

Embodiment as the Third Axis: Disability, Queerness, Privilege, and Oppression



Mike Walker is a doctoral candidate in systematic theology at Knox College at the University of Toronto. His thesis concerns the intersection of disability, community, baptism, and Holy Communion. He's the co-author of the Student Christian Movement of Canada's 'Disability, Faith, & Justice' Devotional' (June 2016); he's available to speak or lead workshops on the physical and social inclusion of people with disabilities in churches.
ma.walker@mail.utoronto.ca

Recently, I was reflecting on the “Intersecting Axes of Privilege, Domination, and Oppression” reproduced in Kathryn Pauly Morgan’s essay “Describing the Emperor’s New Clothes.” I am cisgender, male, white, of European heritage, highly-educated, and more; I also possess multiple disabilities, and embody a queer sexual orientation. Thus, as a person who fits most of the categories of “privilege” on the graph, and as one who inhabits some of its “oppression/resistance” spokes, I want to critique the logic of the diagram, and to assert that one could redraw it in three dimensions, using embodiment as its multifaceted third axis.

I notice that the diagram is a flat wheel with interconnected lines or spokes. For instance, the line marked “Disablism” runs through the thick barrier of “Domination” from “Nondisabled / Mental good health” towards the oppression and resistance of people with disabilities and mental-health needs. Similarly, the spoke of the “politics of appearance” runs through Domination too, from “Attractive” at the top to “Unattractive” at the bottom; third, the spoke of “Heterosexism” runs through Domination, from “Heterosexual” to “LGBTQ+.”

I find these categories useful only as a starting-point, because these linear, two-dimensional spokes touch each other only at the centre, when—in the world that *I* live in—they intertwine all the time. I possess spastic cerebral palsy: I bled from my brain when I was born, and so many of the neurons that dwell in my cerebrum, the part of the brain that controls motor function, got scrambled. I also have some related spatial, logical, mathematical, and non-verbal deficits. My muscles are always tense, and all four of my limbs shake at all times.

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Because of these disabilities, I struggle to stand on concrete without having my legs and back hurt, to do math more complex than arithmetic, and to navigate Toronto's transit-system quickly. I also often occasion stares, and impatient looks and words, as I walk along the street or take the bus. My body functions quite well, all things considered; plus, I possess many other markers of privilege. All that said, my physical and social environment here in Toronto oppresses me to some degree, and no line-graph can completely describe that oppression.

Moreover, my queerness, until recently a well-kept secret even from me, calls out to me in the midst of my physical and social pains. I identify as slightly "heteroflexible." I'm on the light side of bisexuality, where I mostly prefer women (by a wide margin) as sexual partners, but also sometimes find men attractive. I notice that many people who are queer—some of them people I love!—are kept from marrying their chosen partners and from holding down jobs; some are even hurt or killed because of their God-given expressions of sexuality. I fear that these same things could happen to me. These experiences of oppression are neither simple nor linear.

Because of my essential differences of multifaceted disability and queerness, I claim that there ought to be an axis of depth to Morgan's diagram. We could title that third dimension "embodiment." Embodiment blurs the lines of privilege and oppression: for instance, because I can walk, I am not as thoroughly disabled as a person with quadriplegia. Moreover, Jesus, who cut across the lines of diagrams like Morgan's, loves everybody—rather, *every body*. Jesus wants every person to love his, her, or their body, and to experience vibrant relationship in a fragile and often-unjust world. Queer people and people with disabilities know that Oppression, Domination, and Privilege are not a linear plane; rather, these social matrices comprise a polyhedral city, where everyone embodies multiple dimensions of advantage and disadvantage.