



## Representations of Disability

The aims of this Factsheet are to:

- outline the common stereotypes of disability evident in the media
- offer examples of representations of disability in the media
- consider the impact representations have on real life

### Definitions:

- The term **impairment** refers to the individual's functional limitation, be that physical, intellectual, mental or sensory.
- **Disability** is the loss of, or limitation of, opportunities to take part in the everyday, normal life of a given community as a result of physical or social barriers.
- **Disablism** refers to the stereotypes, prejudice and institutional discrimination directed against disabled people.

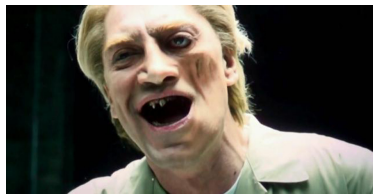


It is important to remember that people do not have disabilities; they have impairments. It is incorrect to say 'people with disabilities' and, instead, you should express this idea as 'people with impairments' or 'disabled people' as this illustrates that disability is society's problem and not the individual's. It is important to use these terms appropriately according to Beth **Haller** (2006) as "even something as mundane as the words used to refer to a group are important because they have ramifications both for the self-perception of people with impairments and what the general public believes about disability".

David **Hevey** (1992), a disabled writer, photographer and director, has said of representations of disability in the media: "The history of the portrayal of disabled people is the history of oppressive and negative representation. This has meant that disabled people have been presented as socially flawed able-bodied people, not as disabled people with their own identities". This notion is illustrated by Colin **Barnes** (1992) in *Disabling Imagery and the Media*. Barnes identifies twelve commonly re-occurring representations of disability in the media that are often linked to one another and offer an overall negative representation of disabled people as a threat to the well-being of the non-disabled community.

### Activity

According to Barnes, stereotypes of disabilities "medicalise, patronise, criminalise and dehumanise" disabled people. Find representations of impairments in the media that support this view and others that show it to be incorrect.

Stereotype	Example in the media
<p><b>Pitiable and pathetic</b></p> <p>Overtly dependent disabled people are included in media texts to illustrate another non-disabled person's goodness and sensitivity. These disabled people's well-being is wholly reliant upon the benevolence of others and this representation perpetuates the idea that disability is synonymous with illness and suffering. This representation makes no acknowledgement of the social factors that create disability and presents people with impairments as worthy of pity and totally dependent.</p>	<p>This is a common representation found in charity advertising. For example, the charity Smile Train, which helps to fund surgery for children with cleft palates, has been criticized for using children's looks as a way of generating pity and gaining donations. In this example, the tagline of 'imagine living your whole life looking like this because you could never afford \$250 for surgery' suggests that life is intolerable if you do not look 'normal'. It does not mention the medical conditions, such as ear infections, associated with a cleft palate and how this may affect the child's life.</p> <div data-bbox="1252 1458 1503 1688" data-label="Image"> </div> <p><a href="http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2007/12/21/charity-organization-capitalizes-on-grossness-of-aid-recipients/">http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2007/12/21/charity-organization-capitalizes-on-grossness-of-aid-recipients/</a></p>
<p><b>Object of violence</b></p> <p>Whilst disabled people are often subject to abuse by non-disabled people, Barnes feels that this stereotype in the media can lead to the assumption that disabled people are totally helpless and this can, in fact, perpetuate real life violence against disabled people. According to Barnes, newspapers tend to sensationalise violence against disabled people, especially those with learning difficulties who are often portrayed as victims.</p>	<p>It is much rarer for people with physical or mental impairments to be seen as victims of physical abuse in the media nowadays but this representation is still commonly seen in relation to people with learning difficulties. For example, the <i>Mirror</i> newspaper ran the headline 'School of Scandal: "Abuse" at school where soldiers send their kids' in connection with a story about alleged sexual abuse at a private school for children with learning difficulties such as autism, dyslexia and dyscalculia.</p>

Stereotype	Example in the media
<p><b>Sinister and evil</b></p> <p>It has been a common stereotypes in broadcast media that villains have some kind of disability, most usually a facial disfigurement or limp. However, more recently, intellectual impairments and mental health issues have come to be connected with criminality in the print media. Both representations suggest that disabled people should be feared as they are not ‘normal’.</p>	<p>Even recent Bond films have relied upon facial disfigurement to signify a character is evil. For example, Le Chiffre in <i>Casino Royal</i> (dir. Campbell, 2006) has a scarred and discoloured left eye and Raoul Silva in <i>Skyfall</i> (dir. Mendes, 2012) is shown to have a dental implant which, when removed, reveals a disfigured and distorted face.</p>  <p><a href="http://jamesbond.wikia.com/wiki/File:Silva%27s_disfigurement.jpg">http://jamesbond.wikia.com/wiki/File:Silva%27s_disfigurement.jpg</a></p>
<p><b>Atmosphere or curio</b></p> <p>Disabled people are sometimes used to enhance the atmosphere of a media text and to create a sense of menace, mystery or deprivation. Barnes refers to this as “disability voyeurism” as the representation portrays disability as something fascinating to the viewer. This stereotype, again, links physical appearance with moral character, suggesting a flawed physical appearance must mean the person has flawed morals too.</p>	<p>The Channel 4 documentary series <i>Bodys Shock</i> is a good example of the curio stereotype. The episodes have titles such as ‘Turtle Boy’, ‘Curse of the Mermaid’ and ‘The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off’ and each centres on a medical condition that severely impacts an individual’s life.</p>  <p><a href="http://www.channel4.com/programmes/bodys Shock/episode-guide">http://www.channel4.com/programmes/bodys Shock/episode-guide</a></p>
<p><b>‘Super Cripple’</b></p> <p>In this representation, disabled people are assigned superhuman, almost magical abilities and are praised excessively for achievements. Themes in this representation tend to focus on disabled people’s extraordinary abilities or their managing to fit into ‘normal life’. This portrayal ignores the fact that the disability is a social issue and is overly sentimental about the individual’s impairment.</p>	<p>This advert for the Paralympics was criticized by the UK disability charity Scope for suggesting the athletes with disabilities were in some way magical for coping with their impairments. It was suggested that the tagline should have read ‘meet the super athletes’ rather than ‘superhumans’ as this would draw attention to their abilities as sportspeople rather than their impairment as being the thing that makes them different to non-disabled people.</p>  <p><a href="http://www.scope.org.uk/news/disability-2012/superhuman-or-super-athletes">http://www.scope.org.uk/news/disability-2012/superhuman-or-super-athletes</a></p>

### Activity

Read this synopsis of *A Boy Called Alex*, which was originally screened on Channel 4 in January 2008, and analyse the representation of Alex. Consider which stereotypes of disability have been used. You can watch clips from the documentary on YouTube.

“Gifted musician Alex Stobbs is taking on his toughest artistic challenge yet. Follow this remarkable 16-year-old in his attempt to conduct Bach’s *Magnificat* at Eton while dealing with a virulent form of cystic fibrosis. In this *Cutting Edge* film by Stephen Walker, we follow Alex over three extraordinary months as he sets out to achieve his goal. Filmed with almost unprecedented access to Eton, a school which rarely allows cameras inside its gates, the documentary charts the highs and lows of rehearsals as Alex pummels the school’s orchestra into shape, meeting his teachers, his friends, his doctors and his family along the way.” (Extract from <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/a-boy-called-alex/episode-guide>)

**Object of ridicule**

This representation shows the disabled person as foolish and focuses on the audience laughing at the impairment. This is often based upon a speech or visual impairment.

This representation is less prevalent in the media today as it is seen as inappropriate to mock people with impairments. However, representing people with learning difficulties as objects of ridicule is still evident. Both *Derek* (Channel 4, 2012 – present) and *The Morgana Show* (Channel 4, 2010) have been criticized for depicting characters that are apparently intellectually challenged in order to create comedy. Ricky Gervais has responded to such criticism of *Derek* saying: “Derek is a fictional character and is defined by his creator. Me. If I say I don’t mean him to be disabled then that’s it. He’s different. But then so are a lot of people. He’s not the smartest tool in the box but he’s cleverer than Father Dougal, and not as different as Mr. Bean. He’s based on those people you meet who are on the margins of society. Nerds, loners, under achievers.” Likewise, the Channel 4 website describes Gilbert in *The Morgana Show* as a “well-meaning but socially inept”. However, as this clip shows, Gilbert is unable to do even basic tasks like making breakfast, which suggests he is more than ‘inept’ and actually has a learning difficulty.

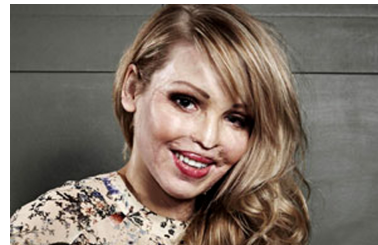


Watch the clip at:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0bahFFAKaM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0bahFFAKaM)

**Their own worst and only enemy**

According to Barnes, the media portrays some disabilities as more acceptable than others. For example, physical disabilities are more acceptable than mental health issues and disabilities caused by illness are more acceptable than facial disfigurements. In this representation, disabled people’s anger at their disability is portrayed as self-destructive and arising from person limitations rather than society’s inability to deal with disability.

Channel 4 has commissioned several documentaries based around Katie Piper, who was the victim of an acid attack, including *Katie: My Beautiful Face*, *Katie: My Beautiful Friends* and *Katie: The Science of Seeing Again*. They all tend to offer uplifting stories of how people with facial disfigurements are courageously battling against public prejudice and attempting to overcome obstacles to achieve a ‘normal’ life.






(<http://www.unrealitytv.co.uk/reality-tv/katie-piper-explores-living-with-disfigurements-in-katie-my-beautiful-friends/>)

**Activity**

Following an accident, Jackson Walsh in *Emmerdale* (ITV Studios) suffered paralysis of his limbs and torso, a impairment known as quadriplegia. The storyline that followed showed Jackson asking his family to assist him in committing suicide. Use the official *Emmerdale* website ([www.itv.com/emmerdale/](http://www.itv.com/emmerdale/)) to research the storyline and then write an analysis of the narrative using the stereotypes outlined in this Factsheet. Why might some quadriplegic people find it offensive?



(<http://metro.co.uk/2011/02/22/emmerdales-jackson-walsh-to-die-in-shocking-assisted-suicide-plot-640335/>)

<p><b>Burden on others</b></p> <p>The term ‘carer’, for Barnes, has become synonymous with self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Disabled people’s needs are shown to be so profoundly different from the non-disabled community that the two cannot function together, with disabled people relying totally upon the help and support of others.</p>	<p>BBC 3’s <i>Don’t Call Me Crazy</i>, part of the ‘It’s a Mad World’ season, was filmed at the McGuinness Unit for Adolescent Mental Health in Manchester, one of Britain’s biggest teenage mental health units. Whilst the season attempted to show young people with mental health issues in a positive light, some were sectioned (held in the unit against their will) and were deemed unable to be with their families or the public.</p>  <p>(<a href="http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/article/bbc3-preview-dont-call-me-crazy">http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/article/bbc3-preview-dont-call-me-crazy</a>)</p> <p>Teenagers, such as Beth (pictured), were shown to need constant supervision, even during meal times, and as wholly reliant upon the staff for their own well-being and safety.</p>
<p><b>Sexually abnormal</b></p> <p>Disabled people, especially those with physical disabilities that include partial paralysis, are portrayed as being incapable of sexual relationships and, therefore, their lives are not worth living. Other disabilities are shown to have a major impact upon a person’s romantic life.</p>	<p><i>The Undateables</i> (Channel 4) has been criticised for using people with impairments as objects of curiosity, especially in terms of their romantic lives. Even the name suggests that people with impairments are not suited to romantic or sexual relationships.</p>  <p>(<a href="http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-undateables">http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-undateables</a>)</p> <p>However, the series did give a voice to people with impairments and allowed them to explain their own view of disability. For example, Luke who has Tourette’s Syndrome, stated that it’s not the disability that makes dating harder for him but the lack of confidence it brings.</p>
<p><b>Incapable of participating in community life</b></p> <p>This stereotype of disability tends to be one of omission, meaning there is a lack of representations of disabled people being productive members of community life, such as teachers, parents or part of the workforce. Where disabled characters are present in non-fiction, which is unusual, narratives tend to focus on their disability as their defining personality trait above all others. Disabled people are rarely depicted in advertising campaigns. This suggests they are not consumers and implies they are reliant upon handouts from charities to function.</p>	<p>The character of Becky Jackson in <i>Glee</i> (Fox, 2009 – present) is played by the actress Lauren Potter who has Down’s Syndrome. Becky is one of four characters in the show who have Down’s Syndrome and, whilst she is featured as part of the Cheerios cheerleading squad and is shown participating in school life, there are still storylines that feature her disability as the central theme.</p>  <p>(<a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ouch/2012/06/">http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ouch/2012/06/</a>)</p> <p>For example, when she attends prom, her date also has Down’s Syndrome and it is implied that Cheerios’ coach Sue Sylvester chooses Becky to join the squad because Sue has a sister with Down’s Syndrome rather than on Becky’s own merits. Whilst Becky is partially engaged in school life in the show, she is still separated from the main group as a result of her Down’s Syndrome.</p>
<p><b>Normal</b></p> <p>Though there has been an increase in representations of disabled people as ‘normal’ people who happen to have impairments, these representations tend to be one dimensional and often only include wheelchair users or blind people with guide dogs as these are easy signifiers of disability for broadcasters to fall back upon. For Barnes, these representations can be damaging too as, despite showing people with impairments as ‘ordinary’, they can normalize the problem of disablism and make non-disabled people less aware of the need for policy changes.</p>	<p>It is much more common nowadays for disabled characters in fiction broadcast media to be portrayed by actors with the impairment being shown. For example, <i>Breaking Bad</i> (Sony Pictures Television, 2008 – present) and <i>Deadwood</i> (HBO, 2004 – 2006) both featured actors with cerebral palsy. However, most representations of disabled people still include able-bodied actors using wheelchairs, such as Chris Tate (1989 – 2003) and Jackson Walsh (2010 – 2011) in <i>Emmerdale</i> (ITV Studios). Both characters were also wheelchair users as a result of accidents rather than from birth.</p>

*Acknowledgements:* This Media Studies Factsheet was researched and written by Helen McDonald Curriculum Press, Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Media Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136