

Guest Editorial: Science and Technology, Social Cohesion, Human Security, and  
Disabled People

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**Abstract:** This editorial highlights the linkage between science and technology advances, social cohesion, human security and disabled people.

**Key Words:** Disability Studies, sciences and technologies, social cohesion

### Introduction

Human security and social cohesion - the topic of this RDS issue - are central requisites especially for the medical and social well being of disabled people. Furthermore, a disability studies lens can crucially clarify and test the discourses of human security and social cohesion for their usefulness for disabled people and provide information about implications for the general population as well. Human security according to the Commission on Human Security (2003) is concerned with safeguarding and expanding people's vital freedoms. It requires both shielding people from acute threats and empowering people to take charge of their own lives. The Commission identified economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, political security, freedom from fear, and freedom from want as primary concerns.

Social cohesion, a term first coined by Émile Durkheim in his 1893 book, *The Division of Labor in Society*, today has various definitions (Jeannotte, 2001; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004; The Canadian Cultural Research Network (CCRN), 2000; New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004; Spoonley, Peace, Butcher, & O'Neill, 2008; Salama, 2004; Jeannotte, 2000; Beauvais & Jenson, 2002). Some of the attributed characteristics of social cohesion are belonging, shared values, shared challenges, equal opportunity, sense of trust, hope, capacity to live together in some harmony and a sense of mutual commitment (The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, 1999). Additionally, how well institutions manage diversity and resolve conflicts by finding mutually satisfactory accommodation (The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, 1999) and everyone having requisite access to establish basic social relationships in society e.g., work participation, family life, political participation, activities in civil society (The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, 1999), are also attributed characteristics of social cohesion. Social Cohesion is linked directly to indexes, indicators and various measures of well-being (Atkinson Foundation, 2005; Bergheim, 2006; Wikipedia, 2008; Huitt, 2004; Nevis, 1983; Börjesson, 2006; Giussani, 2006; Korea National Standard Office, 2006) and to various facets of human security. Social cohesion and human security play themselves out increasingly within a globalization agenda whereby one encounters different understandings of social cohesion and human security within different cultural and political frameworks.

## Social Cohesion, Human Security and Disabled People

### Social Cohesion

A sense of belonging is one main aspects of social cohesion. It is important for disabled people to belong, to be part of shared values as much as it is for everyone else, but do they belong? Are they reflected in shared values? The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990) states that “[H]istorically, society has tended to isolate and segregate individuals with disabilities, and, despite some improvements, such form of discrimination against individuals with disabilities continue to be a serious and pervasive social problem.” The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007) which came into force in May 2008 is another acknowledgment that disabled people are still treated as “others” worldwide and are in need of explicit legal protection. So what values of a society generate such a “we versus the others” regarding disabled people? Which characteristics of a disabled person make them the “others”?

The author submits that ableism (Wolbring, 2008a; Wolbring, 2008c; Wolbring, 2007) is one mechanism that facilitated the “we-other” dynamic. Ableism is a set of beliefs, processes and practices that, based on one’s perceived abilities, produce a particular kind of understanding of oneself, one’s body and one’s relationship with others within one’s species, to other species and one’s environment. It includes being judged by others.

Ableism reflects the sentiment of certain individuals, households, communities, groups, sectors, regions, countries and cultures to cherish and promote certain abilities such as productivity and competitiveness over others such as empathy, compassion and kindness (favoritism of abilities). Ableism, in general, is the phenomenon that some decide that certain abilities are needed in order to belong to the “we” and that one is the “other” if one does not have the same abilities as defined by the “we”. Ableism is used in various “we-other” dynamics (Wolbring, 2008a; Wolbring, 2008c; Wolbring, 2007). In the case of so-called disabled people, the ableism dynamic is that some “we” define certain abilities as species-typical and the exhibition of these species-typical abilities is a measure of worthiness. Variation from these are defined abilities as deviations, as a deficient state of being, labeling the “less able” people as the “other”, the “impaired” (Campbell, 2001; Carlson, 2001; Overboe, 2007) often with accompanying disablism (Miller, 2004). There is often discriminatory, oppressive, or abusive behavior against the “other”, the less able.

Citizenship is one measure of belonging and shared values. “Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (Marshall, 1950). Many articles (Massie, 2006; Jayasooria, 1999; Morris, 2005; Edwards & Imrie, 2008; Rapp & Ginsburg, 2001; Das & Addlakha, 2001; Barton, 1993; Connors & Donnellan, 1993; Craig, 2004; Keyt, 2007; Meekosha & Dowse, 1997; Wallerstein, 2003) conclude that disabled people are not treated as full citizens and that disabled

people's perspectives are mostly absent from debates on citizenship. In recent times, much talk concerns the obligation and the duty (Blair, 1998) (Roulstone, 2000) (Giddens, 1998) one has as a citizen. That has an impact on disabled people. Could the ableism dynamic be used to demand that disabled people have the duty to become and behave as species-typical as possible and that the other citizens have only the duty to accommodate the "disabled people who can't be fixed"? The United States Supreme Court ruling on the "definition of disability" in three cases (*Murphy v. United Parcel Service, Inc, 1999; Sutton et al. v. United Air Lines, Inc. 1999; Albertson's Inc., v. Kirkingburg, 1998*) is interpreted to mean that the Americans with Disabilities Act does not cover persons with correctable impairments (National Council on Disability USA, 2000). In other words, as soon as adaptations are available, all problems must be "fixed" and no protections through civil rights laws, such as the ADA, are allowed anymore. The "we" expect no obligation towards the ones who want to be the "other" and refuse to become part of the "we," whereby the "others" are the ones with body structure related abilities not accepted by the "we."

## Human Security

Human security is another obvious need. Do disabled people experience human security? Do they have human security needs particular to them? Ability Security – that one is accepted, and is able to live one's life with whatever set of abilities one has, and that one will not be forced to have a prescribed set of abilities to live a secure life - is one aspect rarely highlighted within the human security discourse. It is a prerequisite for everyone, especially for people who are seen as not following the ability norms such as the people labeled as impaired.

Vanmala Hiranandani in this special issue makes the case that the human security discourse in general, and the food security discourse in particular, is too limited in its scope and interpretation and too limited in the variety of people covered. She especially makes the case that disabled, people particularly under the social model interpretation, are not present in the food security discourse. This lack of presence is not just confined to the governmental, industrial, and academic discourse around human security in general and food security in particular, but also includes the NGO/CSO movement involved in these issues. The role of disabled people too often seem to be confined to the medical health angle and access to buildings, health services, transportation, employment and education. Even within this confined scope of topics, it is a struggle to involve disabled people. Charles Dube talks in his piece about the lack of access of South African disabled people to primary, secondary, and higher education. This leads to education insecurity with consequent employment insecurity and economic insecurity, with their attendant insecurities such as food insecurity, health insecurity, and political insecurity. Dube makes the point that, a) education and knowledge enable disabled people to identify common problems and act in solidarity with others, b) education and information can play a significant protective role and can thus further human security, and c) this cannot be achieved without the existence of a clearly defined legislative framework and implementation structures that guide disabled people's access to and use of support

services that enhances their social, political, and economic position within mainstream society.

### Science and Technology, Disabled People, and Social Cohesion

How will advances in science and technology change the politics of belonging? Will it change the meaning of belonging and social cohesion fundamentally? Will it eliminate the need for belonging and social cohesion or will it just change who belongs to whom?

Science and technology (S&T) advances are often seen as essential for disabled people. Many visions exist in regards to new and emerging converging sciences and technologies and disabled people (Wolbring, 2005). However the science and technology discourse around applications and products focuses mostly on offering disabled people medical solutions (prevention or cure/normative adaptation) and might move towards transhumanist solutions (augmentation, enhancement of the human body) but rarely offers social solutions (adaptation of the environment, acceptance, societal cures of equal rights and respect) (Wolbring, 2006).

Disabled people are seen as the trailblazers for many transhumanist solutions. Many transhumanists (those who believe that the abilities of the body should be enhanced beyond species typical boundaries) (Wolbring, 2008b; World Transhumanist Association, 2002; World Transhumanist Association, 2003) are very aware of the potential to use disabled people as trailblazers for the acceptance of transhumanist ideas and products (World Transhumanist Association, 2004). James Hughes, the former executive director of the World Transhumanist Association, writes, "Although few disabled people and transhumanists realize it yet, we are allies in fighting for technological empowerment" (Hughes, 2004). The World Transhumanist Association has a specific listserv for disabled people and transhumanism. However disabled people are often used for agendas that might not reflect what they really want and need. As the majority of "disabled people" are poor and live in low-income countries it is very unlikely that they will gain access to these "advances." As much as human enhancement technology will become an enabling technology for the few, it will become a disabling technology for the many.

Charles Dube highlights in his piece the lack of access to technologies by disabled people due to lack of affordability, and that if and when technologies are offered, they are offered by the so-called non-disabled people based on their perception of the so-called disabled people without asking the so-called disabled people what they think they need. A 2007 piece, "The Future of Disability in America" (Field & Jette, 2007) published by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies sees the same lack of access to technology as Charles Dube describes for South Africans. Furthermore, with the ever-increasing ability of science and technology to modify the human body beyond species-typical boundaries one can expect certain powerful people to generate a new "we," making belonging and full citizenship dependent on people (the normal and impaired by today's standard) having obtained certain "upgrades" to their bodies. If not, they will be the "others," not belonging and without full citizenship. People who do not want

(“Refuseniks”) or for other reasons do not have access to the “required” upgrades will constitute a new social group of the “techno poor impaired and disabled” and a new “other.” And this new other might compete for resources with the old other.

### Conclusion

Some of the papers in this issue indicate a deficiency of the involvement of disabled people within the social cohesion and human security discourses and a biased application of science and technology advances towards the medical fixing group of disabled people. Much more research is needed to evaluate the human security and social cohesion discourses and science and technology governance and advances from a disability studies perspective locally and globally. Envisioning science and technologies and newly appearing social movements (e.g., transhumanism) and their impact on social cohesion and human security from a disability studies perspective is needed. I hope that many more papers will cover these essential areas in the future.

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