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## **Title :**

*The Construction of Difference and Bio Tecnico Power*

## **Abstract :**

*We wish to make our position quite clear we stand fundamentally opposed to all forms of oppression. The discourse of disability is a discourse of oppression and modernity. An oppression that is quite rightly campaigned against and written about by many authors. We hope to offer Michel Foucault's analysis of bio tecnico power as a tool in considering not the affects of the oppression of disability but how that oppression evolves and oppresses all.*

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## **Abstract**

In *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault conceptualises discourse as meaning ‘the relations between statements’ (1972 p31) and ‘practices that systematically form the object of what they speak (p49). This particular text considers the discourse of difference and how through discursive practice and biotecnico power the ‘meaning’ of ‘difference’, becomes an ‘object’ of less value.

Bio tecnico power has evolved in two forms. One ‘disciplinary power which operates on the human body as a machine’ (O’Brien 1999 p133) informing us of what we are or should be. The second form is ‘the regulation of the population’ (O’Brien 1999 p133). This text is an attempt by the two authors to reflect on how we have experienced bio tecnico power, accepted dominant power knowledge statements, and oppressed self and others.

We wish to make our position quite clear we stand fundamentally opposed to all forms of oppression. The discourse of disability is a discourse of oppression and modernity. An oppression that is quite rightly campaigned against and written about by many authors. We hope to offer Michel Foucault’s analysis of bio tecnico power as a tool in considering not the affects of the oppression of disability but how that oppression evolves and oppresses all.

It is through the analysis of biotecnico power that we suggest that all ‘labels’ be it handicapped, disabled, normal or a person of difference, are statements, which relate to practices that form the object of ‘what’ they speak. The labels and practices set people apart and assist in perpetuating the oppression of all.

The ‘able bodied’ are handicapped or disabled by their and others representation of what they think, they should be i.e. physically, psychology or spiritually. They are expected to be a ‘type’, which is oppressive. People of disability are oppressed and represented as a ‘type’ that they and others think they should be. We ask in this article is it possible to drop the differences and oppose the joint discourse of oppression?

## **The Construction of Disability and Bio Tecnico Power**

The ‘construction’ and ‘meaning’ of ‘difference’ for the two authors of this paper historically and in practice has meant inferior. It is our ‘prior’ meaning, construction and deconstruction we attempt to share with you, the reader, in this text. Our former meaning whilst being subjective and constructed via different experiences we proffer forms part of the wider discourse of oppression and specifically the oppression of people of difference within modernity. A construction that is held and practiced through formal and informal structures by use of a process that Michel Foucault describes as ‘*bio tecnico power*’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982 pxxii)

Foucault (1989) constructs one of the elements of biotecnico power as a system, where ‘*certain actions modify others*’ (p219) This can clearly be seen in the way people of difference can construct an image of self which will be discussed below by Lynne and how others can construct images of people of difference whilst at the same time believing they are acting in the interest of people of difference this will be discussed below by Alex. We suggest that ‘in the interest of people of difference’ actions create actions that de- values people, which create actions that perpetuate a devaluing process.

Biotechnico power is also used to promote and legitimise the increased organising, structuring and surveillance of individuals by claiming to act in the interest of the individuals and the population by improving and promoting their welfare. It would be simple to attribute this to the power and actions of the state which in many ways would over simplify and negate the attitudes that individuals construct and their

practice i.e. actions. It would also fail to ask how people construct and legitimise their actions.

Through the sciences of medicine and psychology we are presented with the images of the healthy normal body and the healthy psyche i.e. power knowledge. A body and mind, which will develop in set ways at set times (truths). Any deviation from this scientific normal development will lead to further monitoring, surveillance and correction. This may be done in the interest of a specific individual via medical or psychological intervention or in the interest of society and the individual via their incarceration in a special home or unit i.e. institution.

The use of the words incarceration and institution are used here in a much broader sense than the culturally accepted meaning. We offer the postulate that these type of institutions are designed to isolate people and that institutions are social constructions, which do not need physical obstruction i.e. gates, walls boundaries. The isolation can be administered and experienced by exclusion within a community purporting to include i.e. present yet absent and absent but present. Is it possible that through construction and representation people may incarcerate themselves?

We acknowledge our role in the incarceration of self and others, an act we attempt to avoid repeating yet, an act that is easy to repeat. We ask you the reader to consider how **you** may incarcerate yourself and others. This may present the opportunity to analyse how power functions not on a macro scale by use of the umbrella term 'power', which in many senses is an ambiguous non descript.

### *The Construction of Difference and Bio Tecnico Power*

Foucault in *The History of Sexuality & Madness and Civilisation* outlines how power operates not simply as an instrument of the dominant class structures or institutions but how power operates through the 'social body' (the social body in this context for Foucault is the person/self) on a micro scale

Via interlinking structures and systems that includes language, legislation, education and the welfare state etc we construct polices, structures and systems to help the human person to develop and become more civilised. This is expected to benefit all, yet it creates a culture of institutional dependency. We are informed historically that the enlightenment lay the foundations for a transfer from a dependency on God for solutions hope and guidance to science, are we now in a period where the dependency is being given to institutions to provide us with safety, salvation and truth?

We suggest in this article, through the use of biotecnico power, we construct ourselves as independent institutions that draw what is required or possible through our own abilities from others. It is dependence with the facade of independence and autonomy (incarcerated within our institution). Institutions that govern, set agendas, values, and take actions etc in the interest of self and the wider layers of society.

Part of the value system is to form a social conscious or awareness of those who are less 'fortunate'! Those who need our help, support, pity or generate fear within us. This may be used in two ways either to give us feelings of superiority or to censor what we consider to be weaknesses for fear of being labelled and set aside. This may be particularly relevant to people who experience what is labelled mental health issues

which in turn introduces forms of self monitoring and surveillance in the interest of self i.e. oppression through discursive practice.

It is true to say that people are structurally set aside because of their constructed difference, yet it begs the question are they culturally excluded? This obviously will depend on how we define culture and exclusion. Spardly (1980) suggest that culture is defined as *'the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour'* (p6).

For a definition of exclusion we turn to Foucault in his writings on Madness and Civilisation in which he cites the plight of lepers who were historically set apart, yet constantly used to demonstrate the wrath of a displeased God and His reprisals, a form of social control. Structurally set apart within the leper colonies yet very much included within the discourse of the community. It is these two definitions that we feel best outlines the use of bio tecnico power within our current history particularly Foucault's interpretation of discourse, which will present the opportunity to consider 'power knowledge' its use, and oppressive discourse through discursive practice.

Foucault's interpretation of discourse is much wider than the use of language it is a form of social practice which includes activity and systems of behaviour. Discourses are shared practices by a community of people and a shared definition of that community (power knowledge). The definition of a community is kept in place at all levels through systems and structures such as institutions and official agents such as self, family and professions- *'all of whom use discourse more or less consciously as a manifestation of power'* (Foucault 1982 p222).

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In the case of people of difference there is an extra power knowledge that carries with it an authorised truth and oppression through Government Members and Ministers, Medical Professionals, Academics, Educational Psychologist, Special Education Tribunal members etc. Each has their own authority over a certain form of knowledge, which then privileges them to make assessments and statements about or do certain things to other people. This may include 'doing' in the best interest of the person and society without consultation or right to appeal.

That is to say their knowledge is superior, unquestionable, true and accepted. It may include the start or, legitimising of labelling or structural isolation from mainstream schools and society by being incarcerated within differing types of institutions. This is the process carried out through practice that Foucault describes as bio tecnico power.

We have suggested above that that discourses are shared practices by a community of people and part of the definition of that community, and that only some discourses are accepted as authoritative. The question now is how are the authority discourses accepted and defined by the wider community.

We have outlined types of authority discourses that profess to act as providers of truth for the benefit of the individual and society, which contextually contains '*degrees of rationalisation- the legitimisation process or reason for exercising power*' (Foucault 1982 p222). One example of the rationalisation process is the scientific model of disability that is the accepted dominant authoritative view within our current history and practice and acceptance of science as a provider of facts and truths.

The starting point for the scientific model, which is legitimised and rationalised by being given the term medical model of disability is firmly located within the person, who is less valued and in need of correction. Correction or detention may be available through medical intervention and associated professions and systems. That is to say a person may become near to normal as possible or not with the assistance of science but within this process they are labelled handicapped or disabled within a continuing devaluing process. Culturally, science and medicine are seen to work to the benefit of the population. If science cannot correct then we are beyond repair and value.

Bio tecnico power, power knowledge and rationalisation is aptly demonstrated by Gillham (1986) in a forward to his book whilst commenting on the issues of integration v segregation he states '*much of the glibness of the debate has been due to ignorance of even the basic facts of disability*' referring to those who advocate integration. He describes the advocates of integration as indulging in conceptual games.

Gillham's discourse assumes the position of expert, suggesting that others do not have his knowledge status, thus, pronouncing a power knowledge expression of his own authority and status. Thus, bringing power relations into being and devaluing and dismissing alternative concepts or realities (non expert).

Gillham continues to devalue people of difference and alternative views '*Children who suffer from these disabilities are even more handicapped if those who come into contact with them do not understand the nature of their limitations*' (Foreword). This quote rationalises his and other professional's status and power position, by outlining

the suffering and danger that will be further inflicted by the non-expert, who is without understanding.

A power knowledge statement in the interest and protection of the person of difference against the interfering non-knowledgeable meddler, this passage also assumes that people of difference suffer due to their difference, and not, suffering from isolation due to socially constructed limitations imposed by society; an attitude that forms part of the predominant social discourse and practice, which determines how we come to accept others and ourselves within our current context.

### **Constructed Freak Attempting to be a Constructed Person of Value.**

My name is Lynne Smith I was born in August 1955 and was immediately labelled the 'poorly' baby this was the start of my disability and an acceptance of authority statements given by others and accepted by me that would act in my interest (bio tecnico power). The official medical label inflicted on me is 'Talipes Equina Varus' I do not know what the literal translation of these words mean, but the cultural translation is 'spastic' or 'spac'.

The cultural 'meaning' is less valued, less able and in need of pity or scorn. Through this pity or scorn others are able to find some type of value for themselves, be it a feeling of completeness (superior) or feeling good or charitable (superior/humanitarian), which ever, it rationalises their being and consolidates their own oppression. I do not exclude myself from this process as I use derogatory terms to describe others and myself clearly accepting the dominant discourse of less value.

Foucault (1982) suggests that ‘power is not a function of consent’ (p219) yet by our acceptance of the dominant discourses how easily we give our passive consent. I have been subject to hours of surgery and months in hospital beds whilst parts of me have been removed or changed without my consent. The majority of my operations took place whilst I was a child even then I would protest but my mother would always say, “the doctor knew best” (use of power knowledge statement).

My experience of isolation and no value continued through out my years in primary and secondary education. The medical and educational profession automatically assumed that I would go to a ‘special school’ They in their educated wisdom assumed that because my legs are twisted that I cannot function in a mainstream school. I have yet to see the ‘normal’ person who thinks, listens or writes with their legs. Despite attending a mainstream school and not giving my consent to be isolated it still took place. Students were asked to look after me and I was excluded from PE for my own safety. The reality of this is not my safety but the preservation of competition and the oppression of the norm.

The isolation that I experienced is not the starting point for a truly inclusive society it is for those that I have previously labelled the normal ones to consider how they are increasingly becoming individualised and set apart and recognise their own oppression, then join all oppressed people not on the bases of difference but to oppose all oppressive practices, these comments are echoed in ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ within the work of Paulo Freire (1996) who argued that the study of oppressive reality is not carried out by experts but by the ‘objects’ of the oppression, taking action against the oppressive elements to a ‘conscientization’. The following account by

Alex demonstrates how bio tecnico power oppresses both those considered different and those considered normal.

### **Charitable/Humanist or Oppressive?**

In the early 1960's I lived in a community in Miles Platting, Manchester. Within our community a boy some five or six years older than I, he was approximately 15 years of age was described as mentally handicapped by those who 'liked' him and a spastic, mad or mong by others. He attended a 'special school' for the mentally handicapped, on occasions he would go crazy in the street, making noises speaking differently and throwing himself about the ground.

We were told that this happened because he was poorly, or 'retarded' 'you know a bit slow not like normal children' (by the more charitable?) mad, or the demons were in him, or, it was god's punishment by others. I personally found his actions frightening and thought that all people who were mentally handicapped, or went to a special school or, mad, acted this way. A gross generalisation based on what I 'thought' I saw (visual information), and interpreted with the information I was given by people, (audio information) and 'consolidated' via information from books. (Power knowledge)

For example, 'The Bible' is littered with stories of leper's, cripples, and the blind that suffered for their sins, and on occasions were 'forgiven' and 'cured' by Jesus, and in literature Lady Macbeth exemplified someone who suffered insanity due to her 'evil deed'.

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The given, received, and rationalised information about people of difference resulted in a representation that was negative, oppressive, and unfounded. Such passive acceptance of the dominant power cultural discourse and acceptance of our oppressive and oppressed cultural role negates any process of change or challenge.

Some of the other children were not allowed to play with the boy in our community and people crossed the road or closed the door when he approached. This was rationalised by legal systems of power in the interest of his and others safety. Thus leaving him isolated from people of his own age, his school community and his local community. He was never any of the above descriptors he lives with epilepsy.

People tended to hold two different views on this man, reinforcing a 'type', both of which consolidate authoritative views about disability and have negative connotations.

One view was he needed help. We were told to look after him and make sure he was all right. Each May Day a group of us would go 'Molly Dancing' door to door taking our 'friend' with us, he would explain to people when they answered the door that we were raising money to help people 'like' him the 'mentally handicapped'. This was a process of self-labelling devaluing and an acceptance of the dominant power discourse juxtaposed by the acceptance that we were acting in his and others interest.

We were constantly told how 'good' we were to 'help' people like 'that' and how sorry they felt for him. People spoke to us, not our friend. We received all the praise, attention, and credit, which we readily accepted and relished. It was about us and how

good we 'normal kids' were. 'We' knew what 'he needed doing for him', he could not possibly 'know', 'he is not normal', and we did not include him. We 'used' him and failed to recognise our internalised oppressive tactics (bio tecno power).

The second view was one of fear and hatred. 'Don't come around here with him he's dangerous' ' People like him should be locked up'. In essence, both viewpoints accepted the authoritative view and developed part of our 'communities' negative interpretation of difference. We constructed and formed part of the history of the misrepresentation of difference. It is also true to say that both views were used with power knowledge and arguably in the interest of others, be it for the person of difference, or the protection of their children and self, neither of the views assisted, supported, consulted or challenged any form of oppression.

## **Conclusion**

We wish to conclude this paper with a definition of power relations provided by Foucault (1984) '*In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of actions: and action on action, on existing actions or those that may arise in the future*' (p220). Through the process of bio tecnico power actions of those we never meet or never challenge or simply ourselves form our actions of oppression.

We urge all people particularly those who form policy, produce curriculum, assess people to search beyond what they see and experience and to ask the question **how** have I arrived at my current position what are the inclusive and equality of opportunities polices saying and doing in the interest of those excluded how do they move all people forward in an informed and positive way containing choice.

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How could it be different what are the power statements and acceptances that are contained within my thoughts and actions? Who's benefit have we at the centre of our actions and have we made them coherent and transparent. Do your actions include and liberate or are they further structures of containment, surveillance and oppression. How can I challenge the accepted norms, values and practices of oppression?

We suggest that dignity and autonomy are basic human rights, not to be afforded dignity and autonomy is an oppressive practice. We proffer that dignity and autonomy leads to a practice of value of self and others. In this article we have attempted to show how we feel we have been striped of dignity and autonomy.

Lynne by the actions of others and her self and Alex by collusion with the predominant power discourse on difference not valuing people for who they are, but devaluing them due to the discriminatory discourse of what they are i.e. taking/giving away dignity and autonomy of thoughts and expression. We assist the oppressive tactics of our oppressor we become the oppressor of self and others.

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