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Troubling narratives about dis/ability and the social encounter through conversations between narrative inquiry, critical disability studies, and geographies of disability

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ABSTRACT

This article explores written narratives produced by two 'abled' people about a social encounter, or event, with a 'disabled' person in an inland Chinese city. To interpret these, I draw upon principles and approaches associated with narrative inquiry, critical disability studies and geographies of disability. I identify the structural elements, sequentiality, and themes (e.g. fear, pity and especially anxiety, or perplexity) permeating these narratives as well as their lack of resolution, or closure. Later, I situate these narratives within wider discursive contexts albeit while emphasising how perplexity emerges through a lack of identity, or rupture, between words and the world. These troubling and perplexing narratives register the fragility of symbolic systems and the troubled subject positions these enable/disable. Nevertheless, and crucially, these narratives also trouble the taken-for-grantedness of ostensibly stable **abled/disabled** categories, persons, and objects, in ways which may permit realisation of things outside reductive hierarchical binaries.

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Dis/ability; narrative (inquiry); critical disability studies; geographies of disability; defrosting/perplexity; non-identity thinking

Points of interest

- This article presents insights into how 'abled' people reflect upon, and narrate, social encounters with 'disabled' people. To do so, I draw upon two written accounts referring to events in and around two inland Chinese cities.
- Powerful yet simplistic ways of thinking about ability and disability which are grounded in language, society and culture shaped how participants saw and made sense of the disabled people they encountered.
- Participants also felt a mismatch between the ways they had been taught to think about ability and disability and how these 'things'

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appeared through the social encounter. Consequently, participants seemed to experience symptoms resembling definitions of anxiety.

- These anxieties are productive. They emerge when people begin to perceive the imprecision, and limits, of categories like self and other and ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’.
- In this article, I try to show potential for conversation, and dialogue, between not only narrative inquiry, critical disability studies and geographies of disability but also ‘ability’ and ‘disability’.

Introduction

This article investigates written narratives produced by two ‘abled’ people about a social encounter, or event, with a ‘disabled’ person in an inland Chinese city. I not only explore these narratives for what they reveal in and of themselves but also deploy them as prisms through and with which to reflect, more generally, upon the ways ‘ability’ and ‘disability’ are accomplished through and between people. Since this article highlights how these terms—namely ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’, or ‘ability’ and ‘disability’—and the ways, and orders, of being to which they refer are unstable, I have begun this article by placing quotation marks around them although to continue to do so would be ‘stylistically awkward’, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann observe in their *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966, 14).

To interpret this written discourse, I draw upon principles and approaches associated with narrative analysis or inquiry and, albeit to a lesser extent, critical disability studies (hereafter, CDS) and geographies of disability, in specific, and invariably partial, ways which reflect my understanding, and interpretation, of these complex and contested perspectives upon, and orientations to, the world, and the ‘things’ therein.

With such qualifications in mind, this article regards narratives as devices through which persons attempt not only to order experience and events but also produce, or fabricate, order and identity to self and to other. Narrative analysis explores the everyday stories which people construct, in ways which help make sense of, and give intelligibility and order to, the world. Scholars of narrative inquiry lucidly disclose how persons *impose* order upon the ‘flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives’, albeit while recognising that such processes, and products, are not unfettered acts of creative agency but reliant upon ‘linguistic and cultural resources’ (Riessman 1993, 2).

While, as Kirsty Liddiard explains, CDS is a ‘transdisciplinary space’, committed to ‘destabilising and contesting disablism and ableism’ and ‘dis/ableism’, namely ‘the iterative processes of ableism and disablism that casts [disabled people] as a diminished state of being human’ (2021, 41), of primary relevance to this article is the way CDS critically attends to ‘how disability and

impairment feature in cultural, lingual and discursive domains, and their relationship to materialism and material reality' (Flynn 2019, 168).

Meanwhile, spatial studies of disability—or what Brendan Gleeson has termed geographies of disability (1999, 2)—have described and critiqued 'spatial patterns of disadvantage' and 'oppressive environments' (Gleeson 1999, 2–3). Seen through lenses informed by ideas from geography, place, or space, may be regarded not as '*pre-determinedly* exclusionary and oppressive' but as constituting 'contexts in which people engage and perform their embodiment', in ways which 're/produce *and* transform both themselves and their surroundings' (Hall and Wilton 2017, 728, emphasis added). Such attention to the 'recursive relationship between identity and space' (Imrie and Edwards 2007, 626) may be regarded in conjunction with a 'relational turn' within critical disability studies (Hall and Wilton 2017, 728).

As well as drawing upon the conceptualising potential of these individual perspectives, this article seeks to contribute to conversations, or dialogue, between them, such as those already occurring between not only narrative inquiry and CDS (e.g. Flynn 2019) but also geography. Through these conversations, it may be possible not only to destabilise and disturb existing, and inescapably reductive, ways of seeing, being and becoming but also apprehend self and others—and be human—in more expansive ways.

Put differently, these lenses combine to reveal, or disclose, not only how the objects of social and linguistic construction seep into ostensibly mundane places and people in ways which produce and reinforce rigid, reductive, taken-for-granted, stable, and hierarchically related binaries of ability/disability, a power dimension Stuart Hall communicates by making one term in a binary bold and italicising the 'other' (e.g. **white/black**, **men/women**, **British/alien** (1997 [2013]: 225) and **abled** (or **non-disabled**)/*disabled*) but also and especially how the apparent identity between words and the world, and the things therein, are already troubled. Through these lenses it becomes possible to glimpse worlds, people, and things outside the reductive dialectic, or dualism, of ability and disability. This is a world of dis/ability. As Dan Goodley explains, this 'split term ... acknowledges the ways ... disability and disablism (and disability and ability) can only ever be understood simultaneously in relation to one another. The slashed and split term denotes the complex ways in which opposites bleed into one another' (2014, xiii). This world is comparable to that Jean-Paul Sartre's Roquentin glimpses in *Nausea*, namely one in which existence suddenly unveils itself so that it has '*lost* the *harmless* quality of an abstract concept' (1965, 127, emphasis added). Because this leaves 'soft, monstrous masses ... a frightful, obscene nakedness', persons, like Roquentin, may have liked the world 'to exist *less strongly*' (Sartre 1965, 127, emphasis added). It is, nevertheless, productive, and revelatory, to regard, and attend to, a world of things rather objects, even though this may be less stable and more perplexing. A thing, as Ingold explains, is a "going on" ... a place where several goings on become entwined" and "has

the character ... of a knot whose constituent threads, far from being contained within it, trail beyond, only to become caught with other threads in other knots". An object, by contrast, "stands ... as a fait accompli, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection" (2010: 4).

This article, accordingly, dwells with and alongside perplexity, highlighting how it provides opportunities to attend to how 'the meaning of disability is *made* through ... interpretive relations' and to question 'the cultural processes that shore up the capacity to divide' persons (Titchkosky 2001, 83, 84, original emphasis). By inviting, or obliging, reflection upon how 'humanity is *achieved* through interactional work that makes use of typically unexamined conceptions' (Titchkosky 2001, 88, emphasis added), the narratives in this article, and the thinking they register/generate, have the capacity to '*unfreeze*, defrost as it were' '*frozen*' thoughts (Arendt 1971, 431, original emphasis), accepted rules of conduct, and 'unexamined prejudgments which prevent thinking by suggesting that we know where we not only don't know but cannot know' (Arendt 1971, 432–433), in ways which may permit 'original' meanings to be reclaimed. These prejudgments are especially disturbing because they 'come with a veneer of certainty': 'They tell us that this is just how things are or how things ought to be', in ways that, as Cheryl Mattingly explains, may 'damage the practical capacity of ordinary political agents to make thoughtful judgments' (2019, 423).

Methodology matters

The two narratives to which this article significantly refers were produced as part of a larger exploratory qualitative research project which, in a broad and expansive sense, sought to dwell with and alongside notions like 'ability' and 'disability' with the intention of making and sustaining dialogue about 'difference' in and between Hong Kong and the United Kingdom.

The part of the project to which this article refers imitated Goodley's study which elicited stories about non-disabled people's reactions to disability, mostly from the perspectives of disabled persons and non-disabled allies (2014, 72–75). Like Goodley, I made a 'call for stories', asking my students to document a specific social encounter, either through writing or another form of media (e.g. audio recording, face-to-face interview, etc.). After receiving their narratives, I invited students to recruit participants from within their personal networks and ask them to record and submit their own narratives. More detailed explanation about the project was given to both student participants and those they recruited themselves. This took the form of a one-page letter addressed to participants which expressed my intention to 'collect stories about people's verbal and/or non-verbal responses to disability and the feelings and emotions that these produce' (extracted from my letter to participants). This letter also stated that 'these stories may [either] involve

you,' [or] you might merely have witnessed, or heard about, them' and that participants should 'try not to think too much' and to 'write in either Chinese characters or English,' whichever language they felt most comfortable using.

Concurrently, during semi-structured group interviews I asked disabled persons and their parents and siblings to narrate their experiences of social encounters. Then, narratives were exchanged: non-disabled writers were asked to read and respond to disabled narratives and vice-versa, thereby producing actual, albeit contrived, dialogue which I elaborate upon elsewhere (Cockain, 2021a). More than 50 narratives were produced. Texts submitted in Chinese were translated into English. I am aware of how the meanings of words, and the contexts in which they occur, may not necessarily be preserved when translating between languages. Although in one instance I attend to Chinese words themselves, my focus in this article is upon the ways words are made to combine with others in ways which seem intent upon producing not only stories but also identities.

Participants' discourse was made subject to my interpretation of principles associated with narrative analysis, or inquiry (see, for example, Riessman 2002; Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2008, eds.). This process involves 'reducing a long response, parsing it ... into lines, stanzas, and parts' (Riessman 2002, 242). I draw, first, upon William Labov's structural approach to narratives (1972) and, second, I utilise an approach derived from James Gee, the latter of which re/arranges text into poetic units in ways which not only sensitises, or orientates, readers to the ways people try to *make* sense but also recognises that linguistic units are crucial to this meaning making (e.g. 1991). Gee also attunes readers to the subtleties of discourse—like uses of pronouns, and moments of hesitation, as well as repetition and the ways people's stances may shift within narrative (e.g. Cole 2019, 29).

Analysing two, rather than more, narratives, has allowed me to present them in total rather than in part. However, as this article unfolds, readers will notice that narrators' narratives are presented twice: first as uninterrupted text and second as subdivided into entailments and stanzas which bear the limits—and extent—of my interpretive gaze. This repetition may be jarring by virtue of how it obliges, and perhaps even coerces, readers to re-return to events in ways which mirror the processes undertaken by the narrators who feature in this article. Such movements may, in fact, facilitate the defrosting (Arendt 1971, 431) this article strives to realise, or accomplish. It is, nevertheless, crucial to acknowledge that this article registers processes of interpretation and that the same 'raw' data might be re/arranged and re/storied in ways other than how they are made to appear in the pages which follow. Presenting the narratives as uninterrupted text before being written over by my interpretation may not only permit participants to 'speak' or 'write' for themselves but also enable readers to supplement the voices in this text—including my own—with that of their own, in ways which may produce more of the conversation, and dialogue, this article is intent upon contriving.

This article, and the project to which it refers, may likely raise ethical anxieties in readers. Some of these concerns, whether real or imagined, may be placated by the fact that my project received ethical approval from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee at the university where I previously worked (reference: HSEARS20191002001), namely The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and that this endorsement, or consent, extends to now, or here, even when I have departed from there because current practice in the institution where I am currently affiliated—namely Canterbury Christ Church University—does not require a renewed application in situations when approval had already been given by a recognised ethics committee.

Despite ethical approval, boundaries between ethical and unethical research practice are imprecise, and perhaps even blurry. Readers may, for example, have ethical concerns regarding power imbalances, possible coercion, and potential harm. Such concerns—whether real or imagined—precipitate the need for a lengthier narrative. All participants were informed of the nature and scope of my project, my intention to publish and to refer to them pseudonymously in the event my intentions to publish were realised. Participants were given one hundred Hong Kong dollars (approximately £10) by way of compensating them for their involvement. Crucially, recruitment of participants did not commence until the module teaching and assessment had been completed so as not to communicate erroneously a blurring between ‘their’ study and ‘my’ research.

Although I have interpreted students’ lack of participation in my project (only 11 out of 100 initially responded to my ‘call for stories’) as evidence that my teacher identity did not coerce participation, students might have felt obliged to produce critical readings and/or answer in ways that might make them appear ‘good’ because of social desirability bias, namely tendencies for people to emphasise socially desirable attitudes and behaviours and to de-emphasise more negative, or undesirable, traits. However, most concerning to me is that this project seemed to oblige participants to revisit, and re-experience, troubling experiences. Also troubling is that the two participants whose narratives this article largely refers may feel vulnerable, or exposed, by virtue of the presentation of *their* stories in isolation from the many other narratives this project produced. After prolonged, and ongoing, reflection, I have come to narrate ethical transgressions, and potential, or actual, costs to research participants as being necessary, if unwelcome, corollaries of my effort to provide glimpses into ‘the non-disabled psyche’ and the ways ‘non-disabled people and disablist culture ... subjugate ... disabled people’ (Goodley 2012, 181). I also hope any costs of this research may also be offset by the insights this article, and the project to which it refers, provides into the fear, fragility, and uncertainty which seem to populate ostensibly robust nondisabled imaginaries.

Orientating toward narratives

The paragraphs below introduce two narratives, each of which is made subject to a specific reading, or interpretation. The first reading orientates toward, and highlights, structural elements while the second is concerned with scenes, or stanzas, and sequentiality.

Introducing Yuyan and her narrative through a Labovian lens

One student who responded to my 'call for stories' was Yuyan, a freshman student from Xian in central China's Shaanxi province. She described her family as 'traditional' and 'well-educated' and herself as 'kind', before narrating an encounter that had, as she put it, left a 'deep impression'. The 'raw' components of Yuyan's narrative may be re-transcribed by applying Labov's structural approach (1972), particularly the six common elements, or properties, which he claims characterise a 'fully formed' narrative. These are abstract (hereafter, A); orientation (hereafter, O); complicating action (hereafter, CA); evaluation (hereafter, E); resolution (hereafter, R) and coda (hereafter, C).

Yuyan's narrative:

It was when I was eight years old. It was a rainy autumn day, during the National Day holiday. My family and I were driving to another province. After driving a long time, we stopped to rest at a service station. My mother and I got out of the car to go to the toilet. The tiled floor was extremely slippery, because of the rain. When I waited for my mother, I saw a disabled woman. Both her legs were severely deformed. She looked very strange. I felt horrible and curious. At that time, we were the only persons there. The woman struggled to walk by herself due to the slippery floor. I started to worry. I felt heartbroken. My teachers and parents told me to help people in need, but the look on her face was indifferent and even a little stern. She just walked past me, and I stared at her during this time. I hesitated, thinking whether I should help her. She seemed so pitiful but also fierce. Finally, I walked up and asked, "May I help you?" The woman said "no" without even looking at me. I felt so hurt but watched her until she disappeared from sight.

Yuyan's narrative through a Labovian lens:

It was when I was eight years old (O). It was a rainy autumn day, during the National Day holiday (O). My family and I were driving to another province (O).

After driving a long time, we stopped to rest at a service station. My mother and I got out of the car to go to the toilet (CA). The tiled floor was extremely slippery, because of the rain (O). When I waited for my mother, I saw a disabled woman (CA). Both her legs were severely deformed (O).

She looked very strange (E). I felt horrible and curious (E). At that time, we were the only persons there (O). The woman struggled to walk by herself due to the slippery floor (O). I started to worry (E). I felt heartbroken (E).

My teachers and parents told me to help people in need, but the look on her face was indifferent and even a little stern (E). She just walked past me, and I stared at her during this time (CA). I hesitated, thinking whether I should help her (CA). She seemed so pitiful but also fierce (E). Finally, I walked up and asked, “May I help you?” (CA). The woman said “no” without even looking at me (CA). I felt so hurt (E) but watched her until she disappeared from sight (R).

Not all six Labovian elements are present in Yuyan’s narrative. The absence of (A) is inconsequential to this discussion. It is not only ‘optional’ in ordinary circumstances but also unnecessary here given that because narratives had been elicited, participants had no need to ‘bid’ for an extended turn (Patterson 2008, 25). Put differently, my request for participants to produce a narrative, or story, may be ‘seen to constitute the abstract, negating the need for the narrator to produce one’ (Patterson 2008, 25). A more telling omission, or absence, is a fully formed, and conclusive ‘result’ and ‘coda’. This might, for example, index and register a lack of resolution so that like ‘Cindy’, to whom Catherine Riessman refers, Yuyan had ‘not arrived on some firm emotional ground’ (2002, 239). Yuyan was, perhaps, stuck in a liminal space despite her efforts to narrate order upon herself, the woman, and the encounter they both co-produced. Absences of result and coda might, put differently, indicate Yuyan was unable to remedy tensions and was, thus, stranded ‘in the middle of the conflict’ (Riessman 2002, 242) which her involvement in my project might even have returned her to. It is, nevertheless, possible to ‘read’ a partial, albeit implicit, resolution in Yuyan’s text in ways that may make her partly like the young narrator in James Joyce’s ‘Araby’ (2000), a resemblance (or lack thereof) to which I return.

Introducing Ruolan and orientating toward units, sequentiality and themes

Ruolan, a 32-year-old woman from Xian working in telecommunications, narrated an encounter in August 2018 when her company required her to promote a mobile phone service in a supermarket. Although it is possible to produce a Labovian account of Ruolan’s text, it may also be oriented to as a series of ‘acts’, or ‘narrative segments’ (Patterson 2008, 34), which conjoin with others to constitute ‘higher-level organizations’: the ‘macrostructure’ (Gee 2000, 110). As Gee explains:

‘Each stanza is a particular “take” on a character, action, event, claim ... and each involves a shift ... or a change in the time or framing of events from the preceding stanza. Each stanza represents a particular perspective ... in terms of what is seen; it represents an image, what the ‘camera’ is focused on, a “scene” (1991, 23–24).

Ruolan’s narrative:

‘A disabled young man came over. He might have suffered from polio as a child as he had deformities in his limbs and severe muscle atrophy in one of his legs and

hands. He was unable to walk steadily, and his head was slightly skewed, and he talked inarticulately. I gave him a chair to sit down on and asked him about his spending habits and needs to provide him with some recommendations. After a patient exchange, he eventually bought a mobile phone card suitable for his use. I gave him some extra gifts. Before leaving the shop, he asked if he could add me to his *WeChat* [a free messaging and calling application]. Usually, I won't give strangers my contact details, but in the face of this disabled lad's request, I was unable to refuse him, worrying that it might hurt his feelings. I reluctantly agreed, finding, when inputting my number into his handset, his profile photo was a foreign beauty. He smiled, telling me it was his "girlfriend". My colleagues slightly teased him. "Your girlfriend is so beautiful ah". He replied proudly "we often chat". After he left, we discussed whether the lad was joking. In the following days, the young man sent me messages and pictures now and then. I ignored them because I was extremely busy plus I was not familiar with him. Later I felt my life intruded and deleted him from my *WeChat*. To be honest, I didn't give too much thought to this incident before replying to your message. It made me reflect upon whether my behaviour was appropriate. Was it moral? Did I give him warmth, or did I harm him? Undoubtedly, the discovery that he was disabled stimulated an instinctive reaction to be more patient, show more care and give him respect. But looking back now, perhaps I should have declined his request because I wasn't polite afterwards. I do not know whether I hurt him. I hope he is tough and was unaffected by this. In this way I can feel less guilt. In fact, I am also sensitive. Since childhood, I have worried about whether my actions might discomfort others but I'm also afraid of being influenced by the feelings of others. I think the hearts of people with disabilities should be more sensitive. I have never known their mental journeys. If there is an opportunity in the future, I would be happy to make friends with them and listen to their inner voices. I believe most of us are concerned about people with disabilities but because this group is not closely related to our daily life, we do not understand their life and inner needs and we have not learned to understand them. We know we should give them more love and tolerance but when we actually meet, can we do it? Are we really as loving and kind as we think we are? My action of deleting him from my *WeChat* contacts is enough to show that my soul is far less noble than I thought'.

Ruolan's narrative *as* stanzas:

Part 1: Taken-for-granted orientation, or matter in place

'A disabled young man came over. He might have suffered from polio as a child as he had deformities in his limbs and severe muscle atrophy in one of his legs and hands. He was unable to walk steadily, and his head was slightly skewed, and he talked inarticulately.

Part 2: Frustration, or tensions, and charity

I gave him a chair to sit down on and asked him about his spending habits and needs to provide him with some recommendations. After a patient exchange, he eventually bought a mobile phone card suitable for his use. I gave him some extra gifts.

Part 3: Matter out of place-ordinary orientation

Before leaving the shop, he asked if he could add me to his *WeChat* [a free messaging and calling application]. Usually, I won't give strangers my contact details, but in the

face of this disabled lad's request, I was unable to refuse him, worrying that it might hurt his feelings. I reluctantly agreed, finding, when inputting my number into his handset, his profile photo was a foreign beauty. He smiled, telling me it was his "girlfriend".

Part 4: Trying, but failing, to re-impose order: doubt

My colleagues slightly teased him. "Your girlfriend is so beautiful ah". He replied proudly "we often chat". After he left, we discussed whether the lad was joking. In the following days, the young man sent me messages and pictures now and then. After he left, we discussed whether the lad was joking.

Part 5: Reinstating order; busyness as distraction

In the following days, the young man sent me messages and pictures now and then. I ignored them because I was extremely busy plus I was not familiar with him. Later I felt my life intruded and deleted him from my *WeChat*.

Part 6: Questioning self and other and dividing practices

To be honest, I didn't give too much thought to this incident before replying to your message. It made me reflect upon whether my behaviour was appropriate. Was it moral? Did I give him warmth, or did I harm him? Undoubtedly, the discovery that he was disabled stimulated an instinctive reaction to be more patient, show more care and give him respect. But looking back now, perhaps I should have declined his request because I wasn't polite afterwards. I do not know whether I hurt him.

Part 7: Self-justifications, knowingness

I hope he is tough and was unaffected by this. In this way I can feel less guilt.

Part 8: The blurriness of dis/abled persons

In fact, I am also sensitive. Since childhood, I have worried about whether my actions might discomfort others but I'm also afraid of being influenced by the feelings of others.

Part 9: Coming together and apart of dis/abled persons

I think the hearts of people with disabilities should be more sensitive. I have never known their mental journeys. If there is an opportunity in the future, I would be happy to make friends with them and listen to their inner voices. I believe most of us are concerned about people with disabilities but because this group is not closely related to our daily life, we do not understand their life and inner needs and we have not learned to understand them.

Part 10: Doubts persist

We know we should give them more love and tolerance but when we actually meet, can we do it? Are we really as loving and kind as we think we are? My action of deleting him from my *WeChat* contacts is enough to show that my soul is far less noble than I thought.

Admittedly, the headings I have applied to Ruolan's could have been worded differently in ways that readers, and perhaps even Ruolan herself, may feel more closely signify what she meant, or *thought* she meant. This is

because, as Gee explains, 'hearers and readers hear and read differently from each other, and [perhaps even] differently from what readers may intend' (1991, 27). It is, nevertheless, evident that each stanza, or 'act', contains tension and conflict between seemingly contrary and incompatible positions, stances, outlooks, and ways of being in and orientating to the world.

Central to Ruolan's narrative are tensions between seeing, and orienting toward, the disabled man as deficient (1), in ways that may provoke charity (2, 3, to some extent) and the ways in which the man became, to her, a more assertive presence (3). This compelled Ruolan and her colleagues to find ways to make him 'fit' back into a deficient prism (3) even though the man repeatedly seemed to thwart these efforts (4); all of which provoked further efforts to 'return' him to a place where he might trouble her less (5). Despite such work, this led Ruolan to question herself (6) and fluctuate between ostensibly contrary perspectives: the man as tough (7); like her (8) and yet different, especially evident in the repeated use of such distancing pronouns as 'their' or 'them' (9) while, nevertheless, appearing to feel doubts and reservations about all these conclusions (10). Tensions manifest between and within stanzas as for example propensities toward charity in part 2 (i.e. 'I gave him a chair') become enmeshed with frustration (i.e. the coming together of 'patient' and 'eventually'), the latter of which might also communicate desires, even though this may not have been manifest, for him to disappear; to vanish.

These tensions give Ruolan's narrative a back-and-forth, in-between, quality as she vacillates between different ways of orienting toward, and positioning, the man. Although there is sequentiality in Ruolan's narrative as she seemingly sought to resolve tensions, by the end of the narrative she, like Yuyan, remains stranded in an in-between, perhaps even liminal, space: without either resolution or coda. Admittedly, through the process of narrating, Ruolan may have come to occupy a different position within this in-between space (e.g. 'To be honest, I didn't give too much thought to this incident before replying to your message'), this was incomplete so that she, like Yuyan and 'Cindy' had 'not arrived on some firm emotional ground' (Riessman 2002, 239) but was, instead, positioned upon ontological quicksand of a kind that, for Ruolan at least, seemed capable of consuming her.

Pervading Ruolan's narrative were anxiety and, albeit to a lesser extent, charity: two states that may resemble fear and pity which, together with disgust, constitute what Bill Hughes refers to as the 'non-disabled imaginary' and which contribute to the 'social distance between disabled and non-disabled people' (2012, 68). Such emotions also permeate Yuyan's narrative through words like 'strange', 'horrible', 'curious', 'worry', 'heartbroken', 'pitiful', 'fierce' and 'hurt'. That they appear side-by-side may index how such states can become enmeshed *inside* persons. However, most prominent in both Yuyan's and Ruolan's narratives was anxiety. Both seemed stranded amidst the confusion of an event. This confusion extended to themselves, as is especially suggested by the ways

Ruolan's narrative questioned her actions, inactions, and moral integrity (or the lack thereof), despite her apparent efforts to resolve these.

Struggles in narratives may index struggles with and within subjectivity, namely the 'patterns by which experimental and emotional contexts, feelings, images and memories are organized to form ... self-image ... sense of self and others, and ... possibilities of existence' (De Lauretis 1986, 5). These struggles may also register/generate troubled subject positions, namely ones which are 'considered contradictory, negative, and in need of change' and which contrast with untroubled subject positions that follow 'discursively normative expectations and ideals' (Arnell 2017, 166). Crucially, movement from troubled to untroubled positions may not be progressive but regressive. The tensions and struggles may register what Mary Douglas calls 'matter out of place' (1966, 37). By virtue of a category crisis, namely 'a failure of a definitional distinction', borderlines between ordinarily seen-to-be separate and sealed categories become 'permeable' and this permits 'border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another': not only to those which Marjorie Garber refers (e.g. black/white, master/slave) (1992, 16) but also the **ability**/disability to which this article refers. The narratives might, thereby, disclose how despite the human 'yearning for rigidity ... for hard lines and clear concepts', the more we 'search for purity', that is 'force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction', the more we find ourselves 'led into contradiction' because 'experience is not amenable' (Douglas 1966, 163, emphasis added). Consequently, anxieties may register a critical moment facing narrators: 'to either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ... [themselves] to the inadequacy of the concepts' (Douglas 1966, 163).

A discussion on the extent of—and limits to—linguistically circumscribed 'reality' and perplexity

The paragraphs below situate Yuyan's and Ruolan's narratives in wider linguistic and discursive contexts, referring particularly to Berger and Luckmann's lucid account of how language and classificatory systems build up 'semantic fields or zones of meaning that are linguistically circumscribed' (1966, 55). Nevertheless, I dwell upon, and highlight, how although Yuyan's and Ruolan's narratives appear to bear the traces of linguistic and cultural resources, the personal narratives they produced neither seem constrained nor determined by them. This is not a consequence of narrators' wilful efforts to disrupt, or evade, cultural narratives. In fact, narrators experience perplexity when events disturbed, or troubled, the forms of ideation made possible through cultural scripts. Consequently, narrators seemed intent upon—albeit not wholly successfully—re-imposing order upon the flow of experience, thereby *making* it intelligible, having been made bereft of the stabilizing functions of symbolic systems and the perspectives and positions they provide.

Linguistic frames, and cultural discourses

The service station and supermarket Yuyan and Ruolan entered were already preconstructed. Yuyan did not name the processes through which this reality had been legitimated (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 111) although she did name the agents of socialization (i.e. 'teachers and parents') who transmitted this reality to her. Also evident in Yuyan's narrative is the impact of 'typificatory schemes' which provide, or construct, 'recipe knowledge' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 57) and frames, or lenses, within and through which the other may be 'apprehended and "dealt with" in face-to-face encounters' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 45). Yuyan had acquired an unambiguous picture of the person in the service station as a 'disabled person': a 'type' that was strange, and seemingly frightening, albeit while nevertheless being an 'object' capable of evoking curiosity, sympathy, and pity. Ruolan had also acquired a distinct way of seeing the man in the supermarket: as an object of charity, pity, and perhaps lacking in agency, as was suggested when she and her colleagues doubted his capacity to have a girlfriend.

Such ideation is registered by, in and through language and specifically processes of 'naming'. For example, Ruolan referred to the young man as *canji*. As Emma Stone explains, this 'apparently ... neutral term' has, since the 1980s, replaced the alternate and 'derogatory' term *canfei* (1999, 136). This term is widely used, including by some of Yuyan's classmates, although they sometimes express reservations about the connotations of such language (Cockain, 2018, 7). Such unease is pertinent given *canji* is comprised of two characters, namely *can*, which encompasses meanings like 'incomplete', 'deficient', 'remnant', 'cruel', 'ferocious', 'barbarous' and *ji*, which denotes 'disease', 'illness', and 'suffering', in ways that suggest deviation from a 'normal', unmarked and ordered form, as Michel Foucault observes with regard to 'disease' (or *zheng* in Chinese (1973, 119)). These words, or characters, and the chains of discourse they conjoin to form, limit how persons like the woman in the service station may be seen. Words, as Tanya Titchkosky explains of speech elsewhere, produce and reflect 'a particular re-presentation of the meaning of people' (2001, 128) and, thus, have the capacity to 'form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1969 [2002], 54). These words conjoin with others to form chains of discourse which produce a 'symbolic universe' which 'assigns ranks to ... phenomena in a hierarchy of being,' and ideates some types as 'other than or less than human' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 120). These words exist within a wider web of cultural discourses which combine to produce storyworlds which accrete meanings around ability and disability in Chinese contexts (Cockain 2016, 2018, 2021b).

The order of the 'natural' world collapses

In the service station and supermarket, the 'symmetry between objective and subjective reality' which Berger and Luckmann suggest characterises 'successful

socialization' (1966, 183) went asymmetric, or awry. This was a consequence of 'interference' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 45) between typifications which pre-constructed the encounter (e.g. linguistic, and cultural frames) and the confluence of parts or elements which enmeshed to produce the events to which Yuyan and Ruolan referred. These include the materiality of the persons, place, and objects (i.e. the toilet etc.); the ways these 'things' manifest in their experiences of them, the thinking this provoked and the ways these became filtered through, or constructed by, narratives which further produce reality not only for themselves but also others, including myself, who were not actually *there*. Such an enmeshment combined to form situated and positioned events which disturbed or destabilized the 'fixity', coherence, and stability of the world, especially as 'it' and the elements which constitute it had previously been stabilized through symbolic systems like language and representation.

Symptoms suggesting anxiety emerged when 'the legitimations that obscure the precariousness [of social reality] are threatened or collapse' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 121). Yuyan and Ruolan had, figuratively, departed the unproblematic, and ostensibly 'natural' and taken-for-granted, world, entering instead into an 'uncomfortable region': when, as Foucault explains, the '*convenience* of terminal truths' (1965: ix, emphasis added) expose their lack of identity with the world to which they refer. In this precarious metaphorical realm, the hermetically sealed and hierarchical order of **abled/disabled** objects blended, like watercolours on a wet page. Such 'disorder' (e.g. disabled persons not appearing submissive and wretched but assertive and content) emerged in and around the supermarket to which Ruolan referred. So confusing was this 'disorder' that initially Ruolan perceived a lack of identity between the disabled man's words and his actual practice, feeling he was, effectively, choreographing a fictional version of himself. Although she increasingly apprehended overlaps between herself and him, later her narrative worked to ideate greater ontological difference between herself and the disabled man, an orientation indexed by the proliferation of 'othering' terms later in her narrative (e.g. 'their', 'them', 'this group', etc.). This might indicate the power of narrative to 'transform ... [the] potential discordance' of experience and to eschew experiences of 'fragmentation' and 'contingency' (Rapport 2014, 318–319) although the presence of doubts and ruminations in her narrative may also exemplify how narration is a 'site of possible contest' (Rapport 2014, 319). Crucially, that her narrative closed with rumination upon her lack of nobility might indicate how despite trying she could not reinscribe intelligibility and order upon the world.

Perplexing particulars and defrosting

The anxieties Yuyan and Ruolan narrated may be elucidated upon with reference to Mattingly's discussion of 'perplexing particulars' which 'interweave

with concepts and categories', in ways that 'call those very concepts and categories into question or reveal their limits' (2019, 427). A 'perplexing particular' is, Mattingly explains, an 'encounter that not only surprises, in the sense of striking unexpectedly, but also eludes explanation. Such a particular (it could be a person, a scene, an event, an object) emerges with an irreducible singularity. It has a stubborn concreteness that cannot easily be erased by subsuming it under general concepts. And yet it is entangled with concepts. This is because, at the same time that it exudes a singular presence, it confounds or disturbs concepts and categories themselves' (2019, 427).

Within the service station and supermarket, categories, and the objects they make, fail to hold, or subsume, the persons, and 'things', to which they purportedly refer. The anxiety or perplexity that ensues because of such a mismatch might thereby disclose—by virtue of its absence—the ordinary 'transcending potency of symbolic universes ... and the ... terror-assuaging character of the ... *reality* of everyday life' or, put differently, how 'the institutional order represents a shield against terror' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 119, emphasis added).

Such perplexity is negatively defined as a lack, or inability to deal with and understand something although, admittedly, it may also register a state that arises because something *is* complicated and, therefore, ipso facto difficult to understand. Meanwhile, perplexity is associated, experientially, with undesirable emotions: e.g. anxiety, bewilderment and puzzlement which are typically regarded as constituting states either to be avoided entirely or, if encountered, then overcome, and eliminated. Despite the etymologically and experientially negative connotations of perplexity, it may index more ontologically and existentially transformative potentiality. Specifically, perplexity might register states of, or practices associated with, defrosting (Arendt 1971, 431) and as 'a *form of experience* that disquiets concepts' (Mattingly 2019, 416).

Concepts like ability and disability freeze 'innumerable particulars', in ways that give humans categories to think with (Mattingly 2019, 431). Nevertheless, the events at the service station and supermarket and the narratives both Yuyan and Ruolan produced may be regarded as 'artifacts that destabilize' categories, and 'totalizing' descriptions (Mattingly 2019, 431). Thinking, or defrosting, is not aporetic: instead, it produces ways of being and doing in the world. Like the 'invisible wind' to which Arendt refers, thought 'has the peculiarity of doing away with its own previous manifestations' and may 'undo, unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought—words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines)': exposing their weakness and inflexibility (1971, 433). Perplexities arise when '*particulars*' are not made to be subsumed under—or consumed by—general laws and categories, in ways which register not only the fragility of categories and the things they construct as objects but also the potential to discern non-identity between words and the world, and objects and things.

Such a category crisis is productive: it ‘permits border crossings’ by virtue of putting into ‘question or under erasure’ binarism ‘between “this” and “that”’ (Garber, 1992, 16, emphasis added). For Yuyan and Ruolan, defrosting is incomplete and partial. They and the narratives they produce try, albeit not necessarily successfully, to accommodate permeability while feeling perplexity (from the Latin *perplexus*), namely ‘a special sort of confusion ... “confused, involved, [and] interwoven”’ (Mattingly 2019, 427) about the identities of the persons, including themselves, implicated in the encounters to which the narratives referred. In this regard, Yuyan and Ruolan may even resemble those ironic persons to whom Richard Rorty refers who confront the ‘contingency of his or her own most central beliefs’ (1989, xv) and doubt their ‘final vocabulary’ (1989, 73–75). As Rorty explains, for ironists ““final vocabulary” does not mean “the one which puts all doubts to rest”’ (1989, 75): instead, as there is no ‘such thing as a “natural” order (Rorty 1989, 83) so **ability/disability** may be seen as dis/ability, an entity with no solid, discrete, ontological order in-and-of-itself. In this regard, there might, after all, be some resemblance between the young boy in *Araby* who suddenly, and disheartened, gazes ‘up into the darkness’ seeing himself ‘as a creature ... derided by vanity’ (2000, 24) as he tries to come to terms with how the world does not live up to how he imagined—and perhaps was taught—it would be and Yuyan standing watching as the woman disappeared from sight and Ruolan ruminating upon her lack of nobility in the events she narrated.

Concluding thoughts

Using a decidedly de/constructive lens, this article has troubled narratives produced by two abled people about a social encounter they experienced with a disabled person, albeit while registering how they—and the persons who not only make but also are made by them—are *already* troubled and troubling, a double meaning indexed by the title of this article. As Goodley explains, although it is vital for *everyone* to subject their disability stories to analysis and scrutiny, it is even more incumbent upon non-disabled people to unpack their own stories because ‘non-disabled people’s disability stories have throughout history been powerfully influential and immeasurably problematic for disabled people ... And it is [in] the telling of our stories that we will find our common humanity’ (2021, 8).

Prominent in this article, and the events and narratives to which it refers, is instability and perplexity although, admittedly, it seems that writers, or narrators, seek to write over this, albeit not wholly successfully. In contrast to the ways storytellers, or narrators, are regarded within narrative inquiry as making sense of themselves and their social world through narrative, with stories means through which persons attempt ‘to render meaningful that which is otherwise incoherent and inchoate’ (Flynn 2019, 170), the narrators in this article fail to realise, or fabricate, such ontological solid ground and

senses of self and others. This may reveal the fragile qualities of not only ability but also disability.

This article has, nevertheless, sought to demonstrate that although perplexity might be something which, like the obscene nakedness to which Sartre refers, may inconvenience, and perhaps even disgust, in ways which might induce persons to want the world, and the things therein, to 'exist less strongly [...] in a more abstract way' (1965, 127), it also has revelatory potential. Significantly, the events, and narratives, to which this article refers demonstrate 'empirically that one's own universe is less than stable,' and provide glimpses of an 'alternate symbolic universe' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 126). This is a world of dis/ability rather than **ability/disability**.

This fragile world of things rather than objects is an alternate realm to that which may be realised through what Theodor Adorno calls 'identity thinking' which is governed by the principle that an object is known 'only when it is classified in some way,' or 'when it is shown ... to share characteristics or features' with other objects': meanwhile an event may be explained 'if it can be shown to fall within the ambit of a known rule' (Bernstein 2001, 87). As Deborah Cook explains, by 'subsuming objects under concepts and laws ... we wrongly substitute unity for diversity, simplicity for complexity, permanence for change, and identity for difference. Once particulars are effectively identified with universals, there is allegedly nothing more to be said about them ... Identity thinking ... thereby obliterates ... particularity' (2008 [2014], 9–10). Non-identity thinking, by contrast, posits that things are 'irreducible to ... concepts and categories of them' and, moreover, that concepts are entwined in non-conceptuality (Adorno 2001, 66–67, cited in Cook 2008 [2014], 10). As Adorno explains of non-identity thinking, the 'direction of conceptuality' is reversed because concepts are generated through embodied contact with material things (1966 [2007], 12) in ways that oblige immersion in things 'without placing those things in prefabricated categories' (1966 [2007], 13).

There is an obligation to 'think beyond the limitations of knowledge,' as Arendt puts it elsewhere (1971, 421) since this may permit entry into a 'different world' (Arendt 1971, 423). Although 'frozen thoughts' (e.g. ability and disability) are, as Arendt observes, 'so handy you can use them in your sleep,' when 'the wind of thinking ... has roused you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your hand but perplexities, and the most we can do with them is share them with each other' (1971, 434). It is hoped that this article may, in some way, constitute conditions conducive to such thinking and dialogue.

This article has also sought to demonstrate the potential for narrative inquiry to be placed in dialogue with ideas associated with not only critical disability studies but also geographies of disability. Together, these provide tools with which to apprehend how ostensibly potent and robust worldviews, or ways of seeing (e.g. ableism, disablism, etc.), and the categories they

produce (e.g. ability and disability), which animate—and make (up)—places and people are, in fact, fragile, made up, entities and things rather than unassailable objects. These things are accomplished by people like Yuyan and Ruolan who wrestle with kairotic moments as they go about their everyday lives, making objects out of things through the perspectives made possible by symbolic systems. The stop-start, and disjointed, narratives in this article may, accordingly, be regarded as correctives to the reified and fetishised products of discourse that ‘build up the shape of the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 23) in ways that make it acquire, and accumulate, ‘misplaced concreteness’ (Whitehead 1925, 78) and apparent fixity. Apprehending the fragility of these narratives—and the people and things to which they refer—may even open space in which things can be, and become, other than how they are.

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