

Does the ADA Maroon the Disabled Between Unnavigable Islands?
An Analysis of the Shortfalls at the UCLA Campus and Proposed Remedies

Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act has made getting from place to place for individuals with “disabilities” less challenging by requiring different specific accommodations that make transportation more accessible. By increasing accessibility, the ADA has opened opportunities for individuals with challenges in the realms of work, participation in their community, and self-care, such as being able to get to medical appointments. Each realm made more accessible for individuals with “disabilities” makes society more egalitarian because these changes begin to level the playing field for individuals of all abilities. My proposed project examines “spaces” that the ADA does not address: The physical spaces between official points of accessibility, such as the space between a curb cut in a parking lot and a wheelchair ramp for a building.

I will use the information that I obtain to analyze the journey that students with “disabilities” undertake from the periphery of the UCLA campus to the door of their first class of the day. Along this daily path, students encounter a number of accommodations, specifically, intentional environmental changes designed to allow people of all abilities to use a site for its intended purpose. UCLA, like other public universities, exists to provide education; thus, accommodations on the campus are/should be designed to facilitate all aspects of education for every member of the campus community.

My research focuses on specific ways in which the ADA fails to create a fully accessible campus environment; however, it also falls more broadly into the body of research that examines how whole communities can be made hospitable to every member. This broader approach is becoming increasingly important in both the worlds of research and public policy as an aging U.S. population will soon require more and more accommodations. I believe that this research,

thus, has the potential to be an important part of the ongoing dialogue about changing concepts of public space. My research is from the disability perspectives of both the physical and social models as I will be looking at the physical environment that individuals will have to navigate in order to get from one *island* to another, and also the impact of the difficulties they may encounter while doing so on their lives, in this case, their educational goals.

I realize that this research includes significant limitations because of its narrow scope. If I had more time and greater resources, I would expand the study to include other public spaces, as well as semi-public spaces, such as shopping malls, in addition to an examination of how individuals with different types of “disabilities,” such as autism and dementia, meet the challenges of the physical spaces of their daily lives.

Methodology

In this paper, I will use primarily ethnographic methods because ethnographic research will help me determine how the individuals I am working with naturally negotiate their world, thus avoiding artificial conditions imposed in laboratory or constructed situations. I will supplement my ethnographic research with a combination of primarily qualitative methods, using the generally agreed-upon strategy that different methods can be used to complement each other, helping to increase both the reliability and validity of research. For this research, I will combine observation, interviews, public documentation, and the existing literature on related topics.

I believe that this methodological strategy will be by far the most profitable because it is the most effective and accurate way in which to gain access to the subjective experiences of individuals with “disabilities.” A central assumption of my working thesis is that ADA accommodations, in most cases, have important spatial gaps that require individuals with “disabilities” to negotiate unmodified spaces on their own, or to avoid such routes and places

altogether. The only way to acquire detailed, valid views of how the ADA can abandon individuals midway through daily journeys is through observation and conversation with the UCLA students who rely on ADA-required accommodations in their daily lives. Individuals engage with ADA-specified routes in a wide range of ways depending on everything from their personal range of abilities to their current psychological and professional goals, to the physical points at which they access any particular campus route, and my ethnographic approach will elicit and elucidate these different perspectives.

I will conduct interviews of campus staff members about how decisions are made and implemented regarding how the campus can be made (and kept) accessible, and I will conduct interviews with students with disabilities. These latter interviews will allow me to discover what anthropologists call the insiders' viewpoint on how students with disabilities perceive the campus. The students' "native" perspective will be different from the formal requirements of the law, as well as from the understanding of accessibility of the staff. Legislators, staff, and students are affected by accessibility laws and regulations in different ways; because of this variance, it is impossible to get a full picture of the accessibility of the campus without including all of these perspectives or stories.

Ethnographic research is uniquely designed to give voice to the subjective experience of individuals, thus allowing individuals with different types of "disabilities" to describe their experiences with accessible landscapes that have been designed by the "able-bodied." Therefore, I intend to put myself in the position of a UCLA student using a wheelchair as my means for mobility, incorporating a participatory element to this project. I will walk beside students who use a wheelchair and talk to them about the experience in real time. I believe that this aspect of the methodology that will be most effective in helping me understand and analyze the culture

that students with “disabilities” create. This culture derives from the fact the students on campus face the same barriers, although with different abilities. It is also based on the fact that the students with “disabilities” understand that they are often seen as an undifferentiated mass. While many researchers argue that inserting oneself into the research process delegitimizes it, others argue that for some subjects, the only way in which to discover the truth is through participating in the world under investigation. In this project, I side with the latter by demonstrating how powerful participatory research can be. My faculty mentor, Dr. Brian Taylor, is particularly supportive of this aspect of the research.

Literature Review

The literature discusses the connection between The Civil Rights Movement leading to the passage of the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which resulted in the accommodations in the built environment and in other areas. While my research certainly focuses on the ways in which there are physical barriers and challenges that meet individuals with “disabilities” on campus, I will also focus on the psychological and social aspects of the ways in which the physical configuration of the campus affect this population. While studies of issues of disability from a traditional perspective (such as the one that created the ADA) focus on removing pragmatic barriers, obviously, very important, Disability Studies allows one to consider the entire emotional, social, and psychological aspects of the ways in which dis/ability is culturally-constructed.

Among the most important findings that I plan to incorporate from the existing research are the ways in which the process for students to qualify for accommodations can be lengthy and discouraging (Beddow, 2012). Difficulties in this process can be significant for students who must secure a pass for an accessible campus bus, a point that I believe can best be documented

and explored through interviews with students, which will allow me to give a voice to those who use ADA accommodations, but who are often silenced in any assessment of these alterations (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012). I also intend to investigate why some students receive accommodations and others do not, looking specifically how the cultural environment in which an individual with “disabilities” lives has a substantial impact on both how those individuals, as well as their families, understand the meaning of disability (Cheloff, 2000).

Most of the research conducted on accessibility in the context of education examines primary and secondary education, making me grateful that Brinckerhoff, et al. (2002) focus on the population of college students, and the greater demands for independence and flexibility faced by the older student as opposed to younger ones, especially in the area of transportation. Finally, to provide both a broader legal basis and a more far-reaching political one, I chose both McCusker’s (1995) and Phillips’s (1994) work in order to understand the foundation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, and how the former provides a baseline for the dynamics of the current debates about accessibility. They illuminated the connection of the Civil Right movement and the momentum of the disability movement for me.

Ethics

It is a challenge to construct a research design that allows the researcher to gather valid, reliable information about her topic. When the research is focused on humans, the task becomes far more complicated because not only does the research design has to maximize the potential for gathering reliable and valid information, but must also do so in a way that prevents any harm (or at the worst, only the most minimal amount of harm) to the individuals who are the subject of that research. I believe that this situation is especially true when doing research with individuals

with “disabilities” because many of the “disabled” already feel that they are stared at, and objectified when they enter public spaces.

Research with any human subjects raises complex ethical questions that must be addressed by the researcher. After thinking about the topic, I have concluded that my role as a researcher is to allow the students with “disabilities” to be able to give a voice to their experiences that is as unmediated as possible. To avoid the major potential ethical problems that arise in human subject research, I will ensure that everyone with whom I interact understands the framework of the research. I will ask participants if they want to provide me with their email addresses in order to receive the results of my interviews. Then, if they had additional comments, I can incorporate those suggestions into my final project. Such inclusion of my subjects throughout the process of research and writing demonstrates one of the greatest advantages of ethnographic methodology: It will allow me to incorporate information as I progress, so that the information that I gather can be used to create a positive feedback loop that will increase the validity, as well as the truthfulness, of this research.