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ORIGINAL TITLE: Having to "sell sell sell": Locating Responsibility in the Everyday Rhetorical Labor of Disability

REVISED TITLE: Personal Affect Management in Scenes of Access Denials: Locating Responsibility in the Everyday Rhetorical Labor of Disability

The interactions I'd like to share in this presentation all involve a denial--a denial of access to a helping hand, a public place, a walk across the street. social acceptance, or a sense of ease or comfort. These denials occur in interaction between two or more people--one person who is blind or visually impaired and someone who holds the capacity to help them gain access to something. The first scene I'd like to share occurs in a grocery store.

[SLIDE] CANDACE – "I just try to smile but inside I'm at like a hundred degrees"

Candace is a participant in my qualitative interview study of twenty-one blind and visually impaired people's rhetorical experiences. She is a 33-year old, white, female, blind guide dog user. When I asked her about her daily communication experiences, she described soliciting a shopper at one particular grocery store:

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> ...Anytime I've gone in there alone and I've asked for a shopper, they've given me such attitude about it. It's just sort of like we're busy right now. Well what do you think I can just like come in the store when you're not busy? I can't always do that. I'm human you know. I've got stuff to do. I mean not that I say that but... I like shopping there but I won't go alone because I just get too frustrated. I mean I don't really show them my frustration I just try to smile but inside I'm at like a hundred degrees. [groans] Oh my gosh yes I know you're busy but I should be able to come in here when i want to and you shouldn't give me the attitude like oh we're busy, so I stopped going there by myself.

Candace's narrative made me wonder about her rhetorical choices. Why does she feel the need to withhold her frustration? Why doesn't Candace just get mad and demand that she has a right to access groceries when she wants to? Why doesn't she deliver the arguments she presented to me during our interview?

I turn our attention to scenes of access denials as additional sites for understanding how rhetorical responsibility operates in the presence of difference. I attend to how the blind and visually impaired individuals I interviewed have to assume all the responsibility for negotiating for their dignity and their humanity. By asking individuals about the role of communication in different contexts of their lives like school, work, social life, etc. and across their lifespan, I found that the individuals I interviewed must assume responsibility for what I call, everyday rhetorical labor, or the communicative work they do in order to access institutions, inclusion, and information. While in this presentation I focus on participants' use of rhetoric to gain access to seemingly trivial things like groceries or entrance to a store, structural barriers to employment, social inclusion, and information also demand that individuals use rhetorical labor to gain equal access. Staggering estimates of unemployment rates among blind and visually impaired individuals in the United States range from 56%[1] to 70%[2] of working age adults, which highlights the need for further examination of the forces that shape attitudes about blindness and disability. The participant narratives point to a whole web of social discomfort and uncertainty surrounding disability, and they reveal that access is relational, meaning that access is either granted or denied in relation between two or more people. Everyday rhetorical labor occurs both internally and externally, as individuals internally manage emotions and reactions and externally present themselves to the world in ways that they hope will grant them access. It is these scenes of access denials that I'd like to pull apart in this presentation. In the following two examples, I will show how two participants described managing their own personal affects to achieve access.

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CURTIS - Arming Yourself with Information and Killing Them With Kindness

Curtis is a 50-year old white, male, guide dog user. Curtis described that he has been denied access to public places because of his guide dog, as he put it, "30, 35, 40, 45 times" and through those experiences, he has developed a theory about what kinds of communication strategies are most effective in these situations. Curtis's strategy is two-fold: 1) "arming yourself with information" and 2) "killing them with kindness." "Arming yourself with information," for Curtis in the case of being denied access to public places, includes being able to recite a few key pieces of information: the state's public accommodations law, ADA Title Three, and the exact phone number for the ADA hotline and the URL for ADA guidelines website, all of which he recited in our interview. Curtis combines precise information with a "cool, calm, collected"

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[1] Erickson, W., Lee, C., von Schrader, S. (2015). "Disability Statistics from the 2013 American Community Survey (ACS)." Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute (EDI). Retrieved March 31, 2016, from www.disabilitystatistics.org.

[2] American Foundation for the Blind, "Interpreting Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Data." Janruary, 2015. http://www.afb.org/info/blindness-statistics/interpreting-bls-employment-data/24

demeanor, as he put it, as demonstrated in the following example from his narrative. Curtis recited a line he typically uses when he's being denied access to a public place:

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> [he says in a very soft, sweet tone] I'd love to tell you more about what the [State] Public Accommodations law and the Americans with Disabilities Act say, and what they provide for you as a business owner, as well as for me as a person with a legitimate service animal, service dog in this case.

He juxtaposes this calm, informative approach with a more aggressive one in which he used to directly accuse people of discrimination. He described that over the years he's moved "from being aggressive to being, hey we can figure this out. I want to help you help me." He finds that going on the offensive is not effective because his audiences don't know their legal responsibilities. He said,

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> They [business owners] don't know the laws. Who's going to teach them? There's nobody that teaches businesses about what the ADA Title Three says and what their responsibilities are. That's our responsibility, the civil rights law, that's so important.

Curtis adds that being aggressive and disrespectful only leads to angering business owners and causing possible future access denials for himself and other disabled people, a concern expressed by many others that I interviewed. When I asked Curtis if he finds it difficult to remain polite even when he's feeling frustrated, he responded with apathy, as many other participants did. He said that he's experienced so many access refusals and frustrating interactions that they no longer "rattle" him. What's difficult, he explained, is making sure that his rhetorical labor has lasting effects--he doesn't know what kinds of impressions have been made on people before he interacts with them and he can't be sure that the work he does to make a positive impression won't be undone in a subsequent interaction.

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NADINE - "People react to me based on my reaction to the world"

Nadine is a 25-year old female, African American, queer person who wears sunglasses and uses a visual cane for mobility. Nadine highlights how projecting a comfortable affect helps calm people around her, and in turn, allows her access to their assistance.

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Nadine said, "...sometimes I spend more time getting people comfortable with the fact that I'm comfortable." She went on to describe both non-verbal and verbal components of her personal affect management. First, she described how her facial expressions influence the way people react to her:

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> If I have an expression on my face where I am very anxious, very confused, or very nervous, people will talk down to me often. I get this reaction on average whereby they speak, 'Ma'am do you know where you're going? Are you okay?' [speaking like speaking

> to a child] I get that often...But if I am very laid back, or I feel very confident, my expression is one of relaxation and comfort and if I'm okay in that sense people react to me differently. Even when they are a bit anxious and uptight when they're trying to figure me out, I'll often be the one calming them down.

Nadine went on to say that she also comforts people verbally, using a friendly, relaxed tone when teaching people how to assist her. She said,

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> ...I've developed this very laid back demeanor which is just a part of my own personality, whereby I say things like 'Hey, how ya doin'? My name is Nadine, what's your name? Okay, awesome. Um, I'm wondering if you could just give me a little assistance getting here or could you tell me directions on how to get here. Now it's completely fine. What we'll do is I'll just take the back of your arm, okay, just like that, all right, we are good to go, now we're groovin'!' [all said in a very sweet, soft voice]...

Nadine described that what's difficult about interacting is that sometimes she finds herself in situations where someone is being helpful to her, but they also happen to say something insensitive related to race, disability, or sexuality. In these moments, she has to decide between standing up for what she believes is right and getting a ride home or help with getting food in a buffet line. While I won't dive into these particular examples from Nadine's narrative, they serve as further examples of what I call the internal dimension of everyday rhetorical labor, a continual process that involves picking battles, managing emotions, and sometimes tiring of the rhetorical responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

I'd like to end by raising questions about the societal norms and attitudes that shape these interactions. In her book *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (2011), Tanya Titchkosky argues for a politics of wonder, or what she calls a

> [SLIDE] "restless reflective return to what has come before" (15).

Titchkosky warns that getting caught up in the justice work of fighting for access can prevent us from remembering that

> [SLIDE] "disability resides between people in imaginative relations" (54).

In other words, Titchkosky argues that if we want to really fight for access, we need to question the very interpretive relations that make disability recognizable. And those interpretive relations, Titchkosky adds, are collaborative: she says that

> [SLIDE] "everyone participates in making what is noticed and imagined as disability" (56).

As such, I raise the following questions about the scenes of access shared in this presentation as a way of questioning the interpretive relations that shape them: Why are these individuals solely responsible for the rhetorical labor of helping others help them? Why is it necessary to smile, remain polite, and comfort others who feel uncomfortable or downright defensive in the presence of a disabled body? Why do they have to make others feel better about their disability? And finally, why are people so uncomfortable in the presence of disability?

The individuals I've interviewed gave very clear answers to these questions--they perform rhetorical labor because they have to. They have to manage their own personal affects in order to get help from others. My goal in this project is not to claim that the individuals I've interviewed are doing something wrong--they are doing what they need to do in order to access a wide range of material and immaterial things--and their strategies are largely self-taught and revised over the course of a lifespan. The theory of communication about access that I put forth in this paper is that access is relational--it is something that is created in interaction between two or more people, and my data show that in order for relational access to become possible, the individual with the disability has to make other people feel better about their disability. Many individuals I interviewed have developed strategies they find effective, but those strategies took decades to develop and they are always in process. And many tire of the repetitive, rhetorical responsibilities, and experience what I call access fatigue, or the build up of frustration over time that results from the repetitive rhetorical responsibilities of pursuing access. Alarmingly, sometimes access fatigue causes people to not act rhetorically in the pursuit of access, put simply to not ask for help.

The alternative I'd like to pose is the following: responsibility around rhetorical processes of gaining access needs to be redistributed. I extend Titchkosky's call for a politics of wonder by asking you to imagine a

[SLIDE] pre-emptive, proactive, creative, anticipatory, distributed model of relational access in which all individuals participate in the rhetorical processes surrounding access, regardless of inexperience, discomfort, or ignorance. Instead of allowing our uncertainties to result in access denials, we need to assume responsibility for our own interpretive relations with regard to disability so that we can share in the burden of arguing for access.

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Thank you.