

The “Really Disabled”: Disability Hierarchy in John Hockenberry’s *Moving Violations*
Rachel Stewart
University of California, Berkeley

Abstract: This paper explores a disability hierarchy present in John Hockenberry’s memoir, *Moving Violations*. Disability hierarchies are understood as the idea that some impairments are positioned as “worse” or more severe than others, and thus more deserving of stigma. I will examine the different ways a disability hierarchy manifests itself throughout *Moving Violations* in Hockenberry’s discussion of disabled people he has encountered. Finally, the problematic elements that arise from a disability hierarchy are discussed.

Key Words: disability hierarchy, autobiography, John Hockenberry

A common belief within both the non-disabled and disabled communities is the concept of a hierarchy of disability. Disability hierarchies position certain impairments as more or less disabling than others, with the idea that some impairments are “better” or less severe than others. The fact that many disabled people believe in a hierarchy of disability only perpetuates the social exclusion and stigma felt by all persons with disabilities. Disabled people might not know they discriminate against or degrade others with disabilities, but it still occurs, often in forms not easy to recognize. In his memoir, *Moving Violations* (1996), John Hockenberry continually comments about people who are “really disabled.” Although some of his comments are tongue-in-cheek, many others seem to stem from a deep-rooted belief in a hierarchy of disability.

In describing his concept of the “really disabled,” Hockenberry jokingly comments on what they require: “I require no leg bag. That’s for the really disabled. I have no van with a wheelchair lift anymore. Those are for the really disabled, and thank God I’m not one of them. I need no motor on my wheelchair. Those are for the really disabled, and I am definitely not one of those” (p. 87). Hockenberry is clearly not being serious in this quote; he is merely commenting on his tendency to push away from being categorized as “really disabled.” He wishes to be perceived as “normal” as possible, which he thinks is trying to be as non-disabled as possible. This is evident in many different ways throughout the text, including his wish to drive regular cars: “I had a pickup instead of a hospital ‘Ironsides’ lift van. It was a form of liberation” (p. 126). Although it is possible for Hockenberry to drive a regular car, many disabled people aren’t able to drive without a “hospital ‘Ironsides’ lift van;” does this mean someone who drives a car that is in some way ‘marked’ by disability is less socially valuable?

Though Hockenberry may make blatant jokes about the hierarchy of disability, there is also an underlying, less recognizable hierarchy implied in the way he writes about different disabled people he has encountered. This hierarchy first appears when Hockenberry describes the people that were in a rehabilitation facility with him, following his own injury. He explains that Ron, a man with a traumatic brain injury, “constantly stared at the ceiling, drooled, and had periodic uncontrollable seizures. Ron never spoke and never argued. Ron laughed a lot. He was the floor psychologist’s favorite, which seemed to say more about the psychologist than it did about Ron” (p. 30-31). First of all, Hockenberry portrays Ron in a very degrading manner, as someone without any real thoughts or opinions. Secondly, he seems to imply that Ron is not

worthy of being anyone's "favorite" person because he was constantly drooling and staring at the ceiling. Certain disabilities are more likely to lead to bodily leakages, or unusual cognitive behaviors, and Hockenberry alludes to the idea that these types of disabilities deserve less respect than other disabilities.

Another person in rehab with Hockenberry is Roger, a "high quad" (p. 31) who can only move his head and neck. He describes Roger in ways that are inhuman, such as "a doll from a horror movie" (p. 31) and a "bobbing head and motionless body" (p. 39). Hockenberry resorts to degrading words to explain his disabled "friends," illustrating his condescending attitude towards them. He also portrays Roger as someone who is quite helpless: "[Roger] was starved for volition. He told me that he used to steal cars for fun. Now he couldn't make a pencil roll off his tray table" (p. 32). Hockenberry places Roger under the severely disabled category, unable to do anything for himself. He even compares his impairment with Roger's, saying: "For Roger, paraplegia was about as serious a disability as an untied shoe" (p. 32).

One might hope that as a person with a disability, Hockenberry would try to present a balanced view of the disability experience. However, he actually projects the hostile attitudes of society towards disabled people onto those who are "more disabled" than he is – trying to distance himself from other disabled people. For instance, Hockenberry also compares himself with Saul, a "really disabled" (p. 220) radio DJ with Tourette's syndrome. He states: "I could imagine [saying, 'I want to squeeze your tits,' to your date] as a far more serious problem than wetting your pants on the first date, as I had done when I met my wife" (p. 223). Comparing disabilities in this way, however, only detracts from the need to recognize that different types of impairments provoke different social reactions. Hockenberry depicts his interview with Saul like a circus show: "Listening to Saul was quite an adventure...each time he exploded into a self-destructive obscene shout I would look at Flawn as if to say, 'That was a good one. Let's have a couple more like that'" (p. 222). In his entire description of Saul, Hockenberry treats him like one big joke, and a freak. Disability hierarchies often exist inside the disabled community, causing isolation, conflict, and insensitivity. This prevents the disabled community from coming together and working towards a common goal which benefits all disabled people: ridding society of the discrimination and stigma directed towards the disabled.

A disability hierarchy is further reinforced when Hockenberry describes intellectually disabled clients at the nursing home where he worked. He explains them as having "personality defects" (p. 122) and "personalities... obliterated through years of psychoactive drugs like Thorazine and Seconal and institutionalization" (p. 121). Although they may not be "normal" according to societal expectations, that doesn't mean that their personalities are non-existent or defective. At the nursing home, the job of the employees is "strict behavior modification" (p. 122) by "putting them in 'time out' if they weren't compliant" (p. 122). They were "under express orders not to give any of the clients attention that they hadn't earned through screwing screws or writing in workbooks" (p. 122). Although some of Hockenberry's commentary may be tongue-in-cheek, he fails to discuss serious problems of treating clients not like human beings, but as dogs needing to be trained. Such dehumanization actually reinforces many commonly held prejudices about disability.

Hockenberry talks about two clients in more detail, a couple of friends named Jeanie and Jeff. He first states they are “a well-rehearsed comedy sketch” (p. 127). He took them out one day for a trip to the ocean, and describes how passing motorists would stare at “Jeanie’s blotto face and... Jeff’s undersized head” (p. 128). Again, he uses degrading words and comments when describing them, belittling their uniqueness. Out for a stroll on the beach, the cops were called because people thought they were carrying out a suicide pact, and Hockenberry was mistaken for just another disabled person, instead of the person who was “in charge.” He states that he was “humiliated” (p. 131) by the whole experience. A big reason why he describes Jeanie and Jeff in such a degrading way is to reinforce the difference in their types of disability (physical vs. mental), placing himself in an entirely different level on the hierarchy: higher up and thus less disabled. Through such examples, Hockenberry seems to endorse the view that physical disabilities are less “deserving” of stigma than intellectual or psychiatric disabilities.

Hockenberry also places himself as higher up on the disability hierarchy when he goes to visit his Uncle Charlie in a nursing home. When he first entered the nursing home, he thought to himself: “In this place, I was the normal one” (p. 347). Again, this only reflects his belief that people with developmental disabilities are much more disabled than he is, and compared with them, he isn’t disabled at all. One could also conclude from this statement that people inside of nursing homes are abnormal. Either way, he fails to explain the problem of locking up disabled people in institutions away from the “normal” people. He goes on to describe his Uncle as “a little man in a wheelchair with a bib on being fed a mixture of green mush and brown mush... [whose] eyes were darting aimlessly around the room” (p. 347). Hockenberry also states that when he said good-bye to Charlie, “his face twisted into a scowl, his eyes darted up to the ceiling, and he turned away” (p. 353). These descriptions portray Charlie as a “little man” who doesn’t understand what is going on around him. In actuality, Charlie may know exactly what is going on, but may have no way to communicate in “normal” ways. Also, Hockenberry continues the practice of dehumanization when he likens his visit with Charlie as visiting an animal in a cage: “I was another one of those people who showed up every few years to rattle his cage, or tap on his glass tank to get a rise out of him” (p. 348). Although Charlie may be locked up in an institution (and not by his own will, but as a result of his parents decision), he is certainly not an animal. It is this kind of dehumanization which has led to disabled people being put away in institutions where nondisabled society can largely ignore them and not have to deal with them.

The disability hierarchy is also seen in Hockenberry’s phrasing and the way he lists things. This is evident in his description of his encounter with disabled skiers. He starts listing the different types of amputees, ending with: “Then there were the hot dogs, the armless torsos on legs whose balance was adjusted with a move of the head or shoulder. At the top of the heap were the leg amputees who skied solo on a single limb” (p. 219). Hockenberry lists the different amputees first describing the least disadvantaged, those with one prosthetic leg and one muscular leg, then to the “top of the heap” more disabled skiers, the “hot dogs” and those skiing with just one leg. This technique of listing from less disabled to more disabled is also seen when Hockenberry describes the different clinical names for the people he was in rehab with: “I was a para. There were the quads and hemis (hemiplegic), or CP’s (cerebral palsy), BS’s (brain stem

strokes), or CVA's. Ron was a TBI, which meant traumatic brain injury" (p. 30). The author's impairment is listed first, as the least disabled, with the last being Ron's, the TBI who is "really disabled". One of the greatest achievements of the disability movement, and disability studies, has been to explore both the commonalities and differences which exist among people with disabilities – not to determine who is deserving of the most respect, but to examine how processes of stigma and disrespect create hierarchies of shame and privilege that injure all disabled people. The most problematic element of Hockenberry's writing is that he does not promote a message of universal dignity and respect. It is precisely the idea that there are some people who are "really disabled" and others who are not, which leads to social hierarchies between disabled people. Through this discourse, some disabilities become acceptable, while others remain highly stigmatized and are subject to social exclusion. Unfortunately, this argument also seems to imply that people who are "really disabled" somehow deserve the lack of rights and disrespect which they receive. After all, they are "really disabled" and therefore it may be impossible for them to have social inclusion. This message is antithetical to the foundational principles of the disability movement. Dividing people with disabilities according to who is "really disabled" and who is "not really disabled" also diverts attention from the stigma, prejudice and inaccessible resources that we all share in common. Whether the barriers are attitudinal or physical, the disability movement has challenged practices of social exclusion by promoting alternative messages of inclusion based on respect for diversity. When Hockenberry flippantly and disrespectfully describes the bodily habits of other people with disabilities, he is unfortunately promoting messages that run contrary to the entire spirit of the disability movement. Although this is an autobiography, and Hockenberry is entitled to his opinion in his autobiography, many people are reading it and getting a certain message. This message is harmful and hurtful to many disabled people. All in all, the basic goals of the disability movement will be very hard to achieve unless disabled people themselves treat each other with more respect and equality. This will involve challenging hierarchies of disability both within and outside the disability community.

Rachel Stewart is an undergraduate in the Psychology department at the University of California at Berkeley. She is currently working on her honors thesis, examining different social influences on the quality of life of people with Spinal Muscular Atrophy.