

Revisiting the "dys-appearing body" through the lens of psycho-emotional disablism

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The social model of disability has been criticised for maintaining an artificial separation of the impaired body from socially constructed disability. Whilst politically this has been very useful in helping the disabled people's movement recognise and challenge forms of social oppression experienced by people with impairments, this dichotomy fails to recognise the "carnal politics of everyday life" (Paterson and Hughes, 1999). One potential solution to this problem is the introduction of a sociology of impairment which recognises that "impairment is social and disability is embodied" (Paterson and Hughes, 1999: 598). Drawing on phenomenological concepts, these authors showed that when people with impairments experience disabling barriers such as patronising behaviour, then the impaired body is brought into focus, "dys-appearing" because of its perceived "abnormality".

It is clear that the experience of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 2007) which arises from disablist attitudes and behaviours at the interpersonal level, is closely related to Paterson and Hughes' account of the "dys-appearing" body. Therefore, one aim of this exploratory paper is to examine what the concept of psycho-emotional disablism brings to their theoretical work on a sociology of impairment.

Secondly, this paper considers the particular experience of one relatively neglected group of disabled people within disability studies, those who are seen as the "unhealthy disabled" (Wendell, 2001). Data from doctoral research is used to illustrate how interactions with strangers can cause the chronically ill body to "dys-appear", in order to satisfy the stranger's need to maintain a belief in their own invulnerability (Hughes, 2007).

Finally, for many people with chronic illness, their impairments can be invisible or fluctuate over time - thus their bodies can "dys-appear" one day, only to "disappea" and be "taken-for-granted" the next. This failure to fit the stereotypical image of a disabled person with a stable impairment makes it difficult for many people with chronic illness to claim disability benefits and services unless they draw attention to their impairments (Wendell, 2001), making their own bodies "dys-appear". Consequently, the claiming of disability benefits is intricately tied up with notions of identity (as disabled or not) as well as psycho-emotional disablism and impairment.