available to people with disabilities. This enables participation for people with disabilities in the social world.

Each of the resources provides the conditions required for enabling people with disabilities to occupy other subjectivities beyond the limitations of disabled identities. Together, they serve to undermine the notion of essentialist characteristics underlying social action evaluated via a perceptually mediated

ontology. Through the operation of *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* repertoire, people with disabilities are able to display their capabilities free of the contamination of the perceptually mediated prejudice tied to visibly disabled identities. Being able to access this experience enhances the social and economic positioning of people with disabilities. Having the ability to go beyond standard practices of operating in the world is at the heart of a repertoire that is delineated in the next chapter.

## Chapter Six: Transcendence

*Here, I delineate another repertoire identified in the interviews. The notion of being able to go beyond standard practices of operating in daily life formed another broad pattern generated from participants' data. This talk became defined in terms of a transcendence repertoire. Embedded within this repertoire is the idea that, online, people with disabilities can attain a great capacity for operating in the social world to the extent of transcending physical, social, perceptual, and psychological barriers surrounding disability. This offers people with disabilities a highly positive and significant transformation in subjectivity. Within the transcendence repertoire, three key resources were identified: life-altering, overcoming physical barriers, and disconnecting disability.*

### Life-altering resource

This resource is organised around the idea that users can totally reconstitute the way they operate in everyday tasks. This affords them an unprecedented ability of considerable consequence, which extends into all facets of life. This first extract comes from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview as Patrick responds to a question about how useful he has found the medium. Ellipses contained in brackets indicate my contraction of the speaker's paragraph.

- 1 it's impossible to to over estimate the life changing nature of the internet for
- 2 me and probably for a lot of people with disabilities [...] I mean when I think
- 3 of um all of the information that it has given me independent access to um
- 4 you know everything from the fact that I use the internet extensively for my
- 5 masters thesis right through to reading my own bank statements getting a the
- 6 a visa balance um doing shopping for a birthday present so that I don't have
- 7 to try and rely on somebody else to help me do shopping for me um
- 8 supermarket shopping these days over the internet it's much more efficient
- 9 than going into a supermarket getting a staff member who really doesn't even
- 10 want to be helping you um rushing you through you feel you're under
- 11 pressure not to explore the shelves but to sort of just get what you're used to
- 12 and get out of there and leave the woman to do her job or whatever um all of
- 13 those things it's it's just it's about freedom and choice and empowerment and
- 14 increasing your um ability to participate fully in society and opening up job
- 15 prospects it's just life altering really (Patrick)

The extract is organised around the online medium's dramatic and powerful capacity to open up enormous opportunities for operating independently in daily life, which totally transform Patrick's life practices. In lines 1-2, Patrick constructs the online medium's impact on his life as being so vast that any exaggeration is implausible. This construction applies to Patrick's experience and also extends to other people with disabilities, reinforcing the medium's extensive and powerful capabilities. The phrase "all of the information it has given me" positions the medium as the force driving Patrick's transformation in experience. The medium is situated as being responsible for affording Patrick "independent access" to "everything". "Everything" is an extreme case formulation. Such constructions have been identified by Pomerantz (1986) for creating a maximum or minimum effect. Patrick's extreme case formulation prepares the reader for the extensive life-altering opportunities made possible via online access. This construction creates an expectation of the medium's unlimited and boundless capacity to enable the functional operation in society of people with disabilities. The events that follow succeed in meeting these expectations.

In lines 4-6, Patrick proceeds to offer tangible evidence in support of the medium's extensive and powerful application in everyday life by constructing a list of tasks as follows: carrying out a master's thesis, reading bank statements, accessing a visa balance, and shopping for a birthday present. Each of these is made possible through online access. The quantity of examples constructed accentuates the authenticity and veracity of Patrick's account. Variation in the nature of activities achieved highlights the medium's multifaceted utility. This gives further credence to the extreme case formulation deployed in the construction that the medium has given Patrick independent access to "everything".

In comparison with the substantial advantages gained through online access, an example of traditional supermarket shopping is constructed. The efficiency of the Internet is poignantly contrasted with the inefficiency, frustration, inequity, and reluctance of having "to try and rely on somebody else". Without Internet access, Patrick is dependent on a staff member. As a consequence of this dependency, Patrick is forced to seek out traditional items, which are familiar to him, without the freedom and choice "to explore the shelves" of his own accord. Patrick's shopping is rushed and uncomfortable, something he has no control over because he is "under pressure" to only purchase goods he is accustomed to "and get out of

there". This construction conveys a strong sense of helplessness when operating offline, where Patrick is positioned as the unwilling victim of dependency.

The despair performed in this account is reinforced further through the cumbersome construction surrounding the staff member's attitude to helping Patrick, as evident in lines 9-10 and 12 where the staff member would much rather be left to continue her routine. Even the unspecified construction "whatever" in line 12 indicates the staff member's preference for engaging in anything else other than the burdensome task of assisting Patrick. Together, this sequence of events positions Patrick and the supermarket assistant as helpless victims in a co-dependent situation, where neither are willing to engage in their respective subject positions.

In lines 13-15, the account dramatically turns. All of the frustration, helplessness, and inequity of operating offline becomes juxtaposed with the "freedom and choice and empowerment" of accessing and participating in the online medium. This functions to present the Internet within a superior moral and social arena compared to offline contexts. Although the meaning of "all of those things" in lines 12-13 is unclear, I interpret this to be a construction of Patrick's reflection on the vast lack of difficulties faced online in converse with offline contexts. The prodigious and profound benefits of operating online are constructed further with respect to the inclusion of "increasing your um ability to participate fully in society and opening up job prospects". The dramatic contrast in subject positions constructed in on- and offline mediums serves to justify the carrying out of interactive, everyday activities online.

All of these, substantial, benefits bring together a powerful and dramatic conceptualisation of the online medium as something that has the capacity to transcend the limitations, inefficiencies, and inequities of being positioned offline. Patrick's account also functions to position the online medium as an amazing tool, which has the power to completely transform his everyday life in exceedingly positive ways. This gives compelling support for the online experiences of Patrick and other people with disabilities as being really "life-altering".

In another example of the *life-altering* resource, David responds to an email question about how useful he has found the medium.

1 It has been extraordinarily useful. I've only been on-line for a few months, but  
2 already it has improved my work capacity. Whether responding to students'  
3 work or editing articles or exchanging documents or just corresponding, it has  
4 revolutionised my life. On the social front, it means that for the first time since  
5 I lost my sight I have been able to exchange letters directly with people,  
6 rather than having to get sighted help. amongst other things, this means that  
7 I tend to keep in touch with people much more than I used to. On-line  
8 technology is the most important break-through for blind people since the  
9 invention of speech synthesis for computers - on which, of course, it builds. It  
10 also allows me to get books out of the library as I never used to. (David)

David's first statement evaluates the utility of the online medium. The construction that it has been "extraordinarily useful" highlights the medium's expansive application. The utility of the medium is demonstrated by drawing on factual evidence. After "only" the duration of "a few months," the medium had a significantly positive impact on David's capacity to work. The speed at which the medium yields these results is heightened by the shortness of a mere "few" months. David goes as far as to say that the medium has "revolutionised" his life, giving specific reference to a series of events, namely, the performing of four work-related activities. Constructing specific examples of improvement in performance provides credence to David's prodigious claim over the medium's ability to completely alter his life. More than offering some kind of change, the medium has been responsible for a profound reconstitution of the way David operates. This reorientation has manifested in a significantly positive direction as indicated by the meaning conveyed in the word "revolutionised".

Beyond the arena of working, the medium has influenced David's social life in a paramount way. "For the first time" since acquiring his disability, David no longer depends on someone else to carry out correspondence. As a consequence of the online medium, he can attain direct communication with people, which fuels his ability "to keep in touch". In the social arena, this permits David to operate within a subject position where he is independent of others' help for accessing communicative interaction. Moreover, this is just one amongst other accomplishments and subject positions made possible through online access.

The fundamental change constituted by online technology is accentuated via the superlative construction in line 8: "the most important break-through". Similarly, the highly affirmative impact of the medium is conveyed through the use of the concept "break-through", thereby, consolidating the positive, technological, and

cutting-edge advancement encompassing the medium. Even though the fecundity of this construction may be undermined by comparison with its forerunner - speech synthesis software - this is qualified by integrating online technology's advancement with its forerunner's invention, evident in lines 8-9. This functions to further heighten the revolutionary nature of the medium. The final sentence builds on the medium's momentous impact, which enables David to obtain unprecedented access to printed information.

Throughout David's account, the medium is constructed as the force responsible for driving David's exceedingly positive transformation in experience. This transformation extends across multiple dimensions, such as work and social fronts, highlighting the medium's multifaceted utility. As with the first extract categorised under the *life-altering* resource, features in David's account contribute to a growing conception of the medium as a tool for transcending the limitations, frustrations, and dependency of being positioned as disabled in daily life. Finally, Lois, who lives with motor neurone disease, which is a degenerative muscular condition, illustrates the *life-altering* resource in an email interview where she talks about being more connected online.

1        Because I have MND [motor neurone disease] and am severely disabled, I  
2        cannot Read books, newspapers mail etc because I can't turn pages. I can't  
3        talk to people, I'm restricted in meeting people physically and I'm very  
4        restricted in every day life with everything. My life is now limited to one room.  
5        By being on line I can talk to anyone. I can participate in family, friends, be  
6        involved with other MND people in NZ and around the world and I have some  
7        control with running my own life. If I want information I have the Internet to go  
8        to and if I feel the need to talk To anyone, friends family, MND contacts,  
9        business and chats, I have the internet, msn [Microsoft Messenger], Email. I  
10       could even shop if I so wished. I can read on line also, even read the  
11       newspaper if I so wished. (Lois)

In contrast with the previous accounts, this begins by delineating the limitations arising from Lois' disability. Indeed, she constructs herself as "severely disabled". Lois moves from presenting her inability to carry out taken-for-granted operations like turning pages, which preclude her from accessing books, to an inability to access fundamental human activities like talking to people. The extent of her debilitation culminates in the extreme case formulation, "I'm very restricted in everyday life with everything." There is no point at which her disability escapes its infiltration; its influence consumes her life. Lois' experience is validated further by

drawing upon a physically tangible construction of her life as “now limited to one room.” The events in Lois’ account poignantly construct the extreme and extraordinary physical, social, and psychological restrictions experienced by Lois on a daily basis, as a consequence of operating inside a disabled body. This functions to create a dramatic climax from which a different set of events are encountered.

In line 5, the narrative immediately turns to benefits gained from the online medium. Lois proceeds to counter all the instances where her disability had previously precluded her engagement in activities. As a consequence of online technology, she can now “talk”, “participate in family, friends”, and “read”. Each offline barrier is overcome via online access. This functions to position Lois within a highly capable and socially productive subject position. Lois also constructs the medium as an extensively empowering life tool, redressing the inequities previously experienced in a physically bounded environment. More than just reaching the levels of activity inaccessible offline, Lois is able to transcend them. She can converse with “anyone”, develop an interconnection with others on a national and global scale, become immersed within relationship networks of family and friends, as well as attain a greater degree of control over the management of her life. This provides abundant opportunities for Lois to access more fulfilling subjectivities, in dramatic contrast to the oppressive absence of participation surrounding offline activities.

Positioning the medium as an empowering resource is accentuated further in lines 7-11. Lois raises actions she desires in which online facilities inclusive of the “Internet”, “msn”, and “Email” are deployed as denominative solutions to her limitations. Further, engaging in activities available through the online medium are created as opportunities that Lois can choose to participate in. These events come about in stark contrast to the severe lack of choices constructed earlier, as a consequence of her life being confined to the physical boundaries of “one room.” The sense of liberation resulting from having access to a variety of choices from which to fulfil Lois’ subjectivities are conveyed through the following constructions: “If I want”, “if I feel”, and “if I so wished”. These expressions bring together the poignancy surrounding the ability to access activity choices, which are impossible to experience offline.

In summary, the *life-altering* resource positions people with disabilities within a highly capable and socially productive subject position. This contrasts dramatically with the dependency and limitations experienced offline. The *life-altering* resource also functions to position the online medium as a revolutionary force responsible for positively transforming the way people with disabilities operate. Its capacity enables people to carry out a plethora of everyday tasks. This presents the medium as highly useful, embodying extensive application. All of these advantageous qualities lead to people with disabilities constructing the medium as an empowering life tool.

### Overcoming physical barriers resource

While the *life-altering* resource encompasses change across many dimensions, this resource focuses purely on transforming physical ability. The medium is constructed as a unique social space where people with disabilities can transcend the physical limitations of their disability. This is achieved by overcoming, compensating for, and redressing the incapacity to carry through physical actions. The first extract demonstrating this resource comes from an interview conducted on IRC, as Daniel responds to a question about what it is like to be online.

- 1 <Daniel> Online I feel more confident with my abilities
- 2 <Daniel> Yet it is so cerebral
- 3 <Daniel> offline it is a mixture
- 4 <Natilene> Offline it is a mixture - mixture of what?
- 5 <Daniel> mix of physical & cerebral
- 6 <Daniel> greater mix
- 7 <Natilene> Ohh, yes I agree totally
- 8 <Natilene> Do u think about yourself in a different way when you're online?
- 9 <Daniel> umm, yes
- 10 <Daniel> I'm more confident of what I do
- 11 <Daniel> Less worried about physical hang-ups
- 12 <Natilene> Yes I feel like that as well actually, no one's there judging me -
- 13 they may be but i can't sense them or see them or conceptualise them, so it
- 14 doesn't matter
- 15 <Daniel> OK
- 16 <Daniel> What I like is doing what I set out to do
- 17 <Natilene> Doing what u set out to do - can u not do this as easily off-line?
- 18 <Daniel> not always
- 19 <Daniel> often physical factors can override my desires, eg, falling over a
- 20 cutting myself badly, if that happens I have to stop and respond with other
- 21 (tiring) physical actions
- 22 <Daniel> in short, it is far less taxing to use the computer than my body

The dialogue begins as Daniel mentions feeling “more confident” about his “abilities” online. The word “more”, by necessity of its comparative construction, creates a juxtaposition with other contexts to which the medium is being compared in a superior way. The phrase in line 1 sets up a powerful construction for the remaining dialogue, where the medium is positioned as something endowed with the force to evoke feelings of confidence about a person’s abilities.

Next, line 2 suggests a contradiction in expectations surrounding the medium. Daniel constructs the medium as “so cerebral”, which I take to mean that it fosters mental, abstract, and conceptual activity as opposed to physical activity. Support for this interpretation is offered in the proceeding sequence of events where Daniel constructs offline contexts as encompassing “physical and cerebral” ways of operating. There is an assumption that the inclusion of a physical component for operating inhibits Daniel’s capacity to experience confidence in his abilities. This idea is reinforced in lines 10-11 as Daniel responds to a follow-up question. He repeats the construction of experiencing greater confidence online compared with other contexts, while emphasising the physical capacity to take action as indicative in the phrase, “I do”. Experiencing greater confidence online may be attributed to the lack of concern over “physical hang-ups”, which I interpret as being psychological fears resulting from physical barriers inhibiting the carrying out of actions. The shared meaning of this construction is demonstrated in the last sequence of dialogue events.

In lines 12-14, I attempt to develop a common understanding with Daniel by drawing upon my own personal experience as a means of affirming Daniel’s construction. I talk about the medium’s non-judgemental benefit. As a consequence of the lack of visually apparent presentation cues online, users can engage in interaction free from the knowledge of others’ judgement. Although Daniel accepts this interpretation, he repositions the conversation in relation to his own subjectivity, which differs from mine.

Daniel values operating online, because the medium allows him to access an empowering subject position where his intentions correspond with his actions. Justification for this is developed in lines 18-21. Offline, Daniel is not always able to achieve what he intentionally wants as a consequence of physical events overpowering these intentions. A poignant example is given of physical barriers

that inhibit the carrying out of actions. Beyond the physical event of falling over and injuring himself, which suspends any ability to pursue a goal, Daniel is faced with the disruption and complication of having to respond to the emergency with “other (tiring) physical actions”. Such actions are positioned as unwanted deterrents that lead Daniel further away from his desired goal(s). These deterrents are “tiring”, which creates an even more futile reason for consuming his energy. The interview dialogue creates a dramatic comparison between the inefficacy, danger, and general unpleasantness of operating offline compared with the cerebral engagement embodied via an online terminal, which also serves to demonstrate the empowering subject positioning gained from being online.

The entire account culminates in Daniel's construction of the computer, which I also interpret as embodying a vehicle for accessing and engaging in the online medium. Daniel constructs the computer as “far less taxing” to operate within than his “body”. In other words, online interaction overcomes the futility embodied in the energy consumption, complications, and dangers of operating within a physically oriented space. Indeed, the “computer” is positioned as a superior substitute to a body, inclusive of a disabled body. In this way, the online medium enables Daniel to transcend the physical hazards encountered in everyday life and, thereby, operate within an empowering subject position, which may also positively impact on Daniel's identity.

Another extract comes from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with Karen who is responding to a question about the advantages offered through online access for people with disabilities in general. The ideas embedded in this extract overlap with the previous example.

- 1 if I'm feeling sick and I can keep going I'm not completely totally um
- 2 restrained well look my laptop if I was bedridden like if I got stuck and I
- 3 couldn't get up and walk at all I could stay in my bed use my laptop and still
- 4 be on the internet because I've got a phone plug in there I'll just take the
- 5 phone in (Karen)

Karen's account is organised around the medium's ability to compensate for her physical incapacity when feeling unwell. In lines 1-2, she begins by saying that in the event of feeling unwell, having access to the online medium precludes her from complete repression of activity. Even though Karen is physically

incapacitated to the extreme extent of being unable to walk, which leaves her bedridden, accessing the online medium through a laptop provides her with the opportunity to participate, and, thereby, operate without the constraints of a disabled body. This enables Karen to access different kinds of subjectivities where she can continue to take part in social activity, rather than suddenly finding herself bereft of other engagements. The medium is constructed as a powerful tool in response to Karen's debilitation, which rescues her from being occupationally destitute, functioning as a substitute for the inactivity resulting from her disability.

This second extract embedded within the *overcoming physical barriers* resource compares similarly with the previous one, with regard to the way the medium is constructed as compensating and substituting for physical incapacity. Indeed, it provides additional justification and affirmation of Daniel's construction that "it is far less taxing to use the computer than my body". Simultaneously, both extracts demonstrate how online access enables people to operate within an empowering subjectivity, removed from the constraints of embodying physical disability.

In contrast with the previous extracts oriented around the notion of the online medium as a compensatory device for physical incapacity, which can more than adequately substitute actions carried out by the physical body, the last extract constructs the medium somewhat differently. Sally-Ann talks about the kinds of facilities she has utilised online. Her account presents the medium as a resource for redressing physical barriers and opening up extensive opportunities for participating in society.

- 1 I like to visit places "the BBC" and "NZoom". I have visited "Auckland Zoo"
- 2 on-line. You are limited by what the site can provide and your own technical
- 3 skill but you are no longer limited by a physical disability if you use a manual
- 4 chair and find moving around difficult. My computer has extended my skills
- 5 and broadened my outlook like nothing else could have done. (Sally-Ann)

Sally-Ann mentions how she likes to "visit places" online. This suggests a physically embodied experience, enabling movement to a bounded location. Although Sally-Ann may be restrained by the online resources available and her technical knowledge as evident in lines 2-3, her physical disability ceases to become a barrier to accessing information and experiences while online. This functions to place her within a skilled and capable subject position.

An example of a physical disability is constructed in lines 3-4, as in the case of someone who operates via “a manual chair” and has mobility difficulties. This provides a more graphic construction of the limitations surrounding physical disability, reinforcing the significance of disability. It also demonstrates the profound impact of disability, and, hence, the transformation in subjectivity made possible through online access.

Sally-Ann highlights how online technology has expanded her abilities and perspectives “like nothing else could have done.” Beyond merely removing barriers to participation, the medium has furthered Sally-Ann’s opportunities to the extent of increasing her abilities and expanding her constructions on life. This allows her to operate outside a disabled identity and the powerless subjectivities this encompasses. The extreme case formulation “like nothing else could have done” accentuates the medium’s momentous impact on her life. I note the celebratory tone deployed to express this construction, which emphasises the medium’s prodigious value.

Sally-Ann’s account demonstrates how she can virtually attain a physically embodied experience through the visiting of places. This enables her to access a very different subjectivity from that available offline. Indeed, the online medium is positioned as an empowering tool, enabling a person to transcend the severe physical limitations offline in order to experience a more capable subject position, which is effectively impossible in other contexts. There a sense that this may serve to redress some of the inequity surrounding disability and its preclusion from participation in the social world.

To summarise the features pertinent to this resource, the online medium enables people with disabilities to transcend a physically limited subjectivity, which obstructs actions offline. Online, however, people can transform their subjectivity by accessing different places around the world, by operating without the disruption and complication of injury, and by compensating for physical incapacity when bedridden. As a consequence of transcending the physical barriers surrounding a disabled subjectivity, people gain opportunities to access events, activities, and tasks previously inaccessible, or burdensome in other contexts. This opens up liberating experiences and enables people to operate within a completely different subjectivity. This is cherished.

## Disconnecting disability resource

This is the final resource embedded within the *transcendence* repertoire. In conjunction with the other resources, this transforms subjectivity of people with disabilities by allowing participation in the social world. More specifically, it transcends social and to a lesser extent physical barriers by disconnecting the effects of impairment, allowing participants to operate in the same way as everyone else. The first extract occurs as Sally-Ann responds to a question about how frequently she goes online.

- 1 I am on-line every day, sometimes several times a day and sometimes at
- 2 night. I am not addicted but I use it the same way as somebody else might
- 3 use their car. I enjoy the freedom it gives me, it allows me to be 'normal'. I
- 4 don't much like that word, i.e. I can participate because I am interested or
- 5 because I wish to. (It is my choice.) Furthermore I can do so easily without
- 6 having to involve others unless I want to. I enjoy doing this because I am
- 7 physically dependent on others for many things. I don't go out
- 8 unaccompanied as it is too stressful and besides it's not nearly as much fun.
- 9 (Sally-Ann)

The account starts with an extreme case formulation with respect to being online “every day”. This positions the medium as a fundamental component in Sally-Ann’s life. At the same time, the construction indicates a subtle degree of dependency by Sally-Ann, alluding to the possibility that she may possess some kind of addictive online tendency. Such a possibility may be verified even from the remaining phrases in lines 1-2. Beyond utilising the medium “every day”, she “sometimes” engages with it on “several” occasions throughout the same day, as well as during the “night.” However, Sally-Ann counters any possibility of having ever been “addicted” in lines 2-3, where she frankly states non-addiction, although she ends the construction with a disclaimer regarding the way she deploys the medium. This functions to remove her from an unhealthy and excessive engagement, while enabling her to participate extensively without negative evaluation.

A “car” simile is drawn on in line 3 to construct Sally-Ann’s degree of engagement in the medium. This is a powerful construction. Deploying this simile brings together a wider framework for positioning online experience. The simile makes available the notion of utilising the medium in “the same way as somebody else might use their car.” Such a construction incorporates the idea of being able to

physically move from one location to another and, thereby, gain access to a new destination. This creates a new subject position for people with disabilities that integrates a compelling sense of liberation and empowerment, especially with regard to someone with a mobility disability, which I assume to be the case for Sally-Ann. I presume that for a person with a mobility disability, movement may be substantially constrained, precluding the ability to access destinations with any amount of ease. Therefore, the opportunity to travel to destinations afforded through online access may be highly valued by people with disabilities, as well as being paramount to their lives.

Beyond the notion of physical transportation, the “car” simile provides a construction of the online medium as a social and psychological vehicle for transcending the barriers of disability. Evidence of this disconnection from the barriers of disability and access to an enjoyable way of operating appears in line 3 where Sally-Ann mentions that utilising the online medium allows her “to be ‘normal’ ”.

Finally, the “car” simile helps to position Sally-Ann’s online activities within a sensible and psychologically healthy genre. This may function to present Sally-Ann’s participation with the medium as far removed from any notion of it being a substitute or replacement for social engagement. Rather, a “car” encompasses the epitome of practicality because it functions as an intrinsic component in achieving a practical outcome.

Returning to line 3, Sally-Ann mentions how she enjoys being the benefactor of the “freedom” the online medium “gives” her. In Sally-Ann’s construction, “freedom” is positioned as the quality enabling her to access a “normal” subjectivity. I also make the assumption in line 3 that she rejects the negative, non-disablest, and exclusively divided connotations surrounding the construction of “normal”. Conversely, she deploys a normative construction because it offers the capacity to access a non-disabling subjectivity for operating within, whereby, Sally-Ann can participate as a consequence of being interested in an activity or due to her own wishes, as opposed to those of anyone else. Although the phrase, “It is my choice”, is presented in parentheses to presumably detract from its focus, this construction actually functions to highlight the profundity surrounding Sally-Ann’s ability to choose to participate. Incorporating the construction of having

“choice” powerfully indicates the severe lack of choice over participation in other contexts. This “choice” construction overlaps with the *normality* resource embedded in the *choice to disclose* repertoire, where having the choice to withhold disclosure of a disabled identity allows people to operate within a ‘normal’ subjectivity.

As indicated in lines 4-6, the online medium disconnects Sally-Ann from the limitations of operating within a disabled identity by affording her choice over the kinds of activities she engages, as well as enabling independent participation in these activities. Sally-Ann values the ability to participate of her own free will, irrespective of the requirement of involving others, unless this is her choice. This opportunity is extremely valuable because elsewhere in her life Sally-Ann is reliant on people “for many things.” Sally-Ann constructs an example where she requires assistance in relation to going out, which functions to verify the authenticity surrounding the claim that she is highly dependent on others. Justification surrounding the need to involve others is promoted further in line 8, where Sally-Ann argues that “it’s not nearly as much fun” to go out on her own.

Sally-Ann’s points of validation, which involve deploying direct and indirect sources of justification throughout her account, bring together compelling reasons for daily engagement in the online medium. Each enables the transcendence of having to operate within the limitations of a disabled identity by disconnecting Sally-Ann from the social and physical barriers. This transformation leads to a positively momentous, social and psychological outcome in which Sally-Ann can position herself within a “normal” subjectivity.

A further example of the *disconnecting disability* resource is provided in the following extract from an email interview with Cottage\_Maid who lives with deafness. She is talking about the advantages people with hearing impairments may encounter when utilising online technology.

- 1 deaf people cannot "ring" other people because of not being able to hear on
- 2 the phone. I find it extremely difficult to talk to someone on the telephone but
- 3 by being on line (email or chatroom) deaf people can "talk" to others. We are
- 4 the same as a hearing person. We are no different. Hearing people do "talk"
- 5 on line. We can do the same. (Cottage\_Maid)

The account begins in lines 1-2 as Cottage\_Maid constructs the impossible circumstances surrounding deaf people interacting with others via the telephone. This positions deaf people within a socially destitute situation, creating an insurmountable barrier from which there is no possible alternative. Cottage\_Maid draws on personal experience to assist in verifying the authenticity of this construction. She indicates the extreme difficulty involved, thereby, highlighting that from her own circumstance, interacting via telephone presents substantial obstacles. These events bring together a harrowing and insurmountable construction, from which to dramatically contrast the benefits of online communication.

Cottage\_Maid introduces the experience of being online in line 3, with specific mention of email and chatroom communication facilities as a solution to the telephone barrier. With online access, "deaf people can "talk" to others." This is a compelling phrase because it constructs the medium as holding the power to overcome disability and engage in activities previously impossible, or harrowing to attain. There is a sense that in being online, deaf people can disconnect themselves from impairment by gaining back their abilities. This positions the medium as a highly useful tool for overcoming obstructive barriers. By overcoming these barriers, deaf people are positioned within an empowering subjectivity in which they can communicate like non-disabled people.

In lines 3-5, Cottage\_Maid mentions how deaf people, inclusive of herself, are able to cross over into the "same" subjective space "as a hearing person." There is "no" difference between a deaf and hearing person online, which may construct an ultimate platform for equality in the social world. Hearing and deaf people can interact using the same technology. Moreover, deaf people can participate in a social activity, such as "talk[ing]", which may be considered impossible for them offline. If a person is deaf, being able to "talk" demonstrates the considerable, transformative opportunities available through online access, which profoundly impact on people's lives by enabling them to engage in a non-disabled subjectivity. Having the ability to talk if you are deaf functions to transcend earthly and mortal limitations by disconnecting people with disabilities from the effects of a hearing disability.

The final extract embedded in the *disconnecting disability* resource follows. It comes from an email interview with Shaun who is responding to a question about whether having a disability makes any difference online.

- 1 No, it doesn't matter. In fact, being online is a concrete example of the notion
- 2 of the social model of disability. Given the right technology, people are not
- 3 disabled online ie. they can participate on the same terms as other people.
- 4 (Shaun)

Shaun's reply is organised around verifying the medium's sheer lack of interest in whether someone has a disability. This is qualified by deploying the social model of disability, which, according to Oliver (1990), attributes a disabling experience to physical and attitudinal barriers in the environment. In Shaun's account, the social model is deployed to demonstrate how online people can easily disconnect themselves from the physical and social barriers of operating within a disabled identity. Shaun makes further effort to construct his point by highlighting that in the instance of accessing "the right technology," which I interpret to mean equipment catered to the needs of people with disabilities, "people are not disabled". Like the previous extract, this deploys an incredible event in which social barriers resulting from disability suddenly disappear, allowing people to operate outside of a disabled subjectivity. By surpassing the social and environmental barriers surrounding disability, people with disabilities can operate "on the same terms as other people." This functions to erase the inequities of operating within a disabled identity. As a consequence of participating online, people with disabilities are now able to access a subjectivity commensurate with everyone else. This constructs a profound and paramount experience unparalleled in other contexts. It also functions to position the medium as a highly significant tool for transcending many facets of disability.

To conclude this last resource, *disconnecting disability* allows people with disabilities the possibility of gaining abilities that have traditionally been inaccessible as a consequence of physical or sensory impairment. The online medium becomes positioned as a fundamental component for operating in life by enabling people with disabilities the chance to function outside of a disabled subjectivity. Having the capacity to operate without the physical and social limitations resulting from disability constructs opportunities to redress the inequity of people with disabilities in the social world.

## Summary

This analysis has demonstrated how the repertoire of *transcendence* functions in the talk of people with disabilities. Physical, social, and psychological limitations arising from having to operate within a disabled body are surpassed online through the *transcendence* repertoire. This allows people with disabilities a far greater capacity for participating in the social world. Embedded within the *transcendence* repertoire are three resources: *life-altering*, *overcoming physical barriers*, and *disconnecting disability*. Within each of these resources, the extensive obstacles encountered offline, which preclude or inhibit participation, are constructed. These obstacles are drawn on to create a poignant context in which to powerfully position the impact of operating within the online medium. Such a discursive sequence of events leads to constructing online engagement as a social practice for people with disabilities to gain a sense of equity in participation within the social world.

The *life-altering* resource incorporates a broad construction of the expansive applications embodying the online medium. People with disabilities can utilise these extensive capabilities to reconstitute their everyday operation. Within this resource, the medium is positioned as a revolutionary force responsible for transforming the daily operations of people with disabilities in exceedingly positive ways. The medium's impact on the lives of people with disabilities is conveyed dramatically and powerfully by constructing the substantial barriers people with disabilities are confronted with daily in offline contexts. This functions to position the online medium as an empowering life tool that enables people with disabilities to access an empowering subjectivity where they are highly capable and socially productive.

The second resource embedded in the transcendence repertoire – *overcoming physical barriers* - functions to redress the physical incapacity resulting from disability, enabling people with disabilities to operate effectively and outside of a disabled subjectivity. The medium is deployed as a tool for overcoming the physical limitations surrounding daily operation within a disabled body. This leads to significantly liberating outcomes in which people with disabilities can carry out tasks previously cumbersome, or insurmountable. The poignant impact of the medium is constructed by juxtaposing the extensive physical barriers faced offline

with the ease, convenience, and accomplishment of operating via the online environment.

*Disconnecting disability* is the third resource in the *transcendence* repertoire. By dissociating the effects of impairment from online interaction, people with disabilities are able to operate like everyone else, which results in providing a levelling ground for social interaction. This resource enables people with disabilities to gain abilities previously inaccessible due to physical or sensory impairment. This offers them a rare opportunity to transcend the limitations of operating within disabled identities. Such an opportunity is highly valued.

The construction of transcendence presents a set of interesting ideas from a reflexive perspective. For me, this construction embodies a profound sense of liberation from the limitations and human incapacities surrounding a physically oriented world. The act of transcendence provides an opportunity to powerfully move above these barriers in order to operate freely and flexibly. On the one hand, this meaning I hold of transcendence may blend alongside images of immortal fantasies. On another level, the very ability to operate outside the taken-for-granted physical and psychological constraints of working within a disabled body does present a conception of transcending the impossible, which would require superhuman qualities. Traditionally, the overcoming of physical incapacity has been constructed within the story-telling domain of fiction, where heroes possessing superhuman qualities undertake physically impossible tasks. Yet, access to the online medium affords people with disabilities the possibility of carrying out actions that may be akin to those of a superhuman capacity, within an everyday context. An example of this can be illustrated through blind participants' capacity to read their mail online, as was evident in their talk about their online experiences. The possibilities available online afford people with disabilities access to transcendent kinds of activity in everyday life. This occurs in contrast to an ontological context based on fantasy and fiction, which transcendence has traditionally occupied. Online access for people with disabilities enables them opportunities to engage with transcendence from an actualised ontology, which has significant practical, social, and psychological meaning in their everyday life.

Each of the resources embedded in the *transcendence* repertoire works to construct the online experience of people with disabilities within empowering

terms. Through online access, people with disabilities are able to access an unprecedented ability to operate effectively in the social world. This has dramatic and powerful psychological outcomes, as reflected in the highly significant and transformative subject positions deployed. Each of the participant's accounts brings together a compelling justification and validation for daily online engagement.

The following chapter presents another repertoire, which is organised around the ways people with disabilities can access participation on a global scale through the online medium.

## Chapter Seven: Participating In The World

*In this chapter I demonstrate how the participating in the world repertoire operates in the talk of people with disabilities. Being able to immerse oneself in activities and events at a local and global level was identified as a central pattern generated in the data. This talk became defined in terms of a participating in the world repertoire. Embedded within this repertoire is the idea that the online medium affords people with disabilities the opportunity to access and be part of a wider community of relationships, people, interests, activities, and information. Having access to these kinds of opportunities and facilities creates an increased sense of belonging and connection with the world. Within this repertoire, four key resources were identified: ease of access, finding like minds, not being alone, and world at fingertips. The chapter begins with two extracts demonstrating the nature of this repertoire.*

### Central Ideas in the Repertoire

The participating in the world repertoire is organised around the way the online medium enables people with disabilities to be part of a wider community of people, events, and information, which leads to a communal sense of belonging. Two extracts follow demonstrating the central ideas embedded in this repertoire. The first extract comes from Lois in response to a general question about what it is like to be online.

- 1 It's wonderful, I can't imagine living without being on line. Being on line
- 2 enables me to be part of the world. I can keep in touch with friends, family
- 3 and fellow MND sufferers through email, fax, and msn [microsoft
- 4 messenger]. I keep in touch with my bank. I can get information or give
- 5 information to others. Business matters are made easier with the direct
- 6 communication. (Lois)

Having online access fuels the ability to participate in the wider community. The online medium's capacity to facilitate social connections, the dissemination of information to others, as well as to maintain business associations creates a dynamic interconnection with events and relationships integral to the social world. The medium's ability to sustain these networks of activity leads to an engaging sense of communal belonging, which enables Lois to be positioned within an

empowering subjectivity where she can “be part of the world.” This is contrasted with the inability to “imagine living without being on line.”

A second example of the central ideas embedded in the *participating in the world* repertoire follows as Katherine who lives with cerebral palsy, which affects her communication through a speech impairment, responds to a question about the medium’s utility.

1        Being on-line has brought me benefits for instance a couple of years ago I  
2        organised a speaking tour of NZ for someone from the States and 95% of  
3        communication was through the email, indirectly there has been economic  
4        benefits in my work not spending time re typing material and I have done a  
5        couple of internet searches for people. I was involved in the Hikoi a couple of  
6        years ago and that had a lively email life and I felt I was part of it from the  
7        begining to end. In the disability community alot of information comes via the  
8        email and people can organise events through the email (Katherine)

This second extract continues the sense of communal belonging by drawing upon diverse networks of activity from organising a “speaking tour” (line 2) and events in the “disability community” (line 7) to carrying out “internet searches” (line 5) and taking part in a “Hikoi” (line 5), or peaceful protest march. Emphasis on participation is constructed in lines 6-7 where there is a concentrated focus on being part of something throughout its entire process of development from inception to conclusion. This conveys a strong sense of social connection and immersion, which functions to position Katherine as an involved and significant part of local communities, and, by default, also, an important participatory member of the social world. The diverse nature of the events deployed provides a construction of the activity networks Katherine has the opportunity to access via the online medium. The events also create an atmosphere of the global relationships she becomes a part of, which are all made possible through the online environment. In summary, both extracts bring together an increased sense of belonging and connection with the world locally and globally, which encapsulate the nature of the *participating in the world* repertoire. This enables people with disabilities to position themselves within an empowering subjectivity.

Within the *participating in the world* repertoire, four key resources were identified: *ease of access*, *finding like minds*, *not being alone*, and *world at fingertips*. Each of

these serves to highlight central features built into the construction of this repertoire.

### Ease of access resource

This resource is organised around the idea that the online medium facilitates an ability to gain access to people with unparalleled ease. Extracts displayed here, and in the following resource on *finding like minds*, have both arisen from a general question about gaining access to networks of people online. In this first extract demonstrating the *ease of access* resource, Bridgette talks about the ability to tap into social networks during an email interview.

- 1 My networks are varied - but I can tap into any of them, or a combination,
- 2 whenever I like, to run ideas past people ... and people can do the same with
- 3 me. (Bridgette)

Irrespective of the variable nature of Bridgette's networks, she can "tap into" them, via the online medium. Being able to "tap into" these networks suggests instant access can be made. Moreover, Bridgette is bestowed with the capability of connecting to "any" one of her works, "or a combination, whenever" she so chooses. The considerable flexibility embodying the ability to just associate with anyone, or a number at whatever time desired exudes a degree of access to freely available activity not always possible in other contexts where physical barriers may impede connection. This permits Bridgette to operate within a powerful subject position where she can access people at any time. The extreme case formulations deployed, "any" and "whenever", function to demonstrate the great amount of ease with which the online medium can extensively facilitate instantaneous access to people. Immediacy of connection is conveyed further with the construction continuing from line 2 involving Bridgette's ability to "run ideas past people". This construction functions to reinforce the fast paced and convenient nature of conducting social interaction online, and may, also, serve to justify Bridgette's enthusiastic engagement with the online medium.

The last phrase introduces an additional element to Bridgette's online experience, in which she constructs a communal sense of reciprocity in lines 2-3. By making herself available to other social networks, as they have also done, a possibility to

become an integral part of these very networks is established, which functions to connect Bridgette into the same web of social activity. This construction works to strengthen and enhance the ability to “tap into” other networks of people online by moving beyond the gaining of access to becoming a part of and acquiring reciprocal membership. Throughout the extract, there is a sense that the online medium facilitates connection to others with unparalleled ease and flexibility. Another example of the *ease of access* resource is presented as Lois responds to a similar question about having access to different networks of people.

- 1 Yes the on line medium does help me to access different groups of people,
- 2 eg business people, friends, family and fellow MND people here and
- 3 overseas. It's just so easy to email or fax any group of people instantly. It's so
- 4 easy to feel excluded from the rest of the world when one is physically
- 5 challenged, particularly when speech is limited. On line communication
- 6 makes it easier to participate in the community and around the world. (Lois)

Lois begins by affirming the online medium’s assistance in accessing people. A denominative list incorporating varying groups of people is supplied in lines 2-3 that functions to consolidate and verify the medium’s aid to her needs. The extensive nature of the medium’s capacity to assist is accentuated further by going beyond local connections to accessing “overseas” networks of people, as indicated in line 3.

Deploying the medium for the purpose of acquiring different social networks is qualified in line 3 because it is “just so easy” to gain access to “any group of people instantly.” Possessing the ability to communicate with any group instantly conveys a sense of communicative application well surpassing the limitations of standard communication devices. Likewise, emphasis on the ease at which contact is produced via email, or fax, indicates a comparatively superior approach to other communication channels. The construction laid out in line 3, therefore, provides a succinct and effective illustration of the meaning encapsulated in the *ease of access* resource. Furthermore, it offers a transparent and compelling reason to adopt online technology for communication, positioning Lois within an empowering subjectivity where she can easily access “any group of people instantly.”

In lines 3-5, Lois constructs the barriers faced by people with physical disabilities, which may be compounded if a person has a speech impairment. In these

instances, experiencing separation “from the rest of the world” is “easy” to acquire, which highlights the socially impoverished subject positioning available to people with disabilities in contexts outside the online medium. Further, I would argue that the statement in lines 3-5 infers the difficulty involved for a person with a disability to gain a sense of inclusion with “the rest of the world”.

Interestingly, the ease at which a person can “feel excluded” from the world in lines 3-4, as indicated by “It’s so easy”, is, conversely, juxtaposed with the ease in emailing any social network, as evident in “It’s just so easy” in line 3. This (near) parallel construction creates a poignant contrast of events where compatible degrees of ease are drawn on to articulate two quite opposing subject positions. This construction in lines 3-4, regarding the socially impoverished sense of ease surrounding offline contexts, creates an impact for positioning the benefits of online technology that follow.

In lines 5-6, the hardship experienced from extensive limitations surrounding the ability to access different networks of people offline is dramatically offset via “online communication”. This enables “easier” participation, opening up opportunities for people with disabilities to be positioned within a powerful and liberating subjectivity where they can “participate in the community and around the world.” This positions the online medium in extremely positive terms, and may validate Lois’ engagement with it.

In summary, the *ease of access* resource operates in the talk of people with disabilities by constructing the capacity to access people that surpasses the extensive limitations and socially impoverished subject positioning experienced offline. This increased level of social access is flexible, occurs instantaneously, and leads to connections with any of one’s networks. Traditionally, people with disabilities have not been able to position themselves within this freedom of access, as evident in the liberating and celebratory tone of participants’ accounts. Yet, by enabling access to others with a great amount of ease and flexibility through the online medium, people with disabilities can be positioned as part of the social world. This is highly valued.

## Finding like minds resource

Like the previous resource, the notion of being able to connect with others from all over the world is apparent. However, this resource differs in that its focus is about the medium's ability to facilitate connections with others who occupy similar interests. The first account demonstrating the *finding like minds* resource comes from an email interview with Shaun as he offers an explanation for the online medium's utility in accessing other networks of people.

- 1       The medium is ideal for this because you can be united with people with
- 2       similar interests, globally. Also, other spheres of interests become available
- 3       too. (Shaun)

Shaun affirms the medium's suitability for accessing people. Even more so, he considers the medium "ideal" for such a task. This functions to position the medium with the qualities desired for facilitating access to other networks of people. Shaun goes on to provide a justification for this construction.

Accordingly, the medium offers the chance to be "united" with others who have "similar interests". Being united positions people with disabilities beyond the capacity of merely accessing others towards gaining a strong sense of connection, to the point of acquiring solidarity. Forming a strong bond with people who have shared interests at a global level deserves acknowledgement and celebration. This feat incorporates a great sense of achievement. Being able to access a united connection with others all over the world, who have common interests, is a powerful construction of human action that surpasses physical or geographical barriers. It also indicates an ability to become part of an international community and, thus, the world. This construction highlights the profound opportunities available online, which bring about participation in a global community of similar interests. Further, as Shaun points out in lines 2-3, this may even lead to extending the pool of interests into other "spheres". Hence, in addition to becoming connected with others globally, online access can facilitate the broadening of activities engaged in, thus, expanding one's world of interests and the people contained within it. Together, both constructions make available a socially accessible and connected subject position that people with disabilities can engage.

In another example of the *finding like minds* resource, Patrick highlights his enjoyment in being able to access other networks of people who share the same interest. This extract comes from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview.

1 I really enjoy it um I mean if you know where to look you can you can get  
2 together with people on every possible subject really and some of the you  
3 know I enjoy sharing knowledge um with people with interesting computing  
4 and stuff but also just other other lists as well for example um ever since I  
5 was a kid I've always enjoyed the archers which is a BBC ah radio series  
6 which has been going since 1951 and then in 1982 it got too expensive for  
7 them to buy in New Zealand so they took it off and um I've been able to  
8 obviously listen to the archers over the internet now that it's been broadcast  
9 by the BBC on the net but also I actually found an email list where people  
10 who like this programme get together and talk about it pretty obscure sort of  
11 subject so it's it's really good to be able to share knowledge um share  
12 feelings on different issues um yes it's it's good and and again whether you  
13 choose to reveal that you have a disability or not is entirely your choice  
14 (Patrick)

Patrick begins by stating how much he “really enjoys” the opportunity to access networks of people via the online medium, which he then goes on to qualify. Providing that you know the locations where people are online, you have the ability to connect with others “on every possible subject”. More than just being able to discuss with others every existing topic, online users can consider every possible topic, indicating potential discussion areas that may not already exist but are, yet, to take shape. This opens up a collaborative creation and engagement in unique topics, and, subsequently, the possibility of accessing alternative subjectivities.

In line 3, Patrick affirms the pleasure he obtains from having the opportunity to “share knowledge”. A specific area of knowledge to share is deployed, namely, “interesting computing and stuff”. However, there are other topics beyond the vicinity of computing and an example is offered.

An account deriving from Patrick’s childhood is drawn on to demonstrate the broad and unique utility of the online medium. Despite the removal of a radio programme in New Zealand, the aid of online technology allows Patrick to remain informed about the programme via online broadcasting. Further, not only can he still access the programme, but he also has the capacity to access a network of people who share a common interest of enjoyment in the programme through an email discussion list. Even though discussion of the programme’s subject matter may be

considered wildly remote, it is attainable online. In lines 9-11, a meaning is conveyed that irrespective of the obscure nature of some subjects, people can still come together to discuss them online. I note the celebratory tone used in lines 11-12 to highlight the positive outcome surrounding the sharing of “knowledge” as well as “feelings” on “different issues”.

Incorporating the sharing of “feelings” functions to broaden the nature of online connections beyond the business of the reciprocation of information gathering to involve a more personal level of association. Bringing the sharing of feelings into Patrick’s construction suggests an opportunity to freely voice opinions and personal reflections on different matters within a supportive network of people.

In the final turn, lines 12-13, Patrick highlights “again” that the getting together with others to discuss common interests can be achieved without any requirement to mention disability; “whether you choose to reveal that you have a disability or not is entirely your choice”. This last construction invokes a strong sense of freedom and control surrounding the way a person operates online, which may extend into the very practice of getting together with others to share similar interests. Moreover, such a construction also functions to position the identities of people with disabilities as a flexible feature of their subjectivity, which overlaps with the *choice to disclose* repertoire.

The notion of connecting with others who occupy similar interests is portrayed in the final extract under the *finding like minds* resource, as Katherine celebrates the ability to access similar others in an email interview.

- 1        It is fantastic to find "like minds" online and find people who are passionate  
2        about things that I'm passionate about. (Katherine)

Katherine’s account exudes with praise for the online medium as she exalts the ability to come across people with “ ‘like minds’ ”. I interpret this as being able to access others who have qualities and/or interests in common with her. Indeed, Katherine extends her expression of exaltation towards the opportunity to access individuals “who are passionate” about the same things as her. Being able to seek out those who encounter enthusiasm in identical topics of interest is cherished. The celebratory tone involved in having the ability to access others online who find

passion in the same things suggests that in other contexts, this may not be as much of a possibility. This third construction succinctly highlights the meaning inferred in the *finding like minds* resource.

In summary, the *finding like minds* resource is centred on the opportunity to seek out others who have an interest in the same things. Being able to access these “like minded” others is a highly valued experience. This in itself indicates that in other contexts, presumably, outside the online medium, having the ability to access people who are passionate about the same things may be less likely for people with disabilities. Possessing an ability to find these people opens up opportunities for gaining stronger social connections regardless of geographical location. This offers people with disabilities a broader and socially enriched subjectivity to operate within, which may lead to feeling part of a global network, as indicative of Shaun’s account.

#### Not being alone resource

The third resource embedded in *participating in the world* focuses on the ability to access others through the online medium who are experiencing a similar situation, which in this case relates to the same/similar disability. Being able to achieve this removes participants from feeling isolated and alone. Instead, they are afforded the opportunity to experience a sense of commonality with others.

The first account demonstrating the *not being alone* resource comes from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with John as he responds to a question about the medium’s utility. John’s online experience largely revolves around time spent in an online support forum for his terminal illness, shy drager syndrome, a rare neurological disability causing degeneration in the central and autonomic nervous systems (which no others were currently dealing with in New Zealand). John’s account reflects his experience in the online support forum.

- 1       there were a number of things that were useful one was er not being alone
- 2       um knowing there were others out there who were going through the same
- 3       thing and-and-and any type of-of dissemination of information I'd just ask a
- 4       question and within 24 hours at the latest there will be some sort of reply
- 5       (John)

This account is organised around a three-part list, conveying a complete and representative construction of the online medium's usefulness to John. John begins by stating there was more than one thing that was useful, as evident in there being "a number of things", which immediately serves to create a plentiful sense of application embodying the medium. The first item mentioned involves "not being alone". This positions the online medium as a powerful facilitator for supporting John's psychological and emotional well being. Negating the state of "being alone" infers that John was able to access a sense of connection with others and a feeling of being a part of something. Consequently, this also serves to position John within an empowering subjectivity where he knows "others out there" experiencing the "same thing". The construction in lines 2-3 may constitute the second item in the three-part list.

The third item relates to the usefulness surrounding the distribution of information online. John provides justification for this claim. An example is given where he "just" makes a request for information and within a "24" hour time period "at the latest" an answer is supplied. Measuring the exact duration of time required increases the authenticity and cogency of John's account. In conjunction with the first item, the third suggests that making contact with others, which by default departs from a state of "being alone", can be achieved by merely posing a question, resulting in contact always occurring within a day. This serves to enhance the lack of separation from others stated at the beginning of the account. Indeed, while each of the items may appear as separate entities creating the construction of there being a "number of things" useful online, these items also function to strengthen and validate the medium's capacity to facilitate the subject position of "not being alone".

Another example of this resource is portrayed in an ICQ interview with Daniel who is responding to several follow-up questions about accessing other people with disabilities online, with particular reference to a disability support group. In the final sequence of follow-up questions, the interviewer asks how the support group helped him.

- 1 <Daniel> ok, they helped me with info
- 2 <Daniel> I'm still on their email list
- 3 <Daniel> they provide good info
- 4 <Daniel> it helped me to know I wasn't alone

5       <Natilene> Please don't think me an ignoramous, I'm just interested in your  
6       interpretation - facing the world on your own is not good?  
7       <Daniel> that's fine  
8       <Daniel> I face the world as most do  
9       <Daniel> perhaps not a confidently as I could  
10      <Natilene> so, knowing that there are others out there going thru something  
11      similar makes you feel confident about your situation?  
12      <Daniel> a little, but less alone really

The support group provides access to information about Daniel's disability. The information is considered "good", indicating that the kind of material supplied is of a quality that Daniel values and is of a type, which meets his needs. More importantly, the support group was helpful because they afforded Daniel the experience of knowing he was not the only one dealing with his situation. At this point, I am keen for some elaboration and, hence, proceed to consider why being alone is interpreted negatively by posing a rhetorical statement in line 6.

Although Daniel agrees that facing the world alone is fine, he repositions his experience by comparing the way he faces the world with most others. While he confirms that he experiences the world in the same way as "most do", in line 9 he constructs an area where he differs. Daniel argues that he may not face the world as "confidently" as he has the capacity to attain, suggesting a subordinate subject position for Daniel. Not facing the world as "confidently" as he could justifies his engagement with the online support group, inferring that he is not alone in his lack of confidence about facing the world. Knowing that there are others who are also experiencing the same issues enables Daniel to face the world confidently, which permits him to engage in a socially secure subject position.

In lines 10-11, I ensure I have comprehended Daniel's construction accurately by relaying back to him my understanding of his account. "A little" suggests that while there is agreement with my interpretation, this is not the main point. Rather, the central issue as indicated in line 12 constitutes the ability to access a subject position, where Daniel does not experience a state of being alone that is made possible through contact with the online support group. Daniel's account highlights the poignancy surrounding the capacity to feel an association in (disability) experience with others. This allows Daniel to operate within a socially empowering subject position.

A further illustration of the *not being alone* resource is offered in a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with Karen, as she talks about the advantage of accessing overseas friends online.

- 1 and you meet a lot of people I I've made I've got more friends overseas than I
- 2 have here just I'm I'm not not in a nasty in a nasty way but it's people that
- 3 understand my condition because they have it or they have a disability so
- 4 they know exactly how I feel so yeah that's the difference and they're more
- 5 understanding (Karen)

This account has similarities with John's in relation to seeking out others who have an understanding of the situations faced by people with disabilities. Karen highlights how she has met "a lot of people" online, to the extent of acquiring a greater number of "friends" from "overseas" locations in comparison to the amount she presently has "here" (New Zealand). This functions to demonstrate the extensive capacity for meeting people online, and more importantly, people who have the sought after qualities that endow them as friends. Karen proceeds to justify why she has more friends overseas than in her present location.

In line 2, Karen negates any notion that her preference in some way harms the character of her (New Zealand) friends. Rather, her preference is constructed around the level of understanding gained from the people overseas, whom she has met online. These people have the capacity to demonstrate a sufficient level of familiarity with her own condition, because they either have the same condition as Karen, or they are dealing with another disability. This suggests that regardless of a person's disability, the very engagement with disability creates a shared experience between people. This enables Karen to be positioned securely in the knowledge that others are aware of "exactly" how she feels, which endears them as friends. Knowing "exactly" how she feels is constructed as a sought after quality, which is not necessarily available within Karen's local circle of friends. As indicated by Karen in lines 4-5, this is what differentiates the people she meets in other contexts compared to the online medium: "they're more understanding".

Interestingly, while this particular extract does not mention the state of "not being alone", it encapsulates what is at the heart of this resource: namely, the ability to access others who are experiencing the same or similar situation. Being able to achieve this affords participants the opportunity to engage in a subject position

where they can embody a sense of commonality and shared understanding with others. This may lead to an increased sense of belonging and validation surrounding a person's specific state of being, which, in this case, involves a disabled subjectivity. Each of the extracts demonstrate the importance surrounding the capacity to access others experiencing a similar situation, thereby, enabling people with disabilities to be positioned as a part of something as well as a part of a valid state of being. Accessing others through the online medium makes this all possible. The final resource embedded in the *participating in the world* repertoire follows.

#### World at fingertips resource

The fourth and last resource is organised around the ability to access the world, and, hence, the capacity to become involved and immersed in activities across the globe. Consequently, this resource deals centrally with the global aspect embedded in the *participating in the world* repertoire. This contrasts with the previous resources, which focus on being a part of something. The first extract appears in an email interview with James, who lives with poliomyelitis, an acute musculo-skeletal condition, as he responds to a general question regarding what it is like to be online. Due to the broad nature of this question, an optional follow-up question was embedded at the end that involved how or in what way was being online different to being offline.

- 1 To be 'on line' is to have the world at my feet, or rather, my fingertips! It is
- 2 fascinating to have access to so much (useful) information from almost
- 3 anywhere in the world, without incurring the massive costs that would
- 4 otherwise be necessary in physically travelling to various places to obtain
- 5 that information. However, I do not think or feel any differently when I am 'off
- 6 line'. (James)

Being online is equated with having “the world at my feet”. Despite changing the embodied location of accessing the world from a person's “feet” to their “fingertips”, James' construction conveys a strong sense of liberation and empowerment. Mere contact with the tips of one's fingers attains access to the whole globe, invoking the impression that the smallest and most effortless of actions can permit access to prodigious outcomes. Logically and intuitively, a relationship between such inequitable proportions cannot be fathomed. Yet, by

way of the online medium, the impossible becomes achievable. This construction creates an opportunity for James to be positioned with mastery and omnipotence as the entirety of his access and participation in the world is managed through the whims of his extremities.

Fascination surrounding the ability to access a vast supply of information that is actually “useful” strikes a celebratory tone, suggesting a lack of opportunity elsewhere. Further, information can be deployed from “almost anywhere in the world”, accentuating the near boundless and unlimited nature of the online medium’s access capacity. Subsequently, this vast sense of access highlights James’ ability to engage in a position of control over such expansive resources.

In lines 3-5, James points out that accessing information online fails to incur the immense “costs” of “physically travelling” to locations for the information. This construction emphasises the significance of having the world at James’ “feet” because he no longer has to physically move to a destination. Instead, the destination can be accessed via the touch of a button, as opposed to using his feet, enabling James to occupy a resourceful and powerful subject position. This, indeed, illustrates the superior quality of access made available online. The construction spanning lines 3-5 also overlaps with features underlying the *ease of access* resource as the immediacy and ease surrounding online access to information is conveyed, in contrast to the cost of physically getting to places for the desired information.

There is a change of direction in the last turn where James states there is no difference between mediums with respect to feeling or thinking differently. I assume this has occurred as a result of my optional follow-up question - “how or in what way was being online different to being offline?” Despite the incredible opportunities made available online to operate within a masterful subject position, James ensures that his feelings remain the same as evident in lines 5-6. Moreover, this later construction functions to position James within a powerful subject position without letting the negative aspects of power influence him.

Another extract highlighting the *world at fingertips* resource appears in an email interview with Joe, as he responds to a general question regarding what it is like to

be online. Joe lives with cerebral palsy and uses crutches for short distances and a wheelchair for longer distances.

- 1        Being on-line is great. It is different from being off-line in as much as you
- 2        have access to the world via the Internet and everything it offers and doing
- 3        what thousands of people do every day, both in New Zealand and worldwide.
- 4        Likewise, you think about yourself differently because you're part of it. (Joe)

Joe constructs a highly positive appraisal of his online experience. This celebratory tone continues, as the difference between mediums constitutes access to a range of events, activities, and people of global proportions. All this is achieved through the online medium, as portrayed in the phrase “access to the world via the Internet”. This feature of Joe’s account encapsulates an idea fundamental to the *world at fingertips* resource. Merely having access to the online medium, referred to here as the “Internet”, enables entrance to the “world”, which serves to position Joe within an empowering subjectivity where he has access to expansive opportunities of global proportions. The construction “in as much as”, located in line 1, enhances the prodigious extent of the global capacity attained. Interestingly, Joe’s explanation for the difference in mediums, as deployed in lines 1-3, constitutes a three-part list, thereby, adding a sense of completeness and representativeness to the account of his experience.

Being positioned as a part of something global, integral to the *participating in the world* repertoire, comes into play more visibly in lines 2-3 with respect to “doing what thousands of people do every day, both in New Zealand and worldwide.” Being able to engage in the same things that “thousands” of others do “every” day immediately brings in an understanding of regular and committed co-creation on a grand scale. This joint commitment to sharing engagement in the medium suggests a sense of communal connection and belonging. Moreover, the quantity specified indicates involvement and kinship with a huge community extending into the “thousands” “worldwide”.

In the final turn, Joe affirms the construction of occupying a sense of global belonging online in relation to conceptualising himself as being “part of it.” I suggest this particular construction may have been in response to one of my optional follow-up questions involving, “Do you think about yourself in a different way?” Joe’s response, then, indicates that compared to other contexts outside the

online medium, feeling part of it may not be possible. Yet, as Joe's account highlights, the very nature of being online enables him to experience a sense of communal belonging and involvement of global proportions. Hence, I would also argue that the online medium permits Joe to engage in a different subject position involving a feeling of being part of something of global proportions and everything that it offers.

Andrew's response to a question embedded in an email interview about there being any advantages for people with disabilities using the online medium offers a final example of the *world at fingertips* resource.

- 1       The main advantage been on-line for dissabled people in having the world on
- 2       thier computer. (Andrew)

While Andrew's account is brief, it provides a succinct and poignant construction surrounding the principal quality of the online experience of people with disabilities; "having the world on thier computer." This speaks volumes. This phrase gives voice to a feature underlying the *world at fingertips* resource involving the ability to contain the entirety of the world within the individual locality of one's computer hardware. The capacity to access a world-wide, all-encompassing entity from a single item of equipment owned by an individual indicates a situation of copious proportions and unquestionable advantage. Further, it may serve to position Andrew within a powerful subjectivity as he has access to the world, a vast, expansive, and prodigious entity, all contained within the confines of his own computer.

Summarising this fourth and final resource embedded within the *participating in the world* repertoire, it serves to demonstrate the extraordinary opportunity of accessing the entire world, all by means of a single online connection. The accounts bring together a concept of empowerment where people with disabilities can freely participate in all manner of events and activities available in the world. This creates a compelling sense of connection and belonging within a community of universal proportions. Such an opportunity is celebrated as it permits people with disabilities to engage in an empowering subjectivity where they have access to the world and all that offers.

## Summary

The *participating in the world* repertoire affords people with disabilities an unprecedented ability to engage in the social world, and, hence, operate within an empowering subjectivity compared with other contexts. Accessing the capacity for wider social involvement affords them a sense of communal belonging. Indeed, such a subjectivity is far removed from being isolated from other people and events, which some people with disabilities may be more likely to experience than their non-disabled counterparts, due to mobility and speech-related disabilities.

Each of the resources embedded in the *participating in the world* repertoire works to position people with disabilities as socially and communally involved members of the world. The *ease of access* resource surpasses the extensive limitations experienced offline, enabling people with disabilities to access others, locally and globally, with a great amount of ease and flexibility. This affords people with disabilities the opportunity to become part of the world. *Finding like minds* provides opportunities to seek out others who have an interest in the same things. Having the capacity to find these others enables stronger social connections regardless of geographical location. This may lead to feeling part of a global network. *World at fingertips* positions people with disabilities inside a space of global empowerment, as they can freely take part in activities around the world. This constructs a great sense of connection and belonging with a community of global proportions.

Notwithstanding the capacity of each resource to position people with disabilities outside experiences of social isolation, *not being alone*, in particular, removes them from this disempowering subject position. Being able to connect with others who are experiencing the same or similar disability affords an opportunity to engage in a sense of commonality and shared understanding. This may lead to increased feelings of belonging and validation surrounding the state of being of people with disabilities and, hence, their identities.

Drawing on the literature, Jones (1995) argues that online discourse can be seen to operate for the purpose of communion, commonality, and fraternity. Similarly, Holmes (1997b) points out that computer-mediated technologies offer social spaces for continuing older forms of relating in a more efficient and convenient way. The *participating in the world* repertoire encapsulates both of these ideas. By

providing the opportunity to easily access others and participate in the world, people with disabilities can operate within a highly social subjectivity, where they can gain a sense of communal belonging. Such an opportunity is extremely valuable and celebrated. The repertoires organised around how participants with disabilities keep safe online as well as engage in acts of (minor) deception, which constitute the behaviours participants are so critical of others, are delineated in the next chapter.

## Chapter Eight: Managing Safety And Identity Online

*This chapter works to demonstrate how the keeping safe and qualified deception repertoires operate in the talk of people with disabilities about their online experiences. Amongst the linguistic patterns generated at a very broad conceptual level, discourse clustered around the idea that participants could operate without becoming victims of harmful and deceptive acts by employing a number of strategies for keeping themselves safe. For the purpose of analysis, these kinds of constructions were defined within the pattern of a keeping safe repertoire (Bowker & Tuffin, 2003). Interestingly, at other points in the interviews, the talk from a select number of participants focused on the appropriation and acceptance of their acts of deception, which varied in consequential importance according to the nature of the situation. In these circumstances, participants worked to justify their actions in ways that showed they operated outside actions deemed harmful and deceptive. In contrast to the keeping safe repertoire, these kinds of discursive constructions were defined within the pattern of a qualified deception repertoire (Bowker & Tuffin). The first section of this chapter focuses on the keeping safe repertoire, while the second considers the qualified deception repertoire. The chapter closes with a summary as well as a discussion of the findings, which contrasts with other chapters, as the issues raised are specific to the repertoires outlined here.*

### Keeping Safe Repertoire

Within the repertoire of *keeping safe*, three key resources were identified: *happens to others*, *stranger danger*, and *personal judgement*. The *happens to others* resource is based on the idea that others are susceptible to harmful consequences when they participate online because they do not engage in safe practices. In contrast, the *stranger danger* resource deploys other people as the protagonists of harmful situations. Exercising caution before interacting with strangers ensures personal safety. *Personal judgement* is about developing strategies for evaluating the character of other online users. The knowledge gained can then be used to judge the safety of an online interaction. The following section provides an example of the first of these three resources.

## Happens to others resource

In this extract, Daphne is responding to a question about whether there are disadvantages for people with disabilities using the online medium.

1        There is always a danger of "less-worldly" individuals being scammed by  
2        dishonest people, but I guess that would apply to the population at large. I  
3        heard a story recently of a young disabled man who had a woman he had  
4        met on-line come and stay with him (from overseas) and it was a disaster. I  
5        guess some pwds [people with disabilities] may be more susceptible to "chat  
6        up" lines. I'm not, I have enough people in my "real" world to keep me  
7        occupied! (Daphne)

This account highlights how harmful consequences associated with engaging in online interactions happen to other people: namely, those who are "less-worldly". Daphne provides an example of a young disabled man's experience that ended unpleasantly after he decided to extend his online relationship into an offline context. Although no reason is given for why the relationship ended in "disaster", there is an assumption indicated in lines 5-6 that the man is a victim of another's manipulation involving "chat-up" lines. The account positions the young disabled man as innocent, naïve, and vulnerable because he is willing to open his "real" world to someone he has met in an online setting. This lack of worldliness exposes him to being taken in by dishonest people.

In contrast to the young man's gullibility, Daphne remains untouched by such harmful consequences because she chooses not to extend relationships beyond the online context. Having enough people in Daphne's "real" world strengthens her reason for not engaging in offline relationships. As evident in lines 6-7, Daphne does not rely on the medium to enhance her social network, as she is satisfied with her offline relationships. This enables her to occupy a safe subject position where she is content with her "real" world relationships and, hence, free of being "susceptible to "chat-up" lines."

The account suggests Daphne holds a conceptual distinction between interactions occurring offline, which may possess some kind of realist grounding, and interactions occurring online, which are somehow less real. This leads to another assumption that those who are not grounded in reality are also vulnerable to scams and other dishonest practices. In this case, deploying the online medium to

foster relationships in the “real” world is considered naïve, as indicated by the example of the young disabled man.

A further assumption can be deduced from Daphne’s account that positions those who choose not to be taken in by “chat-up” lines or dishonest actions as worldly. By default, Daphne’s behaviour places her outside the subject position of “less-worldly” individuals in which her decision to separate online interactions from offline relationships positions her as worldly. This trait of worldliness removes her from harmful acts because she chooses not to develop offline expectations about online relationships. By differentiating between on- and offline interactions, Daphne maintains her personal safety. Choosing not to meet online acquaintances in person shields her from becoming a victim of others’ manipulation. Engaging in a strategy that ensures Daphne’s safety, positions her as a responsible and competent online user without fear of being taken in.

Interestingly, in lines 1-2 Daphne’s account constructs the proportion of “less-worldly” individuals online as no different from “the population at large.” This indicates that people with disabilities are no more susceptible to dishonest practices than any other group, which reduces the risk surrounding Daphne’s online participation; having a disability does not disadvantage her by being a target of others’ dishonest practices.

The following extract provides another example of the *happens to others* resource embedded in the *keeping safe* repertoire. The extract comes from an interview with Sarah conducted on ICQ and leads on from a response to a question about whether it is better not to mention disability online.

- 1 <Sarah> There are some people out there in the internet world who are really
- 2 nice and others who aren't the sad thing is, some people with or without
- 3 disabilities can open their heart out to the wrong person, I don't take it to that
- 4 stage

Consistent with the previous extract, negative outcomes happen to other people, not Sarah. Mentioning that there are some people who are nice and others who are not helps counterbalance the possibility of becoming a victim. The danger associated with online interaction is positioned as equal to the benefits. This may function to diminish the risk attached to online interaction, placing the activity

within a neutral zone. It also highlights the potential for good relationships, and, hence, offers some justification for participating in the medium.

Sarah argues that it is the degree of engagement that is crucial to maintaining safe experiences online. As evident in lines 3-4, Sarah's strategy involves not taking "it to that stage". Presumably, taking "it to that stage" crosses a threshold over which it is no longer possible to operate safely. Like Daphne's account, Sarah's indicates a distinction between the "internet world" and offline contexts in the sense that, online, Sarah does not position herself as engaging in intimate disclosure. Not opening her "heart out" protects Sarah from being treated in an insensitive or negative way.

Also consistent with the previous account, this one precludes disability from being a factor in becoming a victim. In lines 2-3 Sarah indicates that the potential for danger happens to disabled and non-disabled alike. This neutralises the risk of harmful consequences happening solely to disabled online users, including Sarah, and may reduce the danger associated with her engagement in the medium as a person with a disability.

Both examples of the *happens to others* resource construct a strategy for managing safety online. By maintaining a distinction between online and offline worlds, in relation to the disclosure of intimate and personal details, and the development of relationships, Sarah and Daphne protect themselves from experiencing harmful consequences. This safety mechanism also functions to position participants, including people with disabilities, as responsible and competent online users, who possess the knowledge and skills required to maintain their safety. In summary, the *happens to others* resource enables people with disabilities to operate within a safe and secure subject position while participating online.

#### Stranger danger resource

While the *happens to others* resource positions others as victims of dangerous situations, the *stranger danger* resource positions others as having the potential to invoke danger. In the following extract, Bridgette highlights the degree of caution

exercised when interacting online. She is responding to a question about positive experiences online. The ellipses contained within brackets signify a contraction of my request for clarification about Bridgette's choice not to visit chatrooms.

- 1 Most of my experiences are good ... I don't visit chat rooms, I'm a little
- 2 weary! [...] Lets just say I wouldn't enter a chatroom full of strangers ... it's
- 3 the stranger danger concept ... I don't want to be part of anyones porn
- 4 fantasy... (Bridgette)

The account begins with the statement that Bridgette's online experiences are good because she does not visit chatrooms. She is aware of the potential for bad experiences and, hence, exercises caution in this regard. Bridgette elaborates on her reason for exercising caution in relation to chatrooms. Beyond the mere location, it is the other people inhabiting these places who are deemed dangerous. Chatrooms full of strangers present a risk to personal safety. There is an assumption in lines 3-4 that people who frequent chatrooms may indulge in deviant acts of fantasy and will prey on newcomers to be the victims of their pornographic activities. Bridgette is vigilant of these other users, who have the potential to create deceptive and harmful situations. By avoiding the environments strangers occupy for deviant activities, Bridgette positions herself in safety online. The account functions to warrant Bridgette's participation in the online medium, because she avoids places where others could deceive her.

Another example of the *stranger danger* resource is provided from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with a 15 year old named Janine, who responds to a question about whether she has emailed a person she has never met. Janine lives with deafness.

- 1 I don't really want to e-mail people that I don't know it's just nice to meet
- 2 them first to know what they're like you know yeah like sometimes what I've
- 3 heard like you know in the chatrooms and that they're not all your age some
- 4 people might say oh um fourteen they're really fifty I want to meet you you
- 5 know yeah I just I only e-mail people that I know yeah (Janine)

Janine talks about the danger involved in conversing with strangers online. She deploys a chatroom situation to emphasise the need to be cautious when emailing people she does not know. Consistent with the previous extract, chatrooms are constructed as environments where the potential for deception is high. There is an assumption in line 4 that other chatroom users may be there to wield deliberate

acts of deception. Janine exercises caution by only interacting with people she knows. This removes her from any risk of being deceived and enables her to occupy a safe subject position when participating online.

The last example illustrating the *stranger danger* resource focuses on the vulnerability associated with revealing a disabled identity to others, as justification for avoiding specific kinds of online interactions. Sally-Ann is responding to a question about how she feels having access to other networks of people online.

- 1 I don't really access other networks of people online. I am cautious by nature
- 2 and steer away from live two - way conversations on the net. My disability
- 3 does not allow me to type as so called normal speed. My disability being a
- 4 point of difference also makes me cautious. I accept it other people may not
- 5 do. It is a common sense safety protection thing I suppose. (Sally-Ann)

The extract identifies a compelling need to be cautious of other people online because they may be intolerant of disability. Real-time conversations reveal Sally-Ann's inability to type at "so called normal speed." This "point of difference" exposes her vulnerability as a disabled online user. There is a suggestion in lines 3-4 that other people's prejudice about disability will also jeopardise Sally-Ann's opportunity to participate online. As a result of other people's intolerance toward disability, she chooses not to engage in real-time conversations. This is considered a "common sense safety" strategy. Sally-Ann's account affords a subject position that protects and secures her vulnerability as a disabled participant. This is managed by avoiding situations that have the potential to expose her physical difference.

All three examples of the *stranger danger* resource construct a second strategy for managing safety online. By avoiding interactions where the potential for danger is high, inclusive of chatrooms full of strangers, conversations with unknown individuals, and real-time interactions, Janine, Bridgette, and Sally-Ann can engage in a subject position that protects them from potentially harmful consequences. This safety strategy may function to defend participants' engagement in a medium where the potential for harm is high.

## Personal judgement resource

This resource is organised around the idea that users possess an inner sense of knowing that enables them to judge the character of others online. Developing good judgement enables participants to engage in a subject position where they are protected from malevolent situations. The following extract is taken from an ICQ interview. Sarah is responding to a comment made by the interviewer about keeping safe online.

- 1       <Sarah> That is the burning question really! after talking to people online a  
2       few times I like to think I've got a sense of who they are and most of the time  
3       I can judge that by what we talk about

Sarah's account positions safety online as a serious matter, which she feels strongly about. The phrase, "That is the burning question really", transforms my comment about the need to maintain safety online into a very difficult question, from which there are no clear cut answers. The question Sarah constructs creates a useful rhetorical effect in which to position what follows.

Sarah responds to the question she has posed by developing a strategy that helps her gain a feeling of security in online interaction. After talking to others "online a few times", she likes "to think" that she can gain an understanding of their character. The phrase "I like to think" in line 2 shows that Sarah's ability to access an accurate reading of a person's character online is not foolproof. This acknowledges the fallibility involved in deploying personal judgement as a basis for developing trust. Sarah does, however, justify her claim to gain "a sense of who they are" by looking towards a tangible resource on which to base her judgement: namely, what is talked about in conversation. The opportunity to interact is given as a test for developing trust.

The account does some work to dispel the belief that people cannot judge the character of others with any degree of accuracy online. In contrast, Sarah's talk highlights that participants can develop strategies for evaluating others online, and, hence, protect themselves. This distances Sarah from the potential of becoming a victim of deception and enables her to operate within a safe subject position. The *personal judgement* resource is constructed in another example from

a transcript of a tape-recorded interview. Karen is responding to a question about whether being online fosters a sense of feeling more connected.

1       it's a trust there is there's lots of trust and you normally know the ones that  
2       you steer away from there's one particular person that used to call himself  
3       [name] and they change their names quite often and they will go in and stir  
4       the others up and you tend to know because you know by the words that they  
5       use so you just you don't just don't go into areas where you know that that  
6       will you know get them going (Karen)

Consistent with the previous account, Karen draws on tangible resources to judge someone's online character. "You normally know the ones" to avoid suggests there are some very clear signals that can be deployed as guidelines for identifying dubious online characters. Karen proceeds to list four behaviours in lines 2-5 that she relies on to identify potential perpetrators, and, hence, protect herself. These behaviours cover the particular name perpetrators identify under, the act of frequency in changing their names, the act of stirring-up other online users, and the words they use. She goes on to mention that participants can avoid areas where they know these perpetrators are likely to cause trouble. Karen utilises caution in this regard, which is also deployed in the *stranger danger* resource. There is an assumption that if participants are armed with knowledge about these kinds of behaviours, they can access a subject position where they can protect themselves from danger.

The opportunity to interact is deployed as a resource for developing trust online, which is also consistent with the previous account. The amount of trust Karen can access through her online interactions suggests she is able to engage in secure experiences where she is removed from deception or the threat of harm and danger. These secure experiences can be sustained by Karen's ability to rely on her own judgement in protecting herself from deception and danger. Protecting herself from danger by developing strategies to identify dubious characters, and the degree of trust engaged in online interaction, both function to (in)directly affirm Karen's online engagement.

To summarise this section, the *keeping safe* repertoire functions to allow participants a pleasant and secure engagement in the online medium. This is achieved through each of the resources, which construct participants' ability to deploy safety strategies. These strategies operate to protect participants from

harm and deception, and, hence, to maintain their wellbeing when participating online by allowing them to operate within a safe and secure subject position. Furthermore, while each resource functions to affirm the online engagement of people with disabilities, each one also highlights and acknowledges the malicious and deliberately deceptive acts other people engage in online. Ironically, some people with disabilities seem to take part in behaviours not dissimilar to these deceptive activities, which online users are compelled to protect themselves from. Hence, a concern arises surrounding how people with disabilities manage the issue of engaging in the very acts, they are so critical of others. The management of this complex situation by people with disabilities is demonstrated in the following pattern of talk identified under the *qualified deception* repertoire.

### Qualified Deception Repertoire

This repertoire is based on the idea that activities involving varying degrees of fabrication, either, via a reconstruction of details, or through a deliberate withholding of information to suggest a different presentation of self, are separate from deceptive and harmful acts. Data organised within the *qualified deception* repertoire deploys two key resources: *withholding information* and *reconstructing information*. The *withholding information* resource is built around participants' ability to choose not to disclose revealing information about their personal details. The outcomes associated with making disability information available are drawn on to justify withholding information. *Reconstructing information* is based on participants' active reconstruction of themselves and situations that are justified through specific forms of warranting. The next extract provides an example of the first of these resources.

#### Withholding information resource

This account is taken from an interview conducted on IRC with Daniel. The extract developed out of an open discussion between Daniel and I about whether people are able to present a more accomplished identity online.

- 1       <Daniel> of course, but reality soon sets in,
- 2       <Daniel> someone can pretend to be a Bill Gates,

3 <Daniel> if they can't do everything they say then they end up looking silly,  
 4 <Daniel> I've been using IRC long enough to know that anyone can pretend  
 5 to be anything they want, I've used female nicknames to see how others  
 6 (males) respond to me.  
 7 <Natilene> can you tell me about that?  
 8 <Daniel> oh boy, yes :)  
 9 <Daniel> OK  
 10 <Daniel> Gulp  
 11 <Natilene> no worries, I've interviewed male IRC users, who have talked  
 12 about doing it, although somewhat reluctantly  
 13 <Daniel> I've read lots of articles  
 14 <Daniel> about how females are very marginalised  
 15 <Daniel> and I've observed it too  
 16 <Daniel> 50 guys might be online in a chatroom  
 17 <Daniel> 2 females  
 18 <Daniel> most of them (males) are talking to the females  
 19 <Daniel> some flirting actively  
 20 <Daniel> some just chatting  
 21 <Daniel> I think it's interesting, that's all  
 22 <Natilene> ok cool..  
 23 <Natilene> um you also mentioned that people can pretend to be anything  
 24 they want online, do you have anything else to add to that?  
 25 <Daniel> if you are asking if I have ever pretended, no, but I have maximised  
 26 my anonymity  
 27 <Natilene> that sounds interesting regarding maximising on opportunities for  
 28 anonymity - can you elaborate?  
 29 <Daniel> ok...  
 30 <Daniel> I have - very deliberately - withheld information I would usually give  
 31 out,  
 32 <Daniel> things like - age, sex, sexuality, disability, race, that kind of stuff  
 33 <Natilene> right, and what made you decide to do that?  
 34 <Daniel> mainly to see how I would be responded to, see different lifestyles,  
 35 sometimes (as in disability) I just get tired of stereotypical responses.

This complex account works to exonerate Daniel from a deceptive subject position. In the first part of the account, Daniel is responding to a question about whether people appear more accomplished online. In line 1 Daniel argues that while this is possible there are limitations. These limitations are talked about in a realist context: "reality soon sets in". The construction suggests a realist philosophical standpoint, in which there is a grounded and measurable threshold, situated in a given reality, where it is no longer possible to maintain a fabricated identity. In lines 2-3, an example is illustrated with someone who pretends to be Bill Gates, but is caught out when they overstate what they can do. This initial talk indicates that deceiving others about your identity online is foolish and unsustainable.

In lines 4-5 the focus of the conversation turns towards Daniel's experience and knowledge of IRC as he claims that anyone can engage in pretence. He then goes on to qualify this using his personal experience of pretending to be something he is not as illustrated in the phrase, "I've used female nicknames", although, he claims he does this out of curiosity to find out how others, notably males, respond to him. From my request, Daniel proceeds to divulge his interest in fabricating gender, although, with obvious reluctance as indicated in lines 8 and 10, by "oh boy" and "Gulp".

Daniel draws on the marginalisation of females online and the different ways males interact with females as a point of interest. This interest has come from having read lots of articles written on the subject, from which the findings can be backed up by his own observations. This constructs a very scholarly and scientific account of Daniel's reasons for presenting as female, which functions to remove him from any other motivations and, hence, a deviant subject position. The explanation ends in line 21 with, "I think it's interesting, that's all", which indicates that there are no other reasons for fabricating his identity. Daniel's engagement with alternate identities is positioned within an experimental framework in which he is merely exploring new possibilities. (In a later section of Daniel's account, identity exploration extends to accessing possibilities to engage in an identity removed from disability.) It is acknowledged here, that, although this identity fabrication provides an example of the *reconstructing information* resource, which follows in the next section, it is juxtaposed with an example of the *withholding information* resource. An understanding of the complexity surrounding the *withholding information* resource in this dialogue is enhanced by the preceding discursive events.

The third section of Daniel's account works to undo the admission of deliberate deception mentioned at the beginning and, hence, any potential for Daniel being positioned as deviant. This section of Daniel's account also works to illustrate the beneficial opportunities resulting from engaging in a different subjectivity. In line 25, Daniel states that he has never pretended, which I interpret to mean that he has never presented a fabricated identity, even though, earlier, he indicated assuming a female identity. Daniel qualifies his actions by talking about using the medium purely as a means to maximise its capacity for creating anonymity, which requires identity details to be withheld. This functions to remove Daniel from

engaging in deceptive activities and, hence, a deviant subject position. Instead, he is merely utilising the online resources available. Daniel deploys an illustrative list of identity details in line 32, which he can experimentally conceal. His gender (or “sex”) is now positioned as one among several he conceals, thereby, undermining the suggestion that he withholds information for the purpose of switching gender, which was present in the initial dialogue.

In the final turn, lines 34-35, Daniel exonerates himself further from deceptive motivations for withholding information and, hence, a deviant subject position by deploying the stigma linked with his disabled identity as legitimisation for concealing personal details. This overlaps with the *choice to disclose* repertoire in which participants draw on the prejudice linked to disabled identities as justification for practising non-disclosure online. Daniel’s decision to deliberately withhold information about his disability is entirely justified because of the negative reactions he receives when his disability is accessible to others’ perceptual fields, as indicated by the phrase, “sometimes (as in disability) I just get tired of stereotypical responses.” Being able to withhold details about his disability allows Daniel to access another subjectivity, as well as other identities, which he values. This positions his motivation for deliberately concealing identity details outside the realm of deceptive and harmful acts in order to protect his own psychological wellbeing and access a more enjoyable online experience. The benefits of engaging in an online identity removed from disability are also demonstrated in the next example as Shaun talks about the advantages of being online.

- 1 I think just being able to partake in a forum where disability (in terms of
- 2 access to the environment) is just great. For example, when I email people,
- 3 they don't know that I type with my feet so they're not distracted by that rather
- 4 than what I have to say. (Shaun)

Shaun mentions the benefits of operating within a disabled subjectivity when participating online. The medium is cast as being facilitative of communication that is free of distractions resulting from a disabled identity being visually accessible. The medium’s ability to withhold information about disability allows Shaun to be evaluated purely on the context of his words, rather than on how he operates the keyboard. This also overlaps with the *uncontaminated judgement* resource embedded in the *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* repertoire in which removing the interference of disability enables people with disabilities to be judged

purely on the content of their expression. I read Shaun's description of disability, "in terms of access to the environment", in lines 1-2, as suggesting that participating online with a disability is great because it does not influence interaction.

Each of the extracts presented under the *withholding information* resource demonstrates how people with disabilities can operate outside the prejudice of disabled identities. Extracts supporting the second resource identified under the *qualified deception* repertoire follow.

### Reconstructing information resource

In this resource participants actively reconstruct themselves and situations. Engaging in this deception is justified through specific forms of legitimisation. The extract below, which is also deployed in the *relevance resource* under the *choice to disclose* repertoire, highlights the use of deception when engaging in online interactions with strangers.

- 1 It is nice to be able to sit in the privacy of my own home, go on-line &
- 2 communicate with a stranger .... if my typing speed is queried I say I am new
- 3 at this! On-line my disability is HIDDEN if I choose it to be. Why should I
- 4 reveal such personal info when there is no need to? (Bridgette)

Bridgette is prepared to engage in deception to avoid revealing personal information about her disability. This is apparent when she responds to questions about typing speed in relation to being a novice online as indicated in lines 2-3. Presumably, this incorporates the suggestion that she is still learning to type, as opposed to exposing her disability, and, hence, a disabled subject position, as the reason for her slow typing speed. This act of deception is legitimised because the online environment allows Bridgette to choose whether to expose a disabled identity. Hence, reconstructing her personal details enables Bridgette to exercise that right of choice. In addition, a minor act of deception may be justified because Bridgette is communicating with a stranger. Consequently, engaging in deception maintains her privacy as she converses from home.

The following extract, again, illustrates the way reconstructing information is managed. The example is drawn from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview.

Karen is talking about the support generated from a chatroom for people experiencing a chronic illness.

- 1 we'll fool around like I said to him I just get my jeep out of the backyard and
- 2 [name] will go can I can I can I come where's this jeep you're hiding in our
- 3 backyard and I just you know it was just a big you know they take the
- 4 monotonous out of it and and it does help to ease the pain because
- 5 everyone's fooling around but we're very honest towards each other (Karen)

The phrase, “we'll fool around”, suggests that the situation Karen describes involves a playful engagement, which happens in the context of this chatroom. The act of reconstruction provides an outlet for dealing with the monotony and pain of living with disability. Yet, the pretence is qualified in line 5 as everyone is “very honest towards each other”. While deception is being actively constructed online, participants are able to separate themselves from the negative subject position associated with this kind of activity by positioning their behaviour within a relationship based on honesty. This functions to absolve Karen and her associates from negative evaluations. The creative reconstruction of events is positioned as ethical and justified because it is occurring within the context of having fun and playing around, indicating that this kind of activity creates a legitimate contextual space for engaging in fantasy while online.

### Summary and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates how people with disabilities are managing the dilemma of engaging in a social space where there is potential for outcomes of empowerment and oppression. On the one hand, the *keeping safe* repertoire enables participants to construct, and, hence, access pleasant online experiences by providing strategies, which position participants as being protected from harmful and deceptive acts. Participants can acknowledge the risks involved in online interaction without exposing their vulnerability. Identifying and deploying strategies for ensuring personal safety enhances participants' online integrity. Simultaneously, the *qualified deception* repertoire functions to extend participants' ability to operate beyond a *keeping safe* repertoire, where they can freely explore subjectivities removed from disabled identities. The justifications deployed to manage participants' engagement in acts of deception exonerate them from harmful evaluations.

The *happens to others* resource, identified in the *keeping safe* repertoire, is based on the notion that harmful outcomes happen to those who assume a benevolent online environment. Participants expose their vulnerability when assuming they can manage online interactions in a similar way to relationships that occur in offline contexts. By drawing a conceptual line between on- and offline interactions, thereby, maintaining their exclusivity, participants construct a strategy for protecting their personal safety online, and, thereby, create a safe and secure subject position while engaging in online interaction.

The *stranger danger* resource constructs another strategy for people with disabilities to be safely positioned online. In contrast to the previous resource, which positions others as victims of dangerous situations, the *stranger danger* resource positions others as having the potential to invoke danger. This resource functions to affirm participation in a medium where the potential for harm is high. This is achieved by avoiding situations where participants could expose a vulnerable subject position, which includes being deceived and presenting a disabled identity to others.

The final resource identified in the *keeping safe* repertoire is categorised as *personal judgement*. It operates by utilising an opportunity to interact, as a test for developing trust in relationships with other online users. This opportunity to interact brings forth tangible resources for evaluating the character of others. As a result, participants retain their safety as well as an ability to position themselves as skilled in detecting deceptive users. This presents an interesting paradox with the *stranger danger* resource where interactions are positioned as the site of potentially harmful outcomes and, hence, are to be avoided to retain participants' safety. Instead, the *personal judgement* resource moves participants beyond the limitations of avoiding harmful interactions by allowing them to operate online with additional skills for scrutinising others in potentially deceptive situations.

Each of these resources constructs a strategy for people with disabilities to safely operate within a context where there is potential for harm and deception by enabling them to occupy a safe and secure subject position. Each strategy also helps participants manage the dilemma of engaging in a medium where there is potential for positive and negative consequences. The strategies identified work to protect and separate participants from the malevolent activities that exist online.

Together, these strategies function to retain the integrity of people with disabilities when choosing to engage in online interactions. Ironically, however, the *qualified deception* repertoire also enables participants to further manage the dilemma surrounding online participation without exposing their vulnerability as disabled people, or associating themselves with malevolent intentions.

The *withholding information* resource embedded in the *qualified deception* repertoire is organised around participants' choice not to disclose revealing information about their identity. This allows participants to protect themselves from the prejudice and stereotyping, which they are susceptible to when operating within a disabled identity in society. The prejudice associated with disability, which negatively influences interactions, is deployed as justification for withholding information about a disabled identity online. This functions to distinguish people with disabilities from those who utilise the medium to withhold information for malevolent purposes.

The *reconstructing information* resource provides another opportunity for participants to manage the dilemma of engaging in a medium where there is potential for positive and negative outcomes. In this resource, participants deliberately construct themselves and situations in ways that have no basis beyond online interaction. This is entirely justified because of the negative effects of occupying a disabled subject position. For instance, Bridgette highlights her vulnerability, when exposing her disability to a stranger, as justification for a minor act of deception. Karen draws on the frustrations of operating within a disabled subjectivity as reason for constructing a fictitious event. In both cases, the *reconstructing information* resource allows participants to engage in deceptive activities, which are evaluated unfavourably in the *keeping safe* repertoire without incurring the penalties associated with negative evaluations.

The resources identified under the qualified deception repertoire allow people with disabilities to fully utilise the medium, while distancing themselves from a deviant subject position. By operating within this repertoire, participants are also able to extend their online engagement beyond the restrictions and limitations of a *keeping safe* repertoire. This leads people with disabilities to access a wider range of subjectivities and identities not available in other contexts. Deploying the deceptive attributes of the medium for social empowerment demonstrates how

people with disabilities are successfully managing the dilemma of online participation, where oppressive and empowering outcomes are possible.

The medium's capacity to problematise traditional notions of reality is highlighted in different ways throughout participants' interview data. For instance, much of participants' talk was constructed around issues of being able to accurately judge the integrity of online users and the activities these users choose to engage in. Paradoxically, the integrity of online users with disabilities is retained through each of the resources identified under the *keeping safe* repertoire. The keeping safe resources construct participants as responsible and competent online users who are skilled in detecting and protecting themselves from the deceptive pitfalls of online interaction. Interestingly, the integrity of people with disabilities is sustained even further when they appear to engage in the very behaviours about which they are so vigilant and critical. This is evident in the *qualified deception* repertoire where participants deliberately construct themselves and situations in ways that have no reality beyond the online context, yet, are entirely justified because they protect people with disabilities from stereotyped judgements, which reflect a disabled subjectivity. Each repertoire enables people with disabilities to sustain the integrity of their character, while operating under different philosophical standards for constructing reality.

In the case of the *keeping safe* repertoire, participants' preserved a "realist" belief in maintaining a strict correspondence between the management of identity within on- and offline contexts. Support for this belief may be indicated by participants' focus on ascertaining a realist dimension for constructing relationships and the "true" character of online users. Participants' discourse also reflected a need to protect and disassociate themselves from interactions that had no basis beyond an online context. Under a *keeping safe* repertoire, participants demonstrated a strong desire to construct a realist benchmark for judging online behaviour and for limiting the extent of their online participation. Jordan's (1999) reflections on Sanford's behaviour as a real life, male, psychiatrist (mentioned in Chapter One), who adopted the identity of Julie on a computer conferencing system in the 80s (Van Gelder, 1991), pose serious questions about the danger of retaining a one-to-one correspondence between real life and online identities. Indeed, many of the women who had experienced intense relationships with Julie felt deeply betrayed when the "true" nature of Julie's identity was brought to light.

In contrast, the philosophical orientation apparent in the *qualified deception* repertoire moves away from a realist standpoint, thereby, avoiding the ethical dilemmas associated with a realist construction of knowledge. This repertoire transgresses the strict correspondence between constructing a realist standard for managing on- and offline events. Instead, justification for participants' actions turns toward a relativist framework in which the online medium is evaluated according to its ability to operate within an entirely different social context for constructing a person's subjectivity. This context is removed from the constraints of physical reality, which limit the kinds of subjectivities and identities available to people with disabilities. Operating within a relativist framework enables people with disabilities to access alternative subjectivities, which extend beyond disabled identities.

The contrast between realist and relativist frameworks used for operating within the online medium present some interesting implications for those researching online communities. For instance, it may be necessary to consider the way participants' conceptualise online activities, and whether these constructions are similar to, or independent of a realist framework. Accordingly, either outcome will impact on the way participants conceptualise trust and honesty and the degree of importance, or irrelevance placed on these issues in online interaction. Further, the kinds of rules governing behaviour in many online communities may also be influenced by the realist or relativist standpoints held by that community, and or those in authority.

In addition to discussing the discursive construction of resources, it is worth noting that the categorisation of extracts by gender may conform to differences reported in the literature investigating gender issues online (Bowker, 2000, 2001; Bruckman, 1996b; McCormick & Leonard, 1996; Spender, 1995). The exclusively female representation for extracts categorised under the *keeping safe* repertoire raises the question of whether disabled women are more likely to occupy vulnerable subject positions online, which require them to construct mechanisms to avoid harm, compared to their male counterparts. Conversely, the comparatively high proportion of male extracts positioned under the *qualified deception* repertoire may strike a similarity with online research carried out by Bowker, Bruckman, McCormick and Leonard, and Spender, indicating that men are more willing to operate outside conventional identity standards. The potential for inequity illustrated through the gender of the extracts' authors may highlight the

prevalence of structural hegemonies operating online. Technology is shaped by social, political, and economic structures. As many researchers have pointed out, computer technologies are socially constructed within a gendered framework that advantages men's ways of knowing and understanding the world (Edwards, 1990; Gersch, 1998; Perry & Greber, 1990; Turkle & Papert, 1990).

In conclusion, the *keeping safe* and *qualified deception* repertoires, together, enable people with disabilities to successfully manage the dilemma of participating in a medium, where there is potential for substantial self-gain as well as harm. People with disabilities manage this dilemma by operating within two diverse subject positions. The *keeping safe* repertoire allows people with disabilities to access pleasant and secure experiences through strategies that construct participants as being safe from harmful and deceptive acts. These function to protect participants' vulnerability as online users as well as affirm their engagement in a potentially insecure and deceptive space, thereby, maintaining participants' online integrity. On the other hand, the *qualified deception* repertoire allows participants to manage the deceptive features of the medium for empowering outcomes. Participants can extend their engagement beyond the restrictions and limitations of a *keeping safe* repertoire by gaining full access to the constructive capabilities of the medium. The vulnerability associated with exposing a disabled identity justifies participants' actions. This allows people with disabilities to freely access subjectivities outside disabled identities, without tarnishing their integrity as online users. The final analysis chapter follows, which looks at the negative experiences encountered by participants with disabilities online.

## Chapter Nine: Disabling Differentials

*Here, I seek to demonstrate how the disabling differentials repertoire operates in participants' interview data. Surrounding a further discursive pattern generated at a broad level within the interviews was the idea of people with disabilities facing a number of barriers online. Consequently, this pattern aims to bring together and make sense of the negative and disabling subject positions experienced by people with disabilities online. For the purpose of analysis, these kinds of constructions became categorised in terms of a broadly defined disabling differentials repertoire. Embedded within this repertoire is the idea that possessing a disability positions participants at a definite disadvantage compared with their non-disabled peers. This creates inequalities between users according to their physical or sensory ability, leading to disability related discrimination across interpersonal, physical, and structural dimensions. The disabling differentials repertoire is constructed around four key discursive resources: negative reactions, exclusion, gatekeeping, and disability costs.*

### Negative reactions resource

This first resource is organised around the notion that once disability is disclosed in conversation with non-disabled others, an abrupt and socially unpleasant change occurs. This may constitute a discontinuation of association with the person with a disability, or, in other cases, a significantly reduced expression of friendliness. These kinds of negative reactions lead to the differential treatment of people with disabilities online, according to whether or not they disclose disability. This particular resource interconnects with the *choice to disclose* repertoire, which justifies non-disclosure of disability because of the prejudiced reactions received when disabled identities are made available.

The first extract providing an example of the *negative reactions* resource comes in response to a question about a negative experience encountered when disclosing disability online. The interview was conducted on IRC with Daniel.

- 1 <Daniel> nothing major I suppose, more that it is fairly consistant,
- 2 <Daniel> my contact being polite but the entire context of the conversation
- 3 changes

4 <Daniel> from talking as peers (even as a superior to a computer novice) to a  
5 very...  
6 <Daniel> 'civil' conversation

Daniel's account demonstrates that once a disabled identity is made available, he is treated differently. In lines 2-3, despite Daniel's efforts to be "polite" as opposed to being in some way impolite, and, therefore, implying a less welcoming environment for interaction, a change occurs when he mentions disability. This change covers the "entire context of the conversation", demonstrating that it is extensive and distinguishable as the "entire" conversational event alters. A construction of what constitutes the change follows in lines 4-5. The conversation moves from "talking as peers" "to a very 'civil' conversation". Talking amongst peers indicates a level of equality between Daniel and, presumably, a non-disabled user. Conversely, "a very ... 'civil' conversation" implies a forced sense of politeness in which strict laws of courtesy are followed, indicating a less friendly, welcoming, open, and more formalised interaction. The implied meaning of "civil" also conveys a sense of regression in the development of the relationship, as the other person returns to initial stages of interaction where relational disclosure is minimal, if at all existent. All this contrasts with the "polite" and, presumably, friendly, congenial, and less formal manner of contact Daniel aims to achieve.

In line 1, the construction that it is "nothing major" suggests this type of reaction is frequent enough for Daniel to develop a degree of tolerance over as part and parcel of others' constructions of disability online. Indeed, this is not a one-off incident, but is typical when Daniel discloses disability, which is indicated by the deployment of "it is fairly consistent". In line 4, even in cases when Daniel has greater social status in which he positions himself "as a superior" in relation "to a novice", negative reactions persist.

Daniel's account demonstrates how acknowledging a disabled identity online negatively impacts on the way a person is treated. The cool reception Daniel receives once a disabled identity is made available strongly suggests that prejudice towards disability is involved, which serves to situate Daniel within a disabled subject position and all the negative judgements this encompasses. Daniel's experience challenges the belief that prejudice and discrimination are removed online. Instead, these practices remain hidden until they are invoked by relevant information.

A second example of the *negative reactions* resource occurs in an extract from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with Janine. She is responding to a question about what kinds of responses she receives online when not disclosing being deaf.

- 1       it's just the same like normal normal normal normal they don't really know
- 2       they'll just email back yeah well it's easier that way because then they start
- 3       being disinterested and they won't email me (Janine)

This account is organised around the benefits of not disclosing disability online, which outweigh the disadvantages experienced when a disabled identity is made apparent. “It’s just the same” in line 1 infers that not mentioning disability enables Janine to be treated the “same” as others who are, presumably, without disability, or are not deaf, which is accentuated through reference to “normal”. Indeed, this permits Janine to engage in a “normal”, non-disabled, subject position. The three consecutive repetitions of “normal” strongly indicate that Janine bestows a great deal of significance in the opportunity to be treated “normal”, such that not being positioned in this way may be deduced to be the case in other situations. The accentuation of normality conveys that not disclosing a disabled identity functions to release Janine from a set of practices, which may create a less satisfactory and abnormal response when disability is made apparent. Hence, concealing disability enables Janine to operate within a normal subjectivity. This overlaps with the *normality* resource embedded in the *choice to disclose* repertoire in which features of the online medium invoke a standard assumption of normality where people with disabilities can be positioned outside disabled identities.

Janine’s account also functions to justify non-disclosure of disability because it is “easier” for Janine to engage in interaction and gain more lasting social investment from others. There is a sense that withholding information about a disabled identity leads to more sociable and fruitful outcomes because interactants respond to her. When Janine discloses disability, she experiences a lack of interest from others who fail to engage in further interaction. This construction demonstrates the negative response Janine receives when disability is mentioned, which positions her within a disabled subjectivity involving the preclusion of social engagement.

Sarah’s account provides a third example of the *negative reactions* resource. Sarah is responding to a question regarding the importance of informing others

about her disability online. The extract comes from an interview initially conducted on ICQ, but was later transferred to email due to the difficulty in co-ordinating synchronisation in real-time required for an ICQ interview. Subsequently, the following extract, which happens to appear in a later section of the interview, was gathered via email.

- 1        People I chat to a lot I generally tell them I have a disability but I don't tell  
2        them right a way. I have before and never heard from them again. The  
3        online experience is similar to being offline cause some people really do have  
4        a problem but others are ok. (Sarah)

Akin with the previous account, this is organised around the benefits of not disclosing (in the first instance) a disabled identity online. Sarah follows a general rule of thumb in which she chooses not to disclose disability, immediately, to those she chats with “a lot”. In past cases, where Sarah has informed someone “right a way”, she has “never heard from them again.” This justifies her delay in disclosure because the delay permits opportunities for developing online connections prior to the formation of negative reactions about a disabled identity. Indeed, this allows Janine to develop social relations before being assigned a disabled subject position and the negative connotations this brings. The extreme case formulation “never” in line 2 serves to accentuate the necessity for initial non-disclosure, if Sarah is to acquire regular interaction online. This is inclusive of those she can associate with on many instances, as indicated by the deployment of “a lot”. The constructions in lines 1 and 2 demonstrate how disclosure needs to be managed carefully online for social interaction to last.

As indicated in lines 3-4, the differential treatment Sarah experiences “is similar to” that available offline where there are those who “have a problem” when conversing with someone possessing a disability and, equally, there exist those who are more tolerant and accepting. This equalisation among incidents of disability aversion across mediums positions online discrimination in no more (or less) of a negative light than its offline counterpart. Subsequently, constructing others as responsible for discrimination may function to position the online medium as non-partisan in the process, since these negative experiences occur because of others’ “problem[s]” constructed around a disabled identity. Nevertheless, the online medium does allow participants more control over the kinds of subject positions they are assigned in interaction with others, which are based on popular

constructions surrounding particular social identities, including disability, because participants have power over what identities they make available online.

In summarising this resource, having a disability and disclosing this identity positions people within a socially undesirable subject position online, creating serious disadvantages. This jeopardises any possibility of sustaining social interaction. However, non-disclosure enables people with disabilities to operate outside a disabled subjectivity and the socially discriminating outcomes this brings, leading to greater opportunities for lasting social interaction. The negative outcomes constructed around disabled subject positions warrant the careful management of disclosing a disabled identity.

### Exclusion resource

While the first resource is constructed around discrimination at an interpersonal level, the second focuses on the disabling differentials faced at a mechanical and operational level. The *exclusion* resource is organised around physical access barriers encountered by people with disabilities as they navigate their way around the online medium. These accounts begin with an extract from an interview conducted on ICQ as Daniel responds to a question about whether there are any particular disadvantages for people with disabilities online.

- 1 <Daniel> yip, it usually takes some form of ability to use the net (intellectual
- 2 or physical), that often excludes various disabilities
- 3 < Daniel > i.e.
- 4 < Daniel > a blind person often cannot access all the features of the net that
- 5 sighted users have.

Daniel begins by affirming there are particular disadvantages for people with disabilities online and qualifies this. Accordingly, in most cases, “some form of ability” is required to operate online, such as an “intellectual or physical” ability. This form of ability “excludes various disabilities”, conveying the exclusion of various kinds of operating abilities used by people with disabilities. The exclusionary nature of this process occurs “often”.

An example of a person with a sensory disability, blindness, is drawn on to demonstrate the diverse nature of barriers faced online. People embodying this

disabled subject position are not able to “access” the same number of online “features” as their sighted counterparts. This construction highlights the sense of deprivation experienced by users with disabilities as a result of technical and operational forms of discrimination. Daniel’s account positions people with disabilities as powerless over their exclusion from accessing and, therefore, participating in the online medium as they are situated within a disabled subjectivity.

Another extract demonstrating the *exclusion* resource is provided as Patrick responds to a question about whether having a disability makes any difference online. This extract comes from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview.

- 1       okay um yes um in the sense that um um bli blind people have the same
- 2       problems online that a wheelchair user has in um the built environment um
- 3       blind people need what I like to think of as curve cuts on the information
- 4       superhighway um and the results of not having accessible a an accessible
- 5       environment just is likely to stop you dead in your tracks as they are if you’re
- 6       a wheelchair user and you can’t get up the steps into that building ah and I
- 7       guess that’s the first reaction I have when when you ask if having a disability
- 8       makes a difference (Patrick)

The account is organised around a poignant analogy between wheelchair users’ lack of access in the offline environment and blind users’ experience online. In line 1, Patrick affirms that having a disability online does make a difference, with specific reference to “blind people”. Constructing the problems wheelchair users face in accessing the “built environment” and the obstacles blind people encounter as “the same” online helps consolidate the robust and concrete nature surrounding the barriers experienced by blind users. This functions to sustain the disabled subject position of people with disabilities online. The proceeding events in Patrick’s account work to justify the similarity in experiences.

In lines 3-4, Patrick argues that for blind people to access the online medium equitably, they require “curve cuts”, conveying a sense of physical pathways for online access where alternative routes are necessary to bypass difficult areas. This also constructs an analogy with the physical access barriers experienced by wheelchair users offline. Deployment of a “highway” inferred in the popular metaphor, “information superhighway”, emphasises a straight and fast-paced route for travelling online. This may not be conducive to blind users’ access needs.

Indeed, without the “curve cuts” constructed in line 3, the online medium is inaccessible to the point of stopping blind people “dead” in their “tracks”. This creates instant exclusion if blind people’s needs are not met. Constructing the word “dead” creates a profound sense of discontinuation and, hence, (ultimate) exclusion from online experience because it dramatically halts the ability to move through the information superhighway. Additionally, the construction portrays a complete sense of disconnection from the medium. The likelihood of this outcome happening online is “just” the same as the likelihood of a wheelchair user not being able to negotiate steps offline. The analogy highlights the severe and enduring nature of the barriers excluding blind people from accessing the online medium. It also warrants the need for “curve cuts” if blind users are to participate online. Patrick’s account locates people with disabilities within a disabled subject position where disability precludes participation.

In a further extract demonstrating the *exclusion* resource, a participant called Roger who lives with deafness also responds to a question about whether having a disability makes any difference online. This interview was conducted face-to-face with the extract coming from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview.

- 1 the high literacy rate it’s hard to understand you have to check the English
- 2 and I think that’s still a problem for deaf people whether or not you actually
- 3 understand the English but most deaf people they link to deaf rooms deaf
- 4 newsgroups news bulletins in the deaf world web that’s got that concept of
- 5 you know they’ve got the same experiences and it’s all linked so it’s easier
- 6 for them to understand but something outside is quite hard to read (Roger)

The “high” degree of “literacy” required to operate within the online medium is deemed as the factor precluding deaf people’s full participation. Hardship constitutes deaf people’s online experience because of the sheer difficulty in trying to “understand the English”. For instance, there is a need for participants to go back and “check the English” in an attempt to access its meaning. I interpret the construction in lines 2-3 to indicate that irrespective of whether a deaf person has a good grasp of English and can understand the English language, the “high literacy rate” remains a barrier to online access. This situates deaf users within a disabled subject position where they are powerless over their ability to fully access the online medium. The medium’s incapacity to meet the needs of all users produces this inequity in access and, thus, participation.

To deal with this pervasive level of exclusion, a majority of deaf users find solace in associating with “deaf [chat]rooms”, “newsgroups”, and “news bulletins”, which are all contained within the “deaf world web”. These environments create a shared understanding of experience with other deaf users. In connection with the *finding like minds* resource in the *participating in the world* repertoire, a similarity in meaning becomes apparent with respect to accessing the “same experiences”, offering deaf users a sense of security and belonging. This is inaccessible elsewhere online. Roger mentions that these deaf-oriented environments are “linked”, which indicates they are also easily accessible from a structural perspective for deaf users. In lines 5-6, justification for limiting online access to the “deaf world web” and its related sites is evident in the construction that information located there “is easier” “to understand”.

In the final turn of events, we are reminded again of the construction surrounding the dominance of English, which creates a barrier of exclusion for deaf users, situating them within a disabled subject position online. By merely operating within a different language structure, Roger’s account highlights enormous and profound barriers faced by deaf people online. The whole deployment of events functions to validate deaf users’ lack of participation outside the deaf world web. This positions deaf users’ online participation as inhibited and severely restricts the capacity of their online experience.

The second resource embedded in the *disabling differentials* repertoire operates by drawing on external barriers to online participation embedded in the medium. This locates people with disabilities within a disabled subject position where they are powerless over their ability to access full participation. This functions to circumvent the online experience of people with disabilities.

#### Gatekeeping resource

This third resource is organised around the barriers to online access faced by people with disabilities as a result of being dependent on other structures, systems, and people. The *gatekeeping* resource moves away from the technical impediments encountered in the *exclusion* resource and focuses on the infrastructural policies and decisions made by others. These determine whether

people with disabilities gain online access. The first extract demonstrating the *gatekeeping* resource comes after several follow-up comments I made in relation to whether the government should subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities. The extract occurs in a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with Patrick.

1       the people who make these decisions um often have no idea of how it is to  
2       be deprived of such essential information um I used to work for the  
3       association for a number of years and um last year was put onto a project  
4       designing a technology training service for blind people and because the ah  
5       instructors they have at the moment are not you know are not appropriately  
6       qualified and really don't know what they're doing and I was given the  
7       mission of putting together the ideal training establishment how what what  
8       needed to happen for blind people to get effective access to the internet and I  
9       designed a programme that would cost just under a million dollars annually to  
10      run um when you consider that they spend two point six million dollars on  
11      one programme and a lot more on another it's not a large sum of money  
12      when you consider how many people it would help I mean we're not just  
13      talking about young computer geeks we're talking about perhaps a seventy  
14      or eighty year old who has gone blind later in life absolutely distraught  
15      because they can't read their their dominion anymore in the mornings we can  
16      give them that dominion back if they have the tools and the training um and  
17      um basically the association said well look it's too expensive and and the fact  
18      that they would just make an in intuitive instinctive reaction and rule it out just  
19      demonstrates how how small minded how totally um lacking in understanding  
20      they are of the problem of lack of access to information that we face [...] and  
21      through our inaction whether it be society or the association or the  
22      government we're all guilty of collaborating in um a denial of people to  
23      maximise their full potential (Patrick)

Patrick's account is organised around the inability of people with disabilities to access the online medium because of others' decisions. It begins with the claim that those who carry out the decisions for people with disabilities are ignorant of "how it is to be deprived" of information. "Deprived" evokes an emotive response towards the situation of people with disabilities, constructing injustice over their lack of access. The sense of injustice is made more poignant through the object of deprivation being "such essential information", which moves beyond deprivation to the forfeiture of highly necessary information. This reinforces the enormity of what people with disabilities are being deprived of, which, in turn, strengthens the blameworthy position of others making "these decisions". A substantial part of the remaining account justifies Patrick's claim, casting censure and blame over the decision-makers' actions.

In line 2, Patrick draws on a narrative of his experience with an organisation he once worked for. The narrative is constructed to illustrate the incompetent and unjust actions exercised by the organisation over blind people. This brings together strong evidence for condemning the organisation. At the same time, the organisation's failure to adequately meet the needs of blind users functions to position Patrick, a blind client of the organisation, as competent and concerned about blind people's needs.

In lines 3-4, we are informed that Patrick was employed as project designer for a "technology training service for blind people". Patrick's involvement is constructed as a result of the inadequacy of the "instructors" who "are not appropriately qualified". "They [...] really don't know what they're doing" creates a strong impression that these instructors are incapable of their job. This also positions Patrick, the person making this judgement, as someone who actually has the capacity and competence to identify their errors and the correct approach required.

Patrick's skill is reinforced by being the recipient of a "mission". This alone suggests something of great proportions has been bestowed on Patrick because of his extensive expertise in contrast to others' incompetence. The object required to demonstrate Patrick's expertise comes to fruition with regard to designing the "ideal training establishment" to enable blind people to gain "effective" online access. This sets up extremely high expectations surrounding Patrick's task. The request for his design to be "ideal" indicates the product must fulfil the ultimate of standards by meeting the requirements of all clients. The design must also conform to a standard of effectiveness, creating an expectation that it must actually work and be practically achievable. Hence, Patrick has been given a very difficult and complex task.

Lines 8-9 indicate that Patrick manages to complete the task by having "designed a programme", which positions him as highly skilled and competent. More than this, Patrick has produced a system requiring "just under a million dollars annually to run". The amount needed for the system to function is commensurate with the magnitude of Patrick's task and, thereby, his accomplishment, reinforcing his expertise and skill. At the same time, "just under" may soften the impact of the high financial amount required. The enormity of the cost surrounding Patrick's

programme is juxtaposed with the much greater expenditure of two other programmes, of which one is more than double and closer to triple the cost of Patrick's. This functions to moderate, relativise, and justify the magnitude of money necessary for Patrick's design, which may validate its cost, as evident in the proceeding events.

In lines 11-12, Patrick justifies the high cost of his programme, asserting that "it's not a large sum of money when you consider how many people it would help". Patrick draws on two categories to support this argument. In addition to "computer geeks", an obvious user category interested in accessing online technology, "seventy or eighty year old[s]" are given reference, which broadens the programme's application to the ageing population. This older group also incorporates another category of blind people who develop their disability "later in life". Therefore, training in the online medium has wide application within a community of blind people and the population at large, creating strong validation for Patrick's programme.

The troubled and tormented result of being unable to access daily information, as indicated in lines 14-15 by those "absolutely distraught" at not being able to access The Dominion newspaper, can be resolved via the online training programme. "Absolutely distraught" has high emotive value, which positions the need for access and training at a premium for blind people. Patrick draws on the construction that access to a newspaper can be resurrected for people, despite their lack of sight, providing they have training and the tools to operate online. Such a construction has a poignant and profound effect by demonstrating the online medium's impact on blind people's quality of life, enhancing the rationality for training blind people in the online medium. These highly positive outcomes create a dramatic impact from which to present the organisation's negative response, which inhibits blind people's online participation.

Patrick's justification for creating an online training programme functions to undermine the organisation's "too expensive" argument in line 17 against implementation. Firstly, Patrick challenges their argument with respect to the greater cost incurred by other programmes already implemented by the organisation, in addition to the life changing impact of his programme. Grave disapproval and censure are directed at the organisation's decision not to proceed

with his programme. Injustice is portrayed in the organisation's "instinctive reaction", indicating the decision was made without consideration of or consultation with blind people. Such instinctive inaction towards a group highlights the barriers faced by blind people as a result of others' naive (mis)conceptions. This serves to position Patrick and other blind people as highly experienced and knowledgeable. In contrast, the extreme ignorance, pontificating, and obstinance of the decision-makers is evident in the construction of "small mindedness", highlighting the ill-informed and unjustifiable nature of the organisation's actions. At the same time, the organisation's inaction functions to justify Patrick's anger, frustration, and censure. These events demonstrate how online access is unfairly gatekept by others' (poorly managed) decisions, which actually have the power to control whether or not people with disabilities get online. This serves to sustain blind people's disabled subject position by permitting others' governingship over people's online access rights.

Blatant inaction that creates discrimination and sustains people with disabilities disabling subjectivity is strongly echoed in the final part of the account. In lines 21-23, Patrick lays blame on individuals, systems, and structures external to people with disabilities as the cause of people's incapacity to access their full potential. This functions to hold others responsible for blind people's lack of access and full participation in society, while also positioning blind people as powerless victims of others' decisions. In summary, Patrick's account demonstrates how other people and organisations have ultimate control over blind people's online experiences by gatekeeping their access to resources.

Another example of the *gatekeeping* resource comes from an online interview with David as he responds to a general question about his first experience in getting connected.

- 1 I have made two attempts to get on-line. The first was about five years ago. I
- 2 work from home, so have to use a modem to link up with my work place at
- 3 the Institute. An obliging man from Computer Services came around to my
- 4 place and set up the system. However, it never worked properly - I just
- 5 wanted it for email - and soon collapsed altogether. This was partly because
- 6 the Institute changed its system, I think. I gave up at that point and didn't use
- 7 email for another three or four years.
- 8

9        However, last year (1999) I got a new computer with Windows NT and had a  
10        jaws speech synthesis programme installed. I still had a terrible job getting  
11        email up and running, and linking up with the internet.  
12  
13        There were two problems. The first was that there is nobody who takes  
14        responsibility for actually teaching blind people how to use the sophisticated  
15        new technology at their disposal. For those in work, government will pay for  
16        Jaws, but noone is around who can explain how to use it in conjunction with  
17        Windows, nor how to interface with email and the internet. I spent several  
18        frustrating months just trying to figure out the basics, gleaning bits and pieces  
19        of necessary information from different people at different times.  
20  
21        My second problem relates to the extreme unhelpfulness, even rudeness, of  
22        the current personnel in Computer Services, particularly its head. I requested  
23        help to get my home system interfacing with the institution. They flatly  
24        refused to provide any assistance, saying it was their policy not to service  
25        staff who were working at home. I explained my exceptional circumstances,  
26        but was told that I should contact the Foundation for the Blind. This was  
27        highly offensive, and in all events totally beside the point, since my problem  
28        was linking up with the Institute, something about which the Foundation knew  
29        nothing, and which could only be done by the people in Computer Services.  
30        (David)

This account is organised around a narrative of David's experience in gaining eventual online access, determined largely by others' passing of judgement and the (non-)co-operation of systems and structures external to him. The narrative begins with David having made "two attempts to get on-line", which indicates that despite past efforts there has been a significant lack of success, evident in the deployment of more than one attempt.

The first example of his endeavours "to get on-line" is drawn on in line 1. As a consequence of working from home, David requires the online medium to connect with his workplace. However, in order to obtain home access, David is positioned as dependent on another person. Providing this assistance is not another's responsibility or obligation. Rather, David must appeal to a person's good will and their voluntary accommodation to his needs, indicated by the "obliging" nature of a "man from Computer Services" in line 3. This surrenders David's right of online access to another's generosity of time and skill, which places David within a disabled subject position where he is powerless over his ability to gain online access. David's powerlessness is reinforced through remaining events in the paragraph.

Despite the personal assistance attained as evident in lines 3-4, other barriers inhibit David's access. Firstly, David's home system was "never" fully operational, demonstrating that from the very beginning his online access was under par. "Never" serves to accentuate the constant and unrelenting nature of this limitation. Complete lack of control culminates in lines 5-7 when his home system "collapsed altogether", at which point he "gave up". Another system external to his is "partly" responsible for the destruction of access, although, there is a suggestion that David cannot be certain of this as indicated by the deployment of "I think." This functions to accentuate David's powerlessness over the ability to determine the cause of his system's collapse. Indeed, David's limited knowledge provides only a partial explanation for the collapse, leaving open to question the possibility of remaining factors. Events in the first paragraph indicate that the Institute's prevention of home access leads David to abandon any hope of success for "three or four years." Such extensive duration of non-participation highlights poignant barriers precluding David's access, which are created by outside structures. These events demonstrate how David is positioned within a dependent subjectivity, in which other people and systems control and determine his ability to get online.

Hope is renewed in the following year upon procuring advanced technology and appropriate software, evident in lines 9-10. However, irrespective of possessing sufficient tools, David continues to encounter serious impediments indicated by the deployment of "terrible" in line 10, which functions to invoke an intense feeling of frustration in attaining online access. The proceeding paragraphs work to justify David's negative experience.

David's problems are organised around two fundamental issues. The first of these is based on the absence of people taking up the role of training blind people to operate the "new technology". This positions others as responsible for blind people's powerlessness over online access, which is central to the *gatekeeping* resource. The phrase in lines 13-14 regarding "nobody who takes responsibility" creates the impression that nobody actually upholds the duty to empower blind people with online access. This goes beyond a mere lack of knowledge to an irresponsibility born in others, as a result of their lack of initiative and effort. Such structural and individual (in)action demonstrates how others' decisions gatekeep the online access of people with disabilities. Further, the deployment of "noone is around" in line 16 creates a sense of desertion and abandonment, which positions

blind people as helpless and disempowered, despite having the “sophisticated new technology at their disposal.” The effect of desertion is drawn out at the end of the paragraph, where David is left with the “frustrating” experience spanning “several [...] months” of having to pick up “necessary information” from others. Moreover, this process is constructed as slow, difficult, and arduous, as indicated in the deployment of the phrase “gleaning bits and pieces [...] from different people at different times.” This reflects the fragmented and haphazard manner in which blind users are compelled to understand the mere “basics” of operating online because of others’ lack of responsibility. However, at the same time, David’s construction also demonstrates blind users’ initiative and capacity to acquire the necessary information for successfully operating online, which no longer positions them as helpless or disempowered. David’s actions construct him within an empowering subject position where he is highly resourceful with great aptitude under desolate circumstances.

The second issue in getting online is constructed around the obstructive nature in which people and policy structures, external to David, disbar his capacity to access help when he needed his “home system” functioning in accordance with the Institute’s. This, again, demonstrates how David’s online access is gatekept by other people and policy structures. The harsh criticism directed at Computer Services staff, evident in their “extreme unhelpfulness, even rudeness”, is legitimised through proceeding events. Despite a request for help, Computer Services “flatly refused” to offer “any”, which constructs their reaction as obstinate, unreasonable, and hostile. Moreover, a flat refusal evokes a poignant sense of injustice against David, as it creates a rigidly defined standard without any room for negotiation, or moderate consideration of equitable avenues for action. Unreasonable exclusion actioned by people from the Institute is compounded via structural barriers, indicative of the Institute’s exclusionary policy targeting staff “working at home.”

Even though David puts forward his extraordinary situation as a blind staff member to justify his request in line 25, Computer Services provides no assistance. Further, any potential for the Institute’s responsibility is completely absolved by referring David to another organisation - a disability oriented one. David constructs this as “highly offensive” because, presumably, Computer Services positions David’s problem as solely within the domain of a disabled subjectivity, rather than

a problem of incompatibility between the Institute's system and the technology necessary for David to work. Censure directed at the Institute, combined with David's reconstruction of the problem evident in lines 27-29, both function to position Computer Services staff as insulting as well as incompetent. As a corollary, this places David as astute, competent, knowledgeable, and forthright in his pursuit for justice. Nevertheless, David's account highlights how other people, systems, and structures gatekeep his capacity to gain online access and, thereby, sustain his positioning within a disabled subjectivity.

A final example of the *gatekeeping* resource is presented in an extract from an email interview with Lois as she responds to a question about whether the government should subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities. While this example is organised around overcoming online access barriers, it functions to illustrate the power of external structures in gatekeeping the online access of people with disabilities.

- 1 Agencies like TalkLink are great for those people unable to afford the
- 2 equipment to provide their own on line communication. I was helped
- 3 originally by TalkLink. Not only is the hardware out of reach for most disabled
- 4 people, but the information of what is available for people with the various
- 5 disabilities. This was invaluable to me and as a consequence I've been able
- 6 to communicate Through the use of E Z Keys via the computer. I wouldn't
- 7 have known about E Z Keys and speech synthesizers had it not been for
- 8 TalkLink. I've now been communicating by this means for twelve years.
- 9 Because of this communication I've been able to run my own business and
- 10 be involved in the MND [motor neurone disease] society. Because of limited
- 11 communication people with disabilities are restricted when it comes to doing
- 12 the necessary research in just what is available to them to use. (Lois)

Lois' account justifies the existence of agencies supporting access to people with disabilities through offering information about what is available and their provision of assistive technology for obtaining access. An example of such an agency is drawn on in line 1. For those without financial resources, "TalkLink" provides necessary equipment to attain online communication. In lines 3-5, the point is made that beyond acquiring the equipment, accessing the very information pertaining to the resources available for operating online is "out of reach" for the majority of people with disabilities. This creates an expectation of deprivation and exclusion from adequate educational and financial resources needed to get people with disabilities online. Hence, this feature of Lois' account overlaps with the *exclusion* resource.

In lines 6-8, Lois goes on to say that had it not been for the agency, knowledge of the assistive technology required to operate online would not be possible. This places TalkLink in a powerful position because it has the capacity to control and determine Lois' access to the necessary materials enabling her to participate. As a corollary, however, the agency's dominance also functions to locate Lois within a vulnerable and powerless subject position because she is dependent solely on an external structure for access. Despite this positioning, Lois constructs her online access in highly positive terms, as evident in her capacity to manage her business and participate in a disability organisation. Even though Lois has been reliant on TalkLink for online access, she has moved beyond a position of dependency to direct her own destiny with regard to running her "own business" and the "MND society." This highlights the powerful opportunities for full participation in many aspects of the social world, which are available through online access. This further demonstrates the inherent dependency in which people with disabilities are positioned via other structures, systems, and people for online access, and via the online medium itself for a better quality of life.

The final sentence in the account returns to the poignancy surrounding the extensive barriers faced by people with communication disabilities. Their capacity to be able to source information about the specific technology, which can assist them in getting online, is severely restricted, strengthening the precarious position of the dependency of people with disabilities on other structures for online access.

To summarise, the *gatekeeping resource* is organised around severe barriers inhibiting the capacity of people with disabilities to get online because of decisions made by other people and the infrastructures that people with disabilities find themselves in. Decisions severely restricting access lead to deprivation and injustice, situating people with disabilities within a dependent and subordinate subject position. This justifies ridicule and censure of those directing the decision-making. People with disabilities are positioned as powerless victims of others' discriminatory actions. Constructions surrounding the dramatically positive impact of online access function to highlight the necessity for dependency by people with disabilities and the precarious nature of their access to online facilities. Yet, people with disabilities are able to move beyond a subordinate and dependent subject position by taking charge of their own learning in acquiring skills and knowledge

for operating online. This allows them to situate themselves within a productive, capable, and socially and financially empowering subjectivity.

### Disability costs resource

The final resource in the *disabling differentials* repertoire is constructed around the costs or penalties incurred online by operating within a disabled subjectivity. These are not prevalent for able-bodied users. The first extract demonstrating this resource comes from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview with Patrick who responds to a question about whether the government should subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities.

1 the issue really is that there are times when online access is a cost of  
2 disability I think that the government needs to compensate for the costs of a  
3 person's disability so I look at it from a slightly broader prospective than just  
4 online access costs [...] a lot of the real major barriers to online access  
5 actually are investing in the computing that the hardware and the software I  
6 mean even if you're a blind person and you go along to your local Dick Smith  
7 or Noel Leemings and you've got no deposit and um interest free terms for  
8 twenty four months and no payments until March next year you know you  
9 may well bite the bullet and take that and try and pay a few dollars a week  
10 out of your benefit so you can have a computer but that's not the end of it if  
11 you're at least if you're a blind person because then on top of that you've got  
12 a piece of technology that's probably going for a good one going to cost you  
13 about fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars more that gives you the access that  
14 you need um so that you can actually use the thing and generally there are  
15 no ways of paying that off even if you had the means to pay it off and of  
16 course you could get into all sorts of poverty traps and debt cycles and things  
17 when you pay things off on HP [hire purchase] anyway when you really  
18 perhaps shouldn't and so I think the issue is that um clearly people with  
19 disabilities have a much much higher unemployment rate than those target  
20 groups which are quite deservedly getting at getting attention I don't  
21 begrudge them a bit of attention that they're getting such as Maori and  
22 Pacific Island peoples but I do think that it's outrageous that people with  
23 disabilities are never mentioned in those ah at risk unemployment groups  
24 when our unemployment stats are much worse I mean our gaps are not gaps  
25 man that we have to close they're chasms they're just massive chasms and  
26 so I think the the issue here really is that if we want to close those gaps and  
27 ah ensure that people with disabilities are employable we actually have to  
28 invest in some sort of programme that gives people um either tax breaks or  
29 even the technology that they need to get online even if it's just paying for the  
30 assistive technology component if the government would say okay um we're  
31 going to set up a fund and if you can clearly demonstrate that you can't  
32 access a computer without some sort of assistive technology we will buy it for  
33 you ah I don't think that that's unreasonable um ah specifically about online  
34 costs you have to work out what proportion of your online usage is actually  
35 genuinely a cost of your disability and that's quite complicated if I'm working

36 with a client who is on Xtra and they're not sure maybe they can't afford the  
37 twenty four dollars a month for the flat rate and they're paying two dollars fifty  
38 an hour um I can I think quite justifiably make a case that says because  
39 they're new to the technology they're not able to just glance at a web page  
40 and instantly pick out what they need and click with their mouse and go there  
41 they're going to have to explore the page with a speech synthesiser that's  
42 running reasonably slowly while they get used to it I mean I have mine  
43 running at over five hundred words a minute but that's not normal um then  
44 then I think it is fair to say that that person is going to take longer to do stuff  
45 online and the fact that the reason why it's taking longer is because they  
46 have a disability and on that basis I think there's a really strong cost of  
47 disability argument um then you have the issue of well you know if I could  
48 go and um buy the Herald obviously that's my choice to buy it if it's costing  
49 me more to access the Herald online um than it would be to purchase it then  
50 that's a cost of my disability as well cause it's not a discretionary thing for me  
51 to get it online so there are a whole lot of issues and I don't know whether  
52 you can quantify them absolutely and totally or whether you just need to have  
53 some sort of universal cost of disability allowance that everybody gets  
54 irrespective of earned income but it is something the government has to face  
55 up to (Patrick)

Patrick's entire account is organised around a case for the government to subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities. It begins by positioning the cost of disability as the number one issue above all others as indicative in line 1 of the opening phrase "the issue really is". The government is deemed responsible for people's access when the cost is a consequence "of a person's disability". Making a distinction between disability costs and "online access costs" per se in lines 1-3 warrants government compensation. Patrick's construction also serves to absolve people with disabilities from the burden of disability costs. Justification for government compensation is reinforced with the qualification that Patrick deploys "a slightly broader perspective". This opens the way for Patrick to arrive at the issue of government subsidy from a number of angles, which may extend beyond a narrow perspective to incorporate wider social issues. The proceeding events construct four situations of cost or penalty as a consequence of operating within a disabled subjectivity online. Each of the examples builds on the one before, powerfully accumulating the negative impact of a disabled subject position online.

The first penalty involves the additional cost surrounding assistive technology necessary for enabling actual use of the medium. Patrick introduces this penalty in line 4 as comprising a significant proportion of the "real major barriers to online access". Incorporating "real" indicates a legitimate and genuine impasse, which

may surpass other barriers. Patrick draws on the narrative of a “blind person” and their grossly inequitable, financial struggle on a beneficiary’s income to cover the expense of necessary assistive technology, which will cost “fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars more” than, presumably, another option. The taken-for-granted nature of standard online access costs, without the assistive components, may be notable by their absence.

In lines 16-18, emphasis on the severe, financial repercussions facing people with disabilities when purchasing assistive technology provides a convenient transition to the second disability related penalty. In line 19, Patrick points to the cost of high unemployment, which creates extensive difficulties for people with disabilities. Patrick positions the unemployment rate of people with disabilities as surpassing that of other disadvantaged “target groups”, to the point of being “much much higher”. To avoid censure of his own actions, however, in lines 20-21 Patrick vehemently refutes any suggestion that he resents other disadvantaged groups’ rights to “attention”. Rather, he is highlighting the inequity over the lack of focus on the unemployment of people with disabilities compared to others’. Such inequity is reinforced by reconstructing “gaps” between employed and unemployed as “massive chasms”. This more poignantly locates people with disabilities within a disabled subject position and the impoverished situations this brings. Justification for providing government assistance is constructed by drawing on the need to “close those gaps” and “ensure people with disabilities are employable”.

In contrast to the previous penalty, the third and fourth penalties occur as a consequence of operating online with a disability. The third begins in lines 34-35 as Patrick highlights the complexity of calculating the operating adjustment cost required for a blind person new to speech synthesisers to navigate the online medium. Positioning this person as unfamiliar to the medium invokes the rationalisation that they will take longer to use the medium than a non-disabled person who does not need to acclimatise to assistive technology. Consequently, this accentuates the disabled subject position of people with disabilities, invoking greater time spent online and the need for more financial resources.

The fourth disability related penalty involves inequity of choice for accessing goods and services. Patrick draws on the argument that if there is greater cost in purchasing a product online than offline, blind people should be compensated

because they have no choice over offline goods and services as they are inaccessible. Therefore, they must obtain the product online, which again situates people with disabilities within a dependent and subordinate subject position where they are forced to access one context only, compared with their non-disabled peers who do not occupy a marginalised subject position. Both disability related penalties provide evidence to justify government subsidisation of online access costs for people with disabilities as well as demonstrate the disabling subjectivities people with disabilities are positioned in when accessing the online medium.

Throughout the entire account, a rich and detailed construction of events is deployed. This functions to dramatically heighten the authenticity of Patrick's narrative, as well as convey its compelling nature. Indeed, persuasive features in Patrick's narrative occur when he deploys affirmations of the strength of evidence justifying government compensation for the access costs of people with disabilities. This is apparent in lines 1, 18, and 26 with respect to the clarity and realism of the disability cost issue, while lines 33, 38, and 46-47 affirm the legitimacy of disability cost compensation. In summary, each of the narrative events works to accumulate the negative impact of being positioned within a disabled subjectivity, and powerfully legitimises compensation for this cost.

The final turn embedded in lines 51-55 moves out of the detailed construction of events to reflect upon the situation overall. Patrick highlights the extensive range and number of issues involved as well as the uncertainty and problematic nature of constructing definitive boundaries around the issues. This demonstrates the complexity of the situation and suggests a standard of analysis that does not limit the case for disability costs in "absolute" or "total" terms. Despite the complexity and lack of immediate clarity, Patrick holds firm with positioning the government as responsible for facing "up to" disability cost compensation. This removes people with disabilities from the burden of shouldering assistive technology and online access costs connected to disability, while placing onus of responsibility on the government.

Another example of the *disability costs* resource becomes apparent in a face-to-face interview with Roger who is deaf, as he talks about the resources and services he would like available to support online usage, which are not currently provided. Although aspects of Roger's construction are intertwined with the

*exclusion* and *gatekeeping* resources, his account, which is from a transcript of a tape-recorded interview, is organised around the financial and intellectual penalties involved in getting online. These are directly linked to having a disability.

- 1       you've got to support deaf they've got low incomes they don't have any good
- 2       work low wages most have saved really hard for getting a computer and how
- 3       to set up so I support them I'm instructing them voluntarily and I wish that we
- 4       could provide the association or someone could give it all for deaf people on
- 5       low income hearing people can get good jobs you know and they can get
- 6       wages and set themselves up and read things and find out how to do it but
- 7       deaf people just can't do that and I'd like to support the whole community I
- 8       think that's an issue I wish we could set up and find ways of ah get them to
- 9       be trained cause they can't go on courses it costs money two hundred three
- 10      hundred dollars for a course for a weekend they can't do that and most
- 11      organisations refuse to pay for interpreters and no one's ohhh if you want to
- 12      go on a course no interpreters can't go you know and they're getting a
- 13      computer what to do with it they don't know how even to access it (Roger)

In Roger's account, deaf people are constructed within a socially disadvantaged subject position because of their inability to access "good" employment offering an adequate wage. Being positioned in this social under class, as a consequence of operating within a disabled identity, leaves deaf people bereft of the knowledge and funding to get online. Disability related costs of getting online move beyond merely a struggle in saving, to purchasing equipment from a meagre income, accessing information technology support via a training course, and to the cost of Sign language interpreters to translate information. The construction of these costs function to position a disabled identity, in the case of deafness, as a financial and intellectual penalty whether directly or indirectly that severely inhibits, and may even preclude, online access. Comparison with hearing peers, as evident in lines 5-6, dramatically demonstrates the inequity and disadvantage faced by deaf users, and functions to position a disabled identity, namely deafness, as responsible for these impoverished outcomes.

Despite Roger's acts of support to assist deaf users in getting online, they occur "voluntarily". This suggests current support is purely dependent on the giver's generosity of time. Thus, there is nothing stopping Roger from ceasing his assistance at any moment, thereby, reinforcing the disadvantages faced by deaf users and sustaining their subordinate and marginalised subject position.

Interestingly, Roger's account draws on aspects of both the *exclusion* and *gatekeeping* resources. Other organisations' wielding of power over the online access of people with disabilities is constructed in the refusal of "most organisations [...] to pay for interpreters". This overlaps with the *gatekeeping* resource. Deaf users' complete inability to "get good jobs [...] set themselves up [...] read things and find out how to do it" highlights their exclusion from the taken-for-granted financial and intellectual capital required to get online. Likewise, this incorporates a central feature of the *exclusion* resource.

The third and final extract demonstrating *disability cost* comes from an email interview. David is responding to a question about whether the government should subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities.

- 1 Yes. Disabled people should not have to carry the extra costs of their
- 2 disabilities. If special technology is needed to help them achieve normal lives,
- 3 the national community should bear the cost. At the moment, the government
- 4 pays for certain work-related forms of technology (I got my Jaws programme
- 5 free, for instance), but I feel they should also finance leisure-related stuff.
- 6 Such subsidies are often necessary, since (a) the equipment is pretty
- 7 expensive and (b) many disabled people live on a pittance, and just can't
- 8 afford it. However, even with people like me who can actually afford to buy
- 9 technology, I repeat the point I made above - the costs of disability should not
- 10 lie where they fall. why, for instance, should I have to pay out thousands in
- 11 order to get my job done when sighted colleagues don't have to? (David)

The account begins by affirming government subsidisation, and then offers a number of interconnected reasons for this. David puts forward the assertion that people with disabilities "should not" be liable for any additional costs resulting from operating within a disabled subjectivity. This constructs the idea that, already, people with disabilities are carrying costs directly associated with their disability, which justifies the removal of any others. I note the deployment of "carry" to emphasise the heavy burden of paying for online access, which also serves to create a sense of inequity surrounding the carrying of "extra" loads by people with disabilities.

David justifies absolving people with disabilities from extra costs by arguing that "special technology" is required to enable them to "achieve normal lives". This infers that without the technology, people are barred from a better way of life, which entirely justifies placing the cost of access on a far wider community than on

the individual. Consequently, this may evoke the potential for the “national community” to gain from the productivity surrounding the online access of people with disabilities. Despite there being no clarity on whether “special technology” relates to assistive technology per se, or to all equipment required for online access, line 4 provides a more conclusive outcome. To help support David’s argument for subsidisation, the government’s current provision of technology necessary for work is brought into the construction. This compensation even covers David’s assistive technology component of the equipment required to get online, referred to as a “Jaws programme”, which is speech synthesis software used by blind people to navigate online. In line 5, the argument for subsidisation is extended to assistive technology for engaging in leisure activities online. The equipment’s huge expense and inaccessibility, due to the minimal income of people with disabilities, are drawn on to legitimise subsidisation of these activities.

David qualifies the need for subsidisation further in lines 8-11, incorporating those with disabilities who can afford to pay, and, thus, those who fail to fit into categories justified for compensation. A powerful reason for this is deployed in an example of the inequity between disabled and non-disabled users within a work context where David is forced to pay an extensive amount just to operate in his occupation. This is not the case for his “sighted” peers. This example constructs a poignant sense of injustice if subsidisation does not occur. It also demonstrates the marginalised and subordinate subject positioning engaged by people with disabilities compared to others online.

David’s entire account positions a disabled subjectivity as invoking an online cost that is not the onus of the individual with a disability. Rather, it falls in the domain of outside organisations. This serves to enable people with disabilities access to the medium regardless of their financial resources, thereby, enabling them to engage in a powerful subject position where they can participate online.

To summarise, *disability cost* operates by constructing a disabled subjectivity as an unfair and inequitable social penalty inhibiting people’s access to the online medium. Comparison with the significant lack of costs affecting non-disabled online users functions to justify and legitimise compensation. This form of justification works to absolve a person with a disability from paying online costs

directly linked to having a disability, and, instead, places this onus on external structures.

## Summary

This analysis has demonstrated how the broad repertoire of *disabling differentials* operates in the talk of people with disabilities. Through the operation of this repertoire, participating with a disability online creates differential treatment across a number of social and structural levels. At an interpersonal level, the *negative reactions* resource is organised around the discontinuation or distinct reduction in social interaction when a disabled identity is made available. Despite participants' careful management of their identities by delaying disclosure until which time interactants have developed relational connections or by choosing not to disclose, the negative reactions situate disabled identities within a marginalised and anti-social subject position.

Beyond disclosure, disability is constructed around other forms of differential treatment that function to position people with disabilities as powerless and dependent. The *exclusion* resource is constructed around the mechanical barriers precluding the full participation of people with disabilities online. Not being able to access websites as a consequence of technological impediments circumscribes the online experience of people with disabilities, positioning them as powerless over what they can and cannot access. Similarly, the *gatekeeping* resource serves to position the online access of people with disabilities as dependent on the sanction of other people, and the available capacity of external structures. This constructs a sense of powerlessness over whether people with disabilities can even gain access to the online medium.

Operating with a disability also incurs penalties at a financial and cultural level as evident in the *disability cost* resource. Additional training and assistive technology costs construct the extensive economic burden experienced by people with disabilities online. This burden positions them at a substantial social and financial disadvantage compared to their non-disabled peers. Deployment of these financial and social penalties, however, constructs a need for other structures to compensate the hardship and disabling subjectivity of people with disabilities

Reflexively, the *disabling differentials* repertoire allowed me the opportunity to engage with the oppressive online experiences of people with disabilities in my study. As a person involved in disability issues, I felt politically and socially responsible for giving voice to the less appealing features of participants' online experience. For me, this focus derives from a need for representativeness and completeness, constructed within a common cultural and academic practice of presenting two sides to a story by drawing on positive and negative issues. If I was not immersed within an academic cultural setting, I may well have considered these negative aspects of participants' experience less relevant for construction. Similarly, had I been unconnected to the political and social debates of the disability field, *disabling differentials* may cease to exist in this thesis. This poignantly demonstrates the way in which my subjectivity, including my political, social, and cultural background, is inextricably bound into the very practices deployed to carry out my research and, hence, the very means by which I construct knowledge.

In summary, having a disability online leads to differential treatment and unfair outcomes. The power of other people and structures functions to significantly circumscribe the online access and experience of people with disabilities. This positions people with disabilities as powerless, dependent, vulnerable, and stigmatised, thereby, reflecting and perpetuating their marginalised and subordinate subject positioning. This creates serious disadvantages for people with disabilities compared with their non-disabled peers.

## Chapter Ten: What It Means To Be Online For People With Disabilities - Reflections And Implications

*In the last chapter I summarise each of the repertoires generated from participants' data, as well as provide an analysis of how these repertoires enable people with disabilities to temporarily step outside disabled identities. Simultaneously, this serves to address the research aims: namely, how people with disabilities are constructing their online experiences and the opportunities available online to access alternative subjectivities for positioning people with disabilities in the social world. I briefly revisit limitations surrounding a visual ontology, in contrast to the constructive possibilities of operating within a textually oriented medium that enable people with disabilities to attain control over their identity construction. Traditional views of identity are contrasted with the flexibility and fluidity of online identities. In highlighting the psychological benefits of operating online, I consider the unprecedented opportunities available for people with disabilities to "be" in the world, inclusive of increased access and participation as abilities extend beyond the body. Participants' positive constructions of their online experiences are linked with ideas underlying the social model of disability. At a collective level, some of the research findings are discussed in relation to denying difference and silencing marginalised voices. Issues of technopower and directions for the future are raised. Reflexively, I engage with my analysis of participants' data towards the end of the chapter.*

### Returning to the Research Aims

As outlined in Chapter Two, one of the aims of this research was to analyse the discursive practices of people with disabilities regarding their access and engagement with the online medium. DA and its underlying philosophy, social constructionism, provided the technical and theoretical tools for carrying out such a task. A discursive analysis of participants' data provided a systematic procedure for identifying the different types of engagement made available through online access for people with disabilities. Building on social constructionism, the repertoires identified in the data functioned to show in detail how people with disabilities are operating online. Indeed, social constructionist philosophy holds that the nature of experience is inextricably bound up with the language patterns we use to talk about experience. Therefore, the language patterns identified in

participants' data construct, through enabling and constraining, the very capacity of participants' online experiences.

Each of the repertoires brings about different aspects of participants' constructions of their online experiences. Together, these constructions highlight what it means to be online for people with disabilities. The *choice to disclose* repertoire demonstrates how people with disabilities are afforded complete control over the management of disabled identities in social interaction. This opens up opportunities to deploy and, therefore, experience other subjectivities that are removed from the prejudiced reactions invoked by disability. The *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* repertoire permits the presentation of participants' abilities, skills, productivity, competence, and independence, all of which are features central to a successful construction of personhood. The textual nature of online interaction provides the social and environmental conditions for people with disabilities to operate within this socially valued subjectivity by removing the physical barriers and prejudiced reactions surrounding disabled identities, which have precluded participants' valued participation in the social world.

The *transcendence* repertoire significantly raises the standards people with disabilities have traditionally occupied. This leads to profound changes as participants substantially increase their capacity to operate across many areas of life. This greatly enhances their productivity in the social world. For the first time, this means that many participants can effectively carry out everyday tasks. People who are blind can read their bank statements, manage their personal and work-related correspondence, as well as do their grocery shopping. Online, people who are deaf can talk to others. Those who are homebound can read the newspaper, participate in family, and interact with friends. People with disabilities who are physically restricted are able to gain control over the management of their life. This creates new and alternative subjectivities, which have not been available to people with disabilities. Such experiences are highly valued and celebrated.

Through the *participating in the world* repertoire, people with disabilities experience a great sense of social connection and belonging in the world. This is achieved by opening up access to and participation in a wider community of relationships, people, interests, activities, and information, which are available at local and global levels. This communal sense of belonging extends to having

access to communities of other people with disabilities, who are experiencing the same/similar condition. This affords participants the security of not being alone in their experience of disability. Operating within the *participating in the world* repertoire provides people with the opportunity to engage in an empowering subjectivity where there is freedom to access and participate in a variety of social contexts on a global scale, according to when and how people choose.

Participants also protect themselves from potentially harmful and deceptive situations online by engaging in a *keeping safe* repertoire. This provides participants with strategies for safely and securely operating within an environment where there is potential for both empowering and oppressive outcomes. These strategies serve to remove people with disabilities from operating within a disabling subjectivity online, in relation to being targets of oppression. The *keeping safe* repertoire maintains pleasant online experiences for participants, which may also function to enhance their integrity as online users because they have identified safe practices in which to construct their online interaction. Paradoxically, deploying a *qualified deception* repertoire affords people with disabilities the opportunity to move beyond the limitations of keeping safe, gaining full access to the constructive capabilities of the online medium. Minor acts of deception are justified because they allow people with disabilities to freely explore other subjectivities that are not constrained by the prejudiced reactions invoked by disabled identities. *Qualified deception* allows participants to further manage the dilemma of participating in a medium where empowering and oppressive outcomes are possible without exposing their vulnerability as disabled online users, or associating themselves with deviant activities. In combination, both repertoires enable people with disabilities to step outside disabling subjectivities.

In contrast to the extensive social and psychological benefits of participating online demonstrated through the aforementioned repertoires, *disabling differentials* constructs the barriers and restrictions surrounding online participation for people with disabilities. These barriers maintain the kinds of stigmatised reactions encountered offline when disabled identities are disclosed. Operating within a disabled body online also circumscribes the participation of people with disabilities by limiting their physical access to web environments. Further, other people, structures, and systems largely determine the online access and participation of people with disabilities. This places participants within a dependent and

subordinate subject position, although some participants were able to move beyond these barriers by acquiring the knowledge and skills to position themselves as competent and resourceful users, less dependent on others for navigating the online medium. Online barriers to participation also extend to the financial costs of operating online with a disability that *disable* people's online access and participation. The *disabling differentials* repertoire demonstrates the barriers and restrictions that position participants' online experience within a disabling subjectivity.

Each of the repertoires identified in participants' data actively work to create constructions of the very actions currently available within the online medium for people with disabilities to perform. Many of these constructions allow people with disabilities to engage in the social world in ways that were not formerly possible. Indeed, the online medium offers people with disabilities dynamic access to multiple networks of people throughout the world, allowing them to develop new connections and participate in social relationships. Functionally, people with disabilities can gain greater control over the management of their lives, enabling them to access a highly productive and capable engagement with everyday tasks. Typically, this was not possible for many participants with physical and sensory disabilities prior to online access. Further, online participation affords people the opportunity to step outside the physical and psychological constraints of disability, permitting the demonstration of participants' social value. Each of these experiences brings together the substantial social advantages of participating online for people with disabilities, which, typically, have not been available. Hence, such events are highly valued as reflected in the cherished and celebratory tone of participants' constructions surrounding their online experiences.

Importantly, each of the benefits constructed in the repertoires gathered from participants' data also allow people with disabilities to operate outside the social and psychological barriers of disabled identities, thereby, opening up possibilities for participating in alternative subjectivities. Consequently, this offers a broader range of experiences for participants to engage in by substantially widening their pool of available identity resources. These outcomes are cherished and celebrated. This leads to addressing a second research aim from the data analysis involving the provision of alternative subjectivities for positioning people with

disabilities in the social world. The next section considers participants' ability to access alternative subjectivities in more detail.

### Accessing Alternative Subjectivities

Having the temporary capacity to be positioned outside the physical and psychological restrictions of disabled identities is meaningful to people with disabilities. The profound change in subject positioning means participants can reconstruct their experiences in the social world, unconstrained by the barriers surrounding disability. Such opportunities are rarely available offline. Yet, the textual ontology of many online environments makes these opportunities possible.

Traditionally, reality has been mediated by a visual ontology. Hughes (1999) points out that the "the image" powerfully affects how bodies may be seen and judged. Indeed, the visual power afforded "the other" violates a person's freedom to construct themselves, relinquishing this to "the other" (Sartre, 1958). A person's self-definition becomes controlled by the behavioural and aesthetic norms prevalent in culture. This reaffirms the ocularcentric ideas introduced in Chapter One, where Jay's (1994) argument that visual perception may condemn a person to a particular identity is deployed. Constructed from sensory knowledge, the gaze hierarchically orders bodies according to given categories of cultural significance, where normal forms of appearance and functioning are defined and afforded preferential treatment (Foucault, 1978/1990). Bodies that fail to conform to these ideals are assumed to be abnormal and dysfunctional. Hence, the oppressiveness of the gaze can negatively impact on people with disabilities, creating prejudiced reactions towards disabled identities (Goffman, 1963; Oliver, 1990).

In contrast to a visual mode of interaction, participants' constructions indicate how the textuality of the online medium removes the ocularcentrism governing the way people interpret, evaluate, and construct others. Online, the power of the gaze is displaced with a textually oriented medium. Importantly, this affords people with disabilities control over the way they manage their experiences, inclusive of aspects of their identities.

The repertoires of *choice to disclose*, *accessing a socially valued subjectivity*, *transcendence*, *participating in the world*, and *qualified deception* demonstrate how people with disabilities are able to construct alternative subjectivities for themselves. These operate outside the restrictions and prejudice surrounding disabled bodies and identities. This affords participants control over the unintentional forms of information, which Goffman (1963) argues, may 'leak through' into social interaction. These paralinguistic influences have traditionally been outside the control of people with disabilities, disrupting their capacity to create a favourable self-impression. Yet, participating online offers them a transitory opportunity to govern how their social experiences are constructed in interaction. Having access to this control opens up opportunities to access other subjectivities, which are socially valued. This functions to broaden the identity resources of people with disabilities.

Operating within alternative subjectivities offers hugely important changes in social experience and subject positioning. People with disabilities are able to engage in a totally different form of being from what has typically been available within their realm of social engagement. Indeed, online access revolutionises their very capacity to *be* in the social world. Prior to online access, participants were circumscribed within the boundaries of a disabled subjectivity, incorporating a limited set of rights, duties, and obligations. These included dependency, devaluation, incompetence, incapacity, isolation, prejudice, discrimination, and a lack of productivity. Yet, by participating online people are permitted access to other subjectivities, affording people with disabilities the capacity to engage in positions of social value far removed from disabling identities. In contrast to offline experiences, online, people with disabilities can access positions of independence, competence, productivity, skill, ability, activity, and social connectedness, all of which may contribute to a growing sense of equity with non-disabled others. Simultaneously, having access to alternative subjectivities creates profound psychological benefits for people with disabilities, who have traditionally occupied a devalued subjectivity.

## Psychological Benefits of Operating Online

The repertoires of *choice to disclose*, *accessing a socially valued subjectivity*, *transcendence*, *participating in the world*, and *qualified deception* provide a number of resources for constructing and managing the experiences of people with disabilities that are likely to bring about benefits at a psychological level. Each of the repertoires enable participants to temporarily step outside the physical and social barriers of operating within a disabled body, and, hence, a disabled identity. The withholding of physical and social barriers, which create disability offline, functions to *disable* a disabling subjectivity online, opening the way for socially valued subjectivities to be realised. This leads to psychologically liberating outcomes, allowing people with disabilities to enhance their sense of self-worth. Moreover, engaging in socially valued subjectivities actively challenges the taken-for-granted oppression surrounding disabled identities, creating additional psychological benefits of social and political empowerment.

By suspending the body and its associated constraints, online access permits a disembodied engagement in the social world. This brings forth unprecedented opportunities for psychologically liberating outcomes by creating a context where disability ceases to limit people's experiences. For instance, participating online with the aid of voice output software affords the sensory capacity for people who are blind to read information. Deaf participants can engage in conversation with hearing people as well as access information without the barriers of aural communication. Wheelchair users can travel around the world and access a variety of locales regardless of their mobility. Those who are homebound have the ability to manage their lives without being dependent on others. This opens up enormous opportunities for psychological empowerment as people with disabilities participate within many dimensions of social life, as opposed to only a few. These psychologically liberating outcomes gained through online access have parallels with Ford's (2001) research findings.

Ford (2001) investigated the experiences of people with paralysis in online environments. His research findings showed how participating online afforded people the very ability to "move" within and between different environments without physically embodied motion. Such an experience has not been available to people with paralysis. This led to some profoundly liberating experiences; people

could engage in a relationship of power with their environment by gaining control over the kinds of places and contexts they occupied and how these were accessed. This experience also enabled a reconstruction of the way movement has traditionally been conceptualised, from a physically embodied action to that involving disembodiment. Such a revolutionary change transcends any need for the body to aspire to a normal ideal. Rather, it permits abilities to extend beyond the body.

Similarly, through the online medium participants in this research were able to extend their abilities and ways of operating beyond the body without necessarily creating the need to aspire to a normal ideal. Psychologically, this opens up huge possibilities for people who have traditionally occupied marginalised and restricted subjectivities *because* they operate within non-standard bodies. Enabling the extension of abilities beyond the body substantially lifts the ceiling on standard and disabling ways of operating in the social world, creating new and empowering subject positions, which may enhance the self-worth, confidence, self-esteem, and determination of people with disabilities. This greatly alters the psychological wellbeing of people with disabilities because they can now occupy a valued subjectivity, without, necessarily, compromising a disabled identity as they negotiate alternative subjectivities.

Moving between different subjectivities broadens the available pool of identity resources for people with disabilities to utilise. Being able to access a variety of subjectivities no longer constrained by the limitations of a single identity affords the possibility of positioning oneself within a construction of identity that is fluid and flexible. This offers further benefits of a psychological nature.

Traditional psychological models of identity claim that underlying the self is an essential character that is stable across time, culture, and context. These have been oppressive for minority groups, inclusive of people with disabilities. Such models have a tendency to confine people within a permanent devalued category, incorporating dysfunction, and incompetence. Instead, authors like Gergen (1985, 1989, 1991, 1997) believe that the self is malleable to the situation and its available discursive tools.

The idea that people can embody other subjectivities and, hence, other identities online is a powerful framework for people with disabilities because it permits a creative space for developing ideas about the self, unconstrained by a single identity. This creates greater flexibility in positioning people within the social world. Flexibility in subject positioning may lead to psychological health benefits for people with disabilities. Health research carried out by Thoits (1983) shows that having access to many social identities, as opposed to a few, increases psychological well being. Indeed, having the flexibility of moving among different identity constructions may provide liberating and empowering experiences for those traditionally excluded from many areas of the social world.

Furthermore, being positioned within a flexible view of personhood enables people with disabilities to gain control over features of their identity, which may impact negatively on their psychological experiences. Accessing this control means that people can be evaluated without contamination from the negative evaluations surrounding disabled identities. This may substantially enhance the psychological well being of people with disabilities by enabling them to operate as socially valued citizens in society.

Interestingly, being able to disengage (temporarily) from the social and physical conditions creating disability affirms ideology underlying the social model of disability, as defined by Oliver (1990). Within the social model, disability is constructed as an outcome of disabling practices that limit and preclude people's capacity to participate in the social world. Accordingly, if disabling practices no longer operate, people cannot occupy disabling subjectivities. Importantly, the online medium provides the very context in which the social model can be realised in everyday life as the environment enables alternative subjectivities to be taken up. Having the capacity to bring the social model of disability to fruition creates some highly positive and psychologically fulfilling outcomes, as people with disabilities experience the very ideologies many of them so strongly advocate for.

The implications of being able to engage with and occupy a psychologically empowering ideology as demonstrated via the social model opens up additional psychological benefits. Removing the social and physical constraints tied to disabled identities online highlights the sense of injustice and hardship surrounding the physical and social barriers experienced by people with disabilities

offline. Subsequently, this may serve to validate the disempowered subject positioning of people with disabilities offline, legitimising their sense of social inequity. Accessing this legitimacy has the potential to bring about a poignant sense of self-affirmation surrounding the marginalised experience of people with disabilities.

Validating the inequities of operating offline due to physical and social barriers demonstrates how the inability of people with disabilities to participate is constructed from the limitations of the social environment. This occurs in contrast to the construction that individual limitations in physical, social, and psychological functioning of people with disabilities create their inability to participate. This offers a psychologically liberating subjectivity in which to engage, as the limitations of people with disabilities are located within a social realm of responsibility rather than being positioned as the onus of the individual. This may invoke psychological empowerment for people with disabilities at personal and political levels.

Conversely, opportunities for psychological empowerment may also be created when operating *within* disabled identities online, as evident in the *participating in the world* repertoire. Within this repertoire, the *not being alone* resource enables people with disabilities to access others experiencing the same or similar disability. This may lead to an increased sense of belonging as people with disabilities counter feelings of social isolation. Further, having the opportunity to interact with similar others may serve to validate the state of being of people with disabilities and, hence, their identity. Consequently, people may feel more secure psychologically when operating within a disabled identity online. These outcomes are likely to bring about benefits for the psychological health of people with disabilities. Psychological empowerment through the validation of disabled identities is supported in the literature.

Brennan, Moore, and Smyth's (1991), and Brennan and Ripich's (1994) findings demonstrate how online environments provide an emotionally supportive space for those dealing with medical crises. Fox's (1998) research shows how disability specific forums and those discussing disability-related issues offer psychologically supportive, social spaces for people with disabilities to share similar experiences. This precludes the physical barriers of travelling to a destination in order to access this kind of support. Moreover, accessing others experiencing the same or similar

disability has been found to validate the identity of people with disabilities (Singer, 1999; Sack, 2000).

While online access and participation may lead to considerable psychological benefits for individuals with disabilities, largely due to their ability to temporarily step outside a disabled identity, this may also invoke negative outcomes at a collective level for disabled identities. The following section considers this point of controversy.

### Silencing Marginalised Voices

Many of the repertoires and resources drawn on in the analysis demonstrate how people with disabilities are taking advantage of the online medium to step outside a disabled identity. No longer identified as objects of dysfunction and censure, people with disabilities enjoy being positioned in social relationships where abilities extend beyond the body. This reconstruction of identity, however, may inadvertently serve to reposition the way people with disabilities operate in the world, leading them to reconstitute their sense of personhood within a non-disabled image (Paterson & Hughes, 1999). This whole process denies difference and silences marginalised voices. Indeed, assimilation and integration have been criticised for serving as mechanisms of social control. Passing as normal endorses a non-disabled identity. Cromby and Standon (1999) point out that while the anonymous nature of online communication means disability is not an issue, this limits political action by rendering invisible the very phenomenon evoking political debate, reaction, and a sense of solidarity amongst people with disabilities themselves. Marks (1999) argues that making the lives of people with disabilities visible may unpack misconceptions of disabled bodies. Despite the invisibility of disability online, embodying disabled identities creates disadvantages for people with disabilities online.

In responding to this criticism, participants' constructions were based on transitory opportunities made available through the online medium. Indeed, the capacity to perform within alternative subjectivities was frequently talked about in comparison to the prejudice and discrimination surrounding having to operate within a disabled subjectivity in many other contexts outside the online medium. Hence,

engagement with alternative identities by people with disabilities was limited to an online context only. The temporary and transitory nature of this alternative subjectivity functioned to justify operating outside disability because it gave participants a “mental break” from a disabling subjectivity. Therefore, rather than necessarily silencing the voices of disability, online access afforded people with disabilities a rare opportunity to occupy alternative subjectivities, which were socially valued. The cherished and celebratory constructions surrounding the online experiences of people with disabilities indicate that such opportunities were “a luxury” and, hence, less frequently accessible. Paradoxically, while a majority of repertoires demonstrated the ability of people with disabilities to engage with subjectivities positioned outside traditional limitations of disabled identities, the *disabling differentials* repertoire highlighted areas where online participation confined participants’ experience to that of a disabling subjectivity. The next section examines this disabling subjectivity in relation to the different levels of technopower operating within the online medium.

### Technopower

The *disabling differentials* repertoire brought together instances where disability created unfavourable points of difference. As reflected in the repertoire, operating within disabled bodies and disabled identities online served to construct marginalised subjectivities for people with disabilities. In contrast to technologically determinist assumptions, which propose that the online medium will bring about radically divergent ways of being and operating, people with disabilities continued to experience stigma when disabled identities were made available to others. This demonstrates how constructions surrounding disability do not, necessarily, change online. Rather, people’s negative reactions are constructed when information about disability becomes accessible. This may function to limit the capacity for participants with disabilities to reconstruct disabled identities online, as opposed to reconstituting their identities within alternative subjectivities. Indeed, participants’ repositioning within these alternative subjectivities may result from the prejudiced reactions experienced when disability was made available online. This places limits on the liberating affects of operating outside disability.

The *disabling differentials* repertoire also demonstrates how people with disabilities were caught within relationships of power online. To gain full participation, users were required to attain an adequate level of cultural competency in the medium. This disadvantaged deaf users who were less experienced in the dominant language of online communication, while blind users were constrained by their dependency on others to access the necessary knowledge required to master the technology. Further, as participants moved away from their subject positioning of dependence on people, which was evident in the *transcendence* repertoire and the *operating independently* resource embedded in the *accessing a socially valued subjectivity* repertoire, the object of participants' dependency was transferred to the online medium. This may function to reinforce the positioning of people with disabilities within relationships of power online and, hence, their subordination within the online medium.

Cyberspace designers, including those who program websites and develop online applications, have embedded their cultural values into the hard wiring of the online medium. Social practices at interpersonal and structural levels constrain the access rights to cyberspace for people with disabilities. Such practices perpetuate current inequities between disabled and able bodies, so prevalent offline. Hence, the social context has a powerful influence over the subjectivity of people with disabilities online. In addition to the technology alone, human values embedded in the construction of online technology, and participants' cultural competency, define and restrain the power for action by people with disabilities (Bowker & Tuffin, 2001b). Before considering directions for future research and online technological developments, it is important for me to be reflexive about my analytic process of constructing repertoires from participants' interview data.

### Being Reflexive about my Analysis

There are a number of issues I would like to draw upon from my analysis, reflexively. Realising the power I have, as a researcher over the management and re-production of participants' discursive constructions, is a significant one. My interpretations of participants' textual utterances directed the repertoires and resources generated. Outside the refinement of the repertoires and resources by my supervisors, I had control over how they were arranged, shaped, and re-

constructed for public display. Becoming conscious of the constructive power I possessed throughout the analysis and the whole research process, as well as the responsibility this encompassed was considerable at times. By being reflexive about this experience, I am revisiting some of the central ideas underpinning discursive psychology: the constructive nature of knowledge and how people create social experience.

A closely related area of reflexivity involves the limitations surrounding the scope of the repertoires privileged in the analysis. Indeed, due to constraints of space and time, I gave voice to some repertoires at the expense of others. My analysis was shaped as well as *constrained by* my interests in understanding issues surrounding the subject positioning of people with disabilities online. More specifically, I tended to concentrate on empowering experiences that participants constructed about their participation online, although, I could have just as easily placed emphasis on negative constructions. This kind of focus, in conjunction with my reading and interpretations, created a particular framework from which to construct and, hence, constrain participants' experiences. By default, this created boundaries around what was and was not privileged for analysis.

Interestingly, just as I highlighted participants' use of three-part lists and extreme case formulations for rhetorical effect, I too deployed these very discursive practices when analysing participants' data. Hence, I was utilising particular discursive techniques in order to facilitate rhetorically convincing and effective constructions of my experiences as a discourse analyst.

From a reflexive perspective also, I observed an interesting feature pertaining to the data extracts I selected. Indeed, those that I deemed *best* illustrated the ideas embedded in the repertoires and resources were deployed. My subjectivity determined the extracts that were chosen to demonstrate each discursive repertoire. My decision-making regarding the extracts was based on the most articulate and comprehensive constructions. This functioned to privilege these values at the expense of other qualities in the data, such as brevity. Further, this gave voice to the experiences of certain participants over others. However, it is important to point out that the choices I make as a discourse analyst are also grounded in the data. Hence, my analytic choices must be plausible and

transparent to other readers in order to withstand criticisms surrounding my interpretation of participants' data.

In reflecting upon other aspects of the research process, I also acknowledge that the people I interviewed for my research are all members of an elite disability group. Each participant had the financial resources to purchase the necessary hardware and software, or had access to networks that provided these tools, or were located in institutions that provided the necessary equipment. Many people with disabilities are economically marginalised within the social world and do not have access to the resources or networks that create these opportunities for online participation. While I acknowledge this feature embodying my research participants, I also qualify this by pointing out that a social constructionist approach is concerned with the local and partial nature of issues under investigation.

### Future Directions

My exploratory research highlights important implications for the positioning of people with disabilities in the social world. Through online access, participants' possibilities for operating in daily life, and within the world, were substantially raised beyond standard practices and expectations. This brought about entirely new opportunities for participating in local and global communities, as well as engaging with alternative subjectivities, leading to psychologically empowering experiences. Such experiences have traditionally been inaccessible to people with disabilities. As discussed within this chapter, these highly positive outcomes are likely to provide the social conditions for substantially enhancing people with disabilities psychological well being. Based on the positive constructions of participants' online experiences, I suggest a recommendation for increased government and community resources to be allocated towards enhancing people online access for people with disabilities. Resource funding may be oriented towards online access costs for individuals with disabilities in residential settings, as well as education and employment contexts, in addition to ongoing support and training in the use of online facilities and services, including services that, typically, have only been available offline.

Further research is needed to examine in more detail appropriate and effective areas for allocating resources towards supporting online access and participation for people with disabilities. This may involve conducting in-depth case studies of the online needs of people with disabilities and ways to maximise their full participation in society through services and facilities available online. In addition to people with physical and sensory disabilities, the impact of online access on other disability groups, such as those with social and psychiatric disabilities and their subsequent access and participation needs could be investigated, also.

Historically, people with psychiatric disabilities have encountered extensive social stigma and marginalisation. Having the choice over how psychiatric identities are constructed online may offer considerable psychological benefits for these people, including opportunities to demonstrate their social value without the prejudiced reactions invoked from negative stereotypes of psychiatric disabilities.

Future research could also *test* whether online access and participation lead to health benefits for people with disabilities. This could involve quantitative studies of a longitudinal nature to measure differences in physical and psychological health between participants with disabilities who have online access compared to control groups. Varying disability groups could participate, inclusive of people who are deaf, and blind, as well as those with physical, social, and psychiatric disabilities. Control groups could be matched according to disability type. If findings demonstrate significant health benefits linked to online access and participation, these outcomes may be used to substantiate the exploratory research carried out in this thesis. Together, these findings from contrasting methodological philosophies could be deployed to provide further support and lobbying power for allocating government and community resources towards enhancing online access and participation for people with disabilities.

Additionally, the value people with disabilities place on being able to operate within a subjectivity independent of the physical and psychological constraints of disabled identities presents interesting implications for online technology researchers and designers. While there has been a trend towards enriching the bandwidth of computer-mediated communication via multi-media technology, which integrates audio and visual enhancements in interaction, text-based environments may be more attractive to many people with disabilities because of

the flexibility in identity construction. Introducing opportunities for accessing audio and visual information about online users may actually serve to inhibit participation from those, whose physical and sensory abilities differ from the majority. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that deaf participants in the research looked upon visual media forms favourably because these would enable them to communicate with other deaf people through their own language, which is Sign. Notwithstanding this issue, however, many people with disabilities may value software and hardware that does not expose operational differences. Such differences may pertain to lack of manual dexterity and slow typing speed, as well as communication abilities, inclusive of deaf users who may be proficient in Sign language but not the principal language of online communication, namely English.

## Conclusion

My research demonstrates what it means to be online for people with disabilities. Largely, this constitutes highly positive experiences. Online access affords people with disabilities the capacity to temporarily step outside disabled identities and the marginalised positioning this entails. In contrast, online participation enables people to function in ways that formally have not been possible. This opens up many possibilities for surpassing the ceiling on standard ways of being in the social world. People with disabilities can manage their lives, control how their identity is constructed in interaction, gain access, and participation in local and global communities, and engage in alternative subjectivities, all of which are not available within the repertoires of disabled subjectivities. This very opening up of unprecedented possibilities for being in the world positions people with disabilities within empowering subjectivities. Such experiences were highly valued and celebrated.

When I embarked on this project several years ago, I thought I would be undertaking a study of the differences between operating on- and offline. Yet, I feel I have researched so much more than this. I have come to understand as well as show the profound impact of the online medium on the day-to-day lives of people with disabilities. Beyond merely generating a set of positive and negative characteristics surrounding the online experiences of people with disabilities, I have constructed patterns from participants' data and from my own interpretations

of that data. These patterns and their interconnected sub-patterns bring together a unique illustration of the dynamic and diverse ideas and experiences encountered by people with disabilities. More than conducting a study, I engaged for the first time with a sophisticated and challenging methodological approach, which provided a useful and innovative framework of meaning for making sense of participants' experiences. Furthermore, this research gave me the opportunity to meet and interact with a diverse range of people who shared some very interesting and empowering experiences with me. All of this, I cherish and celebrate.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets

#### *Information Sheet for Interviews Conducted Online*

##### Online Experiences of People with Disabilities Information Sheet

Who is doing this Research?

Hi! My name is Natilene Bowker and I am 26. I am a PhD student in the School of Psychology at Massey University in Palmerston North, and I am researching what it means to be online for people with disabilities. I identify strongly with disability, being diagnosed with Lupus (a connective tissue disorder) in my early teenage years.

What is this Research about?

This research aims to interview people with sensory and physical disabilities who use online technology regularly (e.g. daily or weekly users of the Internet and email) about what it means to be online. By interviewing people who have different disabilities, the research aims to look at the range of experiences people have access to when using the online medium. One of the main goals is to highlight the positives and negatives about being online for people with disabilities.

How did this Research come about?

Through looking into the experiences of chatroom users as part of a Masters thesis, I became interested in how online technology affects people with disabilities. As a person with a disability, who is aware of the different needs of people with disabilities, I am interested in the potential impact of this relatively new technology on the identity and experiences of people with disabilities.

What would be involved?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research. If you decide to take part, you will be involved in an interview, which will be conducted online using an electronic communication program. We can discuss which program would be best, based on the online resources you and I have access to, and which communication tool is most comfortable for you. For instance, I am familiar with the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) program. However, I would be very willing to use another type of program.

If we need to cease the interview for whatever reason (e.g. physical exhaustion, communication lag, or disconnection), we can arrange to continue the interview at a later date. The option of an email interview is also possible. In this situation, I would email you the interview questions and you could reply to these in your own time, at your own convenience.

Although I am putting no limits on the duration of the interviews, to give you an idea of the time commitment, I am expecting them to last on average around two hours.

### What Kinds of Questions would be asked?

The interview is in six main parts. In the first section I focus on how you came to be online. What it is like to be online is covered in section two. Section three concentrates on disclosing disability online and whether it makes a difference, while section four looks at online experiences. The focus of the interview changes to general information about you in the last two interview sections. For instance, in section five I am interested in details surrounding your disability, while section six considers background information about you, such as where you were born. At any stage throughout the interview you are free to ask questions of your own.

### Confidentiality and Anonymity

Interviews will be saved on the hard drive of my computer, which no one else has access to. During the interviews, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym to disguise your identity during the interviews and in the write-up. Any identifying information that appears will be removed, or changed from the interviews and write-up. Once the interview is complete, you will be sent a copy of the interview to read through and approve. This gives you the opportunity to make any changes to your transcript, if you wish.

For safe keeping, a copy of the interviews will also be stored on floppy disk. The computer and the floppy disks will be housed in a locked room, which I have the key to. On completion of the project, electronic copies of the interviews will be kept, in a secure place, for future research involving comparisons between the results of this study and other studies. Results of this research may be published and presented at conferences. However, your anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained as all identifying information will be removed from any excerpts used.

In relation to maintaining confidentiality during the interview, there are options for the two communication programs mentioned. For IRC, the direct client-to-client (DCC) communication facility allows for absolute confidentiality. DCC eliminates the possibility of any third party interference because it allows for a direct connection between two computers. For email, security software applications freely available online can be used to encrypt, or distort messages so that no one can read them except those who were meant to receive them.

### Your Rights as a Participant

All interviewees will be required to complete a consent form before participating. This is a contract, which outlines your rights as a participant in this research.

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to decline any involvement.
- You can ask any questions about the research at any stage.
- You can refuse to answer any particular questions, and withdraw from the research at any time.
- All information provided is confidential to the researcher, and is given on the understanding that your name will not be used under any circumstances, unless you give permission. As far as possible, I will assure your anonymity and confidentiality.
- A summary of the findings will be available to you at the completion of the research.

If you have any questions about this project, you are welcome to get in touch with me, or my supervisors (see below). If you decide to take part, please contact me by email, or phone, and I will send you a consent form.

To contact Natilene Bowker, email - [Natilene.Bowker@actrix.co.nz](mailto:Natilene.Bowker@actrix.co.nz) - or leave a message with the Massey School of Psychology, phone (06) 350-5799 extn 2040.

Dr Keith Tuffin, School of Psychology, Massey University, phone (06) 350-5799 extn 2072. Email - [K.Tuffin@massey.ac.nz](mailto:K.Tuffin@massey.ac.nz)

Dr Mandy Morgan, School of Psychology, Massey University, phone (06) 350-5799 extn 2063. Email - [C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz)

## A Project about People with Disabilities and Their Experiences Online

Who is doing this Project?

My name is Natilene Bowker. I am 26. I am a PhD student in the School of Psychology at Massey Uni. I was diagnosed with Lupus (a connective tissue disorder) in my early teenage years.

What is this Project about?

This project will interview people with different disabilities about what it means to be online. The project is looking at different experiences people have online. One of the goals is to highlight the good and not-so-good things about being online.

I am interested in interviewing people who use the Internet regularly (e.g. daily / weekly).

What would you have to do?

If you decide to participate, you will be involved in a face-to-face interview with a Sign language interpreter. I will pay for interpreting costs.

I am expecting interviews to last about 2 hours.

What Kinds of Questions would be asked?

The interview is in 6 parts.

Part 1. How you came to be online

Part 2. What it's like to be online

Part 3. Disclosing your disability online

Part 4. Online experiences

Part 5. Background information about you, such as where you were born.

Part 6. Details surrounding your disability

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Interviews will be saved on my hard drive. No one else has access to this. You will be asked to choose a false name. This will protect your identity. Any identifying information will be changed from the interviews, and write-up.

For safe keeping, a copy of the interviews will be on disk. The computer and disks will be kept in a locked room. I have the key to this room. On completion of the project, copies of the interviews will be kept on disk and / or on the hard drive of my computer, in a secure place, for future research. This may involve comparing the results of this project with other projects. Results of this project may also be published and presented at conferences. However, all information that could, in anyway, identify you, will be removed.

#### Your Rights as a Participant

You will be required to complete a consent form. This is a contract. It outlines your rights as a participant.

- Your participation in this project is voluntary. You have the right to refuse any involvement.
- You can ask any questions about the project at any stage.
- You can refuse to answer any particular questions, and withdraw from the project at any time.
- All information provided is confidential to me, the researcher. It is given on the understanding that your name will not be used, unless you give permission. As far as possible, I will make sure your anonymity and confidentiality are maintained.

A summary of findings will be available when the project is finished.

Further information contact Natilene Bowker. Email - [Natilene.Bowker@actrix.co.nz](mailto:Natilene.Bowker@actrix.co.nz)

My supervisors are:

Dr Keith Tuffin, School of Psychology, Massey University. Email - [K.Tuffin@massey.ac.nz](mailto:K.Tuffin@massey.ac.nz)

Dr Mandy Morgan, School of Psychology, Massey University. Email - [C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz)

## Online Experiences of People with Disabilities Information Sheet

Who is doing this Research?

Hi! My name is Natilene Bowker and I am 26. I am a PhD student in the School of Psychology at Massey University in Palmerston North, and I am researching what it means to be online for people with disabilities. I identify strongly with disability, being diagnosed with Lupus (a connective tissue disorder) in my early teenage years.

What is this Research about?

This research aims to interview people with sensory and physical disabilities who use online technology regularly (e.g. daily or weekly users of the Internet and email) about what it means to be online. By interviewing people who have different disabilities, the research aims to look at the range of experiences people have access to when using the online medium. One of the main goals is to highlight the positives and negatives about being online for people with disabilities.

How did this Research come about?

Through looking into the experiences of chatroom users as part of a Masters thesis, I became interested in how online technology affects people with disabilities. As a person with a disability, who is aware of the different needs of people with disabilities, I am interested in the potential impact of this relatively new technology on the identity and experiences of people with disabilities.

What would be involved?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you will be involved in a face-to-face interview recorded on audio-tape. Although I am putting no limits on the duration of the interviews, to give you an idea of the time commitment, I am expecting them to last on average around two hours.

What Kinds of Questions would be asked?

The interview is in six main parts. In the first section I focus on how you came to be online. What it is like to be online is covered in section two. Section three concentrates on disclosing disability online and whether it makes a difference, while section four looks at online experiences. The focus of the interview changes to general information about you in the last two interview sections. For instance, in section five I am interested in details surrounding your disability, while section six considers background information about you, such as where you were born. At any stage throughout the interview you are free to ask questions of your own.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Once the tape-recorded interview is transcribed, the document will be saved on the hard drive of my computer, which no one else has access to. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym to disguise your identity during the interview and in the write-up. Any identifying information that appears will be removed, or changed from the interview and write-up. Once the interview is complete, you will be sent a copy to read through and approve. This gives you the opportunity to make any changes to your transcript, if you wish.

For safe keeping, a copy of the interviews will also be stored on floppy disk. The computer and the floppy disks will be housed in a locked room, which I have the key to. On completion of the project, electronic copies of the interviews will be kept in a secure place for future research involving comparisons between the results of this study and other studies. Results of this research may be published and presented at conferences. However, your anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained as all identifying information will be removed from any excerpts used.

#### Your Rights as a Participant

All interviewees will be required to complete a consent form before participating. This is a contract, which outlines your rights as a participant in this research.

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to decline any involvement.
- You can ask any questions about the research at any stage.
- You can refuse to answer any particular questions, and withdraw from the research at any time.
- All information provided is confidential to the researcher, and is given on the understanding that your name will not be used under any circumstances, unless you give permission. As far as possible, I will assure your anonymity and confidentiality.
- A summary of the findings will be available to you at the completion of the research.

If you have any questions about this project, you are welcome to get in touch with me, or my supervisors (see below). If you decide to take part, please contact me by email, or phone, and I will send you a consent form.

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Dr Mandy Morgan, School of Psychology, Massey University, phone (06) 350-5799 extn 2063. Email - [C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Forms

### *Hard Copy of Consent Form for Online Interviews*

#### Online Experiences of People with Disabilities Hard Copy of Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. As far as possible, my anonymity and confidentiality will be assured. Results of this research may be published and presented at conferences. However, my anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained as all identifying information will be removed from any excerpts used.

I agree to the interview being electronically saved on the hard drive of the researcher's computer. I also understand that I have the right to ask for the saving process to be discontinued at any time during the interview.

Please indicate by circling the communication tool you would prefer to use during the online interview. Information about each option is outlined in the information sheet.

- Email
- Internet Relay Chat
- Other (please specify)

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I agree to an electronic copy of my interview (with all identifying details removed, or changed) being kept in a secure place upon completion of this research, for future research purposes.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signed:

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Name:

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Date:

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**Online Experiences of People with Disabilities  
Electronic Copy of Consent Form**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. As far as possible, my anonymity and confidentiality will be assured. Results of this research may be published and presented at conferences. However, my anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained as all identifying information will be removed from any excerpts used.

I agree to the interview being electronically saved on the hard drive of the researcher's computer. I also understand that I have the right to ask for the saving process to be discontinued at any time during the interview.

I agree to an electronic copy of my interview (with all identifying details removed, or changed) being kept in a secure place upon completion of this research, for future research purposes.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

If you agree with the conditions set out in this consent form reply to this email with the words - AGREEMENT CONFIRMED - in the subject line. In your reply please indicate which of the following communication options you would prefer to use during the online interview. Information about each option is outlined in the information sheet.

- Email
- Internet Relay Chat
- Other (If you choose other, please specify what that communication tool is, in your reply.)

## Online Experiences of People with Disabilities

### Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission.

My anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained, as all identifying information will be removed.

I agree to the interview being tape-recorded. I also understand that I have the right to ask for the tape-recorder to be switched off at any time. After completion of the research, the tape will be destroyed.

I agree to an electronic copy of my interview (with all identifying details removed) being kept in a secure place, after the research is finished, for future research.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signed:

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Name:

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Date:

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**Online Experiences of People with Disabilities  
Consent Form for Tape-Recorded Interviews**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. As far as possible, my anonymity and confidentiality will be assured. Results of this research may be published and presented at conferences. However, my anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained as all identifying information will be removed from any excerpts used.

I agree to the interview being tape-recorded. I also understand that I have the right to ask for the tape-recorder to be discontinued at any time during the interview.

I agree to the interview being electronically saved on the hard drive of the researcher's computer.

I agree to an electronic copy of my interview (with all identifying details removed, or changed) being kept in a secure place upon completion of this research, for future research purposes.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signed:

---

Name:

---

Date:

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## Appendix C: Interview Schedule

### *Section 1: Getting Online Access*

1. Can you recall when you first started going online? Can you tell me about that? By online, I mean inclusive of email and the Internet, and any other online system like chat programs. I'm interested in when you began any kind of online participation, or electronic communication.
2. Tell me about how you became interested in the online medium? It might help to think about why you chose to go online.
3. How often do you go online?
4. Can you describe the types of things you have used online?
5. What online resources do you use the most?
6. How useful has the online medium been to you? (Ideas - In what way has it been useful? Can you think of a particular example, such as social, educational, economic, and, or political benefits. You don't need to cover all of these, only those which are relevant to you.)
7. Are there any resources, or services you would like available online, which are not currently provided? If there are, can you elaborate on these?
8. Do you think the government should subsidise online access costs for people with disabilities? Whether you think they should, or not, can you explain your reasons for thinking that?

### *Section 2: Being Online*

1. Can you tell me about what it's like to be online? (Ideas - Is being online different to being off-line? Do you feel different? Do you think about yourself in a different way?)
2. How do you feel about having access to other networks of people online?
3. Do you feel more connected with what's going on? Whether you agree, or disagree, can you provide some explanation for me?
4. Do people respond to you in a better way when you're online? For example, do they seem friendlier? Are they easier to approach?
5. Would you ever want to meet people, who you have met online, in person? Either way, could you explain your reasons for me?
6. What do you like about being online?
7. What don't you like about being online?

### *Section 3: Talking About Disability Online?*

1. Does having a disability make any difference online? (Ideas - Does it matter? Does it affect your interactions with other people online? Does it affect how much control you have in a situation?) Whether you think it does, or does not, can you offer some explanation for me?
2. How important is it for others to know that you have a disability online?
3. Do you have any preferences for mentioning, or not mentioning your disability online? Either way, could you explain your reasons?
4. If this applies to you, can you tell me about a time online when you chose to disclose your disability? If this is relevant to you, you might like to explain why you chose to do this?

5. Likewise, if this applies to you, can you tell me about a time online when you did not choose to disclose your disability? If this question is relevant, you might like to explain why?
6. In general, can you think of advantages for people with disabilities using online technology?
7. In general, can you think of disadvantages for people with disabilities using online technology?

#### *Section 4: Experiences Online*

1. Can you tell me about a positive or good experience you have had online? It may relate to any online activity.
2. Can you tell me about a negative or bad experience you have had online? It may relate to any online activity.
3. Has having access to online technology made a difference for you? Either way, can you explain your reasons for me?
4. What kind of advice would you give other people with disabilities, who were considering going online?

#### *Section 5: Focusing on your Disability*

1. What is your disability? Did it develop from birth or was it acquired?
2. Is having a disability important to you? Either way, can you explain?
3. In what kinds of ways does your disability affect you? (Ideas - Can you think of an example when your disability affected you? It may have been in a physical or social sense. It may have influenced the way you relate to others; the way you interact; how you feel spiritually, or emotionally. How did you feel about that? How was that for you? There may also be other ways in which it impacts on your life, for example, in an economic or political way. You don't need to cover all of these, just what is relevant to you.)

#### *Section 6: Background Details*

1. How old are you?
2. Where were you born?
3. Where did you grow up? It might help to think about the country, or region (city / rural small town), and, or the institution where you grew up.
4. Are there any ethnic groups you identify with?
5. Can you tell me about your educational background? This may cover level(s) of education, and type of education such as whether you received this at school, in an institution, or were home educated.
6. Can you tell me about any work experience you have had, whether paid or unpaid? I'm interested in all types of work - from paid employment to voluntary work, housework, looking after other people inside or outside your home, or living situation, as well as self-employment.

## Appendix D: Summary of Findings for Participants

What it means to be Online for People with Disabilities:

### Summary of Findings for Participants

Natilene Bowker, School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North.

### Acknowledgements

This project has been several years in the making and, as such, it has incorporated relations with many people who have encouraged, supported, and challenged my thinking along a stimulating path. Among the many people I have introduced my project to, I would particularly like to thank the participants with disabilities who allowed me to enter into conversation with them, online and offline, about their online experiences. The knowledge and experiences you shared have been foundational to the thesis. Your commitment has contributed significantly to the project's success. Thank you.

### Background to the Study

People with disabilities have experienced discrimination and prejudice because of the less conventional ways in which they operate. These different ways of operating are often visually apparent. The online medium, on the other hand, may offer social benefits because these different ways of operating are typically not available to others when interacting through electronic communication, where physical appearance cues are not available. So, this study set out to understand the social impact of the online medium on the lives of people with physical and sensory disabilities. This involved finding out about the kinds of positive and negative experiences encountered by people with disabilities online.

### Approach to the Research

As I was interested in understanding people's experiences, I chose a qualitative approach. This involved acquiring large amounts of textual data through interviews. After advertising my study amongst different disability communities, 21 people with physical and sensory disabilities volunteered to take part in an interview. This led to 214 pages of interview data.

### Findings

After reading the data over and over again, I identified seven patterns of talk, which show different aspects of people's online experiences. Each pattern was made up of several parts, which helped demonstrate how each pattern worked. I have identified the patterns and their associated parts as follows:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <u>Choice to disclose</u><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Relevance</li><li>➤ Anonymity</li><li>➤ Normality</li></ul></li></ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <u>Accessing a socially valued identity</u><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Uncontaminated judgement</li><li>➤ Exhibiting strengths</li><li>➤ Operating independently</li></ul></li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <u>Transcendence</u><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Life-altering</li><li>➤ Overcoming physical barriers</li><li>➤ Disconnecting disability</li></ul></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ <u>Participating in the world</u><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Ease of access</li><li>➤ Finding like minds</li><li>➤ Not being alone</li><li>➤ World at fingertips</li></ul></li></ul> |

- ❑ Keeping safe
  - Happens to others
  - Stranger danger
  - Personal judgement
- ❑ Qualified deception
  - Withholding information
  - Reconstructing information
- ❑ Disabling differentials
  - Negative reactions
  - Exclusion
  - Gatekeeping
  - Disability costs

Choice to disclose is about the presence or absence of disability becoming a feature controlled by the individual online. Disclosing disability occurs only when it is *relevant* to conversation, while the medium's *anonymity* sustains non-disclosure. Having the right to choose to disclose disability enables people with disabilities to participate under *normal* conditions.

Accessing a socially valued identity is organised around the way people with disabilities can demonstrate their capabilities online, independent of the physical and attitudinal barriers tied to disabled identities. Online access enables people to be judged purely on the content of what they say, *uncontaminated* from others' negative reactions towards disability. This permits people with disabilities to *exhibit their strengths* by demonstrating their ability to produce valuable social and economic goods. Free of the physical barriers offline, people with disabilities can *operate independently*, which is a feature of high social value in today's society.

Transcendence involves a great capacity to operate in the world in which physical, social, and psychological limitations of having to operate within disabled bodies are surpassed online. The online medium's wide and useful application *alters the lives* of people with disabilities in revolutionary ways. This includes *overcoming physical barriers* by compensating for physical incapacity through the tools and facilities available online, as well as *disconnecting* the effects of impairment, allowing people with disabilities to operate like everyone else.

Participating in the world is based on being part of a wider community of relationships, people, interests, activities, and information, which creates a sense of belonging and connection with the world. The online medium facilitates unparalleled *ease of access* to people with similar interests and *like minds*. Accessing similar others, in terms of people experiencing the same or similar disability, facilitates a feeling of *not being alone*. Online access leads people with disabilities to the empowering position of having the *world at their fingertips*.

Keeping safe is organised around strategies for allowing people to maintain a pleasant and secure experience, while participating in a medium where there is potential for positive as well as negative outcomes. Harmful outcomes *happen to others* who assume online interactions occur in the same way as offline relationships. By drawing a distinction in security between on- and offline interactions and not disclosing intimate details, people maintain their safety online. A second strategy involves exercising caution before interacting with *strangers*. A third strategy is based on people's abilities to develop good *personal judgement* about other online users in order to judge the safety of online interactions.

On the other hand, qualified deception is about the appropriate use of carrying out (minor) acts of deception online, which are separate from deceptive and harmful acts. People *withhold information* about their personal details to avoid prejudiced reactions towards disability, while reconstructing information enables access to alternative experiences, removed from disabled identities. The qualified deception pattern of talk permits people with disabilities to operate beyond the constraints of *keeping safe*.

In contrast to the extensive benefits of participating online, disabling differentials demonstrates the discrimination of people with disabilities online. When disability is disclosed people are met with *negative reactions*. The different mechanical and operational requirements for people with disabilities to participate online lead to barriers of *exclusion*. The dependency on other people, structures, and systems by people with disabilities *gatekeeps* their access to and participation in the online medium. Further, operating within disabled bodies online incurs *costs* that are not encountered by non-disabled online users. *Disabling differentials* highlights the inequities surrounding online access and participation for people with disabilities compared with their non-disabled peers.

It is important to note that while I have identified these patterns in the data, they were generated from my interests. Therefore, I fully acknowledge the bias in my findings.

### Conclusion

Overall, the patterns in participants' interview data demonstrate many social benefits for people with disabilities. The online medium affords them unprecedented opportunities to "be" in the world, inclusive of increased access and participation within many areas of life at local and global levels, as abilities extend beyond the body. These opportunities are made possible through the online medium's capacity to allow people with disabilities to broaden the features that have traditionally defined them. This enables people with disabilities to temporarily operate outside the limitations of disabled identities and their associated prejudice.

Within the disability literature, there are controversial issues tied to moving between able and non-disabled forms. At a collective level, passing as others without disabilities may deny difference. While this argument is acknowledged, what the data demonstrates is that people with disabilities value the opportunity to access a social space where they can temporarily operate without the traditional constraints of disabled identities. Typically, this has not been available in other contexts of their lives. Hence, this opportunity is cherished and celebrated.

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