Disability Humor, Insults, and Inclusive Practice

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This article discusses the use of positive and negative disability humor to raise awareness and teach others how to interrupt oppressive humor and insults. It discusses categories of disability humor and ways to evaluate humor related to any targeted group to promote inclusive practice. Evaluating humor in complex situations where the message is unclear is addressed.

"So have you heard the one about the two retards that go into the bar?"

"That movie was so "retarded!"

"I can't believe you didn't know that --- you're such a retard!"

Karen teaches fifth grade at an inclusive elementary school. Although the school's "No put-downs" program has decreased some of the name calling among students, she still hears them using the "r-word" repeatedly. When she talks to them about this, they say that they "Don't mean anything by it." She is at a loss about how to address this name calling with them.

How often have you heard someone tell a joke about disabilities and not known what to say? Have you ever been unsure whether disability humor was oppressive or liberatory? What makes something an insult? Does it have to be intended that way—or

simply experienced as such? Have you found ways to laugh about and around disability issues that feel good to you?

Disability is no laughing matter; or is it? At our workshops and classes on disability humor we have had countless conversations with teachers and parents who tell us that most of the jokes they hear about disability are tasteless and offensive. Many of us remember the "Helen Keller jokes" of our childhood and other jokes that made fun of people with disabilities, often perpetuating negative stereotypes and images that were devaluing and marginalizing

Similarly, terms such as "dumb" and "retard" are hurled among friends and foes alike. When confronted about the use of disability-oppressive terms, many people respond that they were "only kidding." Confronting insulting behavior and put down humor is an ongoing issue in our schools among both the students and adults. Explaining to older children and adults who say they "don't mean anything by it" can feel difficult. We may be articulate and effective in one situation and feel awkward and despairing in another. Many teachers are at a loss for words when accused of "not having a sense of humor" or being "too politically correct." It becomes difficult to explain what is and isn't funny. And it is even more frustrating when we find ourselves without useful tools for intervention.

The authors are committed to creating warm and welcoming communities for all people, including those with visible and invisible disabilities. We do not set out to become the "humor police," but we have found ways to use humor to increase sensitivity and raise awareness about disability oppression. With these goals in mind, we have been

speaking with people in classes, conferences, and workshops about disability humor over the last five years.

In these settings, we use jokes as a way to raise awareness and help participants become more discerning about what's "funny" and what's "oppressive," and more skilled in learning what to do when confronted by offensive or problematic humor and language. In designing our workshops, we looked for examples of positive and negative, or empowering and disempowering disability humor. We wanted to find enough jokes so that we could begin to describe patterns of humor, and see if there were intuitive ways to sort the jokes into categories. Most of the jokes that participants remembered were quickly rejected (even by those repeating them) as offensive and oppressive.

In many cases participants were hesitant to share what they had heard, and in some cases they had a difficult time even deciding when it was acceptable to share them out loud, or even in writing. The Internet provided us with a variety of disability humor. It was easier to find examples of clearly offensive humor—cruel jokes that reinforced stereotypes. Some items actually seemed to be promoting hatred of people with disabilities.

Positive disability humor in print was rare outside of publications published by people with disabilities such as *Mouth Magazine*, *Accent on Living* (now *Special Living*), and *Mobility,* and by cartoonists such as John Callahan, although we did find the increased exposure of comics with disabilities such as Kathy Buckly and Greg Wallach encouraging (see Reid, 2006).

What did we learn from our investigation? We learned that disability was no laughing matter among attendees of our classes and workshops. So in addition to wanting

to help people interrupt humor that devalues and keeps people with disabilities on the margins, we wanted to also help people lighten up about disability. We encouraged teachers to be proactive, to share sources for positive disability humor, and to find informal and formal ways to use the examples they found to help people think differently about disability, and to rethink some of their assumptions.

Settings In Which To Explore Issues Generated by Humor and Insults

We have explored various ways to use disability humor and jokes—in settings in which the focus was on disability awareness, and in more general settings focused on dealing with hate speech and learning to be allies in the face of oppressive language and behavior. We have used examples of "jokes" that were not funny to anyone, particularly the person with a disability; and we have shared jokes that made us laugh and rethink our own assumptions and stereotypes.

Types Of Disability Humor

We developed categories for the humor and jokes we found, and were able to provide examples in each category. We were also able to see that there was not always a clear consensus about which category a joke belonged to; people's different levels of experience and education, as well as their own identities, often altered their understanding or perception of what was humorous.

Stereotype Busters

We found some jokes that challenged stereotypes, forcing the reader or listener to rethink his or her own assumptions or understandings. Some of these jokes and

cartoons used role reversals, word play, and unexpected situations. The basic discussion starter was: "What's going on here?"

A cartoon by John Callahan, for example, shows a pencil with arms and legs, walking down the street towards another individual. The pencil is holding a tin cup in one hand, and a dollar bill in the other. In the cup are little tiny blind men (1992, p. 54). This cartoon is a reminder of the stereotype of blind men selling pencils to beg for money. When people laughed, we asked: "What's funny about this?" People pointed out that Callahan was making fun of old stereotypes of blind men selling pencils as the main way to make a living. The cartoon created an opportunity to talk about stereotypes that charities have created in telethons and the media. This, combined with some other cartoons, generated excellent discussions on charity fund raising, negative impact of charity images (tragic, hopeless, victim, eternal infant), and how people with disabilities resist these limited, stereotypic portrayals.

In another cartoon (Giangreco, 1998) two boys (one in a wheelchair) face three boys at the seashore. The three boys have drawn a line in the sand between them. In the second panel, all five boys are inside a circle drawn in the sand by the wheelchair. The caption reads, "Marc gives new meaning to drawing a line in the sand (p. 48)." This contradicted the stereotyped marginalized wheelchair user who, if he is out alone with peers at all, needs protection. This child and his friend have been outnumbered and challenged by boys, perhaps bullies, who drew a line in the sand, presumably daring them to cross it. This wheelchair user has obviously taken charge of the situation.

MARC GIVES NEW MEANING TO DRAWING A LINE IN THE SAND.

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*Ouch!, a*n online magazine, included in its top ten things not to say to sighted people:

"Whadya mean you can't read a book in the dark?" and "Bet your electricity bill is at least TWICE as much as mine… em how much does a light cost to run? Exactly HOW many lights do you need? In ONE house!!!!"

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/play/topten/sighted.shtml retrieved 10/13/2008)

Many of these busters not only contradicted pity but also the image of heroism just for doing what you need to do to live your life. Scott chambers sketched a medaled general in a wheelchair pointing to one of them telling a little boy, *"And this is the one I got for my M.S." (retrieved 10/13/2008 http://www.mouthmag.com/heroes.htm).*

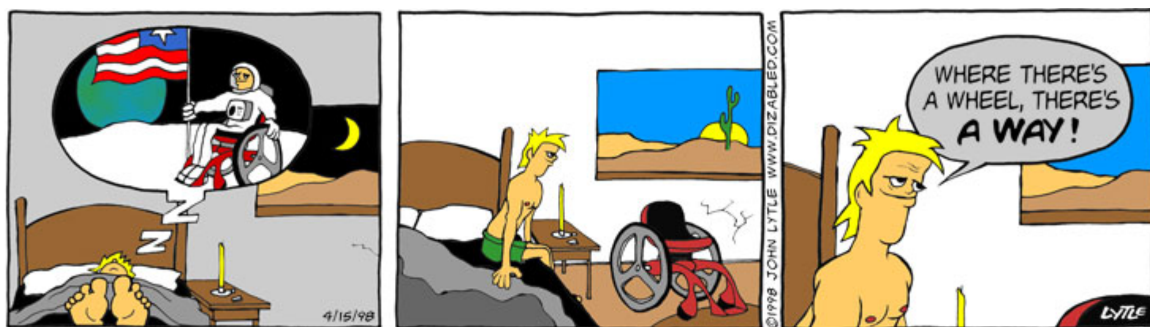
We have used an accompanying activity for students to list all the stereotypes they have heard and to talk about how each is incorrect. They may create their own stereotype busting cartoons or, perhaps, advertisements.

Normalizing

We modeled empowering humor with cartoons that showed the capabilities of people with disabilities in everyday life, as well as their human side. People with disabilities have all the silly quirks, as well as the big dreams, as everyone else. Cartoons can also normalize people with disabilities as they lead their regular lives. Whereas the first category is about overtly addressing stereotypes, these normalizing cartoons bust stereotypes by letting us all laugh together, and dissipating our cultural grimness about disability. These cartoons or jokes make us think about the ways in which people with disabilities are more “like” able-bodied people than different. *Accent on Living* (now renamed *Special Living*) magazine has been a good source for empowering or normalizing humor. John Callahan has some cartoons on his homepage (http://www.myspace.com/johncallahanthecartoonist), including one that shows a sheriff’s posse stopped behind an empty wheelchair in the desert with the caption, “Don’t worry, he won’t get far on foot.” We didn’t know if a crime was committed, but we noticed that there isn’t a shred of pity in this cartoon.

Another one of our favorite jokes was this: Q: Why did the blind man [woman] give up skydiving? A: It was scaring the heck out of his dog. [Robin: I thought it was funny because I wouldn't dream of skydiving so the obvious answer to me was "terror." It made me wonder if I could say I don't skydive because the landing gear on my wheelchair is rusty. It also seems to make fun of the disability super-sports-hero so often appearing in the media. Mara: To me, this joke was funny because it was about the very typical way that we tend to blame our own reluctance or fear on others (in this case the dog) and also because it connected me with the way in which we close our eyes when we're scared-as though by not seeing something, we are somehow safer!].

Youth with disabilities are often discouraged from having big dreams. Adults say they're unrealistic. But why shouldn't folks with disabilities have big (even unrealistic) dreams like anyone else? One such cartoon by O. Men shows a man in bed dreaming of sitting in his wheelchair in his space suit, planting the American flag on the moon. He wakes up; and sitting on the edge of his bed he says, "Where there's a wheel, there's a way" (retrieved 10/13/2008 http://www.dizabled.com/comics/moon-dream/).



Rather than ask people what is going on, we asked them: "Does this work? Why or why not?" We asked why the cartoonist and the magazine editor thought it was funny. We reflected not only on the humor of the cartoon but also about the scarcity of such jokes relative to the cruel and offensive ones. This has been our largest collection of

examples, in an effort to counteract the lack of normalizing examples in peoples' lives and mainstream media.

The isolation of people with disabilities has contributed to the notion that disability is a grim topic, and to the fact that many able-bodied people don't know that people with disabilities have a sense of humor, even and especially, sometimes, about their own challenges. We asked people what they laugh about, and what their friends and acquaintances with disabilities laugh about. We encouraged them to discuss this with one another, noting that many of the jokes that are popular with many disability activists are irreverent and contradict the "tragic but brave" image.

Issues Oriented Consciousness Raising and Mobilizing for Action

We labeled some humor as "issues oriented" in that it helped the reader or listener to talk about issues, consider previously unexamined points and make new connections. *Mouth Magazine* has been a good source for political cartoons about the feature articles in each issue. These include civil rights, consumer directed attendant services, physician assisted suicide, and education including the reauthorization of IDEA. *Ants in his Pants* (Giangreco, 1998) has many cartoons about inclusion issues, and Leeder O. Men (http://www.dizabled.com/comics) frequently has cartoons addressing accessibility issues. Often such cartoons cause us to notice, "That happens too often." For example, a wheelchair user facing a flight of steps at a large city building is asked, "These steps are steep, do you need some help? The next box shows the walker, and only the bubble caption of the wheelchair user who is already down the steps. He says: "Sure man, write the city council for me" (http://www.dizabled.com/comics/stairs/10/2/2008). Another shows Leeder O. Men being refused entrance on an intercity bus. The caption is: "We

don't know how to handle your kind of people." In the next frame he is pulling ahead of the bus in the road with a greyhound harnessed to his wheelchair (http://www.dizabled.com/comics/greyhound-bus/). Although the law has mandated lifts on intercity buses, many are still inaccessible.

Dan Wilkins of *thenthdegree.com* has designed a T-shirt that says: "Stairs, the final frontier." The logo is a person in a wheelchair parachuting down the flight of stairs. These cartoons often show real day-to-day issues. By adding a light touch to serious issues, people pay closer attention, and make and remember more connections between these issues and their own lives. Humor helps people remember that they resolved to take action.

Understanding What Is Cruel, Vile, Hateful

We identified a fourth category of disability humor that seemed to have no redeeming properties. Sadly, most of our workshop participants and students had already heard (and repeated) these jokes; and we often had only to invoke them vaguely. We genuinely hesitated to give additional examples, not wanting to add anything people haven't seen, or to re-victimize those already hurt and oppressed by such humor. These negative jokes formed the bulk of the so-called disability humor on the Internet. We used examples from the audience, or used one of the "borderline" Helen Keller jokes and asked some questions. "Who benefits? At whose expense? What's funny? If this is your only source of information about blind people (or people with other disabilities), how likely are you to be comfortable when you meet one? Does it move you closer to or farther apart from people with disabilities?" We then asked these same questions about the normalizing cartoons. People got the point. It became a jumping off point to

introduce or discuss past abuses and how these jokes reflect and validate abusive attitudes and practices.

We showed how these slightly pejorative jokes escalate into hateful and harmful. There was a list on the Internet titled “Why beer is better than retarded people.” We showed only the title. Most of the list is in the cruel category. The last item, in our opinion, was hateful and dangerous: “Beer doesn’t have to be sterilized.” Many people didn’t realize that in some states sterilization of people labeled mentally retarded is only recently off the books. From another site we found statements about midgets that the site owner thought amusing. Replacing “midget” with more commonly targeted groups made it read word for word like racist hate speech. People came to understand the connection and the progression. It became easy to see how gay jokes escalate into gay bashing, Jewish jokes into violent acts of Anti-Semitism, and disability jokes into policies and practices that are harmful, hateful and sometimes life-threatening for people with disabilities.

Because humor is so powerful, it can influence and reinforce attitudes and behavior. Disability humor can be a valuable resource to help people to rethink assumptions and to create community. Here is a chart to quickly evaluate humor.

Questioning Disability Humor

- In the presence of a person with this disability, would you be comfortable sharing this joke? Hearing this joke?
- Does this joke laugh AT or WITH?
- Is there a cost? Is it exploitive? Who benefits?
- Does this joke make you feel
    - empathy
    - closeness
    - understanding
    - more relaxed with . . .

Does it . . .

- tell you "they" are irrevocably different
- make you feel more distant from "them"
- give the impression they are somehow less than human
- provide/reinforce incorrect information about the disability
- make you likely to be tense or awkward in the presence of a person with this disability

Evaluating Insults: Taking Action In Complex Situations

In the series *South Park,* the 4th graders engage freely in name-calling. An episode where Cartman was called a "retard" generated controversy. How do you deal with negative humor in complex contexts? Can this sort of guide help in confusing contexts such as Cartman being called a "retard" during an episode of *South Park*? Laurence Carter-Long is taken to task by a reader of *Ragged Edge Online* for saying it's OK in some contexts:

> Across the board the word retard is found to be hurtful and offensive to everybody. I think a distinction should be made between a situation where, let's say, *South Park* might be using the word retard to show what a jerk Cartman is, as opposed to simply using that word as a descriptive or as something that is derogatory without that sort of intention.

He replied to the upset writer who was an advocate and a parent of a child with developmental disabilities:

> Where we differ in opinion seems to be in the question of context, which to my mind if examined, can be of enormous value. For example, if offensive words are used to expose a character for the bigots they are, or if an offensive word is used to highlight a situation in which the person on the receiving end of the offensive name is portrayed sympathetically, in an artistic context (which is, of course, relative) the merit becomes clearer. Who does the reader or viewer identify with in these scenarios? Most often it is the person being called the offensive name. That creates common ground and in doing so fosters greater understanding. Using an

> offensive word to denigrate or mock someone does not have that intention, and quite likely, the same effect either. That's why I stressed the difference. (Carter-Long, 2005 http://www.raggededgemagazine.com/departments/mediacircusblog/000684.html)

Looking at Cartman's bigoted behavior through this lens shows us the bigotry was distancing, but the editorial decision to have Cartman speak in this manner could provoke an alliance with those oppressed by such language. Karen, in the opening example, could use our chart for evaluating disability humor to help her fifth graders understand how labels distance us from each other and insert fear into potential friendships. She can help them see that because many young people probably watch *South Park,* it is important for teachers to help young people evaluate what they hear in the media and playground. Another approach to thinking about the controversial aspects of street humor can be for teachers to help students think about how disability is socially constructed and not an "absolute." Smith (in press) explains:

> Disability is socially constructed. Disability resides in the set of social relationships and outcomes of social practices that tend to disadvantage and marginalize people with impairments, perceived impairments, and physical differences. These relationships are institutional, cultural, and interpersonal social structures. Cultural definitions result in deficit oriented assumptions that govern oppressive practices such as exclusion and isolation.

> Even young children can understand that if there are ramps everywhere, then people who use wheelchairs are not "disabled," and that if everyone knew sign language, then those who are hearing impaired would have access to communication with everyone.

Karen can focus on full citizenship explaining that students with disabilities or who are perceived to have disabilities must be fully participating citizens of the educational community. She can use the *South Park* episode to initiate a discussion about name calling including the labels the students experience and hate. Her students may be familiar with the *South Park* characters and can talk about how Timmy, the show's wheelchair user, might feel around his peers' bigoted language. They can discuss what it would be like to have Timmy in their class and how to make sure he is always in the thick of things.

Another difference between oppressive insults and humor, and liberating or inclusive humor, is the extent to which the joke essentializes the disability—making the subject of the joke one-dimensional. Life with disability is complex, and defies being defined by any label, whether medical term, euphemism, or insult. Karen can use a lesson such as "All My Labels" (Sapon-Shevin, 1999) to show how labeling impacts all of us. The students can draw comparisons between what people would think if they only know what a label says about them and the whole "rest of their life." She can also use an activity in which each child is asked to write self-descriptions, one complimentary and affirming and one labeling and judgmental. As they contrast "Timmy is a under-sized boy who has considerable difficulties with reading and writing" with "Timmy is an energetic,

active boy who loves climbing and exploring the outdoors," they can think about how they would be treated differently based on how they are described.

Just as the lives of people with disabilities are complex, so are the issues associated with the use of humor. There are no easy answers. What is important is beginning and continuing the conversation. How do we talk about one another? What do we know about one another and how do we learn more? What are the effects of what we know or don't know or of the assumptions we make or the stereotypes we hold? The challenge is to keep the big picture in mind: creating community where all are valued.

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Resources

Authors

Giangreco, M. F. books of inclusive education issues oriented cartoons

John Callahan: several cartoon books and johncallahan.com

www.dizabled.com/ *Leeder O Men* cartoons

Disability Magazines

http://www.netreach.net/~abrejcha/magazine.htm

Mouth Magazine. Mouthmag.org

Ouch! Home page http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/

Ragged Edge (*formerly The Disability Rag and Resource*) - The Avocado Press, P.O. Box 145, Louisville, KY 40201. E-mail: rgarr@iglou.com. http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com. Bimonthly activist magazine covering disability rights issues.

Special Living: - P.O. Box 1000, Bloomington, IL 61702, Phone: 309-525-8842, e-mail: info@SpeciaLiving.com, http://www.SpeciaLiving.com. This quarterly magazine continues the purpose, tradition, style and some contributors and features of **Accent on Living** and readers of the former will be happy to see the continuation.