

Bridging the Gap of the Personal and Public Identity

by Cole Bush

People whose lives have been affected by impairments, both directly and indirectly, can tell you the value of a society that is willing to accommodate those impairments. For me, impairment has had an indirect effect on me. My mom's sight has been getting progressively worse as she has aged. It has gotten to the point where she can only perceive light and make out figures. To me, having a visually impaired mother is what I would call "normal"; she has always been blind, and my life has always, in some way, been impacted by it. It has made me and the rest of my family more observant and aware of those around us because we realize the importance of vision to others and our eyes are working for two people. This impairment will always be a part of our identity as well as my mom's identity. When she introduces herself to people, she almost always includes, "I am blind." It has almost become as important as her name to her identity. This is because she requires the awareness of those around her which they might not provide otherwise. This impairment may seem strange to others, but to her, it is part of her identity and has become what she would consider to be "normal." People who are disabled are seen by others as different, but they consider themselves to be normal because normal is just a word for what a person is used to. Whatever is in your comfort zone is considered normal. If something is off-putting or strange to you, then you would consider it to be not normal. Once you get this label of being different from society, then it becomes a part of your identity. You are no longer one of the countless "humans" that make up society; you are an outlier of society. You are identified as a person with a disability, a "disabled human." This change in identity brought on by how someone is viewed by others can really change how their life is lived. This identity of being not normal gets further amplified when these people are seen using means to accommodate their impairments. For instance, when someone who is in a wheel chair uses a ramp to get into a building, this says to the world that that person is not normal. That they need to do things that are considered not normal in order to live their lives. This accommodating of impaired people's needs changes their identity and thus isolates them from the rest of the "normal" society.

Identity is an essential part of life that controls the outcome of where we end up. Life is composed of countless interactions with those around you, and these interactions make up what a society is. Identity determines how these social interactions transpire, thus making your identity essential to making your life "livable" in the ways you want. There are two parts of identity. There is how you view yourself and how others, society, views you. Judith Butler, a writer who focuses on gender, sexuality and war, talks about these two sides of identity in her essay, *Besides Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy*. She talks about how our bodies belong to us, but they are still vulnerable to the physical and psychological actions of others. Although there is the identity we label ourselves with, she says, "The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine" (Butler 243). How we view ourselves is very important because it determines how we want to act and what we want to be like. Your body is also "not yours" because you are impacted by how society views you. This "public dimension" of your identity is crucial in determining where your life goes. The occurrence of the public dimension makes the personal aspect of identity that much more important. How we view ourselves gives us a basis for how we would like to be seen by the

rest of the world. This creates the “duality of identity.” It’s the relationship between our personal identity and our public identity.

People who have disabilities often have identities that get changed because of this disability. The public identity of someone who is impaired is usually one of an inability to live “normally.” People see the lives of disabled people and think about how they must hate living with this disadvantage. But to what is a disadvantage relative? They consider it a disadvantage relative to what is considered the “normal” life. To an impaired person, their disability is the “normal” life. In my mom’s case, there are even some aspects of her impairment that could be considered advantages. She cannot see the world around her like we can, so she perceives it in a completely different manner. Not only are her other senses heightened, but her perspective is different. She doesn’t take the world at face value, but sees what is underneath it all. Her public identity would probably be one of sadness due to the fact that the rest of society can’t imagine being happy with this abnormal condition. Her personal identity would be content with her condition and more grateful for what she has. This is an example of the duality of her identity. Her personal identity would be the basis for how she wants her public identity to be formed. Unfortunately, it can be very difficult to change the public dimension of identity. “I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me” (Butler 252). This speaks to the fact that there are set, unchanging norms of society that determine people’s identities. Since the public identity is based off of these norms, it makes those excluded lose their identity as “human” and instead labels them as “disabled” or “different.” This exclusion can be demoralizing for people with disabilities. The basic label of “human” applies to those who are considered normal. It is their most prominent feature that defines them. People who are impaired lose this identity because they are contrasting the normalness of others with their not normal features. Everyone wants to be accepted by those that are around them. Taking away the most basic identity and replacing it with one that points out what is different about someone is demoralizing and isolating.

Some impairments are less obvious than others when seen in public. For instance, many people won’t know my mom is blind just by looking at her. It is not until they try to shake her hand or make eye contact with her, that they realize there is something different about her. It’s funny, sometimes when they realize she is blind, they will raise their voice as if she can’t hear them. My mom has had to deal with this for a very long time, so she has learned to just smile and respond normally, but it can still be demoralizing to bring attention to the fact that someone is disabled. This sort of “babying” occurs to almost all who are impaired. People crowding to help a person in a wheelchair carry something or offering to pay for a mentally challenged person’s meal. These are great intentions that people have, and sometimes they are openly accepted, but it does point out that the person is incapable of doing something on their own. There is a thin line between being helpful and being ignorant to other people’s impairments, and this line will have to be crossed in order for the disabled to receive the identity of “human.” If people could be more educated about common disabilities, then they could make an effort to not isolate the impaired. Butler expresses the idea that being “not normal” will always receive discrimination from society because the “normal people” don’t know how to deal with issues they aren’t familiar with. They discriminate because they are afraid of what these abnormalities mean: “That we cannot predict or control what permutations of the human might arise does not mean that we must value all possible permutations of the human” (Butler 254). Here, Butler is saying that not

every possible “permutation” will warrant the same identity as “human,” but that all “permutations” will receive some form of discrimination along the way. The “babying” received by the disabled is, at its core, not a form of discrimination at all, but is an attempt at understanding and helping those who are different from the norm. It is just hard for those who are making this outreach to not accidentally demoralize and alienate the person. Regardless, a society that makes an attempt at normalizing the disabled by helping them or just being aware of them, will help make the personal identity of those who are impaired part of their public identity.

There is a documentary called “Examine Life” that looks at the philosophy of life on the streets. There is a part of the movie during which Judith Butler takes a walk with Sunaura Taylor, who has Arthrogryposis, a condition characterized by weak muscles and joint fusion which has put her in a wheelchair. They talk about individualism specifically for the disabled and how their public image impacts their lives. Sunaura Taylor says about five and a half minutes into the segment “that disabled people have limited housing options. We don’t have career opportunities. We’re socially isolated. You know in many ways there is a cultural aversion to disabled people.” She goes on to talk about how the word “disability” is the word that describes the group of all who are impaired; it throws them all into one category. She says that “disability” is a word for how their identity disables them from being seen as normal and functioning members of society. This is a great point showing how in the search for recognition by society, disabled people have been grouped into one category no matter how varying their impairments are. I use the word “disability” to show that these ideas are applicable to all forms of impairments.

The fight for recognition by both society and government is one that all minorities face. It is risky, because in order to meet the needs of the minority, members must first isolate themselves by grouping all similar cases into one category. Then, they can work towards meeting their needs. This recognition allows group members to acquire the necessary accommodations that will make their lives “livable,” as Butler describes it. For instance, my mom has a guide dog which is very expensive to train and raise. This is possible because there is a foundation run by donations and the government that raises them and trains owners to handle these dogs. This has made my mom’s life significantly more “livable.” She can now walk into town and independently navigate the world doing “normal” things. However, this assistance comes with a price: she is instantly identifiable as someone who is impaired, whereas before she could get away without anyone knowing of her impairment. This instant identification as being “impaired” alienates her from the “human” identification. This instant identification occurs to many different people. It can happen to people with service dogs, wheelchairs, crutches, canes, etc. These tools of assistance provided by the government and organizations make impaired lives more “livable.” Unfortunately, by being recognized by society and government and receiving aide, people with impairments farther isolate themselves from the “normal” identity.

The failure to gain recognition from society makes it hard to move your public identity away from “disabled.” Without the recognition, you “find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor” (Butler 250). Without recognition, your words are “hollow” or meaningless. They have no value in your request for assistance since society and the government does not understand who they are actually helping. One of the best ways to gain recognition is through forcing your

minority or group out onto society. For instance in the fight for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, people were encouraged to come out so that the world can see how essential these people can be to the community. Sunaura Taylor talks about how the accessibility of San Francisco has allowed more and more impaired people to go out into the world, thus exposing society to the differences in their identities (*Examined Life*). This exposure slowly changes the norms and allows the disabled to become accepted as normal. This is why recognition as a group in need can help shift the norms to accommodate a new minority.

The recognition gained through hard work can help make the lives of the disabled “livable” by helping them get their needs met. This aide, unfortunately, makes people’s impairments stick out more when they take advantage of the assistance. This makes their public identity seem negative which demoralizes and isolates them. This is the price of making their life “livable.” What is important is that those who are impaired keep a strong personal identity that they want the public to see. As time progresses, the norms of society will change, and this minority will be openly accepted, thus allowing the gap between personal identity and public identity to be bridged. This process can be sped up by being open-minded to what you would consider not “normal.” If a society is more open-minded as a whole, then it will allow the definitions of what is “normal” and “human” to expand and include people who are currently regarded as different. In addition, if people become more educated about the challenges other people face, then they won’t be made uncomfortable by these differences and will accept the identity of others as “human.”

Work Cited

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