Communicating through Cripistemologies: The Implications of Non-Normative Communication upon Disabled Futurities

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Oral speech may be one of the most epistemologically privileging, yet taken-for-granted means of human communication. It encompasses more than a mere mode of expression, for it is also a key factor in the distributions of discursive power. I come to this topic because the politics of communication are extremely relevant in the social ordering and shaping of particular bodies. In this paper, I will make connections between the matter of communication and its ties to the figuration of the child. The privileging of normative speech is reflective of the ‘other-centric’ sociality that is required to secure a future within neoliberal humanity. Child bodies and disabled bodies are typically figured on disparate paths—one of potential and the other of waste—both conditioned through surveillance and forced squarely within set borders. I will then explicate non-normative communication with the framework of ‘autism as a teacher.’ This approach takes into consideration that non-speaking autistics challenge existing epistemologies by presenting interdependency as a valid way of coming-into-being. Although
communication may constitute yet another level of domination, it remains constantly negotiated, as human relationality is never salient. Particularly, identity and communicative borders can change with and because of the varying and rich ways in which disabled bodies use their corporeality to interact in the world. This is also an opportunity to interrogate universalized normative systems, revealing desirability as unfixed and socially constructed. By actively using a crippled framework to approach non-normative communication, we may revolutionize our collective practice of sense-making and envision unrestricted potentialities.

The figurations of the child body and of the disabled body are both heavily under surveillance, but conceived in opposition as the former is imagined as the future while the latter represents the looming threat of having no future. The significance of normative communication, operating through oral speech, is that it is informed by hegemonic norms that uphold themselves through an abject ‘other’. It is a principle medium through which figurations are scripted, and is implicated in circulating identity boundaries through and across discourses—semiotically and materially (Castañeda, 2002, p. 3). As described by St. Pierre (2015), “[o]ral speech has occupied a dignified position within the humanist lineage, shaping central questions of what it means to be human, imbued with the power to persuade others, serve human affairs, and articulate truth” (p. 330). Through truth-making claims, non-normative speech or the lack of speech is then pathologized and these voices are made subaltern. They are placed under domination, mystified, and thus in need of management as they have yet to be pinned down and made knowable. In the project of ‘making’ the child into an adult, discourses are grounded in the contentious nature of human development; successful upward growth or twisted degeneration.

In short, the norms of speech can be understood as means through which power reinforces itself, as they put forth an idealized and often-unachievable standard also predicated upon the abjection and failure of some. Here, the non-normative voice is characterized by ‘mindblindness’—that is, the failure to develop the capacity to mind read in a manner that accords with social cues (McGuire and Michalko, 2011, p. 164-165). It is plagued with deficit as it fails
to adhere to the laws of social cognition, also known as Theory of Mind. Normative communication is seemingly effortless in its flow and fluency: a predictable and universalized type of speech dependent upon an other-centric relationality to an imagined and idealized listener. Baron-Cohen’s conception of Theory of Mind requires the actor to perform mind reading of the self and of others in order to make behaviour legible, to react predictably, and continue such patterns of communication (McGuire and Michalko, 2011, p. 165). From the moment of birth and through various cultural conceptions in everyday life, vocalizations are policed to ensure that a given individual is in accords with the right developmental path. Is the child crying upon birth? Babbling at six months? Saying their first words at infancy? Playfully conversing with classmates at toddlerhood? This mapping out is continuous and narrow and, so, developmental milestones are always indicative of larger societal workings as the child is always at “center of discussions concerning the making of ‘facts’ and about human nature and culture” (Castañeda, 2002, p. 8). The universalized notion of normative speech is ultimately exclusionary as “[d]isabled speech is conceived as a private affair marked by particularity and embodiedness, while the rational speech of the universal citizen belongs to the public realm” (St. Pierre, 2015, p. 336).

I argue that the curriculum that calls children to conduct and discover themselves through other-centric and otherizing lenses converges with the deficit model, which locates the shortcoming in the self, rather than in the wider societal system, as well as panopticism, whereby behaviour is disciplined by an atmosphere of constant surveillance. If this particular type of sociality constitutes what is desirable and binds society together, then what may be done to coerce undesirable bodies to conform so as to maintain the status quo?

Within the field of normative parameters, unspoken scripts position the disabled child outside of possibility. Due to the oversight of the intersections between disabled and child futurities, the risky figure of the disabled child faces a “double lack of futurity” (Fritsch, 2016, p. 12). Having no choice but to “grow sideways”, as suggested by Stockton (2009), they are figured as waste and contamination to the futurity of humanity overall. But in the neoliberal sense, child bodies—sites of financial and social investment—that live in disabil-
ity are the targets of biocapitalistic consumption and intervention. Biocapitalism extends its regulatory gaze towards all aspects of biological life with the Foucauldian biopolitical governance of life and its mechanisms (Fritsch, 2016, p. 13). Bodies subjected to this gaze are rendered calculable, their net profits situated in the red, unless they can demonstrate their alignment with neoliberalism through profitability. For example, the circumstances of non-speaking autistics are increasingly understood as matters they can ‘remedy’ on their own through medical and technological consumption. The decision to opt out of these narrow cracks towards the side of acceptability produces “a ‘chosen’ exile” (Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware, 2014, p. 298). This frames non-normative communication as an individualized issue, as something some disabled children and their parents can ultimately overcome through consumption of biomedicine and biotechnology. Liability is embedded in the idea of liberal humanism, whereby the demonstration of speech (or lack thereof) is wholly rational while the consumer is a free, agential subject. Biocapitalism may offer the promise to free one “from the constraints of the body and the context of its production” (St. Pierre, 2015, p. 339), moving toward an incorporeal construction of life. This aims to counter the earthliness of domination through the policing of bodies and ruptures seemingly salient boundaries.

The normative voice leaves essentially every disabled child behind, as it sees difference and lived realities as things to be suppressed. Disabled voices are either characterized by sonic excess or voids of social pleasantries, thus relegated to the realm of the subaltern. One’s rationality and personhood are held in suspension and interrogation. Left alone with disability, the child’s future becomes not merely non-existent, but considered wasteful of potential as it “stops people from living their lives” (Fritsch, 2016, p. 16). The onus is placed on the infantilized disabled body to salvage the self, rather than calling out dominating social structures or relations. But rather than invoking the idea that sheer will can enact membership within normalcy, we should recognize the dynamics of the various actors within communicative systems. McGuire and Michalko (2011) insist that meaning in action is not empirical; rather, it is read and endowed with intentionality by the interpreter (p. 166).
As such, the production of meaning and sense is necessarily an interdependent and collaborative process that expands because of difference. Sequenzia (2015) suggests, “the framework of the other person’s body may actually provide a scaffolding within which one can produce controllable actions, or understand what is an expected response” (A Sense of Wonder, para. 14). But in the rearing of the child, there is no space given to tinker with the configuration of social relationalities and to invite a higher level of complexity in everyday interactions. In neoliberal fashion, “nature is understood to unleash its selective prowess and weed out those whose prediction and information-sharing capacity is at a low level” (p. 171). The always-infantilized disabled body must shut up, listen, and mimic the fast-paced and hypercompetitive movement of neoliberalism.

There is no doubt that the rise of technologies has afforded some disabled subjects to reclaim agency and discursive power that once seemed out of reach. Interventions such as facilitated communication and speech-generating devices may enhance corporealities that preclude disabled subjects’ participation in the mainstream arena. Yet, does it do anything to reframe the rigid constructions of discursive categories and processes? Or, rather, does it reproduce normative communication as a rote act, a claim towards belonging within the hegemony, a performance “for normally normative audiences” (Sequenzia, 2015, Face My Morning Face, para. 1)? Facilitated communication, however scientifically contested, is an example of a proposed solution to systemically imposed discursive barriers. Its workings simultaneously bring light to questions surrounding interdependency, temporality, and the taken-for-granted default status of speech. In the contestations against facilitated communication, authenticity of the non-normative voice is the central issue, whereas the normative voice is seldom questioned. It appears that forms of communication entailing more time, co-constitution (at the very least between the disabled body and the facilitator), mistakes, and reconfiguration are seen as detrimental to reproductive futurism. While stumbling and falling are figuratively and literally essential parts in the coming-to-be of a human, especially as a child, these moments are too often erased and undervalued—seemingly apart from the trajectory of human progression.
Now, a neoliberal contract can afford a place of belonging if one submits to models of cure and correction through technology. With the neoliberal promise of enhancement, the ‘suffering’ individual can aspire towards attaining a better-than-able body (Fritsch, 2016, p. 17). Technology selectively invites disabled subjects into the realm of normalcy if they can partake in the enterprise required of them to compensate for the effort put forth to include them – a form of “futures trading” starting at childhood (Gill-Peterson, 2015, p. 185). Biopolitics, policing which bodies to let live and which to let die, merges with technology to invite individuals to subject themselves to act according to complex sets of self-conduct to protect the self from further risk—here it is the danger of being written out of legitimacy. Fritsch (2016) writes that neoliberal biocapitalism puts forth material and discursive practices that “[enable] the tractability and flourishing of particular disabled futures while other disabled futures remain unanticipated unexpected, and undesired” (p. 11). However, bodily enhancement, as made possible through consumption of biocapitalistic technologies, is not without its limitations. Given biocapitalism’s hold on the government of bodies who are called to consume products, it is partial to particularized embodiments of childhood and disability. The success of biotechnologies is predicated upon “a consumer base that is already somewhat educated as to the scales and stakes of human development” (McGuire, 2016, p. 88). In other words, the design and use of technologies are already dictated by a set of appropriate norms, limiting the extent to which they may be used autonomously.

This yields potential to reify dominant understandings, rescript social implications, or do both simultaneously. As it surpasses the binary between the standard normative voice and the less-than-human non-normative voice, the better-than-human voice questions the authority of policing identity borders. Disabled bodies are given an ultimatum: consume biotechnologies to come as close to normal as possible or remain a “body that does not, cannot, or chooses not to perform or approximate normal human development” that “risks being cast out from the ever exclusionary space of the human” (McGuire, 2016, p. 102). The ever-expanding arrays of technologies and medicalized forms of enhancement are oriented to a selective type of
futurity wherein “material and discursive practices also incite a child that can be enhanced and capacitated in such a way as to meet the current and future demands of the neoliberal economy” (Fritsch, 2016, p. 13-14). In consideration of the diminishing socioeconom-ic prospects of the upcoming generation, there is more pressure to squeeze oneself into the model of reproductive futurism merely to survive. Gill-Peterson (2015) provides the example of education no longer as a liberal equalizer, but a necessary form of human capital particular needed amongst those who face a multiplicity of oppres-sions and devaluation—i.e., racialized children (p. 183). To return to facilitated communication once again, it could be understood as a device to provide non-speaking autistics a mere step into the exploitative capitalist economy. In demonstrating such ‘capital-ability’, the disabled subject proves itself self-sufficient, productive, worthy of investment and inclusion when articulated through an ableist lens.

To problematize the existing balance of discursive powers and disrupt the idea that knowledge must come linearly with age, one can take on McGuire and Michalko’s (2011) lens of “autism as teacher” (p. 162). Communication should be crippled from infancy because, in coming into the world, children instinctually and perhaps un-intentionally defy dominant systems of behaviour. Unfamiliar with social cues, children act without the constricting walls of perfor-mativity, but are often subsequently met with attempts of ‘correction’. One of the central foci of child development can be the practice and understanding of shared intentionality; it is what gives them their status as human (p. 172). Taking a step forward from this, crippled communication can be understood as “a complex of unintentional signs that are always and already circulating throughout a particular social network” wherein “communication necessarily takes on the appearance of noise” (Gunkel as cited in St. Pierre, 2015, p. 344). Messages can first become lost in translation—through various contexts and corporealities—to create deeper and more complex sites of knowing. Take, for example, Baggs’ (2007) video entitled In My Language wherein she reframes her so-called “non-communi-cative” state as a constant conversation through the body and with the environment, encompassing a complex combination of senses. From a cripistemological stance, non-normative communication is
no longer read as an isolated, out-of-this-world, unintelligible act. Normative communication is always restrained as it allows one to engage partially with the senses, while space must be reserved to maintain wiring to self-surveillance. Crippled ways of life open the doors to “reimagining the relations between informational bodies and systems, remapping disabled speech in ways that privilege noise, indeterminacy, affectivity, and sympoiesis” (p. 341). By foregrounding our collective futurity in cripistemology, we may reimagine how to navigate and exist.

In any given exchange in speech, meanings are always multiple and mistakes and misinterpretations are bound to be present. That is precisely because in our current systems of knowing, we fail to recognize that “the sphere of the voice is constitutively broader than that of speech: it exceeds it” (Cavarero as cited in St. Pierre, 2015, p. 346). Disability, or specifically autism, “always exceeds, always confounds, always remains a puzzle—it always remains the yet-to-know” (McGuire and Michalko, 2011, p. 174). So what are the implications of this unsettlement; the rupturing of boundaries that kept common knowledges precious? We learn that failure, miscommunication, and silence are all valuable components; they remain untapped sources of subjugated knowledges. McGuire (2016) writes that seemingly axiomatic significations such as warning signs and red flags are insidious because they “[make] us think twice until we don’t have to think at all” (p. 98). The practice of normative communication and circulation of common knowledges can be read as a violent colonial process, which cuts off one’s embodied differences, one’s mother tongue. The infantilized individual is withheld from the familial, cultural, and natural home that constitutes the self; disability is the barbaric lineage that must be disciplined, anglicized, if not eradicated. Incommensurable differences are flattened and suppressed.

Non-normative communicators bring to light that human potentiality is richer and more varied than normativity assumes. We are inherently constituted by, with, and through one another. In line with the oppressively other-centric approach of developmental psychology, Edelman as quoted in Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware (2014) states that neoliberal normativity propagates the standard of
“sameness by endlessly turning the Other into the image of itself” (p. 298). Meanwhile, non-normative communication recognizes the larger-scale implications of interactions and the utter indeterminacy of meaning. “By forcing listeners to stretch their ears and linger upon unfamiliar sounds, in denying them ostensibly clear, distinct, and terminal signs, the disabled speaker alerts us both to the ubiquitous process of mutually carving out meaning from within noise and to the indeterminate becoming through communication” (St. Pierre, 2015, p. 345). Once we look past the apparent linearity of meanings, we can see through the facades that, in revisiting ideas and rewriting them at any time, knowledges become richer, varied, more profound, and ever contestable.

To wholly resist the coercive and deceptive status quo, we seek to produce breakages in the domination of normative practices. Our understanding of communications should take root in Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware’s (2014) ‘cripistemologies’ whereby failed capacities are articulated as productive incapacities (p. 296). The reason for which we vouch for non-normative communications should not be for any inclusionism, which is ultimately tied to the project of privileging some at the expense of others. Rather, it should expose the finite borders of the normative desires. By contextualizing human relationality into the Foucauldian idea of subjecting ourselves as we subject others within systems of power and domination, then we may see that we also hold some juridical power in the shaping of people. In resisting the dominance of reproductive futurism, Fritsch (2016) reasons that this is “not only to reject the social order that relies on the Child, but rather to invest otherwise in social relations that complicate both the horizon of futurity and that of neoliberal biocapitalism that underlies our current interest in the future” (p. 24). Indeed, there is interplay, however uneven, between discursive authorities—such as medical professionals, policymakers, and educators—and the masses engaged in such practices. We collectively hold some agency to transform the existing social order, so long as the dominant epistemology is destabilized through practices of criping.

“Clear communication” and “understanding” will never mend our problems nor will it help us live together. It will never lead to justice nor break apart ableism, racism, sexism, transphobia, nor
poverty. The master’s tools, Audre Lordre reminds us, will never never dis—never dismantle the ma-ma-aster’s house. Clear and “ef-fec-tive” communication may make dysfluent speakers better adjust-ed, more normal, productive, and efficient cogs in the ffFFFFF... FffffFFluent machine of (late) liberal-capitalism, but will never create justice” (St. Pierre, 2015).

A disability-informed framework holds the potential to re-configure communicative systems in such a way that is cognizant of human interdependency and imagines futurities in unrestricted ways. Veering away from the deficit model sustained by the field of developmental psychology, an anti-oppressive approach can be taken through acknowledging the instability of meaning systems. No lon-ger are differential ways of being and expressing the self understood as waste; they are sites of learning for those who previously assumed they know all. This may legitimize paths that are purposefully and strategically against the idea of developing fluency and envisioning a future within neoliberalism. Communication is, indeed, a multi-di-rectional and non-linear process and, so, non-normative commu-nication actively resists the binds of having a voice restricted in the confines of the subaltern margins. Ultimately, we need not even set-tle on a single answer, agreement, or resolution when it comes to this matter. For it is precisely through the constant, though unstable dialogue that we come to learn and grow more about our collective existence.

References
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