
Stereotypes as Institution: Exploring (Re)institutionalisation and the Negotiation of Possibility

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Résumé

‘When we were building the bakery, we wanted to make an open kitchen, so people could see in. Because people think that disabled people are clumsy, dirty. That they’re not hygienic. So, we had to have an open kitchen, so they could see that they’re not.’
NGO Director, Armenia

This paper investigates the (re)creation of the institution in civil society interventions. It focuses on institutions as the ‘shared values and meanings that hold onto us as much as we hold onto them’ (Alter 2021, n.p.). It does so by exploring how civil society actors negotiate the values and meanings ascribed to disability by ableism. I argue that responses to stereotypes may (re)institutionalise beyond any bricks-and-mortar institution. Where such dominant modes of understanding channel action, they shape possibilities. What does this mean for agency and possibility as we seek to deinstitutionalise in thought and action?

My theoretical grounding draws on Black feminist thought and critical disability studies. Stereotypes and responses to them have been explored as a tool of control, particularly in Black feminist literature (Crenshaw 1997; Collins 1986). However, to my knowledge, this exploration has been less linked to consideration of (re)institutionalisation beyond the residential institution. In response, I argue that critical disability studies in fact provides the grounds to develop that analysis.

Kafer argues that crip futures ‘support multiple ways of being’ and are about ‘possibility, unpredictability, promise’ (2013, 46). Ginsburg and Rapp build on Appadurai’s ‘ethics of possibility’ (2013, 295) to propose it as essential to building the access essential disability worlds (Ginsburg and Rapp 2020, S5). Ableism also lies in demanding a disabled person perform disability in a single immutable manner (Siebers 2004). There is a weight of disability studies literature which emphasises recognising and supporting multiplicity, mutability, and fluidity as central to disabled ways of being. I therefore argue that the dominant discourses which seek to control disability and set the tracks civil society activities in fact restrict this multiplicity. Stereotypes thus recreate the institution by controlling possibilities of action.

This argument is explored through two empirical cases. I take the first from fieldwork and qualitative interviews conducted with civil society actors in Russia from 2017 to 2018. I take the second from ongoing participatory action research in Armenia with civil society actors, disabled people, and their family members organising around disability. Through both

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cases, I outline the dominant discourses, or stereotypes, which civil society actors understand as characterising disability in their contexts. I then demonstrate how certain interventions develop as responses to these stereotypes and how that may create a (re)institutionalisation of disability, or a removal or curtailment of possibility. Finally, I consider the following questions. Firstly, how can we consider agency and possibility within interventions so strongly shaped by restrictive stereotypes? Secondly, (how) is it possible to avoid this restriction? This paper thus contributes an empirically grounded, theoretical argument for the recognition of the institutionalising power of stereotypes and considers how we may build multiple possibility within and beyond stereotypes.