Disability as a Cultural Problem Handout

The Problem of Culture: “The problem is to find out the way in which the elements of a culture interact with each other and the way in which the elements of human nature are caused to interact with one another under conditions set by their interaction with the existing environment.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

* This is generally Dewey’s problem of how people become people through transaction with their environments such that they become recognized as a member of a society, group, or culture.

Disability as a Cultural Problem: The “problem” of disability is to find out the way in which the elements of culture interact with each other and the way in which the elements of human nature are caused to interact with one another under the conditions set by culture as an organized body of habit to give rise to disability in all its forms.

* The problem is also to determine how best to inculcate habits of transacting with disabled persons such that their unique ways of being in the world are incorporated into the broader collection of habits that structures culture. The problem is also to isolate those habits that maintain ableism broadly.
* The problem is also to recognize that disabled people have cultures which proceed from the habits they develop through transacting with a world that does not have appropriate habits of conduct for transacting with the world. Recognizing this means recognizing the eugenic threat to disability is a threat to cultures.

Definitions

Interaction: “inter-action assumes the organism and its environmental objects to be present as substantially separate existences or forms of existence, prior to their entry into joint investigation,”[[2]](#footnote-2) which is to say that the organism and the environment are ontologically separate forms, neither of which is interdependent upon the other.

Transaction: an ongoing process of co-construction between organism and environment that results in organisms that are not static wholes, disconnected from their environments. Transaction designates a change in both the organism and the environment through the encounter between the two. Transaction also enables the transformation of an environment into a culture and the human organism into an individual.

Environment: “The words "environment," "medium" denote something more than surroundings which encompass an individual. They denote the specific continuity of the surroundings with his own active tendencies.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Further, “The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

* Human Environment: “man is social in another sense than the bee and ant, since his activities are encompassed in an environment that is culturally transmitted, so that what man does and how he acts, is determined not by organic structure and physical heredity alone but by the influence of cultural heredity, embedded in traditions, institutions, customs and the purposes and beliefs they both carry and inspire.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Culture: Complex body of customs that transforms a physical environment into an environment of meaning and value through transaction. Culture is continuous with the physical environment that the human organism transacts with and is shaped by the transactions with that environment. This transactional nature allows for different transformations of biological processes through culture such that different cuisines, ways of child rearing, and habitations are formed.

* Material aspect of culture: “Artifacts include habitations, temples and their rituals, weapons, paraphernalia, tools, implements, means of transportation, roads, clothing, decorations and ornamentations, etc., etc. They, together with the technical processes involved in their use, constitute the ‘material aspect of culture.’”[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Ideal Aspect of culture: the whole body of beliefs, attitudes, dispositions which are scientific and "moral" and which as a matter of cultural fact decide the specific uses to which the "material" constituents of culture are put and which accordingly deserve, philosophically speaking, the name "ideal" (even the name "spiritual," if intelligibly used).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Custom: “widespread uniformities of habit” which structure how an individual transacts with the environment. “customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs. An individual usually acquires the morality as he inherits the speech of his social group.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Habit: an active disposition towards action within an environment. Habits serve to organize the self because it is through habit that the self is disclosed, and that the kinds of environments that the individual transacts with are disclosed, “For every habit incorporates within itself some part of the objective environment”[[9]](#footnote-9) The self, here, is adjectival and disclosed through the medium of habit as it is integrated into an organic whole.

Human Nature: “The conception of a fixed and enumerable equipment of tendencies which constitutes human nature thus represents at the best but a convenient intellectual device, a bench mark useful for studying some particular period of development,”[[10]](#footnote-10) and does not constitute an original datum of humanit.

* Human Nature as Relational ”The supposition that there is such a thing as a purely native original constitution of man which can be distinguished from everything acquired and learned cannot be justified by appeal to the facts. It is a view which holds good only when a static cross section is taken; when, that is to say, growth is ignored.”[[11]](#footnote-11)
* Human Nature as Social: “The environment is now distinctly a social one, and the content of the term "fit" has to be made with reference to social adaptation,”[[12]](#footnote-12) which is to say that there can be no understanding of fitness or ability except with referent to how the individual transacts with a social environment.

Fitness: “The conditions with respect to which the term "fit" must now be used include the existing social structure with all the habits, demands, and ideals which are found in it. If so, we have reason to conclude that the "fittest with respect to the whole of the conditions" is the best; that, indeed, the only standard we have of the best is the discovery of that which maintains these conditions in their integrity. The unfit is practically the anti-social.” Dewey, *Evolution and Ethics,* 39

* Fitness can only be understood with reference to some social or cultural conditions and not others. On this view, the “original equipment” of the human organism is irrelevant except insofar as it enables successful transactions with the environment. Here, Ashley Shew-Heflin and Damien Patrick Williams point in this direction regarding the ways that spaceflight will disable everyone; or, the ways that disabled persons may better function in space.
1. Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dewey, *Knowing and the Known*, 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry,* 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dewey, Experience and Nature, 363 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dewey, Experience and Nature, 363 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ibid, 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ibid, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)