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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 18  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 5

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June 1991

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### Recommended Citation

Ringma, Charles and Brown, Christopher (1991) "Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences: An Evaluation of the Function of Hermeneutics in a Consumer Disability Study," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol18/iss3/5>

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# Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences: An Evaluation of the Function of Hermeneutics in a Consumer Disability Study

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*This paper explicates the hermeneutic procedure utilized in the development and interpretation of a questionnaire for consumers with a disability regarding their perspectives on the accessibility and quality of human services they are using. It finds that consumers experience difficulty in bringing into language their critique of existing services. The paper argues the value of a hermeneutic methodology in the social sciences and its usefulness in refining qualitative survey methods designed to explicate the perspectives of those experiencing relative powerlessness in using human services. It seeks, moreover, to establish the complementarity of the hermeneutics of suspicion and those of affirmation.*

This paper seeks to argue that the role of hermeneutics in the social sciences (Bauman, 1978; Habermas; 1978; Hekman, 1986) is not only relevant at a theoretical level as a critique of scientism and positivism (Bleicher, 1982), but also at the level of practical application by providing certain significant outcomes. Hermeneutics has moved from its traditional role in theology (Jeanrond, 1988) and literary studies (Juhl, 1980) as a method of textual interpretation to a broader role in the explication of how all understanding takes place (Howard, 1982; Palmer, 1982). It is therefore applicable to all areas of study, including science (Rorty, 1979) and the social sciences (Winch, 1958; Bernstein, 1983; Hollinger, 1985). In this discussion, hermeneutics refers to understanding our mode of existence in the world characterized by historicity (Heidegger, 1962). Following Gadamer (1975), it is used to bring that which is alienated by distance or distortion, to be heard as in a new voice. Its practicality is demonstrated in the function of hermeneutics in a consumer study.

The consumer study sought to gain the perspectives of people with physical and intellectual disabilities on a range of human service policy and program issues. These perspectives were sought in a human service context in which personal and structural barriers appear to obstruct or weaken the consumer voice. An opportunity was sought for consumers to speak and be heard in this same context. The policy and program issues included: accessibility of information on services, exercise of consumer choice in service provision, access issues, quality of service provision, inadequacies in the service delivery system and consumer participation in program and policy decision-making.

The researchers of this study (Brown & Ringma, 1989a), took as starting point that the circumstances of persons with disabilities can generally be characterized as one of personal and structural disadvantage (Eisenberger, 1982). Such disadvantage within the context of the human services, establishes the particular social location in which the perspectives of consumers are being sought. This location is the social construction of reality on the part of persons with a disability (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and is reflected in language (Mannheim, 1936). Following such experience of disadvantage it was assumed that the language of these persons could be repressed or inadequate.

Some refinement in qualitative survey method and in interpretation was required to emancipate and hear a potentially alienated voice. This is a factor with consumer research in the human services. Critical interpretation is required in areas in which significant gaps can be predicted in the social locations, language and perspectives of consumers, service providers and researchers, and where personal and contextual factors are active in blunting and obscuring the evaluative and critical voice of consumers. This led the researchers to adopt a hermeneutical procedure. This involved establishing a dialectical relationship between the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1981) and those of affirmation (Gadamer, 1975). The former proceeds on the basis that there may be ideological distortion in what the researchers are doing or in what consumers are saying (Habermas, 1978). The latter, the hermeneutics of affirmation, argues that the voice of the other must be fully heard and not constrained

to comply with the concerns of the researchers. It holds, moreover, that researchers can only proceed on the basis of certain preunderstandings but that these must be risked in a dialogical relationship (Gadamer, 1975).

The hermeneutical procedure offered potential in refining qualitative survey methods to further explicate the perspectives of relative powerlessness consumers experienced in their use of human services. Refinements were needed both in the development of the open-ended questionnaire as a survey tool, and in the interpretation of qualitative data. The procedure described above had implications for the way the questionnaire was constructed, the interviews conducted, data interpreted and the study written. (Brown and Ringma, 1989a).

In applying the hermeneutical procedure it became clear that consumers were critical of services but reluctant to specify their concerns with regard to present services. They lacked but wanted participatory power in decision making but did not specify that with regard to the services they were presently utilizing. The depth of their alienation and its impact on their language was surprising to the researchers, indicating that the hermeneutic procedure has an important application in consumer studies undertaken within a human service context.

### The Consumer Study

The study proceeded on the basis that in a complex and mixed welfare economy (Kramer, 1981) the consumer voice needs to be heard as significant with regard to human service policies and programs for people with disabilities. This is particularly pressing in the light of the fact that new disability legislation in Australia, the *Disability Services Act, 1986*, has maximized the consumer role in new service provision. Not only are services to demonstrate positive consumer outcomes, but consumers are to be included in the planning and management of services.

The consumer study profiled 42 people, consisting of 24 disabled consumers and 18 parents of disabled consumers. They utilized 5 nongovernment welfare agencies and a range of generic services and several community services. Twenty consumers were physically disabled, seventeen intellectually disabled

and five were classified as multiple disabled. Disability categories in the group included Downs Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, Spina Bifida, Blindness, Hemiplegia, Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual Disability, Spino Cerebella Ataxia, among other forms of disabling (World Health Organisation, 1980).

Consumers were interviewed by members of the research team using an extensive open-ended questionnaire. None of the interviewees were incapable of expressing their viewpoints on the range of questions asked, except in some cases where the responses of the parents of consumers with disabilities were regarded as expressive of the viewpoint of the consumer.

In this study consumers and their representatives were able to identify: inadequacies in information services which reduced their capacity to exercise choice; the limited choice that existed for them within a narrow field of service options; how access and transport issues influenced their use of services; positive aspects of services they were using; dissatisfaction with services they were no longer using; potential improvements that could be made in existing services; unmet needs; the over-stretching of family support structures; and, their desire to participate in decision-making processes, but the lack of opportunity to do so.

### The Role of Hermeneutics in the Interpretive Process

This century, hermeneutics as philosophical reflection and as a theoretical reflection on methodological issues, is at the centre of continental philosophy (Bernstein, 1983). Bleicher (1980) has identified hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique. It has extended its applicability beyond literary criticism (Hoy, 1978) to the social sciences (Bauman, 1978; Hekman, 1986), the natural sciences (Rorty, 1979), legal interpretation (Betti, 1962; Dworkin, 1986), psychoanalysis (Ricoeur, 1981), and critical theory (Habermas, 1978). Its task is to explicate how understanding takes place.

In the application of hermeneutics to this consumer study, we reject the hermeneutic position of Schleiermacher (1977). He held that the interpreter through empathy had to enter the mind of the other and to reconstruct his or her thoughts. He claimed, moreover, that the interpreter through an act of "divination" can understand the author or speaker better than they know

themselves. This position would be tantamount to saying, with regard to this study, that we know what the consumers really mean even though they are not saying it. And we know what they mean by the act of creative empathy. This clearly runs the risk of projecting the horizon of the interpreter onto that of the consumer. This may lead to a practice in human services where service providers persist with normative judgements of the needs of consumers that are at variance with consumer opinion.

Dilthey (1976), who further developed Schleiermacher's hermeneutic, is more helpful. He suggested that in understanding an author's text, we need to understand the whole of their historical life. This contextualization is helpful. But Dilthey was not able to shake off Schleiermacher's romanticized psychologism, when he maintained that the interpreter through an empathetic process is able to enter into the inner life of the author or speaker (Makkreel, 1975). The issue in understanding or interpretation is not to enter the inner life of the other, but to understand the matter (*die Sache selbst*) under consideration. In this case, the matter under consideration is the perceptions of consumers with disabilities on the accessibility and quality of services, spoken in a human service context that stresses resource scarcity and involves significant power differentials between consumers, service providers and researchers.

The hermeneutic perspective utilized in this consumer study is quite different from the above. It is a hermeneutic of suspicion cojoined with a hermeneutic of affirmation.

The hermeneutics of suspicion proceed on the basis that there can be distortion in what is said or done. This perspective has been fostered particularly by the modern masters of suspicion: Marx, Freud and Nietzsche (Ricoeur, 1981). Each in their respective areas of economics, personal psychology and philosophy, has indicated that suppression and distortion can occur. This concern has influenced Habermas in his suggestion that three cognitive interests undergird our knowledge (Habermas, 1978). The technical interest is characteristic of the empirical analytical sciences with the orientation to control the environment. The practical interest is reflected in the social sciences with its concern with meaningful communication or interaction.

The emancipatory interest characteristic of the psychoanalytic tradition, with its orientation to critical reflection, operates to expose distortion in speech and action resulting from domination. The hermeneutics of suspicion are clearly guided by the emancipatory interest.

The hermeneutics of suspicion thus entails both a critical and an advocacy stance. This stance does not proceed on the basis that the researcher has a transcendent starting point from which what ought to be, as opposed to what is, is automatically assumed. Rather the stance proceeds on the basis of sociological analysis. It is attention to "the way things are", in this particular case the disability field, that leads to understandings regarding personal and structural disadvantage, the human service context, and the impact of social location on language. Its advocacy stance is expressed in the concern to see appropriate changes take place which will result in greater equality and quality of life-style. This is reflected in the researchers' choice to focus on consumers rather than service providers and to facilitate the consumer voice being heard.

At the same time, the hermeneutics of suspicion should not be directed only at the horizon of people with disabilities but also at the horizon of the researchers. Researchers with their concerns can impose their judgements on those under consideration as much as service providers can impose their powerful ideologies on those requiring their services. This was overcome by the open-ended nature of the interview process which sought to hear the voice of consumers and not to expose consumers simply to the questions that reflect the researchers' concerns.

The hermeneutics of suspicion, however, should be co-joined with a hermeneutics of affirmation. Understanding is not achieved simply by overcoming systemic distortion. It is also achieved by dialogue (Gadamer, 1975). The latter takes seriously what the other person is saying even to the point that the researchers' assumptions or preunderstandings may be called into question. Understanding arises in the interactive process between myself and the other. The social scientist does not proceed on the basis of a value free position. Nor, contrary to Max Weber, on the basis of a neutral objectivity.

Therefore, methodology is not without particular assumptions. Scholarly procedure is always on the basis of a particular set of fore-understandings (Heidegger) or prejudices or prejudgements (Gadamer). These preunderstandings need to be legitimized as enabling prejudgements rather than blind prejudices. Gadamer, therefore, in his hermeneutics of affirmation argues for the value of the hermeneutic circle in terms of a dialogical relationship. The circle as traditionally understood, is a movement from part to whole part again and so on. From understanding, for example, a part of a story or event one moves to a fuller application which in turn modifies and enriches the part. Gadamer's position argues that understanding happens dialogically between myself and the other. Dialogue assumes openness to the other and allowing my preunderstandings to be modified by the matter at issue. For Gadamer hermeneutics is to let what is alienated through historical or cultural distance speak again, and it needs to be brought near in such a way that it speaks again with a new voice (Gadamer, 1975).

Both these hermeneutic procedures are complementary. The hermeneutics of suspicion probes for alienation and distortion. That of affirmation seeks to understand what is said by the other to the point of allowing that to modify our preunderstandings. The danger in the former procedure is to prejudge the subject matter on the basis of one's critical ideology. This in effect says, in spite of what is being said or done, this is the way I perceive things ought to be. The potential weakness in the hermeneutics of affirmation is simply to accept what is said without probing for distortion due to contextual factors, including power differentials. Brought together they provide a way of hearing what the other is saying but to hear that critically.

### The Hermeneutics of the Consumer Study

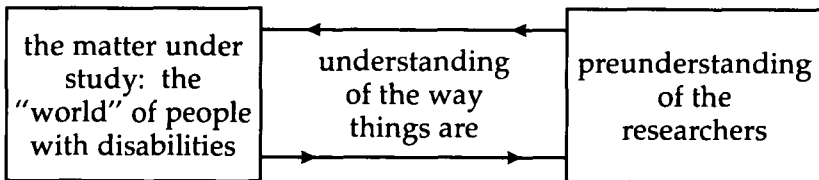
This hermeneutic methodology is applied to this consumer study on the basis that something needs to be interpreted, and that this is made difficult as a gap in horizons exists between researchers and persons being interviewed and studied. We may diagram this gap as follows:





The researchers approached the horizon of the "community" of persons with disabilities on the basis of certain preunderstandings (Gadamer, 1975), and these need to be made as explicit as possible. These preunderstandings not only include the world-view of the researchers but also the particular concerns the researchers have in executing a particular piece of research. It cannot be assumed that researchers are neutral and objective. They carry with them the possibility of imposing their concerns on the matter under study. This needs to be resisted and overcome. This is not to say that the researchers can eliminate their preunderstandings. This is impossible. But they can be modified and corrected.

The researchers' preunderstandings must therefore be tested and if necessary modified in the light of the matter which is the focus of study. In this project the matter in focus is that the voice of consumers with disabilities be heard regarding their perspectives on disability services. To facilitate the matter at issue coming to light involves the use of the hermeneutical circle. The researchers' preunderstandings need to be brought into contact with the horizon of people who are disabled and may thus be modified or enlarged accordingly. This may lead to a change in the preunderstandings which in turn will lead to newer and better questions being posed. This process will continue as in the form of a dialogue so that what emerges is an understanding of "the way things are". This may be diagrammed in the following manner:



The understanding of "the way things are" is thus the end of a process and never its starting point. The end process, however, does not mean that this is the final word. In the beginning the process of understanding "the way things are", the researchers commenced with certain preunderstandings about the "world" of consumers. This could be characterized as one of personal and structural disadvantage, substantially influenced by the context of the human services, and to a lesser extent by the context provided by the researchers. The content of such preunderstanding needs to be specified. This should focus on the experience of disadvantage, on the context of the human services, particularly on the different "worlds" of consumers and service providers, and on predictions concerning the impact of such factors and social location on the language and perspectives of consumers. The researchers' preunderstandings concerning this group of consumers came out of direct contact with and analysis of disability services and was reinforced by other social research (Forder, 1974; Timms, 1973).

Structurally, for people with disabilities, disadvantage involves the lack of power and resources, while personally there are psycho-dynamic features affecting identity, perceptions of reality, hopes and aspirations. These people have devalued roles in our society, experience stigma and relative poverty, and often have to make do with an inferior quality of life-style. They experience limitations in the exercise of life-choice options relative to lack of equal employment opportunities, education, housing and recreation. They are subject to a scarcity of resources that are directed towards their particular needs. Services are inadequate and choices between services are almost nonexistent. People with disabilities lack influence, power and access to appropriate information. Their powerlessness is compounded because many choices appear to be made for them. There is a lack of structural opportunities for consumer participation in the planning and management of services (Handicapped Programs Review, 1985).

By way of contrast, service providers in the context of the human services, are significantly more powerful. They tend to define the needs of consumers and control many of the resources that are basic to social care. Service providers and other welfare

professionals also control the descriptive and evaluative processes that are meant to characterize the needs and wants of people with disabilities. They have greater access to information and their perspectives are influential because they are informed by powerful service ideologies. They, rather than consumers, define "the world" of consumers.

The above factors have a major influence on the language and perspectives of consumers. As previously indicated, the social location of consumers reflects itself in how they construct reality and influences their use of language. One result of power differentials is that consumers can assume and utilize the language of service providers and define their "world" accordingly. Their perspectives compete unfavourably with the influential perspectives of policy makers, health experts, service providers and other professionals (Forder, 1974; Brown and Halladay, 1989). Consumers tend to define their reality by the criteria of the experts. Moreover, they often feel the need to express feelings of gratitude for the services they are receiving (Timms, 1973). Thus the evaluative and critical voice of consumers, reflecting as it does a position of relative powerlessness, can frequently and significantly become blunted and obscured.

Some specific assumptions emerged concerning the hermeneutical horizons of consumers and researchers. From the consumers' horizon it was assumed that all of the above factors combined could result in some repression and alienation in their use of language. From the researchers' horizon it was assumed that our preunderstanding of the "world" of persons with disabilities could be inadequate, overly empathetic, or skewed and that the very process of questionnaire and interview could be alienating. This would, therefore, require the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1981).

The preunderstandings of the researchers relating to disadvantage and context had implications for the way the questionnaire was constructed. This was drawn up after extensive exposure and evaluation of services provided for persons with disabilities. It moreover consciously sought to ascertain the disabled person's point of view. The hermeneutics of suspicion, as applied to this study, sensitized us to distortion arising from the

disadvantage of their social context and highlighted the need to bring the consumer voice out of possible repression and alienation. Moreover, it was assumed that consumers may use the language of the service providers rather than their own, and that they generally felt the need to express feelings of gratitude for services upon which they were currently dependent (Timms, 1973). This assumption was built into the questionnaire and resulted in various stages of the interview process in order for forms of repression and alienation to be overcome. It was also facilitated by recognizing the context referred to in these questions. For example, a critical presupposition was that people with disabilities would be reluctant to convey criticism of services upon which they currently depended. By changing the context with questions about services they no longer used, or questions about their anticipated use of new services, different perspectives may be gained that still had critical implications for services they were currently using.

The hermeneutics of suspicion also required that the researchers' preunderstandings could be ideologically distorted. Therefore interviews were open-ended and careful attention was paid to the fact that the consumers were heard more than they answered the preset questions. This allowed the preunderstandings of the researchers to be questioned, for the consumers prioritized and emphasized issues beyond that of the immediate import of the questions. The interviewers elicited verbal responses in the personal interviews with consumers and noted down their responses. Where questions elicited further responses, beyond the scope of the question, these were also recorded and included in the later analysis. The report was written in such a way that emphasis was given to the consumer voice and not simply to the analysis provided by the researchers. The matter of being heard essentially underscores the hermeneutics of affirmation. Thus the hermeneutics of suspicion and affirmation were utilized coextensively.

### Illustrating the Procedure and Some Results

It is impossible within this limited space to expand on all of the results of this consumer study (Brown & Ringma, 1989a; 1989b; 1989c). By way of illustration of the need to refine the

methodology used to further interpret these results, we isolate some of the outcomes. The first deals with some aspects of consumer choice and participation in decision-making. The second looks at consumer perspectives on the quality of service provision.

Question I.10 asked whether the consumers had decided to use a particular service or whether someone else made that decision. This question occurred in the section dealing with information and choice. The overwhelming response was that consumers had made their own choice: this was indicated by 19 consumers and 14 parents of consumers (N=42). In the section dealing with central and local coordination of services, consumers were asked whether they had any choice in utilizing the services of the particular organization they were now using (Question IV.1). The response of the majority was that such decisions were made for them. Only 12 consumers indicated some personal choice in this matter. In the follow-up question, 38 consumers indicated that they were happy with such decisions being made for them. Yet in a later question only 7 consumers indicated that they would not like to have a say in decisions about the provision of services for people with disabilities. All the others indicated that they should and wanted to have a say. This picture is further complicated by the response to a previous question (I.6), where 18 consumers indicated that other services that could have been of help were held to be unsuitable. And in response to a related question (I.14), 18 consumers indicated that services in their local area were either not available or were inadequate.

From this highly ambivalent and seemingly confusing picture, we can make "sense" of what is being said. First, consumers are saying that they like to, and in fact do, exercise choice regarding which agency they wish to attend. Second, this choice is made in a very narrow range of available service options because other services are unsuitable, not accessible or inadequate. Third, when it comes to having choice regarding the utilization of actual services in the agency of their "choice" most decisions are made for them by administrators and staff. Fourth, they have to accept this reality for they have no real power and few options of going elsewhere. Finally, they wish that things were

different and that they could participate in decision-making processes, but there is little point in "rocking the boat".

By way of further illustration, we can look at consumer perceptions on service quality. Thirty consumers indicated a positive response with regard to the present services they were using (Question I.5). Twenty-six consumers indicated they were treated very well by their service agency (VII.1), and 29 said that they had received a lot of help from their particular organization (VI.3). Moreover, 31 consumers indicated that they needed nothing else from the agency (VI.4). Yet in response to a previous question (IV.6), all except 10 consumers had many suggestions to make regarding improvements in the services they were presently using. Moreover, in response to another question (VII.2), 16 respondents indicated that they had been unsatisfactorily treated by various services they had used previously and went on to specifically name the organizations concerned and the nature of their dissatisfaction.

From this, we can again hear what consumers are saying, namely, that present services are in need of improvement; that some previously used services were quite inadequate; and that present services are regarded as very good because that is what consumers are expected to say. Moreover, in a field of narrow options, there is little point in biting the hand that feeds you.

In the above, we can see the reality of repression as characteristic of disadvantage and of location within a human service context. Consumers are supposed to be thankful for what they get. They are not to be critical of existing services. But in fact they are. They are, therefore, very careful regarding making perspicuous observations on services they were presently utilizing but quite open in their critique of previous services. And in their response to questions of a theoretical or hypothetical nature, they were clearly perceptive, innovative and arguing for change. The preunderstanding that disadvantage and context may reflect itself in language that is repressed was therefore confirmed. At the same time the researchers had not anticipated the depth of this alienation and repression.

### The application of hermeneutics in consumer studies

The hermeneutic procedure took us further than qualitative survey methods we had used in previous consumer studies without such a procedure (Brown, Davey and Halladay, 1986; Brown and Halladay, 1989). While qualitative methods of research tend to focus on "thick description" rather than analytical depiction through the use of models as a heuristic device, hermeneutic procedure makes explicit the nature of preunderstanding on the part of the researchers, the possibility of distortion due to power differentials and the need for a dialogical relationship where the "I" does not subvert the "Thou". In other words where the voice of the other can be heard even to the point of changing and/or enlarging one's own preunderstandings. Emphasis, therefore, is placed on specifying preunderstandings about consumer circumstances and the context in which they are located, as well as those of the location of the researchers. A critical application of this procedure is the attention it draws to the impact of consumer circumstances and context on language. Though gaps in horizons between consumers, service providers and researchers have been recognised in human services research, the hermeneutic procedure provides a systematic approach to working this through as a research issue.

Hermeneutic procedure also assists in interpreting the confusion and contradiction often manifest in consumer studies. This can occur as a result of the loss of consumer voice, especially where the normative judgements of service providers are well established in particular human services.

The juxtaposition of the hermeneutics of suspicion and affirmation provides critical attention to alienation and distortion, and an advocacy stance, balanced with serious attention to what consumers are saying. The hermeneutic circle encourages open dialogue between consumer and researcher, or between consumer and service provider, and the potential for the modification of preunderstandings in the light of consumers speaking again with a new and emancipated voice. This points to the potential for a new chapter in consumer research and for consumer participation in the human services.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to argue the role of hermeneutics in the social sciences. It has demonstrated its relevance by application to a small study in the human services. This study of consumer perspectives on services for persons with physical and intellectual disabilities takes as its starting point that the social "world" of persons with disabilities is one of disadvantage and that they are influenced by their interaction within a human service context. Disadvantage is located in structural features such as lack of power, prestige and income and in personal psycho-dynamic realities such as loss of identity and hope. It was assumed and confirmed in this study that disadvantage expresses itself in difficulties in finding an appropriate language to express critical concerns, hopes and aspirations.

Professionals and service providers tend to define reality for consumers. Consumers are also excluded from participatory management processes. Thus they virtually have no opportunity to test their knowledge and perceptions within this context. Moreover, living within a narrow field of available service options they are subject to significant internal constraints not to express critical views on services they are presently using. These factors contribute to repression and distortion in the language of persons with disabilities.

The consumer study sought to bring the consumer voice to the fore. In order to achieve this the researchers utilized the hermeneutics of suspicion and affirmation. The former operates on the basis that there can be ideological distortion, while the latter argues that the voice of the other needs to be heard in such a way that the researchers' preunderstandings need to be put to the test.

The paper acknowledges that the hermeneutic task is to bring, that which is alienated by distance or distortion, to be heard as in a new voice. The researchers facilitated that in the construction of a questionnaire which asked similar questions in different sections in order to overcome repression and distortion due to the consumers' "world" of disadvantage. This was to bring their voice into language. It also facilitated an open-ended interview process so that the researchers did not simply



impose their questions and thus something of their "world" and their preunderstandings on the "world" of consumers.

The outcome of this procedure was to demonstrate that consumers with disabilities are critical of services and that they do wish to participate in participatory management processes. It also highlighted that the researchers, who in their own understanding sought to be sensitive in the task of talking to depowered people, were "surprised" by the actual degree of repression.

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