

METAPHORS MATTER

- LIBBY WEBBER



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Resource Guide

About Libby Webber

I am an NCS-accredited counsellor in private practice in Portsmouth, Hampshire, where one of my specialisms is working with people living with disability. Before training as a therapist, I spent 20 years working as a producer in radio and television, in both disability-specific and mainstream programmes. I originally studied social anthropology with a special interest in the experience of stigmatised or marginalised communities.



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Event Details

Metaphors abound in our language; in fact, the philosopher Nietzsche went so far as to say that "There is no real knowing apart from metaphor" - meaning that consciously or otherwise, we create and experience reality through the metaphors we use.

Language, and how we use it, creates meaning for people; for example, when someone chooses to describe themselves as a 'survivor' of abuse rather than a 'victim'. Metaphors have the power to shape our opinions, our decisions and even our sense of identity. So what happens when the metaphors we use are drawn from outdated views of disability and impairment? The biblical scholar Renita Weems wrote that metaphors "are often our first lesson in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping and in marginalising others - even if only in our own minds".

This talk will explore how metaphors about disability, both in spoken language and in film, have helped to shape how we view disability and disabled people - and influenced how disabled people see themselves.

1st Learning Objective:

Understanding the power of metaphor and language to shape our experience of the world.

2nd Learning Objective:

Understanding how disabled people are affected and further marginalised by the language and metaphors we use.





Metaphors matter

By Libby Webber

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What is a metaphor?

From the Greek 'metaphora', the word metaphor literally means to 'transfer or carry over', as in a bridge from one thing to another – in this case, an understanding of one thing in terms of another.



For example,

“All the world’s a stage and
all the men and women
merely players”.
-W.Shakespeare

Carries over one idea (that of the stage being somewhere drama takes place through the medium of roles) to illustrate another idea – this is how things work in the world.



Or...

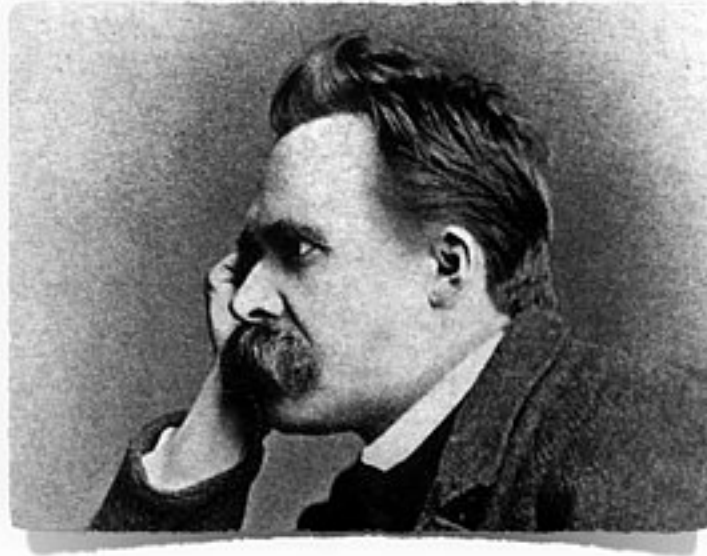
“ My love is like a red red rose”.

- R. Burns

Meaning that love, like a rose, can be both beautiful and painful at times.



(Although technically, this is a simile rather than a metaphor because it uses the word 'like' rather than directly equating the two but you get the idea).



“There is no real knowing apart from metaphor”

– Nietzsche

Metaphors underpin (there goes another metaphor!) the way we understand the world and express ourselves through language.



Visual metaphors

In advertising, the power of the image conveys (carries over) a certain meaning...

<http://bit.ly/1U6z40m>

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Metaphors (and from that, stereotypes) help convey a message very quickly. But they can also leave out the bigger picture. For example, the use of a jaguar to advertise the car conveys a message of speed, power and danger; however in the wild, a Jaguar spends its first two weeks very vulnerable with its eyes closed, and is a solitary and quite shy and cautious animal. So it is with disability; metaphors and stereotypes only give part of the picture.



Metaphors can also be both kinaesthetic/tactile and visual

We sometimes invite clients to use pebbles and shells to represent (carry over the meaning of) people, situations or feelings.

Metaphors rooted in physical or sensory experience are believed to derive their power from a process called “scaffolding”. Systems in the brain which evolved to enable us to assess for example, the warmth or otherwise of the environment, are now employed to assess the warmth or affable-ness of a person. For more on this, this book is a fascinating read: “I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World”, by James

The power of metaphors to affect our behaviour has been repeatedly tested and verified in experimental conditions. One of these was the Stanford Psychological Experiment. Students were divided into 2 groups; one group was given an article describing crime as a virus infecting the community, the other group was given the same article except that it described crime as a beast preying on the community. Each group was asked to come up with ways of tackling the problem of crime. The group who were told that crime was a virus tended to come up with social reform ways of tackling crime; the group who were told that crime was a beast tended to come up with punitive or strict enforcement measures. Neither group was aware of the effect of the metaphor on their decision-making process; it was entirely subconscious. Here is a link to the study:

<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0016782>

This is why it is so important to understand the metaphors we take for granted around disability, reflect on them rather than being influenced subconsciously by them.



Musical metaphors

We can *feel* the meaning of 'happiness' as conveyed in the song 'Happy' by Pharrell Williams.

<https://youtu.be/y6Sxv-sUYtM>

Many metaphors are rooted in physical and sensory experience.

- “She had a poor grip on reality.”
- “He took a leap of faith”
- “She’s a very cold person”
- “There was something fishy about it”
- “She stood her ground”
- “His eyes burned with anger”
- “I can't wrap my head around it”
- “It was music to his ears”
- “I was feeling low”





“Metaphors are often our first lesson in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping and in marginalising others - even if only in our own minds”

-Renita Weems

Disability metaphors in film

- "Single episode disability".
- "Object of pity".
- "Sinister or evil".
- "Eternal innocence".
- "Victim of violence".
- "Inspirational".
- Asexual, undesirable, or incapable".



Metaphors in film. These are also known as “tropes”; shorthand to convey an understanding of character quickly.

1. Single episode disability can be used as a way of exploring character flaws e.g. an episode of Law and Order:SVU in which a detective was temporarily blinded and later regained his sight. Disabled characters are often written into movies to enable other characters to explore plot points.
2. e.g Tiny Tim in a Christmas Carol.
3. e.g Darth Vader in Star Wars, the Joker in the Dark Night
4. e.g Rain Man
5. e.g Wait until Dark. The central character is blind and is terrorised in her apartment by criminals. Her blindness is a metaphor for vulnerability.
- 6.e.g Rahm Kota from Star Wars the Force Unleashed video game who has “overcome” his impairment.
7. e.g Jake Sully in Avatar, who only regains his potency and power when he is in his able-bodied

There are some good examples of characters on screen: Lester Crest from Grand Theft Auto V is a good example of someone who is not defined by their impairment. Peter Dinklage in Game of Thrones. Lisa Hammond in EastEnders.

Disability is often used as a way of signposting how we are supposed to feel about the situation. the characters are often one-dimensional and transient. In the series NCIS, McGee's girlfriend became spinally injured as a result of a terrorist attack. Their relationship continued afterwards but she was written out of the programme shortly after. Her "recovery" from the injury happened over the course of only two or three episodes and was therefore unrealistic, although on the positive side, she and McGee were shown to have remained in a sexual relationship.

Disability in fairytales

- Hansel and Gretel (the witch with withered hands)
- Cinderella (the sisters are blinded as punishment for their wickedness)
- The Brave Tin Soldier (the one-legged soldier is bullied)
- Rapunzel (the Prince is blinded and destined to wander alone)



<https://flic.kr/p/9Er66R>

Fairytales often are written to be scary to children and if the characters in fairytales have an impairment, then that associates impairment with frightening things, an association that can be carried through to adulthood in the form of anxiety and awkwardness around disabled people.



“Disability becomes a metaphor, a code, for the message that the non-disabled writer wishes to get across... In doing this the writer draws on the ignorance, prejudice and fear that generally exist towards disabled people.”

– Jenny Morris, 1991

Impairment-based language

- “Love is blind”
- “His argument fell upon deaf ears”.
- “She was crippled by debt”.
- “A lame excuse”.
- “He was dumbstruck”.
- “So drunk they were paralytic”.



This website offers an explanation of why it matters when we use “ableist” language.

<http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/11/ableist-language-matters/>

Language matters because it’s based on and reinforces the idea that disability is bad. If you listen

to some of the insults that are thrown at people, often they are impairment based for example,

moron, retard, idiot, spaz, “are you blind as well as stupid”.



“The looking-glass self”

Charles Cooley, 1902

- There are three main components of the looking-glass self:
Add a little bit of body text
- We imagine how we must appear to others.
- We imagine and react to what we feel their judgment of that appearance must be.
- We develop our self through the judgments of others.

The concept of the Looking Glass Self is really helpful here in understanding how language affects self perception; for example, some people may find it empowering to describe themselves as “survivor” rather than “victim of a crime. You can find an introduction to the concept and links to further reading [HERE](#)

You can find more on how language affects and influences personal identity for disabled people [HERE](#)

“internalised oppression” is a concept originally applied to minority ethnic experience. However it's very applicable to the experience of disabled people given the prevalence of potentially damaging and negative metaphors and stereotypes surrounding disability. Internalised oppression leads to a lowering of self esteem and self worth and a sense of shame. In recent years, this has been countered by the rise of Disability Pride movements. You can read more about internalised oppression and disabled people [HERE](#)

Living With Disability: Get the bigger picture

A 3-part distance learning course for counsellors,
psychotherapists and wellbeing practitioners

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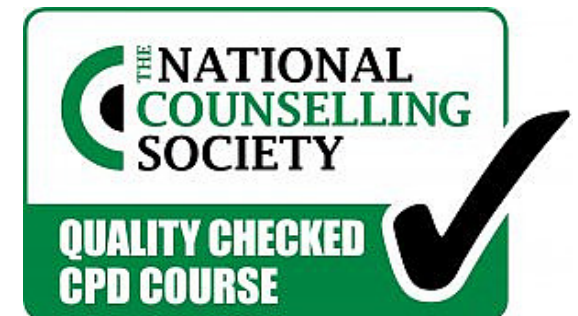
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