

Ableism and disablism in the UK environmental movement

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This article considers disabled people's involvement with the UK environmental movement. It draws on findings from qualitative research with disabled people in the UK exploring experiences of access to sustainable lifestyles. A number of experiences of disablism: the manifestation of oppression against disabled people; and ableism: assumptions and valorisations of non-disabled normality; were described. Similar issues were also identified in relevant documentary sources and from research into disabled people's experiences in other movement contexts such as the wider anti-capitalist movement. These findings suggest that ableism may be a significant feature of the UK environmental movement. If this is the case, there are important implications for the wider success of this movement's aims in terms of achieving environmental protection, as well as for the ongoing exclusion experienced by disabled people with regard to pro-environmental activities.

Keywords: ableism; disablism; exclusion; environmental movement

Introduction

With increasing evidence for anthropogenic climate change, various debates about how to achieve environmental protection are occurring in academic and activist contexts. One in particular concerns the negative impact of capitalism – and the current neoliberal paradigm – on the environment. Grassroots elements of the environmental movement often hold the most radical or counter-cultural views in this regard (Rootes, 2012). They are also potentially best-positioned to create change. Alexander (2013), for example, highlights the importance of cultural change in effecting formal legal change and cites the environmental movement as a key example in influencing these types of change. Relatedly, grassroots groups within the environmental movement may be able to act outside the constraints under which policy

makers currently operate. For example, in UK policy, a weak sustainability approach (Neumayer, 2010) appears to dominate, but various aspects of the UK environmental movement have been critical of the wider neoliberal paradigm (Cerny, 2010) within which these policies are designed (Bergman, 2014; Schlembach, 2011). Their critique links the priorities of a neoliberal economic approach, such as consumerism, profit and individualism, with ongoing environmental degradation. As such they enable a wider discussion of the possibilities for tackling environmental damage which, although attracting significant theoretical attention (for example Agyeman, 2008; Daly and Farley, 2011; Jackson, 2011), rarely feature in mainstream political debate.

However, the outcomes of alternatives provided – associated with concepts such as steady state or ‘degrowth’ – may be potentially problematic for minority groups such as disabled people. Quilley (2013) suggests that these groups have made their recent rights gains in liberal contexts that in turn have been facilitated by continued economic growth. However, once this growth is no longer available, a shift may occur from individualistic to communitarian organising structures. These more traditionally-structured forms of society could be ‘politically and socially regressive’ (Quilley, 2013: 266), with associated value changes creating the risk of increased interpersonal violence and the potential reversal of the recent gains made by minority groups.

This hypothesising becomes particularly salient in the light of evidence that the environmental movement is already a site of exclusionary practices including racism and sexism (Agyeman, 2002; MacGregor, 2006; Taylor, 2014). There seems to be little prospect of addressing future risks of oppression of minority groups if current issues are not recognised. Even where environmental movement aims may avoid the dangers highlighted by Quilley, environmental campaigns are considered to need mass participation for success (Campaign against Climate Change, n.d.; Friends of the Earth [FOE], 2012). If significant

numbers of potential members are excluded this may inadvertently reduce the ability of the environmental movement to reach its goals. Disabled people, as a minority group, may be among those facing exclusion in this context. This exclusion risks adding to the broader exclusion disabled people already face in other areas of life. Excluding this significant and growing section of the population also threatens the overall success of environmental movement aims to achieve environmental protection.

Despite twenty years of disability discrimination legislation in the UK, disabled people continue to face exclusion in many areas of life (Department of Work and Pensions, 2013). Access issues relating to, for example, housing, employment, education and the built environment are well-documented. One area where less research exists, however, is regarding access to sustainable lifestyles and engagement with pro-environmental activities. This paper presents findings from research exploring access to sustainable lifestyles for disabled people living in the UK. In particular, it considers experiences of involvement with the UK environmental movement, a key topic raised by some participants in the research in terms of equal access to (and participation in) the activities of environmental groups, often in relation to exclusionary discourses as well as practices.

There is conflicting evidence about disabled people's levels of involvement with public life more generally, (DWP, 2013; Emerson et al., 2014), and little evidence in relation to environmental involvement in particular. Nonetheless, the findings presented in this paper suggest that there are particular features of the British environmental movement which may exclude disabled people. First, however, key concepts will be outlined. The following section discusses the understandings of disability and sustainable lifestyles that are used in this paper.

Understandings of disability and sustainable lifestyles

The understanding of disability used in this paper is central to its arguments. This research was informed by a social relational approach to disability (Thomas, 1999). Disability is understood to be ‘a form of social oppression’ (Thomas, 1999: 40) due to unequal social relations between disabled and non-disabled people, rather than as a property of an individual. The manifestations of this oppression can be termed ‘disablism’, in a similar way to how patriarchy is understood to manifest in sexism (Thomas, 1999). Impairment, meanwhile, is the term used to describe particular bodily differences or health conditions experienced by an individual. Disablism can be understood both as external, such as physical or social barriers encountered, and internal, such as the negative impact that the experience of these barriers may have on an individual’s psycho-emotional wellbeing (Reeve, 2014; Thomas, 1999).

While considering *disablism* places the focus on how unequal relationships manifest as oppression in particular contexts, considering *ableism* turns a critical spotlight on the category of ‘normal’. Following Campbell (2008), ableism is understood to be the assumption of non-disabled ‘normality’ (and desirability) which renders disability as other and less desirable: ‘disability, then, is cast as a diminished state of being human’ and ‘impairment or disability (irrespective of type) is inherently negative’ (Campbell, 2008: n.p.).

Although ableism is often used synonymously with disablism, particularly in lay contexts, maintaining a distinction between the two is important for this paper. This is not to suggest that they can always be separated out; they are ‘two sides of the same coin’ of exclusion. As Goodley (2014: 10) points out: ‘a barriers approach to disablism provides a powerful critique of the material base of disability’s relationship with its environment’.

Ableism, meanwhile, provides a framework for considering why environments and activities have been constructed in particular ways and which embodiments (and which abilities) are currently assumed and valued. Therefore a consideration of ableism, using Campbell's definition, can be complementary to a social-relational approach to disability. The two are thus used alongside each other to enable wider theorising of disabled people's experiences in this research.

A further key concept for this research is that of 'sustainable lifestyles'. This is a widely used concept in policy literature, but there is little consensus as to what, exactly, a sustainable lifestyle entails (Shirani et al., 2014). It can relate to a wide range of pro-environmental activities however, from domestic to public (see for example Defra, 2011), and this understanding is adopted in this paper. Similarly, wider understandings of sustainability are also highly contested. To briefly summarise one key debate, 'weak' sustainability approaches that focus on continued economic growth facilitated by technological progress are contrasted with 'strong' sustainability approaches that are less optimistic about the potential of technology and concern themselves with finite resources and the need to protect nature (see for example Neumayer, 2010). The UK's policy approach implies the former, while a significant strand of the UK environmental movement may be characterised by the latter.

Both approaches, however, risk obscuring social issues such as those relevant to disability. For example, 'weak' sustainability approaches, such as those in UK policy, are grounded in a wider neoliberal paradigm. This leads to an over-focus on the economy which, along with other features of neoliberalism, has been implicated in maintaining disability as a form of oppression (Barnes, 2005; Wilton and Schuer, 2006). In the case of 'strong' sustainability, this is often associated with the more radical side of environmental activism which rejects current dominant economic (and sometimes political) system(s). It may also be

characterised by an individualistic understanding of humanity and prizing of a traditional view of independence – i.e. doing things without assistance – and self-sufficiency, as has been identified in some environmentally-focused intentional communities (Fenney Salkeld, 2015; Sargisson, 2009). As will be demonstrated, this kind of approach also has potentially negative implications for disabled people.

The UK environmental movement context

The idea of a discernible ‘environmental movement’ in the UK today is contested (Diani and Rambaldo, 2007). Some have focused on categorising environmental NGOs in an assumed ‘movement’ (Rootes, 2012) or on a specific ‘network of activists’ in a subsection of a movement (Schlembach, 2011). Rather than debating the existence or otherwise of a specific social movement, this paper uses the term ‘environmental movement’ as shorthand for a diverse mix of different organisations and campaigns (Rootes, 2012; Schlembach, 2011) grouped broadly around shared environmental concerns. In the context of this research, the focus is on specific spaces and events and also the ‘cultural and political space... produced by [environmental] groups and networks’ (Horton, 2006a: 129) – the environmental ‘milieu’ of organisations, movement and politics.

In the UK, the environmental movement has been broadly grouped into three categories by Rootes (2012). Firstly, there is an older, more established set of environmental NGOs who focus on traditional conservation issues and are generally well-funded (for example Royal Society for the Protection of Birds [RSPB] or the National Trust). Secondly, there are smaller, campaign-focused NGOs (such as FOE or Greenpeace). Thirdly there are also newer grassroots-focused networks that often have the most radical or counter-cultural views, for example Earthfirst, Climate Camp, or most recently Reclaim the Power (Rootes, 2012).

Despite significant activity in the first decade of the current millennium (Bergman, 2015; Schlembach, 2011) and some possible political influence (Fudge, 2010), more recently environmentalism has struggled to retain media, public and political interest (Lockwood, 2014). It has not, however, gone away entirely. The recent election of a Conservative government looks likely to continue – if not enhance – the recent government trajectory of austerity (Levitas, 2012) and distinct lack of environmental concern (Carter and Clements, 2015). In this context, it remains to be seen whether more radical elements of the environmental movement will be able to capitalise on the apparently increased mood for grassroots activism, for example the recent anti-austerity protests (Khomami and Wyatt, 2015) and the so-called ‘green surge’ that quadrupled Green Party membership in England and Wales in 2015 (Cowburn, 2015). With ever-rising carbon dioxide levels (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013), and increasing uncertainty about the success of international agreements to limit dangerous climate change, the environmental movement could still have a significant role to play.

The empirical research

As noted at the start, this paper is based on research that considered disabled people’s access to sustainable lifestyles. In the UK context, most people – both disabled and non-disabled – are likely to be affected by the need to reduce domestic environmental impacts and the move toward sustainability. This is due to the emissions reduction targets legislated in the Climate Change Act (2008). In the absence of significant technological breakthroughs, these challenging targets will require considerable changes across all areas of British society, including business, government, and private households (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2010). If disability issues are not made explicit in this context, however, inaccessible

solutions to environmental problems risk adding to disabled people's exclusion from participation, as well as threatening the success of these solutions.

The consideration of disability is relevant because recent sustainability debates have focused on reducing environmental impacts at the individual or household level (Barr & Gilg, 2006; Shove, 2010). In the UK, this has led to strategies concerned with, for example, increasing domestic recycling and energy efficiency or public transport take-up (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2008). Disabled people's exclusion from pro-environmental activities such as these is becoming increasingly recognised. As the population ages and the number of people facing disability increases (see for example DWP, 2013; Jagger et al., 2007), this has implications for the success of approaches which aim to promote individual or household-level responses to environmental change.

Only a handful of studies have investigated disabled people's experiences of environmental concerns (Adebowale et al., 2009; Beazley et al., 1997; Burningham and Thrush, 2001; Charles and Thomas, 2007). These variously consider disabled people's experiences of a conservation course (Beazley et al., 1997), disabled people's environmental experiences and concerns alongside those of other disadvantaged groups (Adebowale et al., 2009; Burningham and Thrush, 2001) and the environmental involvement of members of a Deaf Club (Charles and Thomas, 2007). Additionally, more theoretical work has identified shared concerns between the disabled people's movement and environmental movement in the UK (Aldred and Woodcock, 2008).

Each of these studies highlighted barriers to disabled people's equal involvement with environmental issues, but none found high levels of knowledge or concern about the environment among their participants. The exception to this was immediate local environmental issues, for example recycling or vandalism (Adebowale et al., 2009; Burningham and Thrush, 2001). Much of this lack of knowledge may be attributed to a lack

of accessible information available regarding environmental issues (Adebowale et al., 2009; Beazley et al., 1997; Charles and Thomas, 2007). These earlier studies were, therefore, mostly limited to discussing local environmental issues – relating both to accessibility and to environmental damage e.g. air pollution.

Broad environmental concern can also be considered a feature of privilege, however. It may not always be a priority of disadvantaged groups because of their increased need to focus primarily on the difficulties encountered in their everyday lives and environments (Clarke and Agyeman, 2011). The low levels of concern or knowledge about the wider environment found among the participants in the studies above also may be indicative of the disadvantage those individuals were experiencing.

The research discussed within this article, informed by these earlier studies, therefore targeted disabled participants *with* broad environmental knowledge and/or experience, as well as those with more immediate environmental concerns. The goal was to enable a more detailed discussion of environmental concerns and experiences (including issues of access), and to consider lived experiences in the context of public policy aims at different scales (principally local, national, and EU, but also with consideration of relevant UN conventions). Thirty-seven disabled people in one local authority were recruited to qualitative, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A single local authority was chosen to enable examination of local policy influences within the scope of the project. The particular local authority was chosen because a detailed knowledge about the availability of local environmental initiatives on the part of the researcher was necessary for discussion with participants and, with the researcher being a local resident, the element of shared knowledge with participants facilitated conversation in interviews and focus groups. Within this geographical limit, a purposive sampling strategy was used to target a diverse range of experiences in recognition of the heterogeneity of the disabled population. Impairment type

was considered important, for example, because there are a wide range of ways to engage with sustainable lifestyles and many different potential access issues, as will be illustrated in the findings. Participants recruited had a range of different impairments: mobility impairments, long-term physical and mental health conditions, and learning disability as well as visual and other sensory impairments. The majority of participants described their impairment as related to mobility, and a majority also identified more than one impairment (for example a mobility impairment and a mental health condition).

Participants were recruited via local environmental and disability groups as well as by snowballing through earlier participants' contacts. The interview schedule was planned to allow as broad a discussion as possible and to allow the emergence of unanticipated issues, while also using broad prompts so that participants did not have to rely solely on memory across a large potential range of relevant issues. Activities from Defra's (2011) Sustainable Lifestyles Framework were adapted and used for this purpose to allow participants to choose areas of most relevance to themselves. Key informants in other areas of the country were sought later in the research in an attempt to begin to triangulate the findings beyond the local authority in question.

A particular topic arising from this research was negative experiences of the wider environmental movement. Although only discussed by a few participants, their rich and detailed accounts highlighted various concerns. This was an unanticipated topic that gained significance during the thematic analysis of the research transcripts (which began while fieldwork was still ongoing) and was also highlighted by later key informant accounts.

Other research published as this project was being undertaken (Abbott and Porter, 2013; Bhakta, 2013) indicated related concerns, which will be discussed further alongside the relevant findings. Similar issues were also identified in relevant documentary sources, such as environmental campaign material and academic research, and parallels could also be

drawn with research describing disabled people's experiences in wider anti-capitalist movement contexts, which will also be discussed further alongside relevant findings in the following sections. Ableism has also begun to be identified in the US environmental movement (Jaquette Ray, 2009, 2013; Withers, 2012). Both these sources and the research reported in this paper suggest the presence of ableism and disablism in the UK environmental movement. While these findings are only small-scale and exploratory, and cannot be considered representative at this stage, this paper argues that they are suggestive of issues that would merit further investigation.

Findings

Types of involvement with the environmental movement

Participants described a variety of forms of involvement with different environmental groups. Each of Rootes' (2012) three types of organisations were mentioned (older conservation-focused NGOs, smaller campaign-focused NGOs, and newer grassroots-focused networks). Additionally, some described more informal 'intentional communities' (Sargisson, 2009), such as those exploring shared and sustainable living. Participants' involvement variously included taking part in environmental campaigns, as well as other interactions such as applying for jobs or volunteering. A number of participants were currently members or supporters of various environmental groups, from national organisations such as Sustrans (a sustainable transport charity) and RSPB, to local campaigning, conservation or community groups. Some participants were recruited for this research project through a local conservation group and often described positive experiences of their involvement. For Participant 04, for example, the group provided a welcome contrast to the disabling barriers

and caring responsibilities he experienced at home: ‘that’s why I like coming here, cos it feels like very purposeful, you know’.

Another participant, who had in the past been actively involved with various environmental campaigns, described his experience attending a particular organisation’s summer gathering. Although physical access at the camp was difficult, the recognition and assistance of fellow members was crucial to enable his attendance:

I’d go to the [group] summer gathering, every summer, and they would do their damndest to make it as accessible as possible for me, so they would do care for me, help me up in the morning, but it’s always in a field, they build wheelchair accessible composting toilets, take portable hoists, recharge electric wheelchairs, they did everything they possibly could, but ultimately it was in a field [...] I mean whenever you’re camping everything’s ten times more difficult than it is in a house isn’t it, and if you’ve already got things ten times more difficult because of access difficulties due to disability it can make it insurmountable and unsupportable. (Participant 13)

Not all participants discussed experiences with the environmental movement, however. For some who had experienced increasing impairment, their profile of engagement had either decreased or shifted towards disability activism. Similarly, other changes of circumstance – such as moving home – contributed to changing engagement for other participants. Some also described the increasing isolation from environmental groups that they had experienced with either acquired or increasing impairment.

Barriers experienced

A variety of barriers were highlighted by participants in relation to accessing and participating with particular environmental groups. Physical access was a key issue – such as access to conservation sites or to the venues where local environmental groups held meetings.

Similar physical access issues were also highlighted in Abbott and Porter's (2013) research. Accessible information was another aspect of this – both a lack of accessible information about particular organisations (such as that available to people with visual impairments) but also a lack of information about accessibility (for example the availability of step-free access at a meeting venue). The trend towards accessing information online caused problems where the websites used were not accessible. There was often a lack of availability or phasing out of telephone inquiries. Even where some organisations did attempt to offer alternative formats, this could still lead to barriers:

Whenever I've [requested accessible materials from organisation] before, it's been five or six weeks out of date, which means that if there are any events, that you're a bit out of time for those, you know cos by the time you get your copy, it's usually, you know behind the main schedule of things. (Participant 20)

Access to protests was also an issue which encompassed physical as well as financial and social barriers, as described by Participant 20:

There's a demonstration about the Arctic [...] this march in London, but I was thinking it's a great idea but the obstacles to overcome as a disabled person [...] a) I'd have to get to London, b) you know there's the cost, c) there's the fact that if you were to get within the march, unless you had quite a few people who were prepared to either guide you or come alongside you and work with you on the march, you know you're not really going to be involved.

Social barriers – those that occur in the context of interactions with other (usually non-disabled) individuals – were also a key feature of participants' accounts. These could be direct, as in the account above where access depended on assistance of others who might offer or refuse. They could also be indirect, however, as the next section explores.

Ableist discourses

Ableism can provide the context for disablism (Wolbring, 2008); ableist discourses reproduced in attitudes or practices may lead to discrimination or barriers even where other access barriers have been addressed. Implicit ableism in campaign messages and broader environmentalist debates was identified by research participants and also noted in environmental movement campaign materials. A key example was around cycling. The bicycle has been described as ‘an iconic object of green discourse’ (Horton, 2006b: 42) and, particularly in the UK, cycling has been positioned as directly opposed to driving. One participant highlighted this; as a wheelchair user he had been involved with a national cycling campaign. Their campaign slogan was ‘two wheels good, four wheels bad’. While probably intended to refer to the difference between bikes and cars, this slogan implicitly positions wheelchair users in the ‘bad’ group. Participant 13, however, described his resistance to this simplistic binary: ‘I had a sign that said “four wheels good”’.

A 2006 Manchester Friends of the Earth ‘Love your bike’ social marketing campaign (Manchester Friends of the Earth, 2006) also made use of this oppositional binary. The campaign included a poster which contrasted ‘fat lane’ driving with ‘fast lane’ cycling and used the slogan ‘Burn calories, save cash, get there on time’. This message promotes a particular embodiment: one that is not fat and is able to cycle ‘fast’. This embodiment implicitly excludes many disabled people because cycling – particularly the utility cycling implied by the imagery and wording of this advert – is often inaccessible. The highlighting of ‘fat’ and prioritising of ‘burn calories’ also plays on contemporary fears around, and stigmatisation of, overweight and obesity (Aphramor, 2009; Bacon and Aphramor, 2011);

overlaps between the oppressions faced by disabled people and fat people are increasingly being highlighted. Discussing environmental discourses around cycling, Horton notes that:

The bicycle demands involvement of ‘the body’, and both produces and performs health and fitness [...] by cycling one parades not only the taking of personal responsibility for one’s own body, but also for the inter-connected bodies of ‘the community’ and planet.
(2006b: 46)

This presents cycling as a valorisation of an ‘able body’ and links it to a continuing neoliberal emphasis on individualism and the maximising of productivity, efficiency and self-sufficiency, and therefore minimising costs, either to the state or to the environment (Fisher, 2007; Imrie, 2014). This can be seen in the examples above and was also reflected in Participant 10’s account of a particular ‘type’ of environmentalist that could be exclusive:

There’s a contingent [...] who are very physically active young people which it’s sometimes very difficult to keep up with. Particularly, there’s a lot of people who cycle, who are very much into like physical fitness and all of that and have this kind of air of superiority about them because they’re moving around on their own power and whether – to some extent particularly the cycling culture is quite exclusionary to people with disabilities.

Participant 10’s description suggests that cyclists themselves may internalise these ideals, which can lead to a culture of exclusion. These ideals of individual productivity and self-sufficiency have also been highlighted elsewhere within the environmental movement. Key Informant 01 talked about her frustration with:

a lot of rather simplistic stuff in various environment circles which is very much... the back-to-the-land types that everyone can go on to have their own allotment and live on

that and that's all you really need, and I have to say no, actually I need really complicated medication, which at the moment is produced by big multinationals and you can't make it – and no just eating lots of potatoes and homeopathy is not the substitute for this [...] the whole idea that natural is good, unnatural is bad, so basically you write off anyone who needs quote unquote 'unnatural' support to live.

Key Informant 01's experience, in a similar way to Participant 13's 'four wheels good' sign, may act to disrupt an established binary which implicitly passes judgement on disabled people's experiences. Examples of such experiences being implicitly ignored were also highlighted by research participants in other contexts. Participant 18, for example, felt that the extra barriers she faced as a disabled person needed to be more acknowledged when talking about environmental activities:

I just feel that the literature should acknowledge that there is not choice – that you're not being a greedy carbon person by choice... and just a simple line, a simple statement; 'by the way we do acknowledge that if you are disabled you will be limited in the public transport you could use', 'we do acknowledge that as a disabled person you will maybe have to use more heating'.

Ignorance or lack of acknowledgement of disabled people's experiences in the environmental movement context has similarly been noted in other academic work. For example, a disabled researcher investigating physical accessibility in sustainable communities in the UK (Bhakta, 2013) encountered various aspects of ableism and disablism. She focused on the views of predominantly non-disabled participants who were involved with the planning of, or who visited, particular eco-communities and considered the potential contribution of disabled people to these groups. She found that participants tended to make

assumptions about what disabled people could and could not – or should not – do, such as being exempted from particular tasks or directed towards office work, rather than offering flexibility and choice.

The lack of recognition of disability as outlined here is likely to be related to the kinds of disablism participants in this research encountered, exemplified in the following account. Key Informant 03 had experience of working in the environmental sector and described instances of active discrimination when applying for jobs with environmental organisations:

I went for an interview two years ago, with [organisation], and I did the interview no problem, I had to do two written papers, I did the first one absolutely fine, however the second half of the written paper was [not accessible] so because I wasn't able to complete the paper I wasn't able to complete my interview and compete for the job [...]
And I applied twice now for an environmental apprenticeship with another large environmental organisation and had the same types of barriers.

Judgmental attitudes and psycho-emotional disablism

Some participants in this research described judgemental attitudes about unsustainable aspects of their lifestyles from members of the environmental movement. Attitudes of others could present barriers to involvement with voluntary or campaigning environmental organisations: 'the group while I was at university [...] it wasn't very accommodating of disability issues' (Participant 15). Some participants also described fearing stigma if they revealed 'hidden' impairments. Anticipated experiences of disablism, meanwhile, might be influenced by experiences of disablism in other contexts, or because of ableist messaging such as that described in the previous section. They might also be described as examples of self-exclusion caused by psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2014); in the case of these participants, previous negative experiences may influence the decision to avoid situations

where similar issues may arise. Real-life examples from this research and other contexts suggest that these are not trivial concerns.

Participant 20 felt that her participation in a climate march would be viewed by others as tokenistic rather than as her acting autonomously:

What tends to happen is that disabled people are an add-on [...] there would be a lot of people who'd view [her potential participation] as being a tokenism [...] they'd say 'oh well that person's there as a token symbolising that' rather than see you as being actually wanting, as a disabled person, to see the whole aspect of your life being linked to the environment as well.

This anticipated experience echoes the experience described by members of Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) attending a recent protest march against welfare cuts in the UK. This was organised by a non-disability specific group, the People's Assembly (DPAC, 2014; vsjustice, 2014). According to its members, DPAC were not included in the planning of the march which, as well as ignoring accessibility issues, allocated their participants to a particular 'block' based on disability status. DPAC pointed out in a statement to the People's Assembly organisers that 'Nobody would dream of proposing a block of Black and Minority Ethnic people flanked by white blocks, so why are disabled people to be herded together?' (DPAC, 2014, n.p.). This is also a potential incident of tokenism.

Participant 11 also described her and her partner's anticipation of judgement from the environmental community. They had investigated the possibility of moving into an intentional community cohousing project. For a variety of reasons, they decided not to go ahead with this, but one of their reasons was what she described as 'the stereotype of the kind of people who would live there'. Explaining this further, she continued:

Just that people would be very evangelically, we must be ‘greener-than-thou’ [...] everything we do must be sustainable and we must make our own yoghurt and all of that stuff [...] I thought it would prompt us maybe to live in a more environmentally friendly way than we do, and I do think that we probably do use the car a bit too much, and it would help us to remember not to [...] we get lazy. But I get what [partner] means about it can be difficult to live if you felt like people are judging you, and also I guess with my issues with energy, sometimes realistically the only way I have to get about is to use the car, and I don’t necessarily want to go into justifying that to people, who live two doors away from me but I don’t really know them.

Participant 11 described both potential positives and negatives here. For her, there was a positive aspect of ‘prompting’ or encouragement for sustainable activities. She envisaged a negative of having to justify additional car use, however, and her expression ‘greener-than-thou’ is evocative of the idea that in this kind of community environmentalism would be linked to status.

Empirical research in the wider academic literature lends support to concerns around judgemental or exclusive attitudes. Hards (2013), for example, described competitiveness between some of the participants in her research with members of the environmental movement in Northern England. She noted that different environmental behaviours can – in certain contexts – be status-enhancing (for example conspicuous energy conservation or ‘green’ consumption or stigmatising) as opposed to more stigmatised environmental behaviours (for example having a cold house). Descriptions like ‘greener-than-thou’ (above) and ‘air of superiority’ (from Participant 10’s discussion of cyclists in the previous section) both reflect this style of competitive or judgemental environmentalism from some – but not all – areas of the environmental movement.

Hards, perhaps unintentionally, also makes a further interesting observation. She notes that, although some energy practices are stigmatised, this stigma is ‘not necessarily as severe or harmful as it can be [around] disability or race’ (Hards, 2013: 441). If stigmatised energy practices are undertaken by those with one or more of these *already* stigmatised identities, however, further oppression may result. This consideration may well also be extended to the implicit stigmatisation of non-environmental energy practices (such as driving instead of walking, or using a tumble dryer instead of hanging clothes on the line) in environmentalist contexts. These practices, however, were described by participants in the current research as often necessary due to access considerations.

Potential implications of ableism and disablism in the environmental movement

As indicated by the discussion so far, ableist messages and judgemental attitudes demonstrated by some environmentalists and campaigns, as well as other barriers to access e.g. physical or financial, can exclude disabled people. Disabled people’s perspectives, however, also have the potential to problematise the simplistic binaries and ableist assumptions in the environmental movement and discourses. This can create both risk and opportunity for disabled people engaging with environmentalism.

If disabled people’s experiences *are* accepted and recognised then there is the potential opportunity for an extension and reconsideration of the terms of debate, and for learning and inclusion. Participant 13’s positive experiences with the camp he attended, described earlier, are arguably an example of this in action. Relatedly, as Participant 13 also described, many historic environmental activists have since developed impairments as a direct result of their actions:

Living in trees, in all weathers is not good for your health, neither is the confrontation that's involved good for your mental health, and you find that there's a generation of people now who were in their teens and twenties maybe during the big road protest movement, the big radical wakeup, the CND days [...] that have now got arthritis and joint problems as a result, or have got mental health difficulties of varying types and severities as a result of what they experienced basically.

As a result of this, and the visibility of Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN) during his period of involvement in the environmental movement, Participant 13 felt there had been some positive improvements:

There was to an extent an awakening amongst the environmentalist movement that disabled people could sometimes be useful allies, but as to whether that's come to full fruition, probably not. But I did see it happening to an extent.

There may also be risks, however. If this kind of 'awakening' does not occur, then the kinds of judgemental attitudes described earlier may result in hostile environments which deter disabled people's involvement. Disablism may also occur, such as that experienced by Key Informant 01. As someone who takes medication to control her mental health condition, she has experienced both pressures to stop taking her medication, and censure and threats for some of her views on her own situation:

Some days I think I'm just making it up and I should stop taking all my meds, you know there are already quite a lot of pressures to do that sort of thing, and it's an annoying thing [...] There have been times when I just sort of stopped being involved in various environmental groups because of this, and it's also a bit of a barrier because it means I have some very definite views about animal experimentation, that I think it's necessary to develop better meds [...] this puts me at odds with a lot of people, particularly at the

more radical climate camp-y edge of the environmental movement, I've been threatened with being punched for saying things like that, and generally called a murderer and all sorts, so it is something I find quite difficult [...] there will always be someone who wants to shout at me for not using homeopathy and for using medications which are tested on animals and in gelatine capsules.

Difficulties faced by disabled people engaging in non-disability-focused activism have also been indicated in other research. Horsler (2003) examined the experiences of disabled people engaging with the wider anti-capitalist movement, which overlaps with parts of the environmental movement. His participants raised the issue that disability campaigns such as independent living and direct payments can be viewed negatively by those without a good understanding of disability issues, as they may be viewed as working against the wider group's anti-capitalist aims. McKay (1998), in his description of 1990s British activism, also noted failed attempts at inclusion of disabled people. One example described was of groups that emphasised the importance of including members of DAN, but then only provided (inaccessible) tube directions to the 'secret location' of a meeting. Similarly, Chouinard (1999) has described the experiences of disabled women in the context of the wider feminist movement in Canada in the 1980s-90s. They found that as disabled women they faced exclusion from feminist organising, while as women they faced sexism within disability activism. Part of their resistance included creating spaces (and an organisation) specifically for disabled women, as well as establishing their voices within feminist and disability groups. It is interesting to consider the parallels with this and the experiences of participants recruited from the conservation group in this research. This group had been specifically designed for disabled participants and tended to be described positively by those participants.

Returning to the environmental movement context, finally, there are risks associated with the ableism that appears to be embedded in the valorisation of cycling and self-

sufficiency, as described earlier. The prevalence of these kinds of ideas, which seem to relate to underlying neoliberal assumptions about the role of individuals, is significant. As noted earlier, neoliberalism is argued to produce and perpetuate oppression faced by disabled people (Barnes, 2005; Wilton and Schuer, 2006). As noted at the start, the neoliberal paradigm has also been critiqued as a significant factor in environmental damage by parts of the environmental movement (Bergman, 2015; Schlembach, 2011). If members of the environmental movement are in fact reproducing neoliberal ideologies such as individualism and self-sufficiency in their activism, this would seem to not only undermine their aims, but also perpetuate disabled people's oppression.

Concluding discussion

This paper has considered disabled people's experiences of the UK environmental movement, highlighting incidences of ableism and disablism. The accounts presented here, although few in number, suggest that ableism and disablism may be present in the UK environmental movement. The emphasis on cycling, and its framing in opposition to driving, seems to be a key site of ableism, as does the dominant narrative of self-sufficiency. As noted earlier, the way these issues are understood, with their links to individual health and independence, indicates pervading neoliberal attitudes that may perpetuate the oppression faced by disabled people.

A number of issues highlighted by this research may contribute to disabled people's exclusion from the environmental movement. Ableist campaigns and rhetoric seem to create both the appearance of exclusion as well as potentially leading to direct discrimination. If disabled people are either discouraged from getting involved or actively barred from doing

so, as the earlier account of discriminatory hiring practices indicated, then it is difficult to see how meaningful change could occur. As Key Informant 03 also pointed out:

Unless we can get disabled people working and integrating in the core fabric of the environmental sector, we're not gonna be able to make these connections and the world is not gonna see how environmental justice and inclusion is linked so closely to disability equality and inclusion.

This again highlights the potential contribution of disabled people to the environmental movement as well as the necessity of inclusion.

If the movement cannot make connections between environmental concerns and disability equality because it lacks the expertise and lived experiences of disabled members, however, then there are further implications. Inaccessible physical and social environments may continue to be reproduced, for example. This in turn could mean that gains made by the environmental movement might lead to further exclusion of disabled people. In this context, if (as is debated in the literature – for example Fudge, 2010) the environmental movement *is* able to exercise influence, its lack of understanding or recognition of disability may also have a potentially negative impact on its sustainability-related aims. If disabled people are unable to take part in reducing environmental impacts then, considering the growing disabled population (already approximately one-fifth of the UK population), this is a significant group to leave behind.

There is reason to hope that positive change is occurring, however, or could be possible if groups and organisations could be exposed to disability equality information and training. Participant 13's extensive interactions with environmental groups indicates the potential for good practice, as do the experiences of those participants attending a conservation group organised specifically for disabled participants. Additionally, some of the

academic literature exploring newer environmental groups highlights the potential for change. Schlembach (2011) for example, investigated the experiences of one campaign group and noted that they faced conflicts between their commitment to collective solutions and the more individualistic, lifestyle-choices focus of other groups. Groups like the former may be more inclusive than the latter in the terms discussed in this paper. Finally, understanding ‘the environmental activist space as essentially contested’ (Schlembach, 2011: 211) also leaves room for the prospect of more inclusive solutions. Moves toward inclusivity, however, will require the participation and leadership of disabled people if they are to be effective.

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