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Disability and difference: Adolescents' interpretations based on television viewing

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DISABILITY AND DIFFERENCE:

ADOLESCENTS' INTERPRETATIONS BASED ON TELEVISION VIEWING

A Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

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Dr. Sandra Alper, Committee Chair

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December, 2008

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DISABILITY AND DIFFERENCE:

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An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

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Dr. Sandra Alper, Committee Chair

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Dr. Sue A. Joseph
Interim Dean of the Graduate College

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University of Northern Iowa

December, 2008

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in order to decipher adolescent interpretations of disability that were portrayed on television. Employing qualitative methodology and methods, I conducted focus groups with adolescents during which they viewed television programs containing portrayals of characters with disabilities, or otherwise defining differences. The sixth grade participants freely shared their perspectives of the programs and characters in addition to their thoughts about the nature of difference in general.

Although I originally intended to interpret adolescents' reactions toward characters with disabilities, I found that it was not only characters with disabilities that they viewed in a judgmental manner. As the study participants discussed the overall nature of difference, they revealed their lack of acceptance not only of people with disabilities, but their lack of acceptance of difference as a whole. Any human difference was deemed unacceptable by my participants.

The participants' reactions to the television programs and "different" characters revealed an ability to quickly identify the positive messages/morals regarding acceptance that were communicated through the conclusions of most episodes, but they almost always failed to see the applications of the episodes' messages/morals to their lives. The judgmental language about normalcy that they used in their discussions revealed a contradiction of acceptance of difference. In addition, both the participants' and the television characters' reactions to difference illuminated a disregard for individuals who had not met (unattainable) societal norms.

As a result, this study highlights the parallel that exists between the intolerance of difference on television and that which exists within the adolescents' daily lived experiences. Portrayals of cruel humor and perpetuations of stereotypes by exploitation of personal difference are exacerbated by network- inserted laugh tracks and interpreted as "funny" by the participants. Interpretation of the adolescents' dialogues necessitates further examination of the nature of difference and disability as portrayed on television programming targeted toward adolescents.

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The journey that has led me to this completed dissertation has been one that I will never forget. Every experience has helped me to grow in understanding of myself, my profession, my relationships, and my perspectives on the world. There are many people whom I thank for their contribution to my academic and personal success.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

<u>Adolescents, Construction of Disability, and Television</u>

How do adolescents, when presented with adolescent television programming, interpret the characters portrayed as different from themselves and their peers? While much has been written about the effect television watching has on how audiences construct their views of minority groups (Bogle, 2005; McWhorter, 2005) and violence (Fowles, 2005; Potter, 2005) stemming from television watching, very little research has been conducted regarding how adolescents construct their views about people with disabilities based upon images presented on television. The purpose of this study was to examine how adolescents constructed their attitudes about people with disabilities when shown, through the popular culture medium of television, images of people with disabilities.

<u>Why I Chose This Topic</u>

Through the course of my doctoral studies program at University of Northern Iowa, I was introduced to the field of disability studies. Disability studies literature argues that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon. Disability studies literature further suggests that, "Our society is so constructed by people with capabilities for people with capabilities and it is this that makes people with impairments incapable of functioning" (Finkelstein, 2004, p. 15). The perceived lack of functional capabilities in people with labeled disabilities is further sustained and reinforced by the medical model of disability.

The social model of disability conceptually opposes the medical model of disability which is based on empiricism and the foundationalist assumption that science and scientific research methods are neutral. The social model of disability, which "highlights the barriers and constraints erected by a disabling society" (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999, p. 67) rejects the medical model because it "puts the fate of disabled people solely in the hands of professional experts" (p. 67). The social model of disability recognizes disability as socially constructed and imposed upon people, whereas the medical model represents disability as an inherent flaw within an individual.

The medical model on the other hand, maintains that when researchers properly apply empirical methods, they can make objective conclusions. Kauffman and Sasso (2006) summarized this viewpoint, "What we *observe* is independent of any theory. How we theorize about the observation is, naturally, highly influenced by our theories, but the observation itself is never tied to them in any way" (p. 117). In critiquing this model, we could then assume that when empirical researchers in their field "discover" that people "have" disabilities, they then have conditions that exist "independent of anyone's knowledge or beliefs about them" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 643).

In contrast, the social model of disability argues that theory-free knowledge does not exist and that "disabilities are social constructions that owe their 'existence' to value-laden judgments about certain human attributes" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 643). These value-laden judgments, enforced by researchers claiming objectivity under the medical model, are often accepted as "real" by society. Society mistakenly assumes "there is an assumption that diagnosis is based on the 'certainties' of scientific rigor and formal

knowledge. However, such certainties do not stand up to close scrutiny" (Gillman, 2004, p. 252).

In this study, I embraced the social model of disability and rejected notions of objectivity. However, this does not mean that I rejected the idea of *difference* among people. Gallagher (2001) provided an illustrative explanation for *difference* as seen within the social model:

> This does not mean that people do not experience various differences, for example, the degree to which one can see or hear (i.e. access visual or auditory stimuli). In this regard, what we term disabilities do in some instances (but not all) have a material referent. However, these conditions are just conditions until meaning is brought to them in a social context. (p. 643)

In other words, I acknowledge that differences are inherent within individuals while also recognizing that labels attached to these differences are what comprise the disability.

With this study, I did not intend to question whether we perceive that people have differences, but instead I explored the responses of my participants to discover and interpret the meanings attached to these perceptions of difference. Gallagher (2001) reiterated this idea when she argued that, "Understanding disabilities as socially constructed offers a more coherent and, one might also suggest, more promising way to approach difference" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 643). For this study, I view both difference and disability to be socially constructed. Prior to beginning my doctoral studies at University of Northern Iowa, I was completely unaware of the existence and power of social constructions.

As a special educator, I was "trained" to teach people with disabilities, without questioning the nature of disability or even considering the notion that disability hinges

on the interpretation of difference. As a result, considering an epistemological basis for understanding disability simply was not a possibility for me. However, once I began to consider the concept of disability as socially constructed, I began to question that which I had not questioned before. I noticed the numerous barriers created by social constructions of disability and was shocked.

What astonished me even more than the existence and number of these societal barriers was the fact that I, as well as society as a whole, accepted them as the "norm." The perpetuation of unarticulated societal norms, termed "hegemony" by Gramsci (1971), is thought to be exercised by "social psychological attempts to win people's consent to domination through cultural institutions such as the media" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 309) and other societal organizations. Further elaborating on the concept of hegemony, Apple (1990) stated, "Hegemony…refers to an organized assemblage of meanings and practices, the central, effective and dominant system of meanings, values and actions which are *lived*" (p. 5). The dominant system of teacher training for special education that I experienced perpetuated practices and values of a medical model of educating people labeled as having disabilities. Apple (1990) continued to describe hegemony by noting, "…hegemony acts to 'saturate' our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, becomes the *tout court*, the only world" (p.5). Popular culture, permeated by hegemony, is intensified through media. To many adolescents, media constitutes their main exposure to popular culture.

As I acquired knowledge of popular culture's strong influence on adolescents, I began to question what research had been done on the connections among popular culture, adolescents, and social construction of disability. All appear to be related in their references to societal norms, expectations, and pressures. Yet, I was unable to find any literature to support their correlation to each other. I did locate research about adolescents and their relationship with popular culture, especially with television as the medium (Collins et al., 2004; Irlen & Dorr, 2002). I also uncovered research that connected social construction of disability and popular culture (Connor & Bejoian, 2006; Drake, 2004; Finkelstein, 2004; Safran, 2001; Thomas, 2004). However, I failed to locate any research that examined adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about disability based on what they saw in popular culture specifically, particularly through the medium of television.

What I Wanted To Learn From This Study

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth analysis of how adolescents verbalize their constructed attitudes about people with disabilities based on images presented to them through television programs. Available research in the areas of disability studies, television, popular culture, and adolescent behavior were based on researcher opinion *about* adolescents, with the crucial perspective of the adolescent omitted.

Much of the research on media from the disability studies field is critical of film and television, yet this criticism emerges from disability studies researchers (e.g. Connor & Bejoian, 2006; Petersen & Gallagher, 2005) well versed regarding society's obstructive

barriers for people with disabilities. I wondered to what extent, if any, my participants' responses would mirror the issues raised in such literature. For example, would adolescents unquestioningly accept as accurate representations the images of disability that they were shown on television? What attitudes toward disabilities and people with disabilities were adolescents constructing as they watched television programs criticized by many researchers in the field of disability studies for perpetuating negative stereotypes?

Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, and Widaman (2007) conducted a study that revealed the detrimental effect of the media in shaping adolescents' perceptions about people with disabilities. In their national survey of nearly 6,000 youth, the researchers found that adolescents generally do not want to interact with a peer, particularly outside of the school environment, who is perceived as having an intellectual disability. Further, they observed that fewer than 40% of youth reported the existence of students with intellectual disabilities in their schools, and that less than 10% of those surveyed admitted the existence of students with an intellectual disability (ID) in their classrooms. They further examined where the origins of youths' perceptions of students labeled as having intellectual disabilities are established and reinforced. Based upon this study, the researchers concluded that, "Most youth gain their knowledge about people with ID predominantly from secondary sources, such as the media and from talking about ID with their teachers and parents" (p. 450). For me, this study highlighted the need to continue with my research, and ultimately, this study because the perceptions of adolescents about people with differences on television needed more comprehensive examination.

Media Critiques in the Disability Studies Literature

A great deal has been written in the disability studies literature about the media's perpetuation of negative stereotypes and its marginalization of people with disabilities. Often the media's portrayal of people with disabilities reflects society's intolerance toward those who are perceived as "others." There is little indication that this trend is changing; in fact, "The representation of disability in the media in the last ten years is pretty much the same as it has always been: clichéd, stereotyped and archetypal" (Drake, 2004, p. 100).

In my study, I created focus groups comprised of adolescents who viewed selected television programs and shared their thoughts immediately following the viewing of the programs in a focus group setting. Prior to the study, I wondered if the themes that emerged from their conversations would confirm, refute, or otherwise contribute to what disability studies researchers recognized as disability themes in the media. As a result, prior to conducting the focus groups, I highlighted several premises in disability studies literature in order to prepare for possible themes that could emerge from the participants' responses and reactions.

When envisioning this study, it was not possible to anticipate all of the themes that would emerge after the adolescents viewed the television episodes and focus groups were conducted. However, there were themes previously identified as being present in the media by disability studies researchers which I had chosen to highlight. The identified themes that follow are representative of themes in disability studies literature that I had anticipated would guide my study, but do not constitute an encompassing list.

One potential theme I had identified was that of normalization of character (Drake, 2004; French & Swain, 2004; Goble, 2004; Sacks & McCloskey, 1994) in which attempts are made to make the character "normal" or as close to "normal" as possible. Another theme I had identified was that of character image. I had anticipated the possibility of character image as an overriding theme in relation to sexuality (Bonnie, 2004), gender (Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2000; Priestly, 2004; Robertson, 2004; Sheldon, 2004b), age (Priestly, 2004), and race (Banton & Singh, 2004).

In addition to the normalization of characters and character image, I had also initially researched the role of societal acceptance of the characters lest that would appear as a component of my focus group interpretations. The disability studies research in relation to media led me to anticipate that several themes may become a product of my research. The first of these themes that I had anticipated was oppression (Connor & Bejoian, 2006; Drake, 2004; Swain, French, Barnes & Thomas, 2004) of characters who are shown to have a disability. Another prominent theme that I had considered may align with my study was that of independence versus dependency (Davis, 2004; Safran, 2001; Swain et al.; Wates, 2004). Relationships (Siperstein et al., 2007) were something I was additionally interested in finding out more about in relation to television portrayals.

Finally, I had explored social class and access as it relates to people with disabilities, simplified into the categories of access to leisure (Carr, 2004), employment (Roulstone, 2004; Davis, 2004), education (Sacks & McCloskey, 1994), technology (Sheldon, 2004a), and housing (Stewart, 2004). Although I had researched some common themes to prepare myself for the data collection and analysis, I approached the

data collection stage with an open mind, understanding the dynamic and multi-faceted

nature of qualitative research. I had no idea the amount and richness of the data that I

would gather through the focus groups and television program transcriptions.

Research Intent

The intent of my research was not to replicate what researchers in the area of

disability studies had already observed in media representations of people with

disabilities, but rather to explore how adolescents, when shown images of people with

disabilities from popular television programs, constructed their attitudes about people

with disabilities. My investigation yielded insights to adolescents' perspectives in relation

to the nature of difference and disability that can greatly contribute to the fields of

disability studies, adolescent studies, and media studies.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Rationale for Qualitative Analysis

As a special educator, it is my privilege and obligation to advocate for those who often cannot advocate for themselves. As a researcher, it is also my privilege and obligation to conduct research that allows for a better understanding of issues that affect those who have been labeled as having disabilities. Soltis (1990) asked, "What purpose could be more worthy than to include in our educational research a concern for the good and the rights of those we investigate and the society of which we and they are a part?" (p. 248). I concur that such research cannot be undervalued.

As stated in Chapter 1, research on media's influence has been conducted as it relates to disability studies, television, popular culture, and adolescents. Yet, the opinions of the adolescents are often lost in the researcher-calculated results of surveys, Likert-type scales, and researchers' reductionistic generalizations about the information obtained from a specific group of adolescents studied.

Surveys with "yes" and "no" responses, or Likert-type surveys, offer limited opportunities for participants to explore their perspectives. Therefore, the most appropriate way to analyze how adolescents interpret disabilities and difference as they are presented through television programs is to allow adolescents to verbally express their thoughts in a focus group setting. Providing participants the opportunity to voice their thoughts and attitudes, and to articulate how and why they have come to these conclusions can best be accomplished through qualitative research.

I employed a qualitative methodology in conjunction with an interpretivist paradigm. As a researcher, I chose to use qualitative inquiry for two reasons. First, I do not subscribe to the assumptions of epistemological or ontological realism. Concurring with major philosophers (see Gadamer, 1989; Rorty, 1985) who dismiss the notion of neutrality inherent in quantitative research, I refute the assumptions of theory-free knowledge and observation. Theory-free knowledge and observation will not be outcomes of my study. Second, qualitative inquiry will allow for a deeper, more contextualized understanding of how the media influences adolescents' perceptions of people with disabilities and differences by allowing the participants an opportunity to voice their interpretations.

In addition, the impossibility of separating fact from value caused me to be keenly aware that I could not step outside my own social and historical standpoints to claim objectivity in my research (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005). Gadamer (1989), and Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) encouraged qualitative researchers to be cautious in interpreting meaning because our efforts to determine "what is" hold dramatic consequences for how we engage "what ought to be" (p. 309). In this qualitative study, therefore, I offer an interpretation of how the participants are influenced to understand disability and difference through popular television programs. This dissertation is based upon my interpretations of the participants' dialogues. I was the only observer and transcriber of the focus groups and the only person to interpret the results. As this could be viewed as a limitation to my study, I have included multiple examples of the actual television scripts

and participant dialogues to allow the reader an opportunity to engage in further

interpretation.

Qualitative Inquiry

In order to decide upon an approach to inquiry for this study, I first considered the

differences between the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Glesne (1999) thoroughly

summarized epistemological differences between the positivist and interpretivist

approaches to research by stating:

> Positivists seek explanations and predictions that will generalize to other persons
> and places. They use primarily quantitative methods with careful sampling
> strategies and experimental designs that help them produce results. The
> researcher's role is to observe and measure, and care is taken to keep the
> researcher from affecting the data through personal involvement with research
> subjects. Researcher "objectivity" is of utmost concern. Meanwhile, since
> interpretivists assume that they deal with multiple, socially constructed realities or
> "qualities" that are complex and indivisible into discrete variables, they regard
> their research task as coming to understand and interpret how the various
> participants in a social setting construct the world around them. To make their
> interpretations, the researchers must gain access to the multiple perspectives of
> the participants. (p. 5)

Glesne's description confirms that the epistemological and ontological position for

qualitative research and the social model of disability is that knowledge and reality are

constructed. The social model of disability (Oliver, 2004) recognizes that society's

response to impairments poses a greater problem than the impairments themselves. This

issue of social construction was also explored by Smith and Deemer (2000) who stated

that, "...our inquiries do not discover reality, but rather construct reality - a constructed

social and educational reality for which we are morally responsible, as individuals and

collectively" (p. 877). Given the importance of social construction to disability studies

and the interpretivist paradigm, it seems only fitting that this be the research methodology through which this study is designed.

Disability studies literature also eschews experimental designs, which Glesne (1999) attributed to the positivist paradigm. The "extent and complexity of human experience" cannot be captured through quantitative methods such as surveys and quantitative analysis (Barnes, 2004, p. 50). As my study examined how adolescents shaped and constructed their attitudes about disability and difference, quantitative methods would have been inadequate; my research questions were addressed more effectively through qualitative inquiry.

Originally, my study was intended to examine how popular television programs contributed to the adolescent participants' construction of disability. Ultimately, I explored adolescents' interpretations of multiple degrees of difference. The goal of the study was not to generalize, control, or predict. Rather, it was to interpret the perceptions of the adolescents to better inform the practices of special educators by providing information on adolescents' constructions of disability and difference based on media images.

Hermeneutics and Discourse Analysis

Building upon the idea of social construction of disability, my study proceeded in a direction in which hermeneutics became a focal point of analysis. Kinsella (2006) suggested that hermeneutic thought is an important underpinning of qualitative research because it (a) seeks to understand rather than explain; (b) acknowledges the situational location of interpretation; (c) recognizes the role of language and historicity in

interpretation; (d) views inquiry as conversation; and (e) is comfortable with ambiguity. Kinsella noted that these characteristics have many unexplored possibilities within the realm of qualitative research. I analyzed my focus group data from a hermeneutics perspective.

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Audi, 1999) included in its definition of hermeneutics, "The art or theory of interpretation, as well as a type of philosophy that starts with questions of interpretation" (p. 377). The dictionary further elaborated that, "The circularity of interpretation concerns the relation of parts to the whole: the interpretation of each part is dependent on the interpretation of the whole" (p. 378). Therefore, it was imperative to study the language that my participants used in presenting their interpretations and to relate those interpretations to society as a whole. Hermeneutics also makes clear that researchers must realize that their interpretations are also based on interpretations, thus creating a hermeneutic circle.

In addition to interpretation of language recognized within hermeneutics, I also found myself analyzing the participant and television character language using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis (Gee, 2006) is the approach of analyzing language and how the contributors of the language use it in "ways that communicate their perspectives on reality, carry out various social activities..., and allow them to enact different social identities" (p. 5). The process of interpreting, organizing, and analyzing the situated meaning of the language used by the participants and television characters portrayed in my study became crucial to my data analysis (as discussed in the results chapters).

Researcher as Participant

It is impossible to separate the knower (researcher) from the known (the participant). Inevitably, the two experience a reciprocity of influence. In this study, I acknowledged that even my presence in the room with the participants had an impact on the research. I also acknowledged that I brought personal dispositions, previous experiences, expectations, and my own interpretations to the study. Inevitably, I gave meaning to what the participants did and said in order to interpret. Soltis (1990) stressed the importance of this interpretation by stating, "Moreover, the measuring instrument of qualitative research is often the researcher himself or herself" (p. 253). I take this statement one step further and assert that the measuring instrument of qualitative research is *always* the researcher himself or herself.

Working with the younger participants (adolescents) posed a special challenge to me as an adult. I brought prior knowledge of my own adolescence into this study. In addition, as a teacher I have had many opportunities to *lead* groups of children. For this study, it was necessary for me to relinquish my role as leader and to embrace the role of listener. Lous Heshusius (1995) discussed the importance of the role of researcher as "listener" when she assigned her undergraduate students to "listen" to children. The information she learned could be useful to all adult researchers when working with children. Her insights stressed the importance of researchers deliberately relinquishing their impulse to exercise power and subsequently allowing the children to dominate the conversation:

> The self-other, adult-child distance became blurred when students realized that the youngsters knew far more than they had expected. Once they gave up the idea of exerting the typical adult control over the conversations, they learned that children's thinking may be on a higher level than they had realized through previous interactions with them. (p. 120)

For my study, it was wise to take Heshusius' advice and "listen" to children in an attempt to understand why they thought as they did. In order to accomplish this, I was keenly aware of the power of my participants' discourse and my personal interpretations of it.

Professional Ethical Values

In all interactions with my participants and in the data analysis, I strove to uphold professional ethical values. Soltis (1990) referenced these professional ethical values by asserting, "Our professional ethical values include honesty, fairness, respect for persons, and beneficence. They are nonnegotiable" (p. 256). Ethical considerations such as these were addressed through the Internal Review Board approval process. Parents and participants in my study were informed of their rights and were aware that they were able to dismiss themselves from the study at any time. Due to the age of my participants, I gave much and consistent consideration to confidentiality through all stages of the process. Pseudonyms were used to represent the participants, peers and siblings they referenced, the organization and its employees, and the community.

Furthermore, I strove to recognize, as much as possible, my biases and interpretations in all aspects of the research and I challenged them constantly. Assuming neutrality in my research would be a flawed moral standpoint (Gallagher, 2001). It was impossible to remove myself, as the researcher, from the participants. I strove not to

judge them, but attempted to understand the perspectives of the world as they interpreted it, and convey these perspectives when conducting and writing my research.

<div align="center">Context of the Study</div>

Selection of Participants

The participants in this study were sixth graders from the community of Bluff View[1] who participated in a local teen program entitled Y Group. Of the seven eligible sixth grade students in Y Group, five of them - Alexis, Charlie, Kira, Lisa and David - returned their permission slips and participated in one or more of the focus groups. One of the participants who did not return his permission slip approached me three different times to report that he had left it at home and that he would bring it the following day. After the fourth focus group session, he ceased to approach me to discuss the permission slip. The seventh eligible student, who did not return his permission form, did not desire to participate.

Three members of the focus group (Alexis, Charlie, and Kira) willingly participated in all six sessions. Lisa willingly participated in five of the six sessions, missing only one due to illness. The final member, David, only participated in one complete focus group and a portion of another. All five of the sixth graders gave up their free time in the Y Group program to participate in my study.

In order to better understand the participants' responses, a brief description of each of the adolescents will aide in interpretations of their comments in subsequent chapters. Each description contains information regarding the individual adolescent's

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for the name of the community, the name of the teen program, and the names of the participants.

physical characteristics, verbal discourse, and body language within the focus group

setting. Their self and peer descriptions reflect the relative dominance to which these

defining characteristics impacted their roles in the group.

Kira. Of the four participants who regularly participated in the focus groups, Kira

laughed the most. Wearing jeans and loose-fitting sweatshirts, she referred several times

to her own physical appearance and that of others. In addition, she shared her perception

that others did not value her casual sense of style.

> To some other people who think that they're really popular, I might look like a
> dork who has no sense of fashion, when actually, when I was, when I was
> younger, I would always be drawing in all my books and if you saw my designs,
> you'd actually, you'd think I had a really good sense of fashion. And they didn't
> really know me so they just take a look at me and think that I'm just a weird, lazy,
> little girl. When actually, I'm very active and I have a lot of friends and all that
> stuff.

Kira frequently self-labeled during the focus group sessions. Several times she

referred to herself as "weird." The self-described tomboy-like image that she perceived

others unfairly assigned to her became her trademark and unique identity in the group.

In a conversation about the injustice of judging individuals based on physical

attributes, Kira made a statement that I interpreted as her desire to be viewed as

physically attractive. However, she contradictorily concluded by rejecting the feminine

image that she had been creating:

> Like one time I ended up wearing a dress 'cause I lost this one bet for my mom.
> People thought that because I was wearing a really pretty dress, [reason number]
> one because I lost the bet and [reason number] two it was a special occasion on
> that day. We were going someplace special. I was wearing a really pretty dress,
> REALLY good shoes, and my hair (touches her ponytail) was done really good.
> And then some boys came over calling me a girly-girl. I ended up biting one of
> them, and chasing the other. And I socked one.

As with the first quote, Kira continually vasillated back and forth between the perceptions she assumed others had of her and the conflicting images of femininity she supposed of herself.

In a dialogue with Lisa, another participant, Kira's response to the notion of mothers telling daughters how to look reinforced her own conflicted image of femininity:

> I think I might know why, because she doesn't want you to end up not, she doesn't want you to end up looking like you haven't really been trying to prove to yourself. Prove yourself. Or something like that. Something kinda like that. 'Cause my mom, when I tell her that, she tells me that she wants me to actually look like a lady, instead of somebody that, instead of the person I really am. 'Cause my mom likes me, likes it, when I look like a lady. I don't like it.

References about her family, such as those above, were common for Kira. While the other participants commonly spoke of friends, Kira's most frequently referenced her second grade sister. As Kira's mention of her sister became more frequent, I sensed annoyance from Lisa and Alexis. While I was opening the pizza boxes at the beginning of the last focus group, an unanticipated exchange occurred during which Lisa was able to predict that Kira would talk about her sister before she actually did:

Kira:	Hey, if there's any extra of the…
Lisa:	(interrupting) No, you can't take it home to your sister.
Kira:	…can I take some to my sister?
Lisa:	Your sister…
Kira:	(interrupting) My sister loves these ones.
Lisa:	So.
Alexis:	No. We cannot give it to her. She's not in this.

Although all of the females mentioned their mothers and siblings during at least one focus group, Kira mentioned her family with more frequency than the other participants, to the extent of annoying other focus group members, as illustrated in the dialogue above.

Kira was the only participant who had not seen *The Simpsons* before, due to her parents' dislike of the program. I sensed that she had the most parental supervision of all the participants, being only one of the two participants who had set bedtimes and the only participant who acknowledged parental restrictions on television programs. This parental supervision, that seemed to be less defined in the other participants, may have contributed to the sense of naiveté that exuded from Kira's comments in the focus groups. She often repeated lines from the television programs directly after they were verbalized by the characters. The repetition of phrases was generally followed by Kira elaborating, "That's funny" with seemingly no notice that her talking had disrupted the listening of others. Her lack of sophistication in comparison to the other group members was also apparent in her frequent and loud habit of burping which was always followed by an "excuse me."

Kira's athletic lifestyle was mentioned as the reason that she watched fewer hours of television per week than the other participants.

> I probably get less than 10 hours of tv [per week] 'cause I spend most of my time outside. One, because I really like going outside and playing since it's getting warmer. And, two, my parents just want me out of the house so I stop bugging them.

Again, references to Kira's family commonly emerged from her discourse, even in descriptions intended to further explain her own actions.

Kira shared her thoughts frequently and freely during focus group sessions. When others were stating opinions, Kira confirmed her agreement by vocalizing, "Yeah" during their speaking.

Alexis. Alexis was the most vivacious of the three females who regularly attended the focus groups. Although she attended a different middle school than the other regular participants, her air of self-confidence fortified her role as a vocal leader of the group.

Whereas Kira had verbal reactions to the television programs and characters, Alexis had physical reactions. For example, during theme songs she danced in her seat, moving her upper body and head to the beat. Most of the time she sang with expression in a hushed tone as well. She also sometimes physically mimicked the actions of some of the characters she viewed.

Of the focus group participants, Alexis watched the most television per week. When asked how many hours of television she watched per week, she replied, "I would say (pause) almost 30, no more than 40 hours a week. Well, I get really bored. Where I live I don't know nobody. I'm pretty much in the house since I just moved." As a result, during the viewing of the programs, Alexis knew the words to the theme songs of most of them and sang along. Alexis's familiarity with program content was evident as well. For example, during the episode of *That's so Raven* that was shown at the final focus group (Waddles, 2004), Alexis briefly conveyed to the other participants what would happen before the events appeared on the screen.

Alexis verbally shared her perspectives and reactions to the television programs and characters more than the other focus group participants. She often responded first to questions and the other students came to view her as a leader. Despite the fact that Alexis had the highest quantity of words shared, she chose her words wisely. This becomes evident when one examines her speeches over the course of six focus group sessions.

Upon initial examination, her dialogue could be interpreted as broken speech or

stuttering. However, upon further interpretation of the actual message she relayed

through her broken speech, it becomes apparent that she carefully chose words that she

had heard and knew she should be using to describe people appropriately. It was as if she

possessed an awareness of the "politically correct" terms that she thought she should be

vocalizing, yet she had not fully internalized them and so was still not effortlessly using

them in her speech.

One of the major findings of this study, that the participants could vocalize

programmatic messages but not internalize them, was most apparent in the comments

made by Alexis (as will be seen throughout the results sections of this study). When

discussing people with disabilities, Alexis attempted to use person-first language such as

"people with disability problems." The addition of the word "problems" at the end of her

attempt at person-first language exemplifies her knowledge of an appropriate way to

verbalize thoughts but an underdeveloped ability to internalize the full meaning of her

language.

Further evidence of Alexis' awareness of her responsibility to respect others was

exhibited in her selfless actions and her verbal tone. For instance, Alexis always initiated

offers to help clean after the focus group sessions. When discussing people who were

elderly or those who had "disability problems," Alexis' choice of words and tone implied

that she genuinely cared about people and enjoyed personal reactions and interactions.

An example from a conversation that occurred as I prepared for a focus group session

while waiting for Lisa to return from service work at a nursing home demonstrated this:

Alexis:	They'll be here soon.
Kira:	She's at the old folks' house.
Alexis:	It's the nursing home.
Kira:	Same thing.
Facilitator:	What do you do there?
Alexis:	We...
Kira:	(interrupts) Play bingo.
Alexis:	Play around with little, with the, um, um, the elderly people. We play bingo with them many times. So we come there...we're like their family.

While Kira made no attempt at recognizing the importance of the appropriateness of word choice, it was clear from this and many other dialogues over the six focus group sessions that Alexis had a partial understanding of the power of her language. This partial understanding was illuminated by her frequent use of the word "retarded." She did use more person-centered language than any other participant, but she also was the participant who most frequently used the word "retarded."

Her appropriate awareness of others was revealed to me again when I had the chance to read Alexis' individual inventory. As part of the Y Group's programmed activities prior to our fifth focus group, the participants had written individual inventories in which they listed their expectations for themselves and their perceptions of other people's expectations for them. Although the inventories were not completed as part of the focus group, I was able to view Alexis' self-inventory. Alexis listed going to college as a personal expectation and a parental expectation of her. She also listed "treat others with respect" and "take care of the elderly" as personal expectations.

It was clear that Alexis had personal expectations about her personal appearance as well. For all six focus groups, she exhibited carefully styled hair and youthful and stylish clothing. She stood tall and proud and exuded self-confidence. A case in point

was her clothing choice for our fourth focus group meeting; the green words written across her tight t-shirt were "You could never have me."

Alexis was the only participant who was not Caucasian. Originally, when conceptualizing this study, I was hoping to have participants who represented different genders and different racial backgrounds. Alexis, the only non-Caucasian participant, racially identified herself when she remarked, "I'm nowhere near white but I'm not exactly in the category of black. I'm in the middle but I am an African American." She frequently utilized the phrase "in the middle" in other contexts as well. She described characters on the television programs, people in her life, and general themes using this phrase.

Facilitator:	What about the show? What was happening? What did you think about it?
Alexis:	Ah, it was in the middle.
Facilitator:	It was in the middle? Go ahead.
Alexis:	It was kinda funny, but not too funny.

She seemed to continually compare people and concepts and place them on an invisible ranking scale with three options: one extreme, the other extreme, and "the middle."

Lisa. Guarding her emotions more than the other female participants, Lisa listened more than spoke during focus group sessions. In addition, she processed questions more slowly than did her peers, and she was slow to answer them. She seemed to ponder whether or not to vocalize her opinions and how much she wanted to share. As the focus groups progressed, she became more vocal. During the fifth focus group, I inquired about snack suggestions for the final focus group. Lisa replied that she would

prefer chocolate brownies. When I arrived at the final focus group with brownies, Lisa

happily and proudly announced to the other participants, "She got brownies for me."

The largest of the participants in physical stature, Lisa continually made self-

deprecating comments about her size and weight. Many of these comments she mumbled

just loud enough for people to hear. Some of her thoughts about physical appearance,

however, were more overt. For example, during a conversation about physical

appearance she once shared, "My mom gets mad at me when I say I don't care what I

look like." During another conversation she communicated concern about her weight:

Lisa:	Help me. I don't want to eat any more. I'll get fatter.
Kira:	What?
Lisa:	I'll get fatter if I eat any more. When it's sitting right here I'm gonna eat it. So, I don't want to eat it.
Kira:	No you won't.
Lisa:	I'm already fat, so what are you saying?
Kira:	Who cares if...
Lisa:	(interrupts) Yes, I am. (giggles)
Charlie:	No, you're not.
Lisa:	Yes, I am. (giggles)
Charlie:	No, you're not.
Kira:	Not compared to my friend Tammy.
Lisa:	Yes, I am. (puts her head on the table and immediately picks it back up again)
Kira:	Uh, uh.
Lisa:	I'm oompa-lumpa.
Kira:	You're like half her size.
Charlie:	Whoa!
Lisa:	(laughter) Are you serious?

During the same focus group session she repeatedly asked of her peers, "Do you think

Alice is fatter than me? Big Alice. Do you think she's fatter than me?"

Lisa's emotions became more exaggerated when she discussed boys. The other

participants never expressed romantic interest in the opposite sex, but Lisa did frequently.

Her subdued tone became more expressive when talking about adolescent males as is

illuminated within the following dialogue:

Facilitator:	Lisa, how was your day?
Lisa:	(Very enthusiastically) Good 'cause I hope this guy breaks up with this girl and then asks me out. I hope. I hope. I hope. I hope. I hope. I hope. Hope.
Kira:	Who? Jerry or something? He's not even going out with anybody is he?
Lisa:	(silence as Lisa looks seriously at Kira) Cozette.
Kira:	Cozette didn't say "yes" yet. Did she?
Lisa:	I don't know. I hope not. (Looks to Alexis then smiles)
Kira:	Nah.
Lisa:	You made my day even more happier! (Puts out her arms in praise)

Lisa was far less guarded when talking of males who interested her.

In addition to her comments about adolescent males, further commentary from

Lisa revealed a higher level of independence and maturity than was apparent in her same

age peer group. An illustrative example in which her animated tone and physical reaction

become apparent follows:

Lisa:	There's gonna be a fight at Bordo Park and I'm gonna go see it. The RCL against the Angry Chickens, I think. There's like a group of people.
Facilitator:	Called the Angry Chickens?
Lisa:	Yeah, I think they changed it though. But Deon…I know all the people that are in RCL. I wanna go see it.
Facilitator:	What's RCL? Can you tell me?
Lisa:	I have no idea. (shrugs shoulders and puts arms out) It's just the name of the group.
Facilitator:	It's just the name of the group?
Lisa:	RCL. I have no idea.
Facilitator:	So can anybody be a part of a group? Or do you just choose? I mean, are you part of a group? Are there lots of groups or are there just a few groups?
Lisa:	There's only, (silently thinks) there's four groups and two are going to go against each other. Then another two are gonna go against each other. I'm just going there to watch. I'm not in it.
Facilitator:	That's really interesting. Is everybody in sixth grade?

Lisa:	No, they're in seventh, I think.
Alexis:	(joins conversation) I don't know why but I like watching fights.
Lisa:	So do I. (nods head and smiles) I'm gonna watch on Friday night.

Lisa's maturity and less-supervised lifestyle is further exemplified in the following

dialogue about her bedtime and housing situation. During a conversation about nightly

television viewing habits, she openly shared the following details:

Lisa:	Tonight, what are you gonna do?
Kira:	No idea.
Charlie:	Go to sleep.
Facilitator:	Go to sleep? That's what I would do. It gets kind of late. Kira, what do you do?
Kira:	Um, watch tv until 9 o'clock.
Alexis:	Wait. Your bedtime is 9 (points to Kira)? When is yours (points in the direction of Charlie and Lisa)?
Charlie:	Ten.
Lisa:	I don't have a bedtime.
Alexis:	Me neither.
Lisa:	I don't sleep at my house.
Facilitator:	Where do you sleep?
Lisa:	By myself. In a big huge humongous house.
Alexis:	Oh (raises hand and chuckles).
Facilitator:	(clarifying) In a big huge what?
Lisa:	In a big humongous house by myself. It has four bedrooms, and a bathroom, and ...
Kira:	(interrupts) Do you seriously sleep in a big house? By yourself?
Alexis:	Ok, her house...
Lisa:	(interrupts) By myself. Yeah.
Alexis:	Ok, it's an actual house but the house is split into two. So there is one half right here and there's one half right here (using her hands to show sides).
Charlie:	It's a duplex.
Alexis:	Oh well (sarcastic to Charlie who corrected her)
Charlie:	Shut up (to Alexis for speaking sarcastically)
Alexis:	And she just sleeps in one side and her parents sleep in the other house.
Kira:	Oh!
Lisa:	'Cause we're moving there and they're not moved in but I am (nods her head).
Kira:	That is cool! That'd be awesome!

During these dialogues, and many others, it appeared that Lisa's independence may have been exaggerated in an attempt to appear more mature. A close examination of the previous dialogue revealed that Alexis' versions of the situations counteracted Lisa's versions, and her attempts make herself appear more independent. Lisa's attempts at making statements of independence in the focus group sessions were frequent and poignant.

Lisa, who was 12 years old, stated that she watched approximately 10 hours of television per week. She missed only one focus group because of an illness.

Charlie. The only male who attended all six focus group sessions, 12 year-old Charlie was the smallest in stature of the participants and also the least vocal. Charlie entered the focus groups with the peer and self-designated label of "shy." Charlie utilized physical actions as replacements for spoken words. He used these physical motions to communicate his thoughts and needs far more than he used words, particularly during the initial two focus groups. This was apparent within seconds of the first focus group, while I described my reasons for videotaping. Kira and Alexis immediately turned to the video camera and waved energetically while saying, "hi." Conversely, Charlie looked at the camera then pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head to block his face from the camera. During all of the focus group sessions, Charlie physically communicated his thoughts through gestures such as pointing, nodding his head, shaking his head, tipping back his chair, shrugging his shoulders, hitting other participants under the table, and jumping up and down.

Originally, I interpreted these physical manifestations as his way of compensating for the lack of verbal communication that resulted from his shyness. In my journaling immediately after the first focus group, I noted:

> I think Charlie's physical reactions may become telling in this study as he is not as verbal as the other participants. In fact, he is using non-verbals to communicate, pointing and nodding to agree. He is also physically distracting the others which I redirected a bit as noted in the transcription....I know he is listening...as he knew a supporting character's name [he verbally stated "Heather"] when the others did not.

As the focus groups progressed, however, I interpreted his physical communication as his means of establishing a unique identity within the group. His silence, in a group of females (two who were very verbal), distinguished him. Within this particular group dynamic, his pointing, nodding, and silence drew more attention to him than his verbalization would have. The female participants often interrupted and talked over one another, but Charlie's actions and taciturn demeanor were what distinguished him and what became his unique contribution to the group. For example, once, when the group was waiting for his input on a topic of discussion, he just shrugged his shoulders and brought his cup to his mouth. He held it there with his teeth for an exaggerated amount of time, as if to make it very clear that no words would escape his mouth. Kira, after Charlie's prolonged silence, whispered, "Remember, he's the shy one." Charlie nodded his head in agreement.

Conversations with Y Group staff members highlighted Charlie's identity as "the shy one" as well. After the second focus group, as I reorganized the meeting area, a Y Group staff member inquired about Charlie's group participation. Without waiting for

my reply, she commented on Charlie's silence, and added that "his brother is the same

way" and that the Y Group workers often have to "pry answers out of him."

With the progression of the focus groups, I sensed that Charlie felt he had firmly

established his role as the "shy one" and thus became more talkative, even describing his

own limited verbal communication:

> I don't like talking in front of people. At school I don't. Do I Lisa? I don't even
> like talking to my teacher with everybody there. Even ask her [Lisa]. Even when
> a teacher asks me something, I'll hesitate for, like, awhile.

The other participants agreed and elaborated on his silence in the Y Group setting:

Kira:	Yeah, he does.
Alexis:	He'll stall for five minutes if … if one of the leaders asks him something.
Lisa:	He'll just sit there and he'll be like (stares at wall to demonstrate Charlie's physical reaction)
Alexis:	And then he'll go like this (shrugs shoulders and arms) or shake his head or something.
Kira:	And he's always smiling when he's just like (holds her head still with only her eyes moving from left to right and then back again repeatedly to demonstrate the physical reactions that accompany Charlie's silence).

Later in the same focus group, Charlie elaborated, "I'll answer but I don't like explaining.

That's what I hate when teachers do. You'll answer a question and they'll be like, 'why,

why, why?' I don't like it." However, as the focus groups went on, he actually started

reading the questions from my sheet and partially took over the role of group facilitator.

Although the role of facilitator's assistant directly opposed his self-analysis as "shy," he

could confidently assume a new position and a more relaxed affect since his unique role

in the group had been solidified.

Interestingly, as I left the YMCA after the fifth focus group session, I saw Charlie and his mother conversing with the Y Group director. I introduced myself to Charlie's mother who shared that Charlie discussed the focus groups at home.

David. The second adolescent male participant, David never fully committed himself to the focus groups. He did not participate in the first two focus group sessions because he had failed to return a signed parental consent form. On two occasions, he chose to participate in free time instead of the focus groups. In addition, David did not attend the final focus group session due to disciplinary action for disruptive behavior that had occurred earlier that evening. Despite not being in attendance at all focus groups, David's peers mentioned him during focus group discussions as an example of someone who displayed inappropriate behaviors. More than once they referred to him as a "devil." An example of a dialogue between Alexis, Kira, and David illustrates how the other members of the group associated him with that they perceived to be his negative behavior. This dialogue occurred after the participants were asked which character, from an episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*, they would like to befriend:

David:	I want to be friends with Zack and Cody.
Facilitator:	Because?
David:	Because they're cool and they do whatever…
Lisa:	(interrupts) They're boys.
David:	(continues) they want and…
Alexis:	They're boys.
David:	Yeah, they're boys.
Facilitator:	So what makes them cool, David? What makes Zack and Cody cool?
David:	They do whatever they want and they play basketball, and they're, in there, in the, in the middle of the hotel in the front lobby. And they do other kinds of stuff, and they…
Kira:	(interrupts) So just because they get in trouble you want to be their friends?

Alexis:	He likes getting in trouble (looks at David).
Kira:	Yeah, he gets in trouble a lot, especially with the art teacher.
Facilitator:	(attempts to redirect the conversation) Ok, so who…
Kira:	(interrupts) He got like five referrals today.
David:	You don't know what happened to me.

David whispered the last comment so softly that it could only be heard on audio; on the video the comment was inaudible. The other participants did not hear his comment.

David participated in one focus group in its entirety, and during it he answered questions in a factual and unemotional tone. Most of the time when asked a question, he stated his answers in long monologues, and while other participants answered questions, he made paper airplanes. While he struggled with the construction of the paper airplanes, he asked all participants individually, in whispered tones while others answered questions, if they knew how to make a paper airplane. Even though his peers replied with "Show you later" and "I'm not making one," he continued to try to convince them to assist him. He persisted until I requested, with fifteen minutes remaining in the focus group, that he construct the airplane after the session ended. David then respectfully complied with my request.

Bluff View Community Y Group

All of the participants belonged to the Bluff View Community YMCA's teen program entitled Y Group. The Bluff View Community YMCA provides a wide range of services and programs to meet the needs of the community. Within the YMCA organization, there is a teen center and teen programs. Students in sixth grade through twelfth grade have the opportunity to participate in this program, and free membership is

offered to adolescent members of the Bluff View YMCA. In addition, financial assistance is available for membership and program participation.

The Y Group meets on Mondays and Wednesdays from 2:30 p.m.- 8:00 p.m. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, the hours available for meeting are 2:30 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Y Group participation is also available on weekdays when school is not in session and on days when there are early releases from school. The Y Group has approximately 40 students in the 6th - 8th grades who participate annually.

The "Y Group" provides the adolescents with a structured place to "hang out" with a caring group of adults and friends. The program begins each year on October 1 and continues until the end of the academic year. During the afternoon and evening meeting times, participants have a wide variety of activities to choose from including tutoring, structured games and activities, health and fitness training, self-defense classes, and character development clubs and events.

During the three weeks that I conducted the focus groups, the students attended character development events that focused on sexuality education. One evening, I spoke with the Y Group director because the word "ass" appeared in the episode of *The Simpsons* that the focus group participants would view the following week (Grearney & Reardon, 1995). I shared that I intended to mute the program at that point, but I also wanted to clarify that an inadvertant error might occur, and I could envision potential problems arising as a result. Her snicker led me to believe that she felt I had over-reacted. She informed me that a speaker from a local sexual abuse center had been scheduled to present information to group members about sexual violence earlier that

evening, but the session had been cancelled due to an emergency on the part of the speaker. The director then utilized the time as an opportunity for the adolescents to anonymously write questions on note cards so that the questions could be addressed in a group discussion. She reported that many of the questions reflected curiosity about homosexuality. In addition, the participants had a lengthy conversation about "vibrators... and were using the terms vagina and penis fluently," so she didn't anticipate the word "ass" being a concern.

I selected my participants from the Y Group because this after-school, community based organization effectively meets the needs of the diverse adolescent population of Bluff View. The adolescents who participate represent a variety of ethnic and socio-economic groups.

The YMCA granted me permission to conduct my focus groups in their building. My aim was to conduct the focus groups in a setting with which the adolescent participants were familiar and could experience a sense of empowerment. The location where a focus group is conducted is important as "these spaces also become emblematic indicators of or for the collective identities of the communities themselves" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 892). All participants were comfortable and felt empowered in the space where they spent each of their weekday evenings during the academic year.

All six focus groups were conducted in a room off of a kitchen on the second floor of the YMCA. This room contained six tables, each with six to eight chairs; this is where all participants of Y Group ate supper and participated in the program's curriculum. A daycare was located to the right of the kitchen/classroom complex and a

weight room was located to the left. Although no noise from the daycare ever interrupted us, on numerous occasions we heard weights dropped in the adjacent room. In addition, interruptions occurred via a loudspeaker mounted in the room to convey messages throughout the facility. One such message interrupted our fourth focus group; the red-haired receptionist announced:

Receptionist:	Attention Y members, there is a car in one of the handicap parking places. Your (silence), um (silence) what are they called (silence)?
All participants:	(laugh)
Charlie:	Talk into the microphone Red, not to yourself.
Receptionist:	Your lights are on. License plate number ######.
All participants:	(laugh)
Receptionist:	Once again, there is a red car in the parking lot in one of the handicap spots.
All participants:	(laugh)
Charlie:	She couldn't figure out 'lights?'
Receptionist:	Your lights are on.
Charlie:	She's like, 'The, what's it called, lights.'
Lisa:	(laughs) She forgot how to say 'lights.'

After interruptions such as this one, it was often difficult to redirect the participants to the previous discussion.

Approval and Conditions of Study

My study was approved to be an optional piece in the Y Group's agenda for six sessions in the months of March and April of 2008. Consequently, I conducted focus groups for six consecutive Monday and Wednesday sessions beginning on March 31, 2008 and ending on April 16, 2008. All focus group sessions lasted approximately one hour. All focus group sessions began at 6:45 p.m., after the Y Group members completed their curriculum and then were given supervised free time in the YMCA building. All

focus group sessions ended at 7:45 p.m. as free time concluded and preparations to go home for the evening began.

Parental permission was required of all focus group participants who chose to relinquish their free time in order to participate in the study. Upon approval of this study, the Y Group director sent an informational letter and parental consent form, provided by the researcher, to the parents of all sixth grade students who attended Y Group. The informational letter and parental consent form, which were approved by the UNI Internal Review Board, explained the project and solicited voluntary participation. Parents who allowed their children to participate could view all six television programs prior to the children's viewing if they so desired. However, no parents chose to do so. In addition, participants could not watch the programs or attend focus group discussions without parental consent. I provided the director with 14 extra copies of the information letters and parental consent forms for students who misplaced their original forms, many of which she distributed.

All students who returned their paperwork were welcomed to participate in the focus groups. Of the five sixth grade students selected, I had initially intended to have both sexes represented equally. In addition, I strove for racial and socio-economic diversity within the group. One of the participants was of mixed race. I was unable to determine if socio-economic diversity was attained. The participants' experience with disability did not constitute a criterion for selection. Although experience with disability was not a deciding factor in participant selection, I did solicit information about the adolescents' prior experiences with disability (described in more detail in Chapter 3).

<u>Community Profile</u>

Bluff View, a vibrant and growing city, is located on a major river in the Midwest and has a population of about 62,000; the county has nearly 90,000 inhabitants. The Bluff View community offers a sound educational base with 11 public elementary schools, three public middle schools, and two public high schools. A parochial school system in Bluff View offers five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Four colleges in or near Bluff View offer four-year degrees; in addition, people can seeker higher education at the one community college and numerous technical schools and seminaries in the area.

Although I live in the Bluff View community and previously held a membership at the Bluff View Community YMCA, I have not worked with the Y Group or any other programs that the Bluff View Community YMCA offers for teenagers, nor had I worked with the director of the Y Group prior to this study.

<u>General Overview of Data Collection</u>

<u>Television Programs Selection</u>

To generate a list of television programs frequently viewed by adolescents, I contacted Nielsen Ratings and received a list of the top 20 broadcast and/or cable television programs that were most watched nationally by adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17. Nielsen generated this list by ranking quarterly ratings and projections (estimated viewers in the thousands) for the May 2007 and July 2007 sweeps period. Eligible programs appeared on ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX and basic cable channels, and this

allowed me to select programs that adolescents are frequently exposed to directly or indirectly.

From this list, I eliminated sporting events and programs that aired only once. From the remaining programs, I used the networks' Internet sites to view episode lists and descriptions. Based upon these descriptions, I selected 41 television episodes that aired in January 2008 and that seemed to portray disability or some aspect of acceptance of difference. Only one of the episode descriptions, however, mentioned a specific disability, so the remaining 40 episodes I selected with no evidence that they revealed a disability theme. I then checked local airing times so that I could record the specific episodes. The Disney Channel broadcast five of the six programs, and many times the same episode was aired during the month, which made recording uncomplicated. Only one of the episodes, from *The Simpsons*, was not airing so I purchased the DVD set containing the specific episode (Grearney & Reardon, 1995). Once recorded, I viewed all episodes multiple times.

I acquired (through taping or purchasing) a total of 41 episodes. Although I was aware that I would be showing only six episodes in the focus groups, I chose to tape 35 additional episodes in order to have multiple episodes of each six of the selected television programs. An unanticipated benefit of viewing and analyzing the extra 35 episodes was that I gained an additional 300 pages of data and more clearly defined and justified interpretations. Ultimately, I reduced the 41 episodes to select a total of six episodes (from six different television series) that contained a theme of disability or

themes centering on acceptance of the nature of difference in some aspect of the storyline.

Following is a list of the specific episodes that were shown to the participants, a description of each episode, and justification regarding my choice of episode. Episodes are listed in the order that they were shown to the focus groups.

Hannah Montana (series), "You're so vain, you probably think this zit is about you" (episode) (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006). This episode originally aired on August 12, 2006 and it was the 13th episode of the first season. *Hannah Montana*, an Emmy Award nominated series on the Disney Channel, focuses on the life of a teenage girl named Miley who has a secret life as a famous pop singer with the name of Hannah Montana. Only Miley's closest friends, Lilly and Oliver, and her family know this secret.

In this particular episode, Miley's friend Lilly lost her contacts and felt humiliated when she had to wear glasses. Miley told Lilly that physical appearance didn't matter, yet when a billboard with Miley as Hannah Montana included her face with a large zit, Miley had a difficult time taking to heart the words she had shared with her friend. In addition, Jackson, Hannah's brother was manipulated into becoming his boss' son's (Rico's) assistant.

Despite the fact that this episode did not directly deal with physical disability as it is generally described, it did focus on Lilly's lack of vision and need for remediation (which made her the stimulus of several jokes and laugh tracks). In addition, there was an overriding message that "looks don't matter" and that difference is acceptable.

Cory in the house (series), "Get smarter" (episode) (Cunningham, Freeman, & Sheridan, 2007). This episode originally aired on May 11, 2007, and it was the 10th episode of the first season. _Cory in the house_ also airs on the Disney Channel and is a spin-off of the series titled _That's so Raven_ (another program I showed in the focus groups - see description as follows in episode list). The plot of _Cory in the house_ revolves around Cory Baxter, an African-American teenage son of Chef Victor, the head chef at the White House. Cory's best friends are Meena Paroom, daughter of the Bahavian Ambassador, and Newt Livingston, the son of the Chief Justice. They all attend preparatory school and have unlimited access to various rooms in the White House. Other supporting characters include President Martinez and his daughter Sophie, and Ms. Samuels, the President's counselor.

In the episode shown to the focus group participants, Newt felt intimidated after he discovered that the new girl at school that he was attracted to, Jessica, was a genius. Cory, Newt, and Meena, however, devised a plan with Jason Stickler (whose father was the head of the CIA) to help Newt while on a date with Jessica. They used Stickler's spy gear which allowed Cory, Meena, and Stickler to suggest the words that Newt should say to Jessica. In addition, the president's mother visited the White House and challenged Chef Victor on his cooking.

I chose this particular episode because unlike the _Hannah Montana_ episode, which focused on a character not wanting to look different (mildly physically disabled), this episode focused on Newt's perceived mental inferiority to "Little Genius Jessica." I

anticipated that a program with a mental difference/disability highlighted might provoke different reactions than an episode with a minor physical disability had.

The Suite life of Zack and Cody (series), "Back in the game" (episode) (Eells & Correll, 2007). This episode originally aired on April 6, 2007, and it was the sixty-first episode of the series, airing for the first time during the series' second season. *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*, an Emmy Award nominated series on the Disney Channel, centers on identical twin brothers, Zack (the rebellious one) and Cody (the academically focused one), who live at the Tipton Hotel in Boston, where their mother is the headline singer. Also living in the hotel is London, the hotel owner's daughter. Other main characters include Mr. Moseby, the hotel manager, and Maddie, the candy-counter "girl."

Although most of the programs that I viewed explored difference in some way, this is the *only* episode of any of the 41 that I viewed which contained multiple characters that could be considered obviously physically disabled according to current societal norms. In this episode the wheelchair basketball team that agreed to play a charity game of wheelchair basketball against Zach and Cody's basketball team spent the night at the Tipton Hotel. Zack and Cody viewed this charity event as an opportunity to get their friend, Jamie, who was in a wheelchair because of a recent accident, to play basketball again.

I chose this episode, as a stated previously, because it was the only episode to feature what may be considered a physical disability by current societal standards. Although all of the characters with disabilities seem to be characters that only appear on

the series for this one episode, nevertheless, the episode features several characters shown in wheelchairs.

Kim Possible (series), "Trading faces" (episode) (McCorkle, 2007c). This episode originally aired on February 10, 2007, and it was the sixty-eighth episode of the series, airing for the first time at the beginning of the series' fourth season. *Kim Possible*, an Emmy Award nominated series on the Disney Channel, is an animated series about a high school cheerleader named Kim Possible and her sidekick boyfriend, Ron Stoppable. Kim and Ron take on a new mission each episode in an attempt to free the world of super-villains. Although Kim and Ron always work toward eliminating evil, Kim still deals with the everyday issues of being a high school student.

In this episode, Kim and Ron attempted to identify the villain in a series of robberies that were staged to appear as if famous celebrities had committed the crimes. In addition, Kim and her friends struggled with the fact that her younger brothers, "the Tweebs," had begun attending her high school through a special educational program called the S.K.I.P. program (Superior Knowledge and Intelligence Program). Kim's anger stemmed from her perception that the S.K.I.P. program took away resources from the seniors in the high school. The director of the S.K.I.P. program, Miss Guide (pronounced Ms. Guida'), held a meeting in her office and shared with Kim that the "tweebs" would continue in the S.K.I.P. program but in another school where they wouldn't interfere with her. In the end, Kim defended her brothers and *allowed* them stay at the program in her school.

I chose this episode because of the obvious parallels between the S.K.I.P. Program and special education programs. Students in Kim's school perceived a loss of their own resources to fund this "other" program and the meeting held in Miss Guide's office strongly resembled an IEP meeting.

The Simpsons (series) "King size-Homer" (episode) (Grearney & Reardon, 1995). This episode originally aired on November 5, 1995, during the series' seventh season. *The Simpsons* is an animated series about the Simpson family whose household is run by the father, Homer, who works at a nuclear power plant, and the mother, Marge. Marge and Homer have three children: Bart, who frequently gets into trouble; Lisa, a strong student and critical thinker; and the baby, Maggie. Homer is what is deemed an *ironic character* (Holtzman, 2000) because he is more of a caricature than an authentic person, not only because he is animated but because he lacks depth, texture, and complexity.

In this episode, when Homer learned of a work colleague who received disability checks, he devised a plan to gain weight in order to claim disability and work from home. When Homer reached the minimum weight to claim disability and began working from home, he soon discovered that he was discriminated against and that working from home was much more complicated than he had anticipated. The episode, which I purchased on DVD as part of season seven, is divided into six scenes which are as follows: (1) Main title, (2) "It's Like a Lottery that Rewards Stupidity," (3) "Get Grubbin'!", (4) "I Wash Myself with a Rag on a Stick," (5) "There'll be Time for the Frozen Pudding Wagon Later," (6) End Credits. In this episode, Homer read from a pamphlet entitled "Am I

Disabled?" and devised a plan to collect disability which was described, "like a lottery that rewards stupidity."

I chose this episode because it presented a different discussion point regarding the term disability and the concept of difference than the other episodes. This episode portrayed disability as a ridiculous process and program that could be manipulated. It mocked governmental assistance in the form of disability and those entitled to receive it.

That's so Raven (series) "To see or not to see" (episode) (Waddles, 2004). This Disney Channel episode originally aired on March 19, 2004, and it was the 21st episode of the series, airing for the first time as the finale of the first season. *That's so Raven* focuses on the life of a psychic African-American teenager named Raven. Since her psychic visions are often misunderstood, she and her friends, Eddy and Chelsea, often end up in precarious situations.

In this episode, Raven had visions about Eddy and Chelsea overcoming their individual fears. Unfortunately, Raven's visions only caused Eddy and Chelsea to be cruelly mocked by their high school peers based upon their differences. In one scene, Raven had a lengthy discussion with her grandmother about her desire to be "normal." Raven's grandmother confessed that she had psychic visions as well and that she understood the hardships Raven encountered because of her difference. Raven's psychic ability caused her friends to become frustrated with her, temporarily reject her, and then tell her that they no longer want to be informed of her visions.

I chose this episode because much of the episode revolved around the theme of "normalcy" which is a common theme in disability studies literature (Davis, 1995; Drake,

2004; French & Swain, 2004; Goble, 2004; Sacks & McCloskey, 1994). I drew a strong parallel between Raven's feelings of difference and desire for "normalcy" and those experienced by students who are labeled as having disabilities who may relate to Raven's feelings of rejection and embarrassment.

All of the aforementioned programs are programs geared toward adolescents. They all have wide television viewing audiences as shown by the Nielsen Ratings data. Programs geared toward adolescents have taken over many of the primetime slots that previously were restricted to family sitcoms (Irlen & Dorr, 2002).

Age Group Selection

I selected sixth grade students as an appropriate age group for the study because of their ability to reason, form judgments, and generally verbalize the reasoning for their opinions. In addition, adolescents were ideal subjects because they had entered a crucial period of emotional growth during which they begin to wrestle with understanding themselves and the world in which they live. Physical growth is also indicative of adolescence. Martin and Gentry (2005) noted, "The emphasis on being physically attractive begins in infancy and continues throughout childhood and adolescence. How physically attractive a child or adolescent perceives him/herself to be heavily influences his/her self-esteem, particularly beginning in fifth grade" (p. 52). As I anticipated, self-esteem and perceptions of physical attractiveness became apparent in my participants' discourse.

Students in sixth grade are already constructing their view about themselves, "others," and the world, and many of these constructions are formed through the

involvement in peer groups. This is especially true in early adolescence, which is why I

chose sixth grade students for my study. The American Psychological Association

(2002) further explains adolescent identification with peer groups:

> The nature of adolescents' involvement with peer groups changes over the course
> of adolescence. Younger adolescents typically have at least one primary peer
> group with whom they identify whose members are usually similar in many
> respects, including sex (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). During this time,
> involvement with the peer group tends to be the most intense, and conformity and
> concerns about acceptance are at their peak. Preoccupation with how their peers
> see them can become all consuming to adolescents. (p. 21)

During middle adolescence (ages 14-16) children conform less to peer groups than they

previously had, and by late adolescence peer groups are often replaced by more intimate

relationships (American Psychological Association, 2002). Because I conducted my

study with sixth grade students who were younger adolescents, there was a greater

possibility that social and group norms would affect the construction of their attitudes

about people with disabilities.

In addition, my research illuminated that few adolescents express that they have

had contact with "disabled" people. In a study examining middle school students'

attitudes toward disability, Siperstein et al. (2007) found, "Youth report little past and

present contact with students with mental retardation, with fewer than 20% having had

contact with a schoolmate with mental retardation in elementary school..." (p. 442).

They added, "With such little contact in school and in the classroom, the findings that

only 10% of youth report having a friend with mental retardation is not surprising" (p.

442). With limited exposure to people with disabilities, adolescents may construct

meaning about disabilities based on images that they see in the media. In fact, Siperstein

et al. found that, "A major source of information for youth is the media, since a majority of youth (81%) report seeing a movie about mental retardation and many (50%) report seeing a television show or reading about it (47%)" (p. 442). I reasonably concluded that perhaps my participants' ideas about disability, like those of most adolescents, would be based on messages sent through the media. During a focus group meeting, I solicited information from my participants about their experiences with disability (results in Chapter 3).

I also solicited information from my participants about the number of hours per week that they watch television. According to a report by Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, and Brodie in a Kaiser Family Foundation report (1999), the amount of time spent using media on a typical day by children 8-18 years of age is six hours and 43 minutes. The researchers also documented that 99% of children live in homes with at least one television. This heavy exposure to television is not without critique. In an assessment of media regulation, Alexander and Hanson (2005) made a powerful statement about unregulated media's affects on adolescents:

> ...we now have a virtually unregulated media environment in which the responsibility for the content of media no longer rests with higher authorities. We, as consumers, are asked to be critical of media which we consume. This requires that we be educated consumers, rather than relying on standards and practices of industry, or government intervention into questionable content. While this may not seem like a big problem for adult consumers, the questions and answers become more difficult when we consider how children use the media to form judgments, form opinions, or seek information. (p. xvi)

The consideration of how children utilize the media to form judgments and opinions while seeking information was of particular interest to me.

In this study, I examined the connection between popular media's influence on adolescents' understandings about disability and the data revealing youngsters' heavy exposure to this medium. I attempted to explore how adolescents, who may or may not be informed consumers of the media, utilized television to form judgments, opinions, and otherwise construct their attitudes about people with disabilities based on television portrayals which they viewed so frequently.

I explained to the participants of this study that they would have an opportunity to express their perspectives openly during focus group sessions in order to have a voice in research about adolescents. I made clear that the research that had been conducted previously often overlooked the opinions of its subjects: adolescents. In the spirit of reciprocity, I gave the adolescents refreshments during the viewing of the programs. In addition, the students were repeatedly informed that they could leave the study at any time.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

Interview Questions

I developed a set of interview questions based on the themes that emerged from my examination of disability studies literature (see Chapter 1). The initial interview questions were deliberately general in nature so that participants would have the opportunity to shape the discussion as much as possible. Based upon feedback from my committee members, however, I made some of the questions more specific. The questions included those in Appendix B. In addition, the script for the focus group sessions can be found in Appendix A.

When asking questions during the focus group sessions, I attempted to maintain a naïve stance in order to avoid taking for granted my immediate interpretations of what the participants' responses meant. Glesne (1999) emphasized the importance of the naïve stance when she advised researchers to be, "relentless in asking, 'What do you mean?' in the many guises you can give it." She hastened to add that as a researcher you also "must be alert to the values of being naïve" (p. 83). I made a conscious effort to assume a naïve stance in all focus groups. In order to maintain my "naiveté," I used the research questions as a guide, but allowed for other questions as needed for clarification and presentation of additional information.

During the final three focus groups, I sensed that the questions had become redundant. However, the participants began asking questions of themselves and each other beginning with the fourth focus group. During the fourth focus group, Charlie, who had entered the initial focus groups so silently, first used the list of pre-determined questions to solicit responses from his peers:

Facilitator:	So, who were the cool characters in this? Who were cool and uncool in this one? Why?
Alexis:	Everybody was cool besides what's-her-face, Camille.
Charlie:	(looking at facilitator's pre-typed list of questions, which was noticed only by the facilitator) How could you tell? (Charlie looks at facilitator and smiles a triumphantly sneaky grin)
Alexis:	How could I tell? Because Camille, she wanted, she like totally (pause). Wait! (looks at Charlie) Did you just look off that?
Lisa:	(laughs)
Charlie:	Yes, it says, 'How could you tell?' (he points toward the sheet of questions on the table in front of facilitator).
Facilitator:	Yes, he's helping me read the question.
Alexis:	(in a amused tone) Oh. Now. Oh, so, you want to ask the questions but you can't answer the question?

Charlie:	Yes. (throws arms up in the air and smiles)
Alexis:	What is it with that?
Charlie:	I don't know.
Kira:	He's weird that way.
Facilitator:	Ok, so, go ahead and finish answering.

Allowing students to gain a heightened sense of security and empowerment through their posing of questions was a surprising result of the focus group format. However, the resulting sense of empowerment that the participants gained added much to this study. At times, as demonstrated in the following example, the participants had a specific answer in mind when they asked the questions. Due to their underdeveloped questioning skills, there were instances in which the questioners were seemingly attempting to persuade the others with leading questions:

Alexis:	Ok, even though they may, like, they might be like rich or famous people, why do you think they still chose those certain characters?
Facilitator:	Hmm.
Alexis:	'Cause like what if they, they're not close into the (pause)? What if they don't know anybody in Hollywood? What if they're not really rich? What if they don't know, they have no connection to Hollywood peoples or anything like that?
Facilitator:	Why do we think they picked these characters?
Kira:	Because they're hilarious.
Alexis:	How would (pause)? No. Auditions- there would be like thousands of people. Why do you think they picked those sort of peoples? All of them could have been amazing. All of them could have looked beautiful and crap like that.
Lisa:	Because of the way they looked, the way they acted, the way they performed.
Alexis:	What if they performed all the same?
Kira:	Their sense of humor.
Lisa:	The way their life is. The way their sense of humor is.
Kira:	I just said that too.

The focus group questions, both predetermined and spontaneous, provided a basis for discussions.

For this study, it proved beneficial to involve the participants by allowing them to assist me in reading my prewritten questions (as in Charlie's example) or developing questions on their own (as in Alexis' question). For the purpose of this study, the success of the questioning evolved as I maintained my original questions while allowing the participants to take a more active role in the questioning.

Focus Groups

For this study, I chose to use focus groups as a means of promoting dialogue among the participants. Researchers who utilize a qualitative methodology often create focus groups because they allow for the exploration of ongoing social discourse in ways that are not possible through individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Focus groups typically consist of four to six people who are asked general questions by the researcher who desires responses from all members of the group (Creswell, 2008). The benefits of focus groups are varied and compelling. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis claimed that "…the synergy and dynamism generated within homogeneous collectives often reveal unarticulated norms and normative assumptions" (p. 903). This is of particular benefit to the researcher because focus groups "take the interpretive process beyond the bounds of individual memory and expression to mine the historically sedimented collective memories and desires" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, p. 903). My intent was to allow the participants to engage in a dialogue, prompted by my guiding questions, that revealed the nature of their responses through their articulated and non-verbalized perceptions about the television characters.

I selected focus groups as the method of interviewing because focus groups allowed the participants to answer questions individually while encouraging dialogue between the group members to expand upon the answers of other participants. Focus groups allowed for free flowing discussions of the questions, in addition to other information the participants offered. These face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended focus group discussions allowed the participants to watch the programs together as a group and then discuss their attitudes about people with disabilities and differences as they were portrayed in the individual programs.

According to Fontana and Frey (1994), "The group interview is essentially a qualitative data gathering technique that finds the interviewer/moderator directing the interaction and inquiry in a very structured or very unstructured manner, depending on the interviewer's purpose" (p. 364). The list of questions that I developed and utilized is included in Appendix A. However, as previously stated, flexibility allowed the participants to enhance their interpretations as necessary.

Review of Transcripts and Taped Sessions

I recorded both audio and video of the six focus group sessions while the participants viewed the programs and while the participants discussed what they had viewed. The duration of each recording varies from 40 to 60 minutes. Both methods of data recording provided me with a more complete set of information from which to draw conclusions. For example, audio recording allowed me to transcribe what the participants stated as well as periods of silence. Video recording, on the other hand, allowed me to "read" the body language, gestures, and group dynamics of the focus groups. It also

allowed me to return to the data and insert details that I may have missed while deciphering the audio recordings. Both audio and video recording provided valuable, although quite different, information.

When transcribing the audio, I listened closely for the words the participants were verbalizing and points at which there were pauses, both short and extended. Once I transcribed the audio of the focus group, I approached the data again by viewing the video recording, this time transcribing visuals that accompanied the audio. An added benefit was that by watching the video recording, I could clarify spoken words that I might have missed on the audio due to crumpling of food wrappers or other movement on the table where the audio recorder rested. The video camera in a corner of the room allowed me to see all participants at the same time.

The data collection and the analysis of the data were simultaneous endeavors. I immersed myself in the data, examining and re-examining it to identify themes for the individual participants and the focus group as a whole. Immediately after each focus group, I recorded in journal format my initial thoughts and reactions. I then transcribed the audio tapes, again taking notes on my thoughts and reactions as themes emerged. Viewing the video recordings as I reviewed my transcriptions allowed for further analyses of the data. I then revisited the disabilities studies and media literature and sought out new literature in connection with my own study's findings.

Emergence of Themes

I attempted to make meaning of the responses, then approached the data from new angles, in continual efforts to interpret the data with new meanings attached. In taking

steps to organize, conceptualize and outline by writing major and minor details on post-it notes, I sorted and re-sorted the post-its into potential themes which continually transformed. Ultimately, I was able to organize the multiple interpretations into basic themes. Once basic themes were established, I re-read all focus group data and television program transcriptions repeatedly to explore possible themes in more detail. Realizing the importance of creating an outline for clear distinction of major points and subordinate points in an orderly progression (Wolcott, 2001) I arranged and re-arranged the post-its until I was comfortable with the presentation.

Once I established solid themes for each individual chapter, I organized the order of presentation for content within the chapters. I again re-visited the focus group session and television transcriptions, color coding all possible quotes and supporting details in alignment with corresponding themes. I then revisited the research and sought additional research in correspondence with my established dissertation outline. My goal in identifying themes in my qualitative research was not to reduce the participant dialogues to simple explanation, but instead to reveal them in their complexity (Wolcott, 2001).

Themes that I interpreted from the data did not necessarily match those identified in my initial research at the proposal stage. Before beginning the study, I had delved deeply into the disabilities studies literature. However, I found that the disability studies literature that had structured my study from the beginning seemed to apply less and less, in its originally interpreted form, with each supplemental focus group.

Merging of Interpretations

Once I analyzed and interpreted the data, I created an outline for the written results section of this dissertation. Initially, my research analysis had been divided into three distinct parts: (1) a review of disabilities literature, (2) a discussion of the participants' interpretations and (3) a discussion of my interpretations of the participants' words and actions stemming from a review of the video, audio and journaled data at hand. My original intent was to present each of these pieces separately.

When I attempted to turn my outline into a written product, I found that the format did not allow me to effectively present the content. For example, the outline organization did not allow me to present participant dialogues and perspectives in conjunction with how those dialogues and perspectives intersected with my interpretations and the disabilities studies literature. In a conscious effort to allow the participants to "tell" their stories, I wanted to employ as many of their actual words and dialogues as possible. However, these words without connection to the literature or my interpretations as the facilitator of the focus group seemed to hold less power and conviction. Everything we read, think, and say is interpreted, so it seemed appropriate and efficient to present in conjunction the interpretations revealed in the disability studies research, my interpretations as the researcher, and the interpretations presented by the participants during the viewing of the television programs and focus group discussions.

For research studies such as this, in which interpretations intertwine and focus groups allow the participants to move beyond the preselected questions and tell personal stories, a central question becomes:

>...how to treat the interviewee as a narrator, both during interviews and while interpreting them. For all narrative researchers, a central question revolves around which voice or voices researchers should use as they interpret and represent the voices of those they study. (Chase, 2005, p. 652)

In writing this dissertation, I found myself increasingly drawn to including a myriad of dialogues to ensure that the multiple voices of the participants were revealed. I found it necessary to, "highlight the versions of self, reality, and experience that the storyteller produces through telling" (Chase, 2005, p. 657) in order for the power of their words to be conveyed to the reader. I recognized that when my participants shared their stories, they attempted to "... shape, construct, and perform the self, experience, and reality" (Chase, 2005, p. 657). Treating their narration as "actively creative" necessitated that I share their word choices as often as possible so that meaning was not lost (Chase, 2005, p. 657). Each specific word chosen by the participants in their discourse holds a powerful and poignant meaning which in many instances would be impossible to convey via summary. Indeed, it was an awesome responsibility to analyze and interpret the language of the participants as I came to recognize that even as I described, I engaged in analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 2001).

Many of the dialogues that I chose to include did not stem from the pre-selected questions. In fact, as these digressive dialogues occurred, I worried about time constraints but forced myself to allow the discourse to continue. Not until I transcribed the focus group sessions did I realize that these times of digression reflected the participants' most clear and emotive voices. As a result, many examples of this spontaneous dialogue are included in the following chapters.

Reflecting and Refocusing

I was only able to find one program with representations of disability. As a result, my study transformed significantly when I chose to replace interpretation of the participants' verbalized perceptions of *disability* with interpretation of their verbalized perceptions of the nature of *difference*. I had to modify my study and ended up interpreting perceptions of disability and difference.

The result of my research refocusing was approximately one thousand pages of data that led me to repeatedly interpret what can best be described as a lack of acceptance of difference. "Lack of acceptance of difference" evolved into a much more complicated ideology than I anticipated because intolerance of difference as a worldview reaches far beyond the realm of special education and disability studies literature.

In this chapter and the one that follows, the words and physical reactions of the adolescent participants are reported and examined. In addition, the television programs themselves are examined in light of disability studies literature as I address the acceptance and lack of acceptance of difference in relation to the stigmatizing differences found in the participants' reactions to the television characters.

In the following two chapters I present information through multiple examples of participant and character voice. Chapter 3 focuses on the theme of acceptance/lack of acceptance of difference. Chapter 4 focuses on the theme of relationships and interactions. Both Chapters 3 and 4 are comprised of a combination of disability studies research, the words and actions of the participants, and my own interpretations. Chapter 5

presents conclusions and implications for educators, parents, researchers and consumers

of media.

CHAPTER 3

ACCEPTANCE/LACK OF ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENCE AND
CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to share the results of my study pertaining to acceptance and lack of acceptance of difference. In this chapter, I address my participants' acceptance and lack of acceptance of difference by examining their dialogues and those found in the television programs.

<u>Stigmatizing Difference(s)</u>

<u>Disability/Difference</u>

When I embarked upon my dissertation journey, I had intended to compile a list of characters with disabilities from the 41 television programs that I viewed. At the proposal meeting, it was suggested that I note whether the disabilities in the episodes were physical or mental disabilities. I approached the viewing of the 41 episodes with the expectation that I would be able to compile a list of the characters with physical and mental disabilities, then describe defining characteristics, and interpret my participants' reactions to the characters. I was very unprepared, however, to discover the almost complete lack of characters with obvious as commonly understood disabilities that perpetuated adolescent television programming.

My initial research revealed that television programs featuring people with disabilities are on the decline. Research by Gerbner (1998) traced this decline between 1993 and 1997 when the representation of disability among television characters declined by almost half of the original number. Furthermore, when people with disabilities are portrayed, they are often recipients of charity, evil characters, or tragic victims of illness

or accidents (Bonnie, 2004). And, as Carr pointed out in 2004, many programs that present characters with disabilities contain deeply disturbing and depressing messages about disability (Carr, 2004).

When characters with disabilities are included in television programs, often the characters do not play "normal" roles and their parts often focused upon their disabilities with little attention given to their abilities (Gerbner, 1998). I found this to be the case with *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* that I showed to my participants (Eells & Correll, 2007). In the over 20 hours of television programs I watched, it was the only one program (approximately 20 minutes running time) which showed a character with notable physical difference that would be generally accepted by current societal norms to constitute a disability. The episode featured a wheelchair basketball team, but none of the characters with disabilities in the program were recurring characters on the show.

In addition, many of the programs that I viewed, including those that were viewed in the focus group settings, included one "token" character with a difference who seemed to have been brought in for that particular episode as an exemplar of the featured lesson. Again, these were not recurring characters on the programs.

More shocking than the lack of characters with disabilities, however, was the participants' lack of recognition of this absence of character type. Despite the fact that discussions often revolved around recognition of difference, the discussions acknowledged little variation in type of difference represented in the television programs. The most noted types of differences according to the characters on the television programs and the focus group were physical difference and intellectual difference.

Physical characteristics that were out of what were considered the societal "norm" rendered multiple stigmatizing references in character and participant dialogues. Some of the reactions to physical differences expressed by the focus group members mirrored those made by television characters. A clear example of this can be found in the *Hannah Montana* episode in which Lilly lost her contacts and needed to wear glasses (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006). Although Charlie proclaimed that he did not like Hannah Montana "'cause it's a girl show," at one point in the episode he almost identically emulated Hannah's physical reaction to Lilly's glasses. The scene went as follows:

Miley (Hannah Montana):	Don't you have backup glasses?
Lilly:	Uh, oh. You mean these? (Lilly replies in a disgusted voice as she takes a pair of thick black rimmed glasses out of her pocket and puts them on).
Laugh Track Inserted	
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(Backs away as far as she can until she bumps into snack bar and then stands on her toes to back up even more).

Upon viewing this scene, Charlie immediately pushed himself back in his chair at the sight of Lilly's glasses. He even attempted to tip on his chair to go further back, much as Miley had done by standing on her toes.

The television programs examined in this study placed strongly negative emphasis on differences of physical appearance. The humor, sarcasm, and cruelty in the television programs and within the focus group discussions reflected perceptions of deficient physical attributes. The following example from an episode of the *Hannah Montana* series revealed this during our first focus group session (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006). Inserted are the statements made by the participants while viewing the program (italicized

print for network inserted laugh tracks and bold print for responses of the focus group

participants during the viewing):

Miley (Hannah Montana):	Oliver, please tell Lilly that LOOKS DON"T MATTER.
Oliver:	Ok. (looks at Lily and repeats with the same emphasis as Miley) LOOKS DON'T MATTER.

Laugh Track Inserted
Kira, Charlie, & Alexis: **(laugh)**
Miley (Hannah Montana): See, if Oliver can say it with his freaky nostril thing (disgusted look on her face and tone in her voice)...

Laugh Track Inserted
Miley (Hannah Montana): ...you can get over your glasses.
Oliver: Yeah. (realizes what Miley has just said about his nostrils and looks to Miley.) What?

Laugh Track Inserted
Kira, Charlie, & Alexis: **(laugh)**
Charlie: **(turns to face Kira and repeats Miley's words) Freaky nostril thing.**

Miley (Hannah Montana): (to Oliver) Oh, you know how one is way bigger than the other? (to Lilly)You don't see him obsessing about it.

Laugh Track Inserted
Charlie: **(loud laughter)**
Oliver: (runs to a passerby who is wearing sunglasses, rips them off the man's face to look at his reflection in them)

Laugh Track Inserted
Oliver: Oh, my gosh.
Laugh Track Inserted
Oliver: (runs back to Lilly and Miley putting his nose near their faces) Look at me. Look! I'm a lopsided FREAK!

Laugh Track Inserted
Kira, Charlie, & Alexis: **(laughter)**
Miley (Hannah Montana): Sorry, I thought you knew.
Laugh Track Inserted
Oliver: (horrified, he looks at two girls standing near him; then he runs away)

Laugh Track Inserted

Oliver:	(stops and turns back to crowd on beach) Stop staring at me! I am not an animal!
Laugh Track Inserted	
Kira:	**(throws her head back with laughter)**

Television for adolescents frequently reveals how the details of physical appearance are scrutinized. One episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* (entitled "Big hair and baseball") that I reviewed (Eells & Correll, 2005) but the participants did not depicts the clear connection between such scrutiny and the intolerance of people to physical differences that veer from the acceptable norm for physical attractiveness:

Maddie:	(to London and Carrie) I mean who cares about looks.
London & Carrie:	(instantly raise their hands high)
Maddie:	Ok.
London:	What else is there?
Maddie:	How about intelligence? Sense of humor, sweetness, creativity.
London:	(mimicking and mocking Maddie's actions and tone of voice as she speaks.)
Maddie:	(stops speaking and turns to watch Maddie mimic her) Ok, if you're gonna do that, stop when I stop.
London:	If you really care about all that junk, I know this guy, Gavin, who'd be perfect for you. I'll set you up tomorrow.
Maddie:	London, that is so sweet!
London:	Well, you guys have so much in common. He has bad skin, too. Tons of blackheads. (nods her head while closely looking at Maddie's fact)
Maddie:	(defensively) I do not have any black...
London:	(interrupts by holding a mirror directly in front of Maddie's face)
Maddie:	(shock and horrified, she gasps) Oh! (squeals) Oh!

Even though I did not show this particular episode in the focus groups, the participants all admitted familiarity with *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* as a program and all had watched the program before.

Physical differences such as those exemplified above served as rationale for selecting and sorting individuals, a concept that arose repeatedly as a topic of discussion in the focus groups. Some participants commented about physical appearance as utterances to themselves as they watched programs during the focus sessions. For example, while watching *The Simpsons* episode (Grearney & Reardon, 1995), Lisa mumbled, "Ugh" to herself in a disgusted tone when Homer, an animated character, displayed a stomach so large that it hung over his underwear. In a dialogue that ensued following the viewing of that episode, Lisa shared how she would have liked to have seen the episode end: "…for the ending I would at least show how he got skinny, and show him skinnier and show his life a lot more better than it was before." Alexis elaborated on Lisa's modification to the ending, "But like he accidently got skinnier than he was and he, like, like somehow he got even handsomer than what he looked before. And he'd have big muscles." Charlie and Kira added their perspectives:

Charlie:	Homer was treated differently because he was fat.
Charlie & Kira:	He was fat!
Alexis:	And 'cause, like, the movie, they wouldn't let him in 'cause he was fat.
Charlie:	He was a fatty-mc-fat-fat.
Alexis:	And because of the clothes he was wearing.

The above participant reactions were stated after viewing just one of the numerous television scenes that showed complete intolerance of difference. However, the effect of this consistent negative focus on physical difference was apparent in conversations that took place in the focus groups.

| Kira: | I do have some friends that (pause) are (pause) that have (pause), like my, one of my friends, well she's not really a |

	good friend of mine but she's a friend, she has this rash going all the way up her leg and then her arm.
Lisa:	Is that Yasmine?
Kira:	It never goes away.
Charlie:	Yasmine who?
Kira:	Oh, no, a different Yasmine.
Charlie:	Yasmine who?
Lisa:	Nobody likes her.
Kira:	She's only, she's only (long pause) eight.
Lisa:	Oh.
Alexis:	Eighth grade?
Kira:	And she's one of my other friend's friend. And she has this rash going all the way up her leg and her arm and she's treated differently because people think that she needs help with things that (pause) when she doesn't.

I strongly sensed that Kira was discussing the same Yasmine as Lisa. However, Lisa's negative reaction to Yasmine's name being mentioned may have caused Kira to reconsider acknowledging a friendship with Yasmine.

After the second focus group, I wrote the following comment in my journal in regard to a minor aspect of physical appearance, specifically the hairstyle of a character named Jason Stickler (who is called Stickler or Stick Man by the other characters in the show):

> As I was watching the show with the kids, I made a note about Stickler's hair and clothes. He has a severe side part with his hair greased down. Why didn't I notice this before when today, in the presence of the kids, it was so glaringly obvious? Then the kids noted it themselves when answering questions.

As I noted in my reflective research journal entry, the participants verbalized their non-acceptance of the character named Stickler by rejecting his chosen hair style:

Alexis:	I think Stinkler was the uncool one because he was trying to impress Maleena WAY too hard.
Kira:	The way he greased his hair back! It was kind of weird.
Alexis:	That's not cool.
Kira:	Why do people grease their hair back?

Alexis:	I don't know. (shrugs shoulders) They think it's cool. That's, that's boring.
Kira:	They did that a lot in the 80's.
Alexis:	And then their hair looks all…
Kira:	(interrupts) Greasy and yucky.
Alexis:	Sticky and boring.
Kira:	Yeah, but you need to have WILD hair (raises hands in the air).
Alexis:	Mohawk. (points to Kira in response)
Kira:	(laughs) Mohawk guy, whew! (pushes hands up past hair to represent a Mohawk)

Many similar discussions critiquing the differences of the characters, of each other, and of people at their middle schools occurred frequently. The participants' spontaneous dialogues stood in direct opposition to the messages of acceptance they had reiterated when directly asked about the themes of difference portrayed on the television programs. The continuation of the above conversation illuminates the discrepancy between what the participants said when directly asked a question and what they internalized and then verbalized in their free speech:

Facilitator:	So, if he was uncool, what made the other ones cool?
Alexis:	They were just like…
Kira:	(interrupts) They were just hanging out being theirselves, being silly. And then something funny always happens to them.
Alexis:	I know.

The disconnect here, as with so many other examples of focus group text from this study, is that the participants can restate and even paraphrase the program's message of acceptance but when the conversation moved beyond specific questions and their free speaking took over, the dialogues often reflected that the message had not been internalized.

In the previous examples of dialogue surrounding the character of Jason Stickler, Kira stated that the cool characters were, "just hanging out being theirselves." However, when the group participants discussed the physical feature of Stickler's hair, they noted the "difference" and judged him negatively for being himself. Furthermore, the adolescent viewers in this study clearly implied that Stickler should have striven to be more like the norm or the "cool" characters as far as his hair style was concerned; his "uncoolness" stemmed from not conforming to the crowd with his chosen hair style. The participants completely contradicted their previous perception of "cool" characters just "being theirselves."

The participants' pattern of negatively judging characters for "being theirselves" continued as they discussed characters' intellectual differences. Although there were no specific statements made about characters having intellectual disabilities, every episode had a character who was much slower to grasp concepts than the other characters. Most often the speech of these characters reflected their perceived inabilities, and their words were followed immediately with laugh tracks. And at these moments the focus group participants generally added various marginalizing comments.

For example, in the *Cory in the house* episode that was shown during the second focus group session (Cunningham et al., 2007), Cory's friend Newt, who is the character frequently depicted as intellectually inferior, shared his feelings of inadequacy with Cory and Jessica about the possibility of going on a date with a girl who is a genius (italicized print for network- inserted laugh tracks and bold print for responses of the focus group participant during the viewing):

Newt:	You guys aren't gonna believe this but I've got a date with a brilliant, beautiful girl who really likes me. (dazed in awe)
Cory:	Hey man, that's awesome.
Newt:	No.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Newt:	That's so NOT awesome.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Meena:	What? How could you not want to go on a date with Jessica?
Newt:	She's like the smartest girl in the universe. Maybe even in America.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Kira:	**(laughs)**
Cory:	(looks confused by Newt's statement)
Newt:	I wouldn't know how to talk to her.
Cory:	Then why did you say yes?
Newt:	'Cause I got nervous and couldn't think of that other word.
Meena:	No?
Newt:	That's it!
Laugh Track Inserted	
Kira, Charlie, & Alexis:	**(laugh)**
Newt:	Man, this is a disaster. A fiasco! A quagmire of epic proportions.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Alexis:	**Quagmire.**
Cory:	But you couldn't think of 'no?'
Laugh Track Inserted	
Kira & Alexis:	**(laugh)**
Kira:	**He's stupid.**
Commercial Break	
Cory:	Newt, man, stop stressing over this date with Jessica. I mean, you were fine before you realized how smart she was.
Meena:	Right, there's no reason to be intimidated.
Cory:	Yeah, remember, you both put your pants on one leg at a time.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Newt:	One at a time?
Laugh Track Inserted	
Newt:	I knew there was a trick to it.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Kira, Charlie, & Alexis:	**(laugh)**

Alexis:	**Everybody…(stops talking to watch program)**
Cory:	Newt, if we teach you the pants trick…
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cory:	…then will you go out with her?
Newt:	Only if you guys come with me and tell me what to say.

As seen in the dialogue above, the character himself verbalized statements that made him appear intellectually inferior to the other characters. The selected locations of the laugh tracks amplified this portrayal. Newt's self-depreciating remarks, or others doing it for him, were immediately followed by network-inserted laugh tracks and laughter from my participants. In addition, Kira's description of Newt as "stupid," revealed her perception that Newt was intellectually inferior to his peers.

Most often characters were portrayed as incompetent by the verbal statements they made. In addition to the characters making statements that highlighted their intellectual differences, in the episodes I viewed there were multiple examples in which supporting characters made comments or physical gestures to indicate that a certain character had intellectual differences. An episode of *Kim Possible* entitled "Larry's birthday" clearly illustrated these verbal and physical reactions to intellectual differences (McCorkle, 2007b). In this episode, Kim was supposed to be "watching" her cousin Larry while the house was prepared for his nineteenth birthday party. Prior to the following scene, Kim had taken Larry (an overweight teen dressed in slacks pulled high over his waist, displaying prominent buck teeth and large glasses and speaking in a nasal tone as he described himself as the "alpha dog" of the comic book store) out of the house and had lost track of him:

Dad:	You lost Larry?
Aunt June:	What?
Kim:	Ha, ah. I only left him for a few minutes Aunt June.
Aunt June:	You left Larry alone? (throws her hand over her face)
Dramatic Music Inserted	
Aunt June:	How could you leave my little Larry alone?
Kim:	Um. Larry is nineteen. You, you can leave nineteen-year-olds alone.
Aunt June:	(inches from Kim Possible's face) Larry isn't like other nineteen-year-olds.
Kim:	(backs away from Aunt June and falls into a chair) Yeah, tell me about it (mutters to herself).

Kim Possible verbally and physically reacted to the intellectual difference of Larry. This episode and many others that we viewed included depictions of intellectually different characters to which others negatively reacted with words and gestures. Interestingly but not surprisingly, the focus group participants had the same sorts of reactions. The adolescent participants frequently pointed at their heads as they described someone as "slow."

Sometimes differences were perceived as a marginally positive trait as in the character of "Little Genius Jessica" from *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* episode (Lapidus & Kallis, 2007). However, in most instances differences were portrayed as negative attributes. The nature of the individual difference was emphasized and often became the precursor to a laugh track, usually at the expense of the character (see Chapter 4 for further discussion of laugh tracks). The difference also set that character apart enough that other characters were uncomfortable in their presence. In the episodes I showed the participants and those that I viewed in addition, apart from the one or two

recurring characters per series who were alluded to as "slow," the majority of characters with notable differences were one time appearance characters.

Language of Normalcy and Judgment

A second category of stigmatizing differences emerged from participant dialogues repeatedly utilizing language of normalcy and judgment. "Normalization" of character was one of the few themes from the disability studies literature that I had correctly anticipated as applicable to my study. A widely embraced societal generalization holds that people who are disabled have a desire to be "normal" and "non-disabled". "Disabled people are subjected to many disabling expectations, for example, to be 'independent', 'normal', to 'adjust' and 'accept' their situation" (French & Swain, 2004, p. 34). In society, as well as in the media, the underlying assumption appears to be that people who are disabled want to be "made normal" through hard work or some other miraculous intervention, be it divine or otherwise. Drake (2004) noted that the normalized idea(l)s that are portrayed in the media are those rooted in white middle-classness. He referred to people with disabilities in the media who strive to become "normal" as "good cripples" and those who refuse to conform to society's norms as "bad cripples":

> What one now gets (and this is especially true of television) is the clear distinction between the rights and representation of two distinct classes of disabled (impaired) people; the normalized and the un-normalized disabled people; the 'good' and the 'bad' cripple (disabled people). (pp. 101-102)

In many cases, this normalization occurs through "treatment" from someone who is viewed as "able." Goble (2004) stated, "The assumption is that the problem lies within the individual, and the response is technical intervention by skilled 'expert' professionals to help the person overcome it and return to an approximation of 'normality'" (p. 43).

This attempt to achieve normalization is especially significant when people have an acquired disability versus a congenital one (French & Swain, 2004). The implication appears to be that it is one thing to come into the world with an impairment, but quite another thing altogether to have acquired one along the way. The latter, presumably, is far less acceptable, as was illustrated in the wheelchair basketball episode (Eells & Correll, 2007) of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* (italicized print for network inserted laugh tracks and bold print for responses of the focus group participants during the viewing):

Zack:	(on telephone) Dude, you gotta get over here right now! (holds the phone up for Cody to speak into).
Cody:	Jessica Simpson is in the hotel.
Mom:	Jessica Simpson is here? (excited) Oh, maybe I can get her to perform for a PTA fundraiser. I don't think the bake sale is going to go very well (holds up a burnt pastry).
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	(with his hand over the receiver says to his mom) Don't be silly, Jessica Simpson isn't really here. (puts the phone up to his ear and lies excitedly) Oh, I just saw her walk by! Hi, Jessica.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cody:	(pretending to be super star Jessica Simpson who has a southern accent) Hey, y'all.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cody:	(still pretending to be Jessica Simpson) Wanna come hang out with me by the pool?
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cody:	(still pretending to be Jessica Simpson) I need someone to help me rub in my suntan lotion.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	(closes phone) Jamie's on his way.
Mom:	I miss Jamie (reminiscing tone)
Zack:	Yeah me too. We used to get in so much...
Mom:	(awaits the completion of his sentence with a scowl)
Zack:	(notices his mom's scowl so he chooses his words carefully)...good clean fun together.

Laugh Track Inserted	
Charlie:	**(laughs)**
Cody:	Jamie hasn't been the same since his accident.
Zack:	All he ever does is go straight to school then straight home (scoffs). Like Cody.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cody:	Excuse me…
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cody:	(continued and bragging)…you're forgetting about stamp club. I came up with our motto, 'You can't lick us.' (smiles proudly)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Lisa:	**(Raises eyebrows and looks to Kira for a reaction to the last line. Kira is still looking at screen so Lisa looks back to screen as well.)**
Zack:	Well here's my motto. My brother's a geek.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	(pushes Cody out of the way and into a chair)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	Anyway (to mom), remember those kids playing basketball in the lobby? Well, I was hoping if Jamie meets them, he might be interested in basketball again.
Cody:	He was the best player on our team.
Zack:	Ahem (clears throat expectantly).
Cody:	He was the best player on our team.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	(looks disgusted)
Cody:	Now he won't even pick up a ball.
Mom:	Well, I think it's great that you guys want to help your friend, but what happens when Jamie get's here and there's no Jessica Simpson?
Zack:	(points at Cody)
Cody:	Oh, no. I am not putting on a bikini.
Laugh Track Inserted	

The script supposes that Jamie's acquired disability was responsible for the demise of the friendship. The mother's comment of "I miss Jamie" followed by Zach's confirmation of, "Yeah, me too" seemed to suggest that Jamie no longer was included in their social circle. The further suggestion that Jamie was not "the same" since his accident implies

that Jamie, by way of his newly acquired disability, is responsible for the friendship demise. Furthermore, in other episodes that I viewed, two close male friends of Zack and Cody's appeared, but Jamie was not one of them. This further supported the emerging trend that the characters with differences are often one time appearance characters.

The presumption that Jamie was somehow responsible for letting others down appeared again as Alexis shared her interpretation of Jamie's disability, "…he quit it [basketball] and he like bailed out on his team after his accident and he's just in a wheelchair. So, then he saw them, so he started helping out and everything like that." Alexis' word choices, "bailed out on his team" and "he's just in a wheelchair" spoke volumes. According to all indications in this episode, this was the one and only time on *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* that they orchestrated a wheelchair basketball game. Jamie's inability to play basketball as it is traditionally played (which he was not physically able to do) was interpreted by Alexis as "bailing out" because he was not striving for normalcy.

Alexis' view reflected the insight offered by Swain et al. (2004) that the problems of disabled people are inherent to their impairments and are not a result of society's failure to meet their needs in terms of inclusion and accessibility. Scott-Hill (2004) endorsed this line of thinking and elaborated that people with impairments are, "seen to be both responsible for their individual conditions and as functionally restricted when compared to people without impairments" (p. 88).

In what was the most intimate and telling ninety seconds of my focus group

research, the participants shared their views on the word "normal:"

Facilitator:	So, tell me about…on this show, when they were talking about, Raven said she just wants to be normal and her grandma said, 'you just want to be normal.' What does that mean to you? When you're in sixth grade, what does that mean?
Lisa:	I want to be normal (serious).
Facilitator:	(clarifying) You do want to be normal?
Lisa:	(nods)
Facilitator:	What does that mean? What does normal mean?
Alexis:	What do you mean, you want to be normal?
Lisa:	Like, you want to act like, like you're actually a 6th grader, like…
Charlie:	(interrupts) Not like a…
Kira:	(interrupts) I act like a preschooler, my mom says.
Charlie:	…second grade. (corrects self) Second period. They act like first graders.
Alexis:	What do you mean you want to act like a 6th grader? What do you act like?
Kira:	That's funny.
Lisa:	Like, uh. (pause) I can't (pauses and keeps mouth open in an exaggerated manner to show that the words aren't coming out).
Facilitator:	No, but I don't understand. So, you're doing a job, Lisa, of explaining it to me. Can you keep explaining it to me so I understand it better? Or someone explain to me? What's normal?
Lisa:	I don't know.
Alexis:	I don't even know. Like she said she wants to be a normal 6th grader. I really don't know what she's talking about. But normal, like, normal, like, you wanna feel that you belong at something and you (pause) actually fit in without you looking like the oddball crowd.
Lisa:	I don't act like a 6th grader. I wish I did.
Kira:	I'm an oddball.
Alexis:	I act like a 7th grader.
Lisa:	Jo Ann doesn't act like a sixth grader.
Charlie:	No, she don't!
Facilitator:	Because?
Lisa:	She acts like a… (points finger in a downward motion)
Charlie:	(interrupts) Zero grader. Kindergartner.

Facilitator:	But I don't know what that means. What does that mean? What does it mean to act like a 6th grader?
Alexis:	Act like a 6th grader (pause), act like a…
Lisa:	(interrupt) Act like who you are.
Charlie:	Like you whine all the time.
Facilitator:	(chuckle) You whine all the time?
Lisa:	Act like, trying to act like somebody you're not just to impress someone.
Alexis:	More older. Being an older person or stuff. But I act like a 7th grader. Why? Because some of the stuff that we do is too easy for me. So I can't…
Kira:	(interrupts) I'm in all honors.
Alexis:	It's like, some of the stuff is so easy for me that I don't feel like doing it so I act like a 7th grader or some, uh, older grade than I am.

A lack of a clear definition for several of the words the participants used, did not stop the use of them, often in contexts that did not seem to match the meanings of the words. In addition to "normal," the participants often used the words "perfect," "regular," "typical" and "real." On the opposite end of the spectrum, the characters in the programs and my participants frequently used the words "wimp," "weenie," "loser," "failure," "weird," "freak," "maniac" and "psycho." In addition they frequently used the descriptors of "retarded," "dork," "stupid," and "awkward" to describe people, places, and anything else that they felt should be ranked or labeled in regard to the characters, themselves, their peers, or specific situations. Finkelstein's (2004) research described the prominent use of labels by recognizing that, "People who enjoy the fruits of the dominant culture always label others as lesser classes of themselves" (p. 19).

The labels used by the participants in their discussions reflected their judgments of degrees of normalcy. Connor and Bejoian (2006) described the use of such derogatory comments and phrases in everyday conversations as reinforcing "… the connection

between disability and negativity, inferiority, undesirability, incompletion, and abnormality" (p. 52). They continued their argument by looking at the societal macrocosm:

> The pervasiveness of such tolerated verbal expressions indicates the larger, stereotypical perspective of our culture: Disability can never be a good thing. Within contemporary society, disability – unlike race, gender, sexual orientation, or age – is still somewhat of a free-for-all; a repository of bad associations and images; and a concept that people routinely look down on, devalue, and ridicule. (p. 52)

In this study, derogatory labels were applied freely by characters on the programs and by the participants. Sometimes the targets of the labels were present and sometimes they were not.

The following 90 second dialogue, illustrates how freely the participants applied a magnitude of devaluing labels in short time periods. The dialogue began with the question, "What did you think of the characters?"

Alexis:	Pick me (raises hand)!
Facilitator:	Go ahead.
Alexis:	Maddie, she's the smart one.
Kira:	London is the dumb one.
Alexis:	And London, she's the slow…
Lisa:	Dumb, rich one.
Kira:	(laughs)
Alexis:	Fishy boy, he's the slow one too.
Lisa:	He's the lifeguard.
Alexis:	Still, fishy boy cause he's talk about fish and crap.
Kira:	Yeah, and um he…
Alexis:	(interrupts) Mr. Moseboy, he's in the middle...
Kira:	(interrupts) He's the manager…
Alexis:	…he's awkward and mean.
Kira:	…and he's a meanie.
Alexis:	Estaban, he's, um, funny.
Kira:	Funny.
Alexis:	Funny. Slow (points to her temples) and kind of creapy.

Kira:	He's in love with, um, Zack and Cody's mom.
Alexis:	Uh, uh. That's Arwin.
Kira:	Oh, yeah, Arwin.
Alexis:	Arwin, he's the crazy... (points her finger in the air to emphasize her list)
Lisa:	And um...
Alexis:	(interrupts)...mechanical custodian dude.
Kira:	Yeah.
David:	Yeah, um...
Kira:	(interrupts) He's in love with...
Alexis:	(interrupts) He's lover boy.
David:	And the mana, and Arwin is, not Arwin but, um, but whatever that dude's name is, he's the uh, he's the helper.
Lisa:	The manager?
David:	He's the helper for the manager. He carries, he...
Kira:	Bellboy?
David:	Huh?
Alexis:	The bellboy, Estaban?
Kira:	Yeah.
David:	Yeah, Estaban is, is the helper for uh, Mr. Moseby and he carries, he carries peoples' bags to their rooms.
Kira:	He's the bellboy.
Lisa:	He's funny.
Kira:	Yeah, he's funny. He has a long name.
Facilitator:	He's funny?
Lisa:	(nods her head)
Alexis:	Alls I know is Estaban Ricardo and that's it.
Facilitator:	What was that?
Alexis:	The only thing I can remember from Estaban's name is Estaban Ricardo and then some other names.
Kira:	Someone calls him Estaban Retardo before by accident (smiles).

The participants are quick to apply labels such as "dumb," "slow," "smart," "rich,"

"awkward," "mean," "funny," "slow," "crazy," "lover," and "Retardo" all within a

minute and a half about only six characters. In addition the meaning Kira associates with

Estaban Ricardo's name sounding like "retardo" is another commonality that can be found between the episodes, names possessing meaning.

In many of the programs, names often described the characters' mental or physical capacities. The result of the seemingly innocuous practice of assigning names based on physical attributes is that the physical attribute becomes the primary signifier of identity (Connor & Bejoian, 2006). The character of Jason Stickler from *Cory in the house* was a prominent example. He consistently abided by rules—otherwise known as "sticking to the rules" hence the nickname "Stickler." Names as character labels provide commentary about normality and how it is defined.

Although many of the programs associated physical or mental capabilities to names, the *Kim Possible* series practiced this labeling technique the most frequently and skillfully. The main character Kim Possible (impossible), was assisted by her boyfriend Ron Stopable (unstoppable), and her two brothers the Tweebs (twin dweebs). For characters who were not regulars on the show, the same practice of attaching meanings to names applied. For example, Camille Leon (chameleon), who appeared in the Kim Possible episode shown during the focus group (McCorkle, 2007c), was a character who continually changed appearances.

In addition, an episode of *Cory in the house* entitled "Just desserts" (Rinsler & Seaton, 2007) which was not shown to the participants, portrayed a medical client named Norman who was portrayed as an "overly-stressed" patient of Professor Bushwick who is being honored at the White House for her work with overly-stressed clients during this scene. Throughout the show, Professor Bushwick was highly praised for her medical

model treatment of stress. Several of her clients were in attendance as Ms. Samuels, the

White House aide presented her an award:

Ms. Samuels:	(to Professor Bushwick)…And on behalf of the President, our country thanks you. And now a word from one of the many overly-stressed people you've helped, Norman Trembles.
Norman:	That's 'Trumbles.'
Ms. Samuels	Of course it is.
Norman:	(stands up to address group) Six months ago, I was overly stressed. I could barely go out in public. I had the jumps (jumps, crouches, and puts hands in front of face for protection), the jitters (hands shake), and an occasional heeby-jeeby. Then I read Calm the Heck Down and it changed my life. Thanks to Professor Bushwick, I am now a mellow fellow.
Chef Victor:	(claps)
Norman:	(jumps, easily startled) Ah, what was that?
Professor Bushwick:	It's ok, Norman.
Norman:	It's so loud.
Professor Bushwick:	(to Chef Victor privately) The group isn't quite ready for loud noises. Perhaps we should just push on to dessert.

Less than four minutes after this scene, Ms. Samuels again called Norman "Mr.

Trembles" and he again corrected her and told her that his name was Mr. Trumbles.

Stigmatizing nicknames were not always assigned at the beginnings of episodes;

sometimes they appeared later in the episodes. For example, in the middle of an episode

of *Hannah Montana* entitled "I want you to want me…to go to Florida," (Poryes &

Christiansen, 2007) a competitor's mother calls Hannah Montana "Little Miss Soon-To-

Be-Used-To-Be." In another episode entitled "Get down, study-udy-udy," Jackson, who

Hannah called "Jerkson" in another episode, discussed a girl named Becky with his friend

Thor, a large boy with a Minnesotan accent depicted as socially inept to California social

norms:

Jackson:	(to Thor) Now, if you don't mind, I've got myself a little study date with Becky. So (points Thor to the door and begins to escort him there)
Thor:	You mean Becky with the bad teeth?
Jackson:	No, not her.
Thor:	Oh, you mean Bucktooth Becky, the human bottle opener. (serious tone) She scares me. Although she did come in handy on that field trip. (smiles)
Jackson:	No, no, no. Becky from Spanish class.
Thor:	Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. (jabs at Jackson triumphantly) You mean Brainless Becky.
Jackson:	Yeah, Brainless BODACIOUS Becky.

The previous examples of "Brainless" and "Bucktooth" when referring to a character

named Becky are just a few of the many stigmatizing names that consistently appear in

adolescent television programming. The practice was prevalent in the episodes I shared

with the adolescent focus group participants and the additional episodes I viewed.

Names as character labels indeed provide commentary about normalcy and how it

is defined. In addition, however, the media sends messages about normalcy via endings

of episodes/movies that resolve all issues if a character has successfully normalized

(Sacks & McCloskey, 1994). This oversimplification and manipulation of the

experienced context of disability is inaccurate and damaging for those who choose not to

or cannot "normalize." Being successfully normalized was alluded to by Alexis when

describing *Cory in the house* characters, "I thought they were acting like *typical* people."

This unattainable descriptor of "typical" seems to be the norm against which characters

are compared. If, near the end of the episode, the characters have normalized or have at

least transformed closer to the ideal of "normal," they appear to be viewed as successful individuals.

The pattern of the television programs having the main characters redeem themselves in the final minutes is what I have termed "end of episode salvation." End of episode salvation occurred when a character was shallow, blatantly discriminated against others because of their differences, used humor to be cruel at others' expense, and then in the final minutes stated what it was that they did wrong and then were considered the hero of the episode. During each focus group, I asked my participants who the hero of the episode was. Although upon deeper discussion they would list some of the supporting characters, their initial reactions were to quickly identify in most cases the main character who had been intolerant of difference until their end of episode salvation. Wright (2005) describes the process of hero identification in popular stories as determining who the hero is in the new social context.

The episodes' final minutes were crucial for marginalized characters' normalization and typical characters' acceptance opportunities. The final two to four minutes of each episode returned to messages and examples of tolerance and acceptance of difference. In contrast, the majority of each thirty minute episode was devoted to exploitive and undignifying examples, which were considered the central focus of the show. This pattern replicated the participants' infusion of the programmatic messages to their daily lives.

<u>Life Applications</u>

After viewing each of the episodes in the focus group setting, when asked

directly, the participants could fluently and quickly reiterate the message or moral of the

show. It appeared that the positive and humanizing focus of the last two to four minutes

of the program had impacted their way of thinking, so that on the surface the programs

had successfully promoted a message of acceptance of difference. However, as the

questioning continued and the participants spoke freely of their impressions/perceptions

of the characters and the applications of these to their daily lives, it was as if the message

they had so fluently reiterated earlier had no consequence or implication for their daily

lives. There seemed to be disconnect between stating the message and relating its

application to their everyday existence.

This should not be surprising given that the characters on the episodes displayed a

lack of acceptance during the majority of the show, acting harshly, cruelly, or

uncomfortably when around people they viewed as different. They often quickly made

judgments. During the final few minutes of the show, however, the characters that had

been quick to judge often verbalized their mistakes and refuted their judgmental ways as

if somehow all the rejection and misrepresentation that was caused could be

instantaneously and incontrovertibly undone. A pattern emerged within the focus groups

that was similar to the pattern in the television programs: the individuals said the "right"

thing, did or said the "wrong" thing, then if noticed for doing the "wrong" thing, they

would correct themselves even if the message they reiterated was not internalized. In this

example from the *Hannah Montana* episode (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006) that was shown

to the focus group, the character of Hannah Montana mirrors this progression. The first

dialogue occurred during the initial minutes of the episode:

Miley (Hannah Montana):	(to Lilly) Ah, so what. You can just wear your glasses to the skate finals. Who cares?
Lilly:	(raises voice) I do. No way I'm gonna compete if I have to wear these (takes glasses out of pocket and holds them up).
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Are you kidding me? (paces and raises voice) All you've been talking about is double kick flipping Heather all across the skate park.
Lilly:	That was with two eyes, not four (walks to Hannah but actually walks past her since she cannot see her).
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(taps Lilly on shoulder) Over here.
Lilly:	I am not going in front of all those people looking like this (puts her glasses on, but they are accidentally upside-down).
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(pleading voice) Lilly, will you please forget about how you look. It's what's on the inside that counts.
Lilly:	Easy for you to say. You're the poster child for perfect skin.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	This isn't about me, or my perfect skin (stops and strokes her cheek and chin with pride and a smile).

In the first dialogue, Hannah stated a message to Lilly about acceptance, concluding with

a contradictory statement about her perfect skin. During the middle of the program,

Hannah realized that the billboard photographer had added a zit to her face. In this scene,

Lilly challenged Hannah to take her own advice.

Lilly:	(mockingly) Not so easy when it's YOUR face that has the problem.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(forced smile) I don't have a problem. Why should I have a problem? After all, looks don't matter. And if that's the way they want to go with this worldwide campaign, I'm fine with it (shrugs shoulders).
Miley's father:	(enters room) Sorry, Mile, but this is the way they want to go with the worldwide campaign.

Miley (Hannah Montana):	(loses calmness and voice volume raises) What? (realizes that she had contradicted herself then speaks slowly and deliberately) I mean, re-really? (forced cheeriness in her voice) Great. Awesome. Terrific. I love it.
Miley's father:	You do?
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Yes, I do. I mean, after all, looks don't matter. I don't just talk the talk, I walk the walk. (dances)
Lilly:	You are amazing. I mean if you can stand up in front of the whole world with that ginormous zit, something any NORMAL person would be humiliated by…
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(interrupts) Lilly, please get to the point.
Lilly:	The point is, that if you can do all of that, then I can wear my glasses to the skate competition (hugs Hannah). Thank you so much. This is the greatest thing you've ever done for me. I AM gonna double kick flip Heather all over that skate park (snaps and waves fingers) thanks to you. (leaves)
Miley's father:	I am so proud of you, Mile.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Thanks. (serious) Daddy, we have got to get rid of that zit!
Miley's father:	What happened to 'looks don't matter?'
Miley (Hannah Montana):	What happened to 'don't worry, I'll fix it?'
Miley's father:	I tried, Bud.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(mocking and sarcastic tone) I tried, Bud (leaves room).

In this dialogue, Hannah pretends to follow her own advice when with Lilly but quickly becomes frustrated when she is unable to change her personal circumstances. Following this conversation Hannah, Jackson, and their father painted over the zit on the billboard. Hannah did not intend to share with Lilly that she had ignored her own advice. However, Lilly attended the billboard unveiling, and the following conversation ensued:

Photographer:	(to crowd) Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to present my latest masterpiece, the worldwide premiere of the Magic Glow skin care campaign (puts out arm

to curtain that is opening in front of billboard with Hannah Montana on it with no zit).

Lilly:	Hey, what happened to the zit? Where did it go?
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Wow, that zit zapper really works.
Photographer:	(upset) Where's my zit? I loved that zit.
Hannah's father:	Well, that'll teach you to sell us a horse and then deliver a mule.
Lilly:	(to Hannah) You covered it up.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Lilly, you don't understand.
Lilly:	Oh, I understand fine. You lied to me. (walks away)
Miley (Hannah Montana):	But, Lilly, just because I couldn't take my own advice doesn't mean you shouldn't. I mean, go to that skateboard competition. Teach me a lesson. Be my role model.
Lilly:	Save it. Why should I believe anything you tell me?
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Because you said it was the best thing I ever did for you.
Lilly:	Well, sometimes I say things I don't mean. You should know what that's like (walks away).
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(calling after Lilly) Lilly, please give me one minute.
Photographer:	(addressing crowd) Well, here she is, the new Magic Glow skin girl, Ms. Can't Even Have One Little Blemish No Matter How Many Awards I Would Win If She Did. Ladies and gentlemen, Hannah Montana.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(comes to microphone to address the crowd on the rooftop) Thank you. It's a real honor to be the spokesperson for Magic Glow skin cleanser. But if there is one thing that I've learned throughout this entire experience, it's that nobody's perfect (pause) even celebrities. (she is calm and purposeful in her speaking while looking at Lilly in the crowd)
Lilly:	(heckling, yelling back at Hannah) You look pretty perfect up there.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Yeah, but sometimes (picks up bucket) I look like this (slashes water to take off the paint she had put on to cover zit)
Lilly:	Whoa (as camera focuses on zit that is not exposed on billboard)
Miley (Hannah Montana):	I didn't want people seeing me this way but I was wrong. Looks aren't everything. I'm not going to

> say that they don't matter but there's stuff that matters more. And if you let a zit or let, say, dorky glasses stop you from living your life, you're gonna regret it. You really will. (takes deep breath and forces a smile) So take your pictures. Let the world see that even Hannah Montana gets zits and I'm ok with it.

The progression of this episode -- character stated the message, character failed to follow the message, and then character restated message at the end with little regard to the damage it may have done -- was common in almost all of the 41 episodes I viewed.

Given this common pattern in the television programs targeting adolescent audiences, it was not surprising that the dialogue of the participants revealed an almost identical pattern. In fact, Alexis labeled Hannah the hero of the previously described episode because, "...even though she may do something wrong, she actually goes back, she actually looks at what she does wrong and rethinks it."

The adolescent participants, much like the characters they viewed, quickly reiterated the message they knew to repeat. Then they disregarded the meaning of the stated message while answering the remaining questions during focus group sessions. If they noticed a contradiction, they quickly corrected themselves, as can be seen in the discussion that followed the viewing of this *Hannah Montana* program (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006). Alexis stated, "Everybody is pretty in their own way." Lisa concurred by repeating what Alexis said, and Kira reiterated, "Yeah, yeah, everybody's pretty in their own way." One minute later the conversation turned:

Alexis:	Don't worry about what people think of you.
Kira:	Yeah, only worry about what you think of yourself.
Alexis:	'Cause if you worry about what other people think, then total chaos will go on to you in your life.

Kira, Alexis, & Lisa: Yeah.

The contradictions began just seconds later when Kira elaborated:

> Yeah, 'cause everybody's special in their own way, even if they have like really big dorky glasses (motions around her eyes, making glasses with her hands) and all that stuff…even if they looked kinda dorky, no matter what, you shouldn't judge people just by the way they look, you need to go by their personality.

Minutes later, when attempting to apply the message to their daily lives, the contradictions continued:

Kira:	'Cause like some boys will probably be looking through a magazine because they're bored and all a sudden they see a male model and they, and like with a six pack and everything, they feel like, and compared with that person they feel like they're, like compared to that person they feel, probably feel like they're fat and lazy…
Alexis:	(interrupts) And like for some boys they could be like going through puberty and everything…
Kira:	(laughs)
Alexis:	…so they have zits all over their face. Not saying that's ok. I think it's kinda weird.
Kira:	(laughs)
Alexis:	But still, they can have zits all over their face and then people could just look at them and call them a dork or something like that.
Kira:	Yeah.
Alexis:	Or a nerd.
Kira:	(laughs)
Alexis:	Or a loser. Or worse like that.
Kira:	Yeah, way worse stuff that I'm not allowed to repeat.

The participants repeated this contradictory pattern in each of the six focus groups. They vacillated between acknowledging what was appropriate and applying this message in their thinking and discourse. There was a continual incompatibility between the accepted messages and the participants' lived experiences.

During the third focus group discussion, which was conducted after watching *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* wheelchair basketball episode (Eells & Correll, 2007), the incompatibility of the accepted message and the participants' lived experiences was apparent in Alexis' comments. When asked what the message of the program was, Alexis quickly replied, "Even if you have disability problems, that you're still a regular person, so just do what you want to do." Kira quickly responded, "Yeah. That's what I was going to say. Word stealer." Thirty seconds later Alexis articulated, "Even though people like, who are in wheelchairs, even though like, like, they can't exactly walk and everything, doesn't mean that they cannot do what we can do." Despite her habitual use of the phrase "disability problems" as a synonym for "disability," on the surface it appeared that the group had a sound understanding of the episode's message. However, a closer examination of Alexis' description of people in wheelchairs exposed an irreconcilable "us" versus "them" dichotomy that became more explicit as she answered an additional question. As explained in the description of Alexis that appears in Chapter 2, she consistently chose her words purposefully, which often caused her speech to stumble:

> Ok, there's this kid. (pause) Ok, there's some (pause) few people I know that, (pause) I like to hang out with because they're (pause) they have disability problems and they are in wheelchairs but they are learning how to walk. And there's this little kid and his name is Anthony, and, um, he is in a wheelchair. And like, everybody like tries to treat him the same (pause) and then when he (pause) he is (pause) like when we're training him to walk, we all like try to (pause) we take our time and help him out and everything like that. And there's another girl, her name's Ashley. She is in wheelchairs too. And we like, try to make her feel like she's an actual person. Like, even though she's like a person, but make her feel like she's an ACTUAL person who's standing up like other people.

Denying a person in a wheelchair the title of an "actual" person further illuminated the divide that existed between the television programs' intended message of acceptance and the message of intolerance of those individuals whose differences were exploited. Thus, the television program's modeling of lack of acceptance of difference blocks the participants' internalization or application of the message of acceptance to their daily lived experiences.

The characters in the programs did not fully recognize and display internalization of the message of acceptance either. The characters verbally stated messages, but as soon as the object of the message was out of view, the characters returned to the behavior that they had briefly redirected. As a result, one can conclude that television programs that target adolescent audiences promote doing what is decent and honorable only when one is observed. This message was crystal clear in an episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* entitled "Health and fitness" (Nemetz & Correll, 2007). In this scene London and Maddie, concerned about their individual appearances, attempted to alter their physical traits by taking extreme measures. Mr. Moseby, the manager of the hotel, approached them to discuss the situation.

Mr. Moseby:	Look girls, this is ridiculous. Now, if you want one man's opinion, I think you are both two beautiful young women.
London:	You really think so?
Mr. Moseby:	Absolutely, and you don't need to change the way you look.
London and Maddie:	(smile)
London:	Thanks, Moseby.
Maddie:	You're the best.
London and Maddie:	(in unison) Goodnight. (wave and smile)
Mr. Moseby:	Goodnight. (walks away)

| Maddie: | He's gone!!! (they both instantly go back to extreme efforts to change their body shapes) |

This pattern of repeating a standardized and moral message, but being unable or unwilling to internalize it, appeared in the words and behaviors of both television characters and discussion group participants. The repetition of the message appeared effortless, but the implementation proved more problematic and complicated.

In the focus discussions, participants regularly displayed this lack of internalization of the messages they so easily had shared verbally. A speech from Kira embodied this discrepancy:

> ...there's always a lesson to learn in this show. Like me and my sister, we learn that even though we're sisters we shouldn't be always mad and fighting with each other. Like once in a while we'll be fighting and then a show comes on and we're totally distracted by the TV. We'll end up watching Hannah Montana and there's a lesson about, about people fighting and all that. Kelly and I realize how much we fight but we still end up fighting anyway. (laughs) Until my parents come up yelling at us, then we stop. Most of the time.

Kira's response elucidates the lack of internalization of the messages television programs provide.

This disconnect, however, may be attributed to the superficial way in which the lessons are presented. The following scene from an episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* offered many opportunities for the focus group participants to respectfully explore the idea of difference (Eells & Correll, 2007). Yet, when the participants shared even slight acceptance or understanding of difference, often a humorous rejoinder seemed to purposefully deflect the importance of the lesson. The following scene occurred as Zack and Cody prepared in the gym for the wheelchair basketball game. All players from both

teams warmed up in wheelchairs, as Zack and Cody quickly rolled past their friends Bob

and Trent:

Bob:	(attempting to roll forward but only rolling in circles)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Trent:	(sits in his chair and stares at Bob rolling in circles)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Trent:	What are you doing?
Laugh Track Inserted	
Bob:	(throws hands up in the air) Beats me.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Bob:	(puts hands to forehead and hides his face)
Trent:	(with hands on his hips and leaning in condescendingly) Do you know we got a game coming up?
Bob:	Relax, Trent. It's only an exhibition.
Trent:	My dad said, 'If you're not giving maximum effort all of the time, you're a waste of human life.'
Bob:	Oh, he must be a lot of fun at parties. (laughs and hits Trent on arm)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Lisa:	**(smiles)**
Daryl:	(Coach of Rockland Rollers who is in a wheelchair) Hey, where's your coach?
Arwin:	(Maintenance man at hotel and coach of Zack and Cody's basketball team) (speeds by in a fast, out of control wheelchair with flames coming out the back while he is screaming) Ahhhhhhhhh!
Laugh Track Inserted	
Arwin:	(a crashing noise is heard as Arwin hits wall at end of gym)
Daryl:	Ah, don't worry. Electric wheelchairs aren't allowed in the game anyway.
Arwin:	What? (appears in wheelchair looking disheveled, his glasses are crooked, and there is a hula dancer figurine attached to the arm of his wheelchair) They're not allowed here. They're not allowed in the carpool lane (makes quotation marks with his fingers around these words)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Arwin:	Where are they allowed?
Cody:	Daryl, this is our coach Arwin.

Daryl:	Oh, hey, how you doing Coach? (rolls to Arwin and shakes his hand)
Arwin:	(leans in to shake Daryl's hand) Hi, Daryl.
Daryl:	Cool. Good, good. So where'd you coach before?
Arwin:	Oh, uh, uh, nowhere.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Daryl:	(astonished tone) So, where'd you play?
Arwin:	Oh, played? I just (pause) nowhere.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Daryl:	So, why'd you get into coaching?
Arwin:	(looks down at his blazer and proudly adjusts it) Well, this snazzy jacket of course.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Daryl:	Talk about playing with a handicap.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Daryl:	Good luck. (taps Cody on the shoulder) Hey, let's do some lay-ups.
Cody:	Great. I'm real excited to be on the court.
Zack:	Yeah, you should be good at this. You're used to sitting during our games (laughs).
Laugh Track Inserted	
Daryl:	Hey, Zack. Come on, get the ball, man.
Zack:	(starts to stand up to get the basketball)
Daryl:	(stops him) Ho, in the chair, partner.
Zack:	(sits back down in chair and starts to wheel toward ball)
Trent:	(loudly to his team) Come on guys, let's focus.
Zack:	(continues to try to get the ball but is unable to from the wheelchair as the ball continually rolls away from him)
Trent:	I believe in hard work.
Bob:	I believe in frequent, short naps.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	(still struggling to pick up the ball. He looks around to see if anyone is looking and when he sees that no one is looking he pushes the wheelchair back and steps out of the chair to pick up the basketball)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Jamie:	(friend who recently was injured and is permanently in a wheelchair rolls into the entrance of the gym in his wheelchair)
Zack:	(arrogant tone) Oh hey, Jamie. You decided to check out the team?

Jamie:	(angrily) No, the wheelchair exit is out that door (points to side of gym).
Zack:	Oh, you mean the skateboard ramp?
Laugh Track Inserted	
Jamie:	(angrily rolls his eyes)
Zack:	Hey, why don't you stick around for awhile? (slaps Jamie on the arm)
Jamie:	I have better things to do than watch you guys make fools of yourselves.
Zack:	(defensively) We are not making fools of ourselves.
Arwin:	(zooms by in his electric wheelchair and crashes into another wall screaming) Ahhhhh! Incoming.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Arwin:	(Arwin is still out of sight of the camera but a hubcap rolls back into the gym from Arwin's crash in his wheelchair)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	(walks past Jamie to check on Arwin)
Jamie:	I'm outta here (starts to roll away toward other side of gym to the exit rolling over Zack's foot without looking back or apologizing)
Zack:	Ow!
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	Stop that!
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack:	You know, the Jamie I knew wasn't a quitter. (yelling across gym) But if that's what you want to be then fine, just keep on walking! (looks at Daryl) That was a poor choice of words.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Alexis:	**(laughs)**

The opportunities for exploration of disabling barriers in this scene, and in the entire

program, were never acknowledged. The characters' societal expectations and the

perpetuation of disabling stereotypes were not further addressed or examined. Disability

studies literature has drawn attention to the fact that television programs often portray the

lives of people with disabilities as one dimensional, and, the literature argues, the media

does little to explore the disabling barriers that society has created for these characters

(Barnes & Mercer, 2003). In this episode, the blatant disregard for the physical and social barriers of the characters was clear. Yet, viewers typically overlook these barriers when laugh tracks imply oppositional messages.

The ease with which one can ignore these barriers was further illuminated twenty minutes into the episode when the character of Jamie joined Zack and Cody's team because, as he tells his new teammates, "I decided I'd better play. Not that I want to but I can't let you guys turn our team into a laughing stock." Zack replied to Jamie's concession with a handshake and "Welcome back to the team." Another laugh track obscures further lessons on societal oppression when Cody, wearing a jersey with the number 30, inquired as to whom Jamie would replace. Zack replied, "Well, I'll give you a hint. His number rhymes with nerdy." Lack of acceptance of difference pervaded this episode as it did the others, in a multitude of forms.

A final example of the parallel of patterns between the characters and the focus group participants is pointedly evident in Alexis' statement regarding the *That's so Raven* episode watched in the final focus group (Waddles, 2004), "The jocks. Uncool! They is so immature for being jocks. They made fun of Eddy because of his fear of heights. They made fun of Chelsea because of the ring. Even though I was laughing myself, but still..."

CHAPTER 4

RELATIONSHIPS/INTERACTIONS AND CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

As I prepared to conduct my own primary research, I read a great deal of the current disability studies literature, hoping to anticipate possible relationship and interactional attributes that I might find in the television characters that were portrayed with disabilities and my participants' reaction to these characters. However, the absence of characters with disabilities and my subsequent interpretation of a global lack of acceptance of atypical social or personal characteristics, led me to discover that much of the disability studies research still applied but in a different configuration. Rather than the expected direct connection to disability studies literature I had anticipated finding, the participants' interpretations of the television relationships and interactions instead coincided with their personal relationships and interactions. The participants' perceptions of the character relationships as relating to their own relationships led to my summarized interpretations derived once again from disability studies literature, albeit with a more expansive range of meaning. While the participants viewed the television programs as entertaining and relating to their own relationships, they were unaware that the programs also reinforced stereotypes previously addressed in literature.

While television programs that include portrayals of disability entertain, they also simultaneously provide information that shapes attitudes about individuals with disabilities. Referring to cinematic representations of disability, Safran (2001) asserted, "If, for example, movies portray persons with disabilities as violent, dependent, or incompetent, the public may be less accepting of them as neighbors, parents, or co-

workers" (p. 223). No doubt this statement applies with equal force to television. These "disabling images, themselves created and controlled by non-disabled people, are essentially founded on concepts of dependency, abnormality, individual tragedy and the colonization of disability" (Swain et al., 2004, p. 3). These statements describe the character relationships that were portrayed as typical in the programs viewed for this study.

What these television programs depicted as typical relationships did not reflect functional relationships in society. The harsh humor, cruelty, and sarcasm repeatedly utilized in the television programs symbolized interactions that, if applied to relationships off-screen, would result in harassment, oppression, stereotypes, and an ideology of exclusion toward anyone not conforming to a pre-established, yet situational, norm.

<div align="center">Disregard for Feelings of Others</div>

Humor

I analyzed the focus group data from a hermeneutics perspective (see Chapter 2), recognizing the power of the language utilized by the adolescent participants. They frequently uttered the word "funny," especially under the guise of "that's funny." These utterances led me to attempt to uncover what they found humorous. After transcribing the focus group sessions, I analyzed and reanalyzed each to identify what the individual participants and the collective group considered funny. However, I discovered that the multiple components that these adolescents associated with the term "funny" were much more complicated than I had originally anticipated.

The participants used "funny" when describing their interpretations of characters in the programs, the actions of the character, the scenes themselves and the episodes in general. For example, when asked what they liked about the episodes or a specific character, the participants often responded "it was funny" or "they were funny." Frequently during the viewing of the programs, the participants (especially Kira) reacted with statements such as, "I like Meena. She's funny." Later in the same focus group, Kira further explained why Meena was funny, "She's funny because she doesn't get the jokes that Cory's trying to say." Alexis supplemented Kira's description of the humor in Meena's language deficiency by elaborating, "Yeah, that was like the only part she was funny at."

Using the word "funny" as a form of ridiculing others as a result of their difference, as seen in the following dialogue, occurred frequently in the focus groups:

Alexis:	(laughs) I think Newt is like the funniest person because how he acts so (pause) dumb is funny.
Kira:	I know. It would be hilarious if somebody like him was real.
Facilitator:	Ok, so (pause) you don't think (pause) tell me about that. You don't think there are people like him who are real?
Kira:	Well, no, um, I mean somebody who's related to me that was like him. That would be hilarious (bounces in seat). I'd be laughing my head off.

Kira and Alexis' agreement about "dumb" being "funny" and "hilarious" occurred often and was not just a concurrence between those two participants. In a subsequent focus group, the group further discussed the term "funny" in relation to characters in the programs:

Facilitator:	What about them makes them funny?
Alexis:	They act like (pause), they are (pause), they act so stupid. Or how they act is really stupid.
David:	(raises hand)
Facilitator:	Go ahead, David.
David:	It was funny when, um, when Zack and Cody called their friend over. They called Jamie over and they made a lie so he can come over to their house. And he said that uh, Jessica Simpson is in the hotel and, and he said that's a lie. And then, and then he said, and then Zack said that she just, he just, that she just walked by. And then he said, "Hi, Jessica Simpson" and then, and then he acted like he was Jessica Simpson on the phone.
Kira:	'Hey y'all' (mimicking what Cody said in the program)
David:	So then he said that, 'I'll be right over to see her' but it wasn't really her and she wasn't really at the hotel it was just...
Alexis:	(interrupts) That was funny when he said...
Lisa:	(interrupts) That was funny when he told that guy he looked ugly in person.
Alexis:	'No offense, but you look so ugly in person.' (repeating what Jamie said on the program)

Again, "stupid" is deemed to be "funny" in the participants' character interpretations. *The Simpsons* episode (Grearney & Reardon, 1995) revealed further evidence that the participants used both the terms "funny" and "hilarious" to mock someone's difference.

Facilitator:	Did you like it?
Lisa:	Yeah.
Kira:	Yeah.
Facilitator:	Why did you like it, Lisa?
Lisa:	'Cause it was funny.
Kira:	Homer got FAT.
Lisa:	And you gotta learn, like, just cause you like something doesn't mean, like, you should, like, make yourself do something that you don't want to do. Just do something that you like.
Kira:	(burp) Excuse me.
Facilitator:	Ok, Charlie. You said you liked it too. Why did you like it?

Charlie:	Homer got fat. Couldn't run.
Alexis:	Wait, um, can this be out of order (referring to the order with which the questions are asked)
Facilitator:	Sure.
Alexis:	Ok, would you, would you, um, um, ah, recommend this to your friend? (answers her own question) Yep.
Kira:	Uh, hm.
Alexis:	Why? Because?
Kira:	It's hilarious.
Alexis:	It's just hilarious and it's like so funny and everything, so. Yep. Your turn. Would you? Why?
Lisa:	Would I what?
Kira:	(nods head) It's hilarious.
Facilitator:	Recommend it to your friends?
Alexis:	Would you Lisa?
Lisa:	Um, yeah.
Alexis:	Why?
Lisa:	Because it's funny.
Alexis:	Charlie, would you?
Charlie:	(nods his head as he is drinking from a water bottle)
Alexis:	Ok.
Facilitator:	Is that a yes?
Alexis:	Why?
Charlie:	It's funny.
Alexis:	Hmm. And then that, um.
Facilitator:	Ok. Let's go back to that for a second. You said it was hilarious and funny. What was? What made it hilarious and funny?
Alexis:	Just because like, Homer and like the kids. He's weird 'cause like, um, Homer...
Lisa:	(interrupts) He's fat.
Kira:	(laughs)
Alexis:	(laughs) He was trying to do stuff. So the funny part, like, was, he was, he was skinny and he wanted him to gain 300 pounds so...
Charlie:	(shakes head vigorously) Hnnn,nnnn.
Alexis:	...when he was trying to gain three hundred pounds.
Kira:	He was trying to gain sixty-one but he was trying to get to...
Alexis:	(interrupts) Well, still...
Charlie:	Sixty-one.
Alexis:	Well, get to 300 pounds. Whatever.
Charlie:	You said fifty-one.

Kira:	I said sixty-one.
Charlie:	Fifty.
Lisa:	Oh, well.
Alexis:	He, um, was trying to eat all this food. And so then every time he weighed hisself, he always goes a little bit short and he only (pause), he forgot all his fat was on the towel rack thing. And it was so hilarious. And then he let it go and he was over the (laughs)...
Kira:	(smiles)
Alexis:	...over the, um, amount and it was so hilarious.
Lisa:	He was three hundred fifteen.
Facilitator:	Is that what made it funny for the rest of you?
Lisa:	Yeah. (pause) Yes and no.
Alexis:	He actually ate clay.
Kira:	I know. That was so disgusting.
Lisa:	Then when them people were spraying him when he was in that thing.
Kira:	That was funny.

My questioning was my attempt at bringing the group closer to a solid description of

funny. The conversation as to the "funniness" of the program ended with the following

dialogue:

Kira:	I like the part when he was, he tried to lay in his bed and he was so fat he made the bed sink down (laughs).
Alexis:	(laughs) Another part that was like, he was trying to, um, he was laughing...
Kira:	(laughs)
Alexis:	...and he was having, they was cleaning him.
Lisa:	(raises hand) I like the part when he was dancin'.
Alexis:	That was funny.
Kira:	That was funny.
Charlie:	(laughs while drinking from his water bottle)

This conclusion to their discussion of "funniness" revealed the humor they perceived in

the humiliation the character was forced to endure because of his weight gain. The focus

group participants engaged in many discussions during which the descriptor "funny"

drew attention to a character's difference in a humiliating or demeaning way.

Not only did the participants use the word "funny" to describe characters, they

also used it to describe entire episodes. For example, in the episode of *The Simpsons*

(Grearney & Reardon, 1995), 25 words into the program, Charlie stated, "I seen this one.

It's funny. It's hilarious." To which Lisa echoed, "high-lar-i-ous. The participants

frequently repeated comments about the "funniness" of the program throughout the

viewing. In the discussion that followed the viewing, I prompted the participants to

define the term "funny," as I was interpreting that they used it interchangeably with

"cool:"

Charlie:	It was funny.
Facilitator:	It was funny? You just think, 'it was funny?'
Kira:	(laughs)
Charlie:	Yeah, 'that was funny.'
Facilitator:	Um, is funny the same thing as cool?
All participants:	(simultaneously) Yeah.
Facilitator:	Funny and cool are the same thing?
Lisa:	Pretty much.
Alexis:	(thinking about changing her answer) Nnnn.
Charlie:	No, but cool means…
Kira:	Uh, kinda.
Facilitator:	Kind of? Kira says 'uh, kinda.' You're waving your hand (to Alexis).
Alexis:	It's in the middle 'cause like cool…
Charlie:	(interrupts) COOL means Constipated, Overweighted, Out of style, Loser.
Alexis:	Exactly.
Kira, Lisa, and Alexis:	(laugh)
Facilitator:	Ok.
Lisa:	The boys say that.
Alexis:	Cool has its meaning and so do like, um, uh, what is (pause)? FREAK! I forgot FREAK.
Facilitator:	What does that mean?
Kira:	That's what my dad is.

Alexis:	It's something (pause) rich kid.
Charlie:	You mean JERK?
Alexis:	Yeah, that. It's some...
Charlie:	(interrupts) Junior, Educated, Rich, Kid.
Alexis:	That's the thing!
Lisa:	He knows everything.
Alexis:	No, he don't.
Kira:	He's the smarty-mc-smart-smart.
All participants:	(laugh)
Facilitator:	But are these terms, how often do people use these terms?
Alexis:	Every time.
Kira:	A lot.
Alexis:	'Cause a lot of people say, um, people like, um, say, 'You're a jerk.' I'm like, and then some people, 'Well, thank you, I know I'm a jerk' and then like they, somebody like look at them like they're crazy and talk about 'em, 'Ok, I just called you a jerk.'

Although this dialogue broached much more than the original intent, which was to obtain a more succinct interpretation of the term funny, it is an excellent example of how when initially asked a question the participants were quick to state an answer, yet their understanding of their own answers varied.

As noted in the previous chapter, the majority of each episode that we viewed displayed behaviors and speech which reflected "what not to do" in relation to the episode's overarching message. This duration directly impacted how the participants used the term "funny." They frequently used it to describe the majority of the duration of the program, that portion of the program that illustrated a lack of acceptance of difference. In other words, the adolescent viewers labeled as "funny" those scenes in which interactions and relationships were dysfunctional and in which humor was used ruthlessly. The less humorous scenes, according to the participants, were the final and shorter ones during which the characters touted the serious lessons. Humor often

appeared in these final scenes as was evidenced by the frequently inserted laugh tracks. However, it was at these junctures that the laughter aimed less "at" the characters and more "with" them.

The deliberate placement of the laugh tracks revealed previously obscured messages because the intentional placement illuminated for the viewers appropriate times and situations for laughter; "funny" was defined for the audience. In my journal, directly after viewing *Kim Possible* in the focus group with the adolescents, I noted, "There is no laugh track for *Kim Possible*. Why had I not noticed this before when I watched and transcribed it, yet I was keenly aware of it almost immediately when watching this with the focus group?" Both of the animated episodes that were shown to the adolescent participants lacked laugh tracks. The other four episodes (and all of the non-animated additional programs I viewed) were inundated with them. Therefore, I found it important during the data analysis stages to add laugh track notations to the existing transcriptions. I also added notations of participant laughter.

I heard the inserted laugh tracks much more frequently than the laughter from the participants. The programmatically replicated laugh tracks often reflected a desire to alleviate uncomfortable situations. In this example from *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* (Eells & Correll, 2007), the two brothers introduced their mother (Carrie) to Daryl, the coach of the wheelchair basketball team, who was in a wheelchair.

Zack:	(after knock on door) I'll get it. (looks through eyehole) There's no one there.
Daryl:	(from other side of door) Hello, I'm down here.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Cody:	Ah. (opens door) Hey, Daryl. Thanks for coming to meet our friend.

Daryl:	Hey, no problem.
Carrie:	(entering room) Daryl. Hi. I'm Carrie. I have been wanting to meet you since I saw you last night at my show. (shakes Daryl's hand)
Daryl:	Oh, really? Hmmm. (sprays breath spray)
Laugh Track Inserted	
Carrie:	Oh, no, I'm not interested in you for that. (nervously) I mean, (physically freezes) not that I couldn't be.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Carrie:	I mean, you're a very attractive man. What I'm trying to say (long pause). I dated a guy in a wheelchair once (talking uncomfortably and quickly). Maybe you know him.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Zack and Cody:	(simultaneously) Ugh.
Laugh Track Inserted	
Daryl:	Carrie, listen, I was just playing around. I have a girlfriend.
Carrie:	Is she in a wheelchair, too?
Daryl:	No, she can walk (sarcasm laced with cheerfulness). Maybe you know her.
Laugh Track Inserted	

Laugh tracks appeared as efforts to lighten awkward or uncomfortable situations. The placement of such laugh tracks is significant when examining the hegemony that the program conveys. In the 41 episodes I viewed, I was overwhelmed by the large number of laugh tracks utilized. I noted that very often they appeared following a mistake, a cruel comment, or after the use of sarcasm. The laughter from the focus group participants generally came at the expense of a character's mistake or difference and almost always aligned with a network inserted laugh track.

The participants expressed a desire to see even more humor at the expense of others. When I asked participants how they would change the ending to the *Hannah*

Montana episode watched in the focus group (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006), Kira added this suggestion:

> I'd make it kinda funny. Like, I'd have the same ending except for the fact that the girl that...was challenging Lilly is in the background trying to show off some moves and trying to get the trophy one last time. She ends up falling on her butt and her skateboard goes flying and hits somebody in the head. (laughs) That'd be funny.

Kira's description of her "kinda funny" ending revealed her definition of "funny," while simultaneously directly refuting the positive message of the program, much like the pattern noted by characters who stated a message, refuted the message when it applied to them, then stated the message again for an "end of episode salvation."

<u>Sarcasm</u>

Intriguingly, laugh tracks and the participants' laughter occurred simultaneously most often after the use of sarcasm. Television characters often used sarcasm throughout entire episodes, and the participants used it while viewing and discussing the episodes as well. The cruel and ruthless humor of the characters knew no boundaries. An example, from a *Hannah Montana* episode entitled "I want you to want me...to go to Florida" (Poryes & Christiansen, 2007) highlighted the credence given to sarcasm. In the following scene, Hannah Montana and another child superstar, Mikayla, starred on a television talk show together, smiling and laughing. When the talk show went to a commercial, Hannah Montana, Mikayla, and their manager parents had the following discussion:

Miley (Hannah Montana)	It is so great to finally meet you. I really am a huge fan.
Mikayla:	I hate you (serious).

Miley (Hannah Montana)	(smiling because she anticipates a similar return greeting) Thanks, I feel the exact same (pauses when she comprehends Mikayla's words). What?
Mikayla:	Your voice is stinchy. Your music is stupid. Your outfits make me want to puke on 'em. But it looks like somebody already did (walks away).
Miley (Hannah Montana)	(to herself) Ok. (walks over to Mikayla) I don't know what your problem is...
Mikayla:	(interrupts) My problem is, I'm 10 times better than you and you're gonna find that out in Florida, Miss Hannah-I'm-Taking-All-Your-Fannas.
Miley (Hannah Montana)	Ok, listen here you one-hit-bobblehead, the only thing you're taking from me is lessons. Ok? Lesson number one: This (moves head and neck) is how you do the head thing. Yeah, that's right (taps the front of Mikayla's hat). I went there.
Mikayla:	Well, you know where I'm gonna go?
Miley (Hannah Montana)	(smiling a fake cheerful grin) Down the toilet with the rest of your career? Yeah, that's right. I went there again. And this time I bought property.
Mikayla's mother:	(pushes Mikayla out of the way to get to Hannah Montana) Back off kid and don't go shooting off your little tweeny-bopper mouth at my client. Ok?
Miley (Hannah Montana)	(not apologetically but instead harshly) She started it.
Mikayla's mother:	Yeah and I am ending it, Little Miss Soon-To-Be-Used-To-Be.
Hannah's father:	(enters scene) Whoa, Nellie. I don't know who put the burr underneath your saddle but no one talks to my client that way.
Miley (Hannah Montana)	It's ok, Dad. I can handle it.
Mikayla's mother:	(to Hannah's father) You heard her Zeke. Why don't you go wait in the wagon.
Hannah's father:	Excuse me?
Mikayla's mother:	Oh, and while you're at it, (smiling a fake cheerful grin) you might want to shave the ferret off your face, ok? (referring to his facial hair)
Hannah's father:	I'll shave mine when you shave yours. That's right, I went there.
TV Crewmember:	We are back in 5...4...
Hannah and Mikayla:	(run to television broadcast table)
TV Crewmember:	...3...
Hannah and Mikayla:	(the girls grab hands like close friends as the television host slips into his seat)

Television Host:	Great story, Hannah. (looks to camera) Hey, we're back and we're having some fun now (sounds very convincing). Aren't we girls?
Mikayla:	(large false smile) Oh yeah, I just can't wait until Florida.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	Neither can I.
Hannah and Mikayla:	(the two girls embrace, look at the camera smiling, and wave cheerfully)

Interestingly, the previous scene, like so many of the others which I viewed, displayed children as often as adults using harsh sarcasm. In addition to sarcasm, many of the adolescent characters' negative behaviors were very similar to the adult characters' destructive traits.

An examination of the interactions containing multiple sarcastic remarks led me to reexamine disability studies literature on oppression. With reference to the social model of disability, Swain et al.(2004) described clearly what might also be interpreted as media's oppressive representation of people with disabilities: "It is rooted in the history of the oppression of disabled people - a history of elimination, segregation, marginalization, enforced dependency, and social death..." (p. 2). When I began this study, I had anticipated that I would examine characters portrayed as having disabilities to see if they were shown as oppressed in the television programs. In addition, I had wondered if the adolescents might view people with disabilities as the oppressors, not the oppressed. An example of such a reversal is Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, a character portrayed as having a disability whose role can be viewed as that of an oppressor. In the past, the media has, at times, utilized characters with disabilities as threatening and evil presences that seek revenge against a society that has shunned them.

In the focus group viewings and discussions, however, I found oppression of differences flourished under the guise of sarcasm. In the *Hannah Montana* dialogue included earlier (Poryes & Christiansen, 2007), each speaker attempted to oppress the other through the use of demeaning and condescending comments and voice intonations. In the same episode, just minutes later, this climate of verbal oppression continued in Hannah Montana's family home:

Miley (Hannah Montana):	(to Lilly) I cannot wait to get to that concert to show that two-faced, tone-deaf, toad who's boss.
Lilly:	Yeah, but you have to wear something amazing. Mikayla always looks INCREDIBLE...
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(glares at Lilly)
Lilly:	...for a two faced, tone-deaf, toad. (forced smile)
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(forced smile followed by a brief glare)
Hannah's father:	(on the phone with Mikayla's mother) Well, I don't care what Mikayla wants. It's a benefit concert and all the girls are sharing one dressing room.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(dancing around the room with Lilly, proud of and encouraging her father's telephone behavior) Go, Daddy! Go, Daddy! Go, Daddy!
Mikalya's mother:	(shown on other end of phone line) I don't think so. Because unlike you and your (makes quotation marks with her fingers) KINFOLK, my client didn't grow up in a barn and we're expecting our own dressing room.
Hannah's father:	Oh, I could see why you would need more room. I mean, where else are you gonna put Mikayla's ego and your big mouth.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	(smiles broadly)
Mikayla's mother:	Step off, Goober.
Hannah's father:	Oh, darn. I'm afraid I'm losing you (puts a bag of potato chips by the phone and puts pressure on the wrapper to produce a static like noise). We're breaking up.
Mikayla's mother:	I know that trick. You're crunching potato chips.
Hannah's father:	They're corn chips and you're not getting another room (hangs up phone).
Hannah's father:	(talking proudly to Lilly and Hannah Montana when off telephone) And that's the way Robbie Ray rolls.

That the father models sarcasm in front of adolescents and receives admiration and encouragement from the adolescents is troubling. Ironically, Hannah who encouraged her father's sarcasm during this episode, at many times in other episodes that I viewed, was the target of his sarcasm albeit with slightly less cruelty.

Often, the characters delivered their sarcasm via cruel "one liners" intended to be viewed as humorous. In the episode of *Hannah Montana* shown to the adolescent focus group participants (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006), Jackson used exercise equipment, and rather than ask his father if he would like to try the equipment, Jackson used one line of sarcasm to ridicule his father's weight with, "Well, I'd like to see you give it a try, Flabio." Jackson's comment concurrently criticized his father's weight (flab) and physical appearance (Fabio). Many sarcastic remarks from Hannah, Jackson and his own mother focused on the father's weight. However, Billy Ray Cyrus, the actor who played the father, is very slightly overweight, if at all. His character, though, was a frequent target of oppressive sarcasm that not only focused on his weight, but on his southern heritage as well. One example of sarcasm directed at Billy Ray's southern heritage came from a photographer who did not want to hear his advice and mumbled, "Just what I need, Jethro's chicken-fried wisdom."

When delivering sarcasm in one quickly stated line, it seemed as though no consideration of the target's feelings were ever considered. For example, often best friends served as the objects of unyielding and oppressive sarcasm. *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* offered numerous examples via the interactions between London and Maddie. The focus group participants described London as "the slow, dumb, rich one" and

Maddie as the "smart one." Their descriptions stemmed from seeing London consistently

and sarcastically poke fun at Maddie's lack of money as London consistently and

sarcastically poked fun at London's lack of intelligence.

London:	(to Maddie) And I'm sorry I stole your blue collar cheap look.
Maddie:	You mean chic.
London:	No.

In 11 words London was able to effectively expose a social hierarchy in which she

prevailed over Maddie. In another example, the content of the dialogue was different, but

the use of sarcastic humor at the expense of another's difference was the same:

London:	(to her friend) Francesca, could you please stop insulting Maddie? Her life is pathetic enough without you. (looks to Maddie) Don't say I never defend you.
Maddie:	Can I say you never defend me WELL?

London's assertion that she is defending Maddie, could mislead the uninformed viewer to

overlook the sarcasm in her discourse. The following dialogue, again between London

and Maddie calls to the forefront the relationship portrayed as typical between these two

characters with socio-economic and intellectual differences:

London:	(concerned voice) Maddie, that makeup you're wearing makes you look all sad.
Maddie:	I am sad.
London:	Oh, no. Now you're probably going to tell me why and I'm gonna have to pretend to care.
Maddie:	London, you are the last person I would ever go to for sympathy.
London:	(happily) Ok. (begins to walk away)

This type of selfish interaction was shown as commonplace between London and

Maddie. These two characters not only displayed their sarcasm directly to one another,

but they also did not shy away from displaying such sarcasm with others present. For

example, in one episode that I viewed, London's new stepmother assured her, "I already love you. You're my daughter and you're perfect in every way." Before London could reply, Maddie sarcastically interjected, "Wait 'til you get to know her."

London and Maddie from *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* were not the only characters portrayed as best friends who continually oppressed each other with sarcasm. Cory and Newt, from *Cory in the house*, did as well. In the episode shown to the focus group (Cunningham et al., 2007), one such example between the two characters occurred in their science class when Professor Dobbs discovered that the new student, Jessica, was a genius:

Professor Dobbs:	I knew you looked familiar. You're Jessica Moldenado. Little Genius Jessica.
Jessica:	Yeah, I kinda dropped the 'Little Genius' part. Let's just go with Jessica.
Professor Dobbs:	And she's modest. You played concert piano at two. You graduated from college at nine. What the flippity-jip are you doing here?
Jessica:	Well, I skipped through school so fast I kinda missed the whole experience of being with kids my own age. Plus, you gotta be 18 to do brain surgery.
Cory:	(laughing to Meena) Too bad she can't operate on Newt's brain. Ha, ha.

Cory's comment exemplified the cruel nature of sarcasm portrayed as existing between best friends. In almost all of the episodes viewed, similar sarcasm existed between friends, followed by a laugh track, generally equating a character's difference with a deficiency.

Family members depicted in television programs received equally oppressive and ruthless treatment. Sarcastic humor at the expense of a sibling occurred most often

between Raven and Cory in *That's so Raven* and between Zack and Cody in *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*, when the six episodes were compared. During one episode of *That's so Raven*, Cory was watching a skateboarding group rehearse:

Cory:	I came here to check out the X Squad. Man, they've got the coolest shirts, the coolest nicknames. I wish I could skate like them.
Raven:	(supportive tone, puts her arm around Cory) Oh, I bet you could. You're just missing two things: a skateboard and some skills (laughs at Cory).

Raven, as the older sister, most often made the sarcastic remarks toward Cory, her younger brother, in the eight episodes of *That's so Raven* I viewed. In *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*, it was Zack, the more irresponsible identical twin, who delivered the majority of sarcastic remarks. For example, in one episode I viewed, Zack mimicked a talk show host and elaborately professed about his brother, "And the winner of Boston's Biggest Nerd for an unprecedented five years in a row is Cody Martin." In both programs, the characters' use of sarcasm invoked little to no remorse.

In addition to familial sarcasm, further sarcasm bantered between characters who were complete strangers. Characters unfamiliar with each other delivered sarcasm in the continued fashion of cruel "one liners" intended to be humorous:

Mr. Moseby:	(to Cody at the first baseball game Mr. Moseby attended) You know, I read the Encyclopedia of Baseball last night.
Cody:	All of it?
Mr. Moseby:	Well, you know, you have to be informed. Don't want to appear the boob.
Baseball fan behind him:	Too late.

As demonstrated in this *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* dialogue (Kallis & Geoghan, 2006), two words served to oppress Mr. Moseby. In another *The Suite life of Zack and*

Cody episode (Kallis & Geoghan, 2007) their mother encountered more extensive and sustained sarcasm:

Carrie:	(looking at price tag on an item of clothing) Whoa, that's a lot of numbers. (looks at clerk). What do you suggest for a woman who's on a budget?
Store clerk:	Marry a rich man? (laughs politely) Or failing that, down the street, the 49 cent store. (laughs and forces a false, polite, smile)
Carrie:	(knocks on dressing room door where Zack and Cody are hiding inside) Hello? Is anyone in here?
Cody:	(voice disguised) It's occupied.
Carrie:	I'm sorry.
Cody:	(voice disguised) It's alright Mom. (Zack hits him) Ma'am.
Carrie:	(looks a bit confused but turns to clerk) Excuse me, do you have any other changing rooms?
Store clerk:	Oh (touching the tag on a dress Carrie was going to try on). Size four. Aren't we being a bit optimistic?
London, Maddie, and Brandi:	(enter store. Brandi is London's new stepmother)
Brandi:	(to London and Maddie) Ok, you can buy whatever you want.
London:	I can do that anyway.
Maddie:	I can't! Thanks, Mom! (hugs Brandi)
London:	(puts hand up to block view and walks away)
Store Clerk:	London Tipton! How great to see you! (puts her hands on London's shoulders and makes a kissing gesture on her cheeks in an exaggerated fashion with London reciprocating).
Store Clerk:	(to London) Shall I throw everyone out of the store? (laughs but expression becomes serious as she turns to look at Carrie with annoyance). Really, it's no bother.
Carrie:	(looks past clerk) Hi girls.
London:	Hi, Carrie.
Store Clerk:	(looks surprised, then at London) You? Know her?
London:	Mm, hm.
Store Clerk:	You two are friends? (looks back and forth between Carrie and London)
Store Clerk:	(to Carrie) Love your hair. (laughs)
Carrie:	Sparkling water.
Store Clerk:	Citrus or berry?

| Carrie: | Surprise me. |
| Store Clerk: | (forces a false kindness) Oh. (Clasps hands and leaves group in search of water for Carrie). |

The adult store clerk repeatedly insulted her adult client by way of sarcasm. Not unusual in the dialogues, adult characters articulated ruthless and cruel humor as often as adolescent characters.

Academic scenarios demanded no less with characters using sarcasm in classrooms, hallways, and various academic settings. In contrived academic situations the sarcasm was again commonplace, often occurring between classmates. Cory and a classmate's discussion became negative while exiting a classroom in this *That's so Raven* episode (Poryes & Sherman, 2006) entitled "Four Aces:"

Cory:	Madison. Madison, can I ask you something?
Madison:	(turns and faces Cory with a smile that does not leave her face while she talks) Yes, you are a big dummy. (begins to walk away)
Cory:	Seriously, I need your help. It's my three month anniversary with Cindy.
Madison:	(sincere facial expression and voice tone) You remembered. (now louder and faster, no longer faking sincerity) Score one for the big dummy.
Cory:	Thanks. (smiles as he anticipants a compliment but then comprehends her statement)

Cory and Madison interacted in a calm and rational manner during her harsh sarcasm. In another scene involving Cory (*this one from Cory in the house*) Cory's instigation of sarcasm directed a more one-sided conversation (Cunningham et al., 2007):

| Professor Dobbs: | Alright, settle down everybody. (closes classroom door) Before we start, just a word to the wise. If you want to pass my class, you need to do more calculating (looks to Cory) and less gyrating. |

Cory:	(taps the shoulder of the boy sitting in front of him. The boy has very thick, black plastic rimmed glasses, is Asian, and is wearing a button up collared shirt). Less gyrating, you got that?
Other student:	(the boy looks confused but does not respond)

Cory emitted sarcasm and promoted stereotypes by tapping the shoulder of his studious Asian classmate. Professor Dobbs, Cory's teacher, stood just feet away.

Teachers and other adult characters present in the television schools provided equally discriminating and dehumanizing sarcasm. In a *That's so Raven* episode (Poryes & Sherman, 2005) entitled "Big Buzz," Raven's guidance counselor received a makeover resulting in the following dialogue with the female school principal during an all school assembly:

Guidance counselor:	I made some life changes.
Principal:	You're telling me. Nobody used to look twice at you.
Guidance counselor:	(forced smile) Ok, I get it.
Principal:	I mean, they used to say, 'Ms. Romano? Who?'
Guidance counselor:	(forced smile remains on her face) I said, 'I get it.'

The principal's sarcastic remarks were abrasive and abrupt yet general. In opposition, Mr. Moseby and Carrie directly indicated each other's physical deficiencies in teaching the hotel pool boy how to be "high society" in this dialogue from *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*:

Mr. Moseby:	Now, use your imagination and pretend that Carrie is a young, beautiful aristocrat (puts hand to mouth and snickers purposefully)
Carrie:	(quick glare at Mr. Moseby) After that you can pretend Moseby's tall enough to see over his desk (does a quick shake of pride with her body).
Lance:	(smiles)
Mr. Moseby:	Focus, Carrie. (mumbles) Amazon freak.

The adult characters of Carrie and Mr. Moseby were ironically coaching the teenage Lance on appropriate social interactions. An intolerance of people with differences is promoted to adolescent viewers by Carrie's discrimination of Mr. Moseby's short stature and Mr. Moseby's criticique of Carrie's tall physique. The characters' lack of serious reaction promotes indifference to sarcasm. Carrie's quick reiteration of sarcasm to Mr. Moseby was met with Mr. Moseby's mumbling under his breath.

The recipients of sarcasm generally displayed indifference or only a minor reaction. Furthermore, the most common character reaction to sarcasm was a confused facial expression:

London:	(to Maddie) Daddy's gonna build a hotel on a beach and name it after me.
Maddie:	(pretending to be excited) Oh great! I can't wait to stay at Hotel Airhead. Yeah! (giddy with false excitement)
London:	(mirroring Maddie's excitement then stops and looks confused)

At least once in all episodes of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody,* London donned this confused facial facade. In addition, recipients of sarcasm often mistakenly interpreted the sarcasm as a compliment. In this *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* scene (Kallis & Geoghan, 2007), Maddie complained of her peers not complying with her movie making demands while the mermaid obsessed pool boy, Lance, interpreted her criticism as a compliment:

Maddie:	This is (pause) is (pause). I can't say what it is. I'd have to go to confession! (grabs video camera that Estaban is taping with) Get out! (looks to entire

	group of actors) What I can say is you people all stink. Yeah. (points to Lance) Except for you. You mer-stink! (hands on hips).
Lance:	(excited by perceived compliment) Cool.
Maddie:	(stomps away)

Lance's verbalized misunderstanding further demonstrated his insinuated intellectual inferiority. In addition, blank looks accompanying mistaken compliments suggested intellectual confusion and inferiority.

An additional character reaction to sarcasm allowed for character understanding but with a restricted reaction of indifference. Characters acknowledged the sarcasm passively, rarely becoming angered. Instead, character reactions such as the following occurred:

Kim Possible:	(answering Wade's request for help with a "big" situation) We got something big here too. (referring to Ron's recent weight gain)
Ron:	Another line crossed, man. (said in a matter of fact tone)

Ron's inconsequential acknowledgement recognized but did not argue the claim.

Furthermore, in other episodes that I viewed, characters made no attempt to refute the claim, accepting it as truth:

London:	(explaining her informal attire to Lance) I dressed this way so you wouldn't feel out of place with my snobby, obnoxious friends. (turns to friends) Oh, no offense girls.
Friend #1:	None taken (cheerfully).
Friend #2:	You pegged it (matter of fact tone).

The sarcasm recipient's reaction, or lack thereof, promoted degrading sarcasm as a societal norm. In addition, there was no immediate or prolonged remorse by the characters who bestowed the cruel humor.

One exception to the lack of character reaction is what I refer to as the "Hello, I'm still here" response. The "Hello, I'm still here" response occurred in group situations where a group of characters discussed another character as if they were not present. The "Hello, I'm still here" scenario occurred as a means of character retort to a group's segregating sarcasm as present in Maddie's discourse:

London:	(in Tipton Hotel lobby with two friends)
Friend #1:	Tiffany, are you and your boyfriend coming to my yacht party this weekend?
Friend #2 (Tiffany):	No. My boyfriend Wintrop Barrington and I are going skiing this weekend. We'll be staying at the Barrington resort, at Barrington Mountain, in Barringtonia.
Friend #1:	(to London) Oh, I would have invited you but you don't have a boyfriend and I didn't want you to feel bad because you don't have a boyfriend (emphasis on the final few words)
London:	Actually, I do have a boyfriend. His name is Lance (smiles).
Lance:	(coming off elevator toward girls) Hey, London. Check out my new goggles (snaps them to his face). Hey, that hurt.
Friend #2 (Tiffany):	Who's the goofball?
London:	He's my (pause as she considers telling the friends that Lance is her boyfriend) poolboy. Oh, look at the time, you two must get going (rushes them away, pushing them toward the revolving door of the hotel).
Friends:	Bye. Thanks. Bye (one says 'bye' repeatedly when she can't get through the revolving door).
Lance:	(to London) Hey, how come you never introduce me to your friends? I introduce you to mine.
London:	Look, trust me. You wouldn't like my friends. I'm not a big fan myself.
Lance:	Something's a little fishy here, not in a good way. I think you don't want your friends to meet me.
London:	Phet, phet, phet. (swipes away the notion 3 times) Please. Look, I'll call one of them right now. (cell phone by ear) Hey, this is London. I just wanted to introduce you to my boyfriend, Lance.

Lance:	(takes phone and talks into it) Hi, it's nice to finally meet one of London's friends.
Maddie:	(who is the candy counter girl at the hotel is on other end of phone line) Lance, it's Maddie. We've met.
Lance:	(talking to London and pointing at phone) It's Maddie. She doesn't count.
Maddie:	(through phone) Hello! I can hear you.
Lance:	(still talking to London) I want to meet your other friends. The rich, high society ones who have different noses every time I see them.
London:	Fine, if it's important to you. I'll invite them over for tea. But just promise you won't say anything embarrassing like Maddie does.
Maddie:	(through phone) Still here! Did you call just to insult me?

Maddie's "Hello, I'm still here" response was indicative of the words and reactions of multiple characters employing this method of response. Due to the characters' disregard for the potentially harmful effects of sarcasm, it was not surprising that my participants failed to note the sarcasm or the cruelty.

Not only did my participants fail to verbalize the colossal use of sarcasm in the programs, they replicated similar forms of sarcasm when interacting with each other. When interacting with each other, my participants replicated the "matter of fact" sarcastic tone accompanied by a smile that the characters used to accompany their sarcasm. At times the parallel was uncanny as my participants even donned the forced smile that so frequently accompanied the sarcasm on the programs. A conversation that occurred in the last focus group exemplified the sarcasm between participants:

Facilitator:	Are you guys all really good friends? Because you're, I mean 'cause like Charlie doesn't care that Lisa's touching him. And nobody cares...
Charlie:	(sarcastic tone) I care that she's touching me.
Lisa:	(laughs)

Alexis:	(looking toward Lisa) She's my homey! She's my homey! (Looking at Kira) She's my second. No. No. Well, in here [Y Group], she's my first (looking at Lisa). She's my second (looking at Kira). (referring to Charlie) He's nowhere near in it 'cause he get's on my nerves (sarcastic tone). (tone changes to cheerful with a smile as she looks to Charlie) Hey, Charlie! How you doing?
Kira and Alexis:	(laugh)
Alexis:	(sarcastically to Charlie) Get away from me!
Kira:	They, they are all really good friends.
Lisa:	Charlie, I love you!
Kira, Alexis, and Lisa:	(laughter)
Facilitator:	You're all good friends?
All:	Yeah.

All participants laughed, except Charlie who was the object of the sarcasm. The location of the participants' laughter is of great consequence. To them the notable portions of the programs were those that were "funny." My participants viewed sarcasm as funny. They laughed following examples of sarcasm in the programs and they attempted to recreate it in their interactions with each other.

Many of the network-inserted laugh tracks that the adolescent participants laughed along with immediately followed sarcasm directed at a character due to their perceived differences. In the episode of *Hannah Montana* shown in the focus group (Greenwald & Hurd, 2006), group laughter most often occurred directly following sarcasm:

Photographer:	Stop. Stop. (stops taking photos and walks toward Hannah) Hannah, darling, we're doing an ad for skin cream not wart removal. What is that face?
Laugh track inserted	
Charlie:	**Psycho freak.**
Hannah's father:	I believe it's a reaction to your singing.
Laugh track inserted	
Kira, Charlie and Alexis:	**(laughter)**

Participants who joined in the group laughter varied based on scenes and episodes. In several of the cases, a character's sarcastic remark was followed by a participant's addition such as "she's funny" or "I love her."

Within the focus groups, sarcasm between participants generally included references to affection. "Yeah, I like you too" and "I love you" were among the most verbalized. Cited as a consequence for sarcasm was withholding of affection:

Facilitator:	You found the mute button?
Charlie:	Yes.
Kira:	Press it and see if it works on Alexis. (laughs)
Alexis:	You know what...
Charlie:	Mute (points remote control at Alexis as he says this).
Alexis:	You know what? I don't like none of you all.

Alexis responded to Kira and Charlie's sarcasm with her own in the form of denial of her affection. In following excerpt Alexis again counteracts Charlie's verbalizations:

Charlie:	(to Alexis who had called a character immature) You're immature.
Alexis:	Thank you. I'm proud to be.
Charlie.	Yeah. You're welcome.

Both Charlie and Alexis were quick to retort to each others' criticisms which mirrored the quick wit shown by the television characters.

Due to the physical nature of the participants in the focus groups, physical retaliation was also a potential consequence for sarcasm. Following a monologue by Kira about a friend who was overweight, Charlie anticipated his sarcasm would be met with physical retaliation by Kira:

| Kira: | ...and most of it's in her booty. (laughs) Her booty's like (laughs) that big (puts arms out to her sides to show width). |
| Charlie: | Why you lookin'? (jumps off chair and backs away as if expecting Kira to hit him). |

Although Kira made no attempt to strike Charlie, she laughed about her friend and replied to Charlie's sarcastic remark about homosexuality by retorting, "I don't mean to." Although my participants were unable to replicate the sophistication and quick-wittedness of the television characters' sarcasm, sarcasm was nonetheless present in the focus group sessions.

Getting Ahead

Another commonality I consistently noted across the television episodes was a blatant disregard for others. Characters displayed an over-riding ideology of getting ahead regardless of the cost to others. Characters succeeding at all costs appeared to be a necessary component of the episode plots. Concern for those hurt in process was omitted. In fact, in many of the programs, characters chose other characters to verbally and physically mock based upon assumptions of competitiveness. In *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*, London became a finalist in a teen competition and testified her merciless drive to succeed (Nemetz & Correll, 2007):

Teen Competition Judge:	Well, we're going to be reviewing all the finalists next week and make our decisions on the cover then.
London:	When you break the bad news to the others (pause), can I watch? (cheerfully laughs)
Teen Competition Judge:	(laughs gleefully in return)

Although London entered a formal competition, often the character challenge was to succeed on a daily basis in a hierarchical society. Characters showed little or no regard to

the consequences of sacrificing others in their quest to succeed. Homer's tone in *The Simpsons* exemplified this misguided cognition (Grearney & Reardon, 1995):

Homer:	(sing song voice) Bart and Lisa have to go to school while I get to stay home. Na, na, na, na, na, na (sticks out tongue and makes face)
Lisa:	I like school.
Homer:	(teasing) Why don't you live in it then?
Lisa:	(mumbles) I would if I could.
Bart:	Not me, sister. When I grow up, I wanna be a lardo on workman's comp. Just like Dad. (Bart daydreams of himself in a bed, obese, with only a sheet on. Photographers and television newscasters surround him).
Bart (in daydream):	I wash myself with a rag on a stick (holds up a stick with a dripping rag on the end. The people in the room clap).

That the father models his manipulation of the disability system for personal gain in front of his children and receives admiration and encouragement from his son is troubling.

Motivation for characters to succeed at the cost of others was also exhibited with a trivial, day to day, focus:

Cory:	(crashes on his new skateboard)
Raven:	(laughs) You know what, Cory? You definitely have a future in skateboarding (pause) as a crash test dummy (laughs).
Cory:	Thanks a lot, Raven.
Raven:	I'm there for you any time. (laughs)
Father:	Raven, that was not funny. You shouldn't be making fun of him just because he wants to learn something new.
Raven:	(thinks to herself while her father is talking, the words in her head drowning out everything he is saying) Man, bad timing. I was gonna ask Dad for the money to go to the Ultra Jam concert. I, I wonder if he knows I'm not listening? I better just nod my head (nods head)
Father:	Are you listening to me?

Raven:	Uh, huh. Sure, Dad. To what you were saying when you said (long pause). Hey, hey, Dad. Can I have some money to go to the Ultra Jam concert?
Father:	I knew you weren't listening to me. Don't you care about anything else but yourself?
Raven:	Absolutely. I care about all the great acts that are gonna be at the Ultra Jam. (laughs excitedly)

Raven pretended to befriend Cory for the majority of the episode, attempting to falsely convince her father of her selflessness with hopes of earning concert tickets. Ultimately, Raven had an end of episode salvation, indicative of the pattern in adolescent programs, where she realized Cory was in physical harm due to her actions and she attempted to rectify the situation.

A character's self-centered action of making themselves look superior frequently consisted of exacerbating the limitations of others. In an episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody*, Maddie's hair invoked London's criticism in a mocking, sing-song tone:

Maddie:	(enters Carrie's suite with her hair undone)
Carrie:	Whoa.
London:	(screams) Something's eating Maddie's head (covers her mouth in fear).
Maddie:	It's my hair. It's humid outside which tends to make it a little frizzy.
London:	Frizzy? You look like the bride of Frankenstein.
Maddie:	Are we done making fun of my hair?
London:	Not quite. (sing song tone while laughing) Your hair looks funny. Your hair looks funny. Ok (cheerfully). Now I'm done.

In a further example, from a different episode of *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, the characters enacted social oppression for self-empowerment in various forms:

| London: | Maddie, I want you to meet Franchesca. |
| Franchesca: | Oh, this is your poor friend. (looks at Maddie, leans in, and slowly articulates each word) It's. So. Nice. To. Meet. You. |

Maddie:	(exasperated expression and rolls eyes)
London:	Ok, people. Pick out two of your favorite oufits.
Maddie:	(holds up a dress) Ow. What do you think of this one?
Franchesca:	Oh, it's hideous.
Carrie:	I think it's gorgeous.
Franchesca:	Thank you but we really don't need an opinion from the help.
Carrie:	I'm not help.
Franchesca:	You're telling me? I ordered a mocha frap ten minutes ago and (looks around) nothing. (waves Carrie away with her hand)
Carrie:	(hand on hips) Oh, I'll give you a frap. (walks away)
London:	Look, Franchesca, remember what we said before you came here? We can only criticize people that we pay.
Franchesca:	Fine. (looks at London) Your butt is huge (looks at Maddie) and you have chicken legs. (takes cash out of her purse and hands it to them) That's the best fifty bucks I ever spent. (smiles to herself and walks away)
Maddie:	Ok, I never thought I'd say this, but she makes you look sweet.
London:	Why do you think I hang out with her?
London & Maddie:	(walk to a mirror)
Maddie:	You don't think I'm too skinny do you?
London:	No. And my butt's not too big is it?
Maddie:	Absolutely not.
Maddie & London:	(Both look in the mirror and see images of themselves that they fear. London's rear becomes very large and Maddie becomes very skinny).

An unmistakable message emerges from these examples: the characters become the oppressors, regardless of whom they oppress in the process.

In an episode of *Cory in the house*, the president attempted to explain to his daughter about gracefully winning. The President's remarks are consistent with the pattern I previously identified (the characters state the message, the characters act in opposition to the message, then the characters reiterate the message again when caught):

President Martinez:	Sophie, the point is, it's great to win but when you do you should win with class and dignity. (his cell phone rings) Excuse me. It's about my bill. I have to take this. (speaking into phone) Yeah, Sam. It passed? Yes! (hangs up phone and arrogantly speaks) Who's your daddy, Congress? (in a sing song tone with dance) Who's your daddy, Congress? Who's your...
Sophie:	Daddy?
President Martinez:	Huh? As I was saying (pause as he tightens his tie) ah, class and dignity.

Laugh tracks abound in such interactions on the television programs, yet when the characters' interactions continually paralleled interactions that exist in society, the examples are unsettling.

In one unsettling example, from the *Kim Possible* episode viewed by the participants (McCorkle, 2007c), Kim's younger brothers participated in a program entitled the S.K.I.P. program (Superior Knowledge and Intelligence Program). Correlations existing between the program and special education were many and well defined. Kim verbally and physically stressed how uncomfortable she was with her brothers being in the program and in her school. Miss Guide, the program coordinator who was also the guidance counselor, continually followed Kim's brothers recording notes on a clipboard. In Miss Guide's presence, Kim pretended that she was accepting of the program and her brothers' participation. However, Miss Guide detected Kim's apprehension and at the end of the episode Kim was called into a meeting (resembling an IEP meeting) in Miss Guide's office:

| Kim: | (enters office where Miss Guide, Kim's parents and her brothers are already meeting) You wanted to see me Miss Guide? |

Miss Guide:	Miss Possible, I was just sharing my observations of the past week with your parents.
Kim:	Super (sarcastic tone).
Miss Guide:	It is my recommendation Jim and Tim be enrolled as freshmen (pause) at another school.
Kim:	(surprised) What?
Kim's mother:	Honey, clearly this is having a negative effect on you.
Kim's father:	It's not all about the boys, Kimmy. It's about your best interest too.
Kim:	If the tweebs switch schools, then so do I. They had my back, now I have theirs.
Tweebs (Jim and Tim):	(in unison) Hicca-bicca-boo.
Kim:	Hoo-sha.
Miss Guide:	How do you spell 'hoo-sha?'

This disturbing scene suggests that Kim's educational satisfaction was more important than her brothers' due to her typical educational program and their specially designed educational program. The adults decided to decrease stress on the typical sibling by requiring the atypical siblings to receive the specialized services they needed in a school outside of their home school. Even more disturbing, no one talked to the boys the entire scene. The parents, guidance counselor and older sibling made educational decisions as if they were not present. A strong message was relayed about individuals' rights to "get ahead" and the rights of those who impose upon the progress of the entitled individuals.

In the focus group following this episode, Alexis justified Kim's maltreatment of of her brothers:

> Kim Possible treated her brothers differently just because they were younger than her and they they're not supposed to actually be in, um, not supposed to be in high school. So she treated them different. She wanted to treat them like they were actually middle schoolers, as they were supposed to be.

Alexis was not the only focus group participant to justify a character's actions of succeeding socially at the expense of others. Charlie shared his thoughts on Homer

Simpson's plan to abuse the disability system by becoming obese and not leaving his

house to work, "I think it's kinda good because you'd save money on gas, which is really

expensive right now. Really expensive right now!" Other participants' opinions on

Homer's plan contradicted Charlie's as Lisa called the plan "stupid" and Alexis retorted,

"That was so retarded."

The opinions of *The Simpsons* characters regarding Homer's plan were also

varied (Grearney & Reardon, 1995):

Bart:	If you gain 61 pounds, they'll let you work from home?
Homer:	Yuh, huh. That's the deal. No more exercise program. No more traffic. No more blood drives or charity walks.
Bart:	Dad, I know we don't do a lot together, but helping you gain 61 pounds is something I want to be a part of.
Lisa:	(turns around in chair that she was reading in to face Bart and Homer) Dad!
Homer:	(shocked by her presence) Ahhh!
Lisa:	I must protest. You're abusing a program intended to help the unfortunate.
Homer:	(chuckling) I'm not saying it isn't sleazy, honey. But try to see it my way. All my life, I've been an obese man trapped inside a fat man's body (lifts up stomach).

Homer's daughter, Lisa, attempted to protest but was quieted by her father's disturbing

justification of his actions. Later in the same program, Homer's boss publicized Homer's

at-home work station in front of a crowd of reporters:

Mr. Burns:	(clears throat) I'm pleased to dedicate this remote work terminal. It will allow our safety inspector here to perform his duties from home. And so, excelsior to you Mr. (leans over to assistant and whispers) What is the name of this gastropod?

Assistant:	Simpson, sir. One of your chair moisteners from Sector 7G.
Mr. Burns:	Yes! Simpson! (claps follow this from photographer and all in the room)
Homer:	(excitedly) Thank you for your pity.
Lisa:	(to Marge) Mom, are you ever planning to step in and put a stop to this?
Marge:	Normally, your father's crackpot schemes fizzle out as soon as he finds something good on tv. But this season...

The photographer took a picture of Homer with Mr. Burns, placed it on the front page of the employee newsletter with only Homer's eye and top of head showing (but with all of Mr. Burns' face showing), and added a headline of "Burns Survives Brush with Shut-in."

Although the focus group participants did not specifically refer to Homer's scheme as manipulating the "disability" system they referred to it as "a plan." When Homer was discriminated against because of his weight, he began to become a burden on his family and became less independent. According to the disability studies literature, like other aspects of societal roles and expectations of people with disabilities depicted on television, this dependence or lack of independence may be explicitly or implicitly conveyed through conversations, actions, or scenarios within each television episode. The character may be a recipient of charity (Wates, 2004), assumed to be a parental responsibility (Bonnie, 2004), or viewed as a burden to friends or family (Davis, 2004). The character may be depicted to embody all of these roles of dependency at any given time.

The issue of charity, as noted by Wates (2004), appeared multiple times during the television programs, but only one episode of *That's So Raven* entitled "Four aces" actually showed the characters taking action for charity (Poryes & Sherman, 2006). Most

often charity was mentioned as a means of making another character look altruistic as seen in *Hannah Montana* where she is forced to possibly suspend a performance at a scheduled charity concert (Poryes & Christiansen, 2007):

Miley (Hannah Montana):	(on the phone with rival teen superstar, Mikayla) Listen, Mik-cockroach, one of my family members has a serious medical condition, ok?
Mikayla:	Yeah, it's you. And it's called wimp-o-titus. That means you're a wimp.
Miley (Hannah Montana):	I know what it means.
Mikayla:	Oh, I can see the headlines now, "Mikayla rocks while heartless Hannah hides from the homeless."
Miley (Hannah Montana):	The concert's for hunger relief.
Mikayla:	Like I care.
(later in same program- after concert)	
Hannah's father:	(next to Lilly talking on the phone to Hannah who is in Florida) Lilly and I just watched the concert on tv. You were terrific.
Lilly:	And you blew Mikayla off the stage!
Hannah's father:	The important thing is honey, you did a great thing for charity.
Lilly:	And you blew Mikayla off the stage!
Hannah's father:	Yeah, I guess Hannah did show her a thing or two and my daughter did the same for me. I'm proud of you darling, and...
Father and Lilly:	(in unison) And you blew Mikayla off the stage!

The ending of the dialogue implies that the charitable cause was unimportant in comparison to her defeat of a competitor. An episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* also utilized charity as a mechanism for personal gain as shown in this brief dialogue between the two brothers (Kallis & Geoghan, 2006):

Cody:	(to Zack) Ok, so what are you going to do for your school community service?
Zack:	I thought I'd see a movie.
Cody:	(looks at Zack with a disappointed expression)
Zack:	(cheerfully continues) Then go tell poor people about it.

Cody:	Zack, this is a chance for us to really help people. I'm thinking about working with kids.
Zack:	(glares) I hate kids.
Cody:	You better take this seriously or you're gonna fail while I get an A.
Zack:	(glares) You're one of the kids I hate.
Cody:	(unscathed by Zack's remark) I know, we should feed the hungry.
Zack:	(as a tray of food is being pushed through hotel lobby) Good idea. Let's start with me.

The blatant disregard for the recipients of the charities other than means of enhancing one's own status, was a theme that was ingrained within the messages of several of the programs.

Life Applications

Participants verbalized the ways in which they applied what they viewed in the programs as applicable to their lived experiences of interactions and relationships. One application noted by the participants related to their personal identities and the characters. Focus group participants liberally used the verbs "am' and "is" when they defined not how they were "like" or "similar to" the characters, but instead how they "are" the characters:

Facilitator:	Does this show remind you of any people you know?
Kira and Alexis:	(laughter)
Lisa:	Yeah.
Alexis:	Yeah, me and my little sister. I will say I have to be Rico and my little sister is Jackson.
Kira:	Same here.
Facilitator:	Because?
Alexis:	Because I always, like, make tricks on her. And, like, when she try to get revenge, she's the one who, like, gets in trouble and everything.
Facilitator:	Ok, so, Lisa, you said "yes." Who does it remind you of?

Lisa:	Um, me and my friend Dot. 'Cause she always be like joking around with me and then I was trying to joke around with her.
Kira:	If I was comparing Jackson and Rico, it would definitely be me and my little sister because, me, I like Alexis, I'm probably Rico since I'm always mean to her and everything. Like picking on her and she tries to get back at me and we both ended, end up being grounded and end up being (pause), so yeah. We're definitely sisters. You can tell by the first time you meet both of us.

Participants commonly made statements such as Kira's "I'm probably Rico." A similar conversation, expanding upon the concept of "being" a character, occurred after the viewing of the Kim Possible episode (McCorkle, 2007c) in the fourth focus group:

Alexis:	Um. Uh. I liked it. Like, um, I liked the whole entire thing…because it's actually a kid's show that I like cause it's like one of my top favorite cartoons. I mean, Disney Channel cartoony thingy-ba-boppers. And it's (pause) and yeah (pause) it's so hilarious. And because I think Kim Possible's my sister.
Lisa:	(laughs)
Kira:	What are you laughing about?
Facilitator:	You think she's your sister?
Alexis:	I call my sister, well my sister's nickname is Kim Possible so, yep.
Facilitator:	So did the people in this show remind you of anyone that you know in your real life?
Alexis:	My sister.
Charlie:	Please explain.
Alexis:	My sister. Ok, my sister, Kimberly, she would probably be Kim Possible. But I think me and my sister would both be Kim Possible.
Kira:	I'm Kim Possible.
Charlie:	(whispered) You wish.
Lisa:	(laughs)
Alexis:	And then my little brother, my brother Martin, he would probably be (pause), my big brother Marty, he would probably be Ron.
Kira:	Ron.

Alexis:	And then one of my older sisters, she might be, uh, what is her name? Um, Monique, yeps. Um, um, Camille would probably be...
Charlie:	Would be Kira.
Alexis:	No, no, would probably be my little sister. And, yeah.
Lisa:	Camille would be me.
Charlie and Kira:	(laugh)
Alexis:	(questioning Lisa on her choice of character) What? You wanna try to be somebody that you're not?
Lisa:	No.
Kira:	No, cause she's rich (referring to the character of Camille).
Lisa:	Because I try to get people in trouble.
Alexis:	Oh, and try to be like one of the girls who you don't like?
Lisa:	I get my brothers and sisters in trouble all the time.

The participants' language of "being" and existing as one of the characters was one way they correlated the characters on the television programs with themselves and their personal societal role.

Another correlation between the characters and the participants existed in the participants' recognition of the commonalities of the characters to their own middle school social settings. The theme of getting ahead transpired even within the participants of the focus group, with one person (generally a rotating position) being singled out by the others as the stepping stone for others' success. In the following dialogue, Kira (with the help of Alexis and Lisa) was attempting to prove her superiority over Charlie:

Lisa:	(to Charlie) Kira's smarter than you.
Alexis:	(laughs) Let's give a clap to for that. (claps)
Charlie:	She wishes.
Kira:	I got all straight A's on my report card. What did you get? An F?
Charlie:	No. I didn't get no F's.

In this case, as in several others, there appeared to be hints of a gender discrimination against Charlie occurring. Although David was present at the time of the discussion, he was reading the program names on the screen and was not defending his fellow male focus group participant. Originally, I had approached this study with gender issues in relation to characters with disabilities as an anticipated theme. Research in disability studies has concluded that social constructions of disability affect males and females in different ways. "Such constructions have been highly gendered, with a traditional emphasis on distinctive male and female adult roles centered on participation in productive or reproductive labour respectively (specifically, employment and parenting)" (Priestly, 2004, p. 97).

Women with disabilities are often in a state of double oppression imposed by society and the media. As stated by Sheldon (2004b), "Disabled women are perceived to be needy, dependent and passive-stereotypical feminine qualities. At the same time, they are deemed incapable of aspiring to other 'feminine' roles, especially those relating to appearance, partnering, and motherhood" (p. 71).

Men with disabilities face a different challenge in society and the media. Western culture has tended to define masculinity through strength, rationality, self-reliance, potency, and action (Robertson, 2004). Hutchinson and Kleiber (2000, ¶ 6) expand on the traditional assumptions of masculinity that are affected by disability by stating, "Some of what it means to be a man in Western culture – physical strength, sexual prowess and range of influence... is threatened by the loss of physical function" that accompanies certain physical disabilities.

Given the six episodes that were shown to my participants, they gave no verbal

indications that they perceived gender or sexuality to be a focus of their interpretations.

In contrast, the times when gender was mentioned arose when female focus group

participants decided to speak on behalf of what they believed Charlie was thinking. The

following interchange occurred after viewing the episode of *Cory in the house*

(Cunningham et al., 2007):

Facilitator:	Charlie, do you want to check in on this? Who you'd want to be friends with?
Charlie:	(raises eyebrows but does not speak)
Alexis:	(to Charlie) Just say a boy.
Charlie:	(no vocalizations)
Facilitator:	Maybe he'd want to be friends with one of the girls.
Charlie:	(nods)
Alexis:	Ugh, Melena.
Facilitator:	(to Charlie) Yeah? Which one?
Kira:	(guessing) Mina.
Alexis:	(guessing) Jessica.
Charlie:	(nods)
Alexis:	I knew it!
Facilitator:	(to Charlie) Would you want to be friends with Jessica?
Charlie:	(nods)
Kira:	Yes, so she could tutor him. So she could TUTOR him (makes quotation marks with hands around the word "tutor").
Alexis:	But he probably thinks she's cute, but...
Facilitator:	But you girls didn't answer Jessica as one of the people you would want to be friends with.
Alexis:	Oh, I forgot about her.
Kira:	(throws head back laughing) Me, too.
Facilitator:	Would you want to be friends with her?
Alexis:	(nods and raises hand)
Kira:	Yeah. 'Cause I'm smart too and it would be good to have some tips to get, stay with good grades.
Alexis:	She could be my study buddy.
Kira:	Study buddy (laughs). She'd be doing all the work (laughs).
Alexis:	No, she'd just be the study buddy.

Kira:	No, she'd be doing all the work (laughs).
Alexis:	Study buddy.
Kira:	For you, she'd be doing all the work (laughs).

Not only did this exchange of ideas present one of the few times that gender was mentioned in the focus groups, it also offered another connection to the disability studies literature.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, disability studies literature has shown that characters with disabilities are often presented as one-dimensional (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). According to the interpretations of the focus group participants, the same can be said about characters portrayed as having differences in general. Jessica was a one-episode "token" character with a chief difference: she exhibited more intelligence than the other students. Newt spent the majority of the episode attempting to feel less intimidated and more comfortable around her. Yet, when I questioned the participants as to whom they would like to befriend, no one mentioned Jessica until Charlie's recognition of her. Then, even after she was mentioned, there seemed to be only two purposes for having her around, academic assistance and a female presence for Charlie.

In relation to gender, disability studies literature also highlights sexuality as a theme in television characters with disabilities that I had originally anticipated to appear in my study. The sexuality of people with disabilities has long been denied in both society and in the media. According to Bonnie (2004), people with disabilities who are represented in media, film, television, and advertising are "...rarely, if ever, portrayed in relationships as sexually active or as parents" (p. 125). Bonnie (2004) also noted:

> Disabled children and teenagers have been dressed in androgynous, bland, or babyish clothes, denied relationships and sexuality education, and

placed in segregated 'special' institutions and schools. Disabled adults have been infantilized, sterilized, prohibited from engaging in sexual activity and marriage, and excluded from mainstream social and leisure activities. (p. 125)

My original intent was to actively listen for comments made in the focus groups in reference to the sexuality of the characters with regard to dress, sexual identity, flirtatiousness, sexual expression, or other themes of sexuality as they appeared. I acknowledged that the appearance of this theme may be explicit, implicit, or omitted within the context of the focus group discussions. However, in the programs selected and viewed, and because of the limited number of characters with disabilities, there was only one character with disabilities who had sufficient speaking lines to have the opportunity to mention sexual desires. The character was Daryl, the coach of the wheelchair basketball team from *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* episode watched in the focus groups (Eells & Correll, 2007).

Contradictory to the disability studies literature, Daryl seemed to have no dilemmas in discussing his sexuality. In contrast, the character of Daryl seemed to utilize his physical disability in conjunction with his sexuality:

Daryl:	(rolls up next to Jamie after the basketball game) Wow, Jamie. You got game. As for the rest of you guys, I hope you're better on your feet.
Bob:	Actually, we're worse.
Daryl:	So, Jamie, I'm starting a team in Boston. Are you interested?
Zack and Cody:	(share congratulatory hits in the background)
Jamie:	Sure, well, I mean, all I want is a car, a house for my parents and fifty thousand dollars.
Daryl:	How about instead I teach you how to use sympathy to pick up girls. (Looks at Carrie who is walking up to them) See that one over there? Been hittin' on me all week.

Jamie: Deal.
Daryl and Jamie: (shake hands)

Although, in this particular case, the character's portrayal was not in alignment with disability studies literature, the summation of the disability studies literature can be applied to the concepts of relationships and interactions as portrayed in the television programs when the definition of disability is expanded to encompass differences of multiple varieties.

When initiating this study, I had sought out literature on how media depictions of disability perpetuate and endorse the oppression of people with disabilities. As stated by Connor and Bejoian (2006), "We believe the prevalence of negative associations with disability is so deeply ingrained in our culture that most people simply neither see nor hear them and therefore do not understand them" (p. 53). In my study, I originally intended to note if the participants recognized and verbalized oppression of people with disabilities from the television clips that they were shown. If they did not verbalize the oppression, I intended to look for indications that they may accept these negative associations unconsciously or that they may be conscious of the associations but fail to correlate a negative connotation to them. Both proved to be true, but again it went well beyond a common understanding of the term disability to an all-encompassing view of relationships and interactions with people deemed different or seen as "others."

The participants were able to verbalize how and why they felt some people on the programs were treated differently than others. However, what I found to be most telling was when they applied these scenarios and relationship critiques to their own lives,

showing the ingrained cultural associations that Connor and Bejoian (2006) had

attributed to disability:

Kira:	A whole bunch of my people try to act like other people. Like the people who are kinda like, um, in the lower part of the food chain, um...
Alexis:	You all got a food chain?
Kira:	Like the unpopular and the popular people.
Alexis:	Oh, don't get me started with that.
Kira:	Like, people think like that. People think that they're all popular and all that. The people that don't think they're popular and think they're ugly and that, wanna be exactly, wanna be like the higher students and all that so, that's just stupid. You need to be yourself. Even though I'm really weird, and I dress up a lot like a boy.
Alexis:	(raises hand) Oh!
Kira:	(laughs)
Facilitator:	Ok, let's let her finish here. Ok?
Kira:	Um, like me, I can actually be a lot of fun.
Charlie:	(shakes his head while looking at Alexis)
Alexis:	(shakes her head back)
Kira:	Like, um, first when, um first when Chandra saw me, she thought I was a boy and then she noticed my ponytail then she thought I was a girl.
Charlie:	(scrunches up his face)
Kira:	She thought, 'Why would I be dressed as a boy?' So, she kinda thought I would be really weird. She was right. I am really weird but I'm also really fun. Like, I'm the funny weird and also the bad weird sometimes.
Alexis:	(raises hand)
Facilitator:	Go ahead.
Alexis:	There's so many kids at my school who act like they're something that they're not. There's these girls who get on my bus every single day. They think they're all cool. So the COOL (makes quotation marks with her fingers around the word 'cool') people go in the way back of the bus and they talk about retarded things.
Kira:	(burps) Excuse me.
Kira:	Like, 'Is my hair all pretty and ok' like all that stuff.
Alexis:	Like, that's a total blonde moment.

Kira:	Yeah, blonde moment (laughs and throws head back).
Alexis:	Then, there's kids at my school, they're think they're something that they're not. Like some people think they're all cool and some kids think they're smarter, even though everybody's pretty, but they think they're prettier than other girls and they think they're, just because they're older than somebody, then they can have all the power over people.
Kira:	Yeah, like at the, the boys at my school. They'll all be like flipping their hair (flips head) like that, trying to (pause) I don't know. It's kinda weird. It's like (makes motion by flipping her head around). Why do they do that?

The perpetuated oppression that they verbalized as being part of their everyday existence

and interactive relationships was hidden within the messages ingrained in the programs.

In this dialogue, Alexis described how her middle school was similar to the high school

depicted in *That's so Raven*:

Alexis:	We don't have a jock block but we do have people who stand at a certain table or sit in the hallway that think they're cool and crap like that but other than that, no.
Facilitator:	If they don't have a name like 'jock block' how do you know that they think they're cool?
Lisa:	Because...
Alexis:	Like how they act, how they dress, and then like on the walls, they be, they be like on the wall like this (stands casually and confidently with her back to the wall, one leg straight and the other bent with bottom of foot on wall, and arms crossed) and crap like this and stuff.
Facilitator:	With their arms crossed like that?
Alexis:	Or the good little girls, they will go like this, or crap like this or something.
Charlie:	Why do you keep saying 'crap?'
Lisa:	(laughs)
Alexis:	'Cause it's nasty, just like they are.

The interpretations of the participants alluded to clearly established social barriers recognized in the schools and the television episodes that are viewed as traditional, conventional, and unbreakable. The participants alluded that their personal positions within these boundaries were clearly established as well. The established norms within relationships were verbally stated and were clearly recognized in that persons who were atypical were anomalies and were viewed as such:

Facilitator:	Do you know any people with disabilities?
Kira:	Yes.
Charlie:	Yes.
Lisa:	Yeah, me. (unsure here if she is sarcastic or serious)
Kira:	There's this girl named Cara at [middle school].
Charlie:	And Andy.
Kira:	Yeah.
David:	Yeah, my friend Andy.
Lisa:	Cara? Cara who?
Kira:	Cara.
Charlie:	Um, the one that can't really talk right.
Lisa:	She's my cousin.
Kira:	She is? Ah.
Lisa:	Somehow. I don't know how. My mom told me.

In another conversation, following the viewing of *The Simpsons* disability episode (Grearney & Reardon, 1995), Lisa again made a comment demonstrating her background with disability (her third disability related comment):

Lisa:	My mom doesn't work. That's because of her hands and her feet but she's not lazy.
Alexis:	Her hands and her feet?
Lisa:	(nods)
Alexis:	What about her hands and her feet?
Lisa:	(nods then begins to speak) Ugh, I don't know. She was working and she fell 'cause her ankle gave out one day (silence). Then she fell in the middle of the street. And (chuckle) I couldn't help her up 'cause of all the cars stopped.
Facilitator:	All the cars stopped hopefully.

Alexis:	Stop! In the name of love!
Kira:	Like, 'stoooooop.'
Charlie:	Stop.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, humor often takes the place discomfort, filling what may otherwise become a moment of uncomfortable silence. In the dialogue, when it became too serious, Alexis altered the temperament of the group by singing and Kira and Charlie quickly coalesced her efforts to derail the conversation that was becoming too somber for them.

This is not to suppose that the participants were completely uncomfortable talking about differences and disability. It seemed that they were comfortable discussing disability and difference, as long as pre-determined hegemonic conversational boundaries were in place. When asked if they would recommend the program we watched to their friends, in only one episode did the participants state to what friends they would specifically recommend it to. This conversation followed the viewing of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* wheelchair basketball episode (Eells & Correll, 2007):

Facilitator:	Would you recommend this one?
Alexis:	Yep.
Kira:	Yeah.
Alexis:	Especially to my friends who have disability problems.
Facilitator:	Why to them?
Alexis:	Because they can't, sometimes they get treated wrong. Because of what they have, like they may have, 'cause of their disability problems. And so if they actually watched that show, then they would see that they are fine, even if they have a disability.

From Alexis' use of the doubly oppressive term "disability problems," to the assumption that adolescents with labeled disabilities would internalize a lesson in a program that only

briefly embedded a message of empowerment, her words exemplify the power of

hegemony.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

<u>Introduction</u>

Kim Possible:	Ah, Ron. What are you doing?
Ron Stoppable:	Watching TV. It's a Monday night tradition in my family. Actually, it's an every night tradition in my family.
Kim Possible:	But you're not supposed to be, that's not TV. It's fireflies.
Ron Stoppable:	Bbb, bb (clears the air in front of him with his hand). Gotta see how the car chase ends. I can talk during the commercial.

Television pervades the lives of adolescents. Even television programs display

characters watching television programs. The above scene from a *Kim Possible* episode

which revolved around the absence of television conveyed the important role this

medium plays in society today.

With this study, I originally intended to interpret the reactions adolescents

displayed toward television portrayals of people with disabilities. I had anticipated that I

would find a connection between the prominent themes in the disability studies literature

and their replication in television programming aimed at adolescent audiences. Therefore,

prior to conducting focus groups, I read extensively in the area of disability studies and

highlighted several themes that I thought I would encounter as can be seen in the

literature review section of this dissertation. Although I acknowledge that these are

crucial topics in the field of disability studies, in my particular study the focus shifted in

an alternate direction.

Summary of Methods and Methodology

I utilized a qualitative design and focus group interviewing for this study. Six students, all sixth graders, came together during their Y Group time and watched television programs that contained a character or theme associated with a disability or difference. I then conducted six focus group discussions and collected data for each session, with three to five participants attending each session. Three of them attended all six focus group sessions, one attended five of the six sessions, and one attended only one full focus session and part of another. During each session, participants watched a television episode and then conversed about what they had seen. Despite the fact that each episode and ensuing conversation was unique, once I transcribed and interpreted the data, intriguing commonalities emerged.

With this study, it was not my intent to derive one correct analysis based on the research. Because I subscribe to the idea that theory free knowledge does not exist, I kept in the forefront of my mind as I conducted this research, that I was both a researcher and a participant. In this study, I continually acknowledged my role as both researcher and participant. Therefore, I analyzed and reanalyzed the data until I arrived at what I believed to be the most plausible interpretations and conclusions.

Lack of Characters with Disabilities

Using Nielsen Rating's list of most watched programs for 12 to 17 year-olds, I chose six different television programs, viewing multiple episodes of each program. As I reviewed these programs, I, like Gerbner (1998) recognized that the number of television characters with disabilities is decreasing. In the 41 television programs that I viewed,

only one program contained characters with what could be considered a significant physical disability. None of the programs I viewed had a character with a diagnosed intellectual disability. However, characters were discriminated against due to their *differences.*

Characters who exhibited difference received harsh treatment as others cruelly criticized and dehumanized them in an effort to force a sense of normalcy for all. If characters were not able to meet the cultural ideas of "abstract perfection" (Finkelstein, 2004, p. 19), they were considered inferior. Despite the fact that the characters did not discuss disabilities specifically, their speeches and behaviors made clear that it is wrong to be different. Characters who exhibited difference were present in all programs viewed in the focus groups.

All of the participants enjoyed the episodes, despite the fact that they had viewed some of them before. Five of the six programs air almost daily on the Disney Channel, with most of them airing several times per day. The frequency of such airings prompted me to ask Alexis if she would recommend one of the programs to her friends; she responded, "I don't have to recommend this to my friends. My friends already watch it. They watch all the shows because they Disney Channel peoples." I began to wonder what societal influence the Disney Channel held since so many of its programs appeared on Nielsen Rating's list of most-watched programs. I soon learned of Disney's worldwide influence of epic proportions. Steyer (2002) provided this scrutiny of Disney's power and control:

It's not just your little family entertainment company led by Uncle Walt. It's the third largest global media conglomerate, with fiscal year 2000 earnings of more than $25 billion. Theme parks and resorts produce 27 percent of its revenues, studio entertainment accounts for 24 percent, and media networks make up 17 percent. In addition to its rights to theme parks, Disney owns one broadcast network (ABC) and all or part of at least nine cable channels (ESPN, Disney Channel, and the new ABC Family channel, A&E, Lifetime, E!, Toon Disney, etc.). It also owns six different production and distribution companies (Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone, Miramax, Walt Disney Television Animation, etc.) as well as a music group with at least five labels. It owns publishing assets (including Hyperion, Disney Publishing, and *Discover* magazine) and a couple of sports teams. It owns ten different television stations, the ABC, ESPN, and Disney radio networks, and a variety of newspapers. It also controls a growing Internet empire that includes ABC.com, ESPN.com, Disney.com, and Family.com, among others. In short, Disney is everywhere. (p. 30)

My intent was not to criticize the Disney Channel. Although Steyer found it useful to critique the structure of current media, my intent was to interpret what adolescents verbalized when they viewed this media. However, media is "everywhere" and I found patterns emerging between media depictions and the participants' applications to their lives, lending themselves to the media criticisms.

Siperstein et al. (2007) revealed in their study that for adolescents the media is a major source of information about people with disabilities. However, based upon the responses from my focus group participants, I concluded that focusing on how adolescents interpret disability through television was too limiting. Lack of acceptance of difference expands beyond the often blurred boundaries of definitions of disabilities. The adolescent television programs repeatedly model characters striving for normalization and acceptance. These programs model exclusion, not just of people with disabilities but of all who appear to be "others" in the competition of social acceptance.

Ironically, through whatever interpretations and meanings they formed as they watched the television programs, the adolescents did not perceive that they had learned anything. They did not view the programs as educational in any sort, but instead saw them as entertainment with little meaning:

Facilitator:	Ok, so anything else you want to tell me about the show? Did you like it?
Alexis:	It rocked.
Kira:	(giggle)
Facilitator:	Why?
Alexis:	It just did. It's a kids' show. I need to watch kids' shows then…
Kira:	(interrupts) I think it's (pause). It rocked because it was really funny.
Alexis:	If there's no kids' shows, all kids would suffocate watching educational things. Even though it's not bad watching educational things, then we'd, then we'd have to watch it everyday. It would be bored.
Kira:	(laughs) I don't really like educational stuff (laughs).
Alexis:	Then you might as well say there's no reason to have fun.
Kira;	Yeah, the only way you can be able to have fun is to go outside and run around like crazy, like, 'Agh get me away from here (moves arms quickly in the air over her head). I want my kids' shows.'

While a specifically educational program may bore them, the adolescents fail to recognize that the programs they "love" watching for entertainment educate them about social norms, exclusion, and a lack of acceptance of differences in others.

Wright (2005) asserted that there is much to be learned by popular stories such as those conveyed through the media, because the stories represent familiar social situations in exaggerated and entertaining versions. Wright further upheld that everyone learns something about actions that are appropriate for themselves in their cultural place from

these popular stories. A conversation that occurred in the final three minutes of the

concluding focus group explored extensively the participants' gained understandings

from the programs:

Facilitator:	When kids watch this, when kids like you watch this, does it really make an impact on your life? Or do you just kinda watch it and go, "Oh."
Alexis:	Nah, just watch it.
Kira and Charlie:	Just watch it.
Alexis:	Some like, ok, like, the only time I actually think, I actually thought about these shows is when we started doing this. But other than that I don't really (pause) listening to the show. Unless, like, something I think is really funny, I might repeat it again to myself and laugh at it. But other than that, I don't really think about what the show meaning is or if I like the show or if I like the character in the thing until I started doing this.
Facilitator:	And now I've got you thinking about it?
Alexis:	Yep, but I don't think I'm gonna do it after this. I don't know why.
Facilitator:	Kira, you watch these shows on tv then you walk away. What happens? Anything?
Lisa:	No.
Facilitator:	Lisa says 'no.'
Kira:	I usually go outside and play.
Facilitator:	You go outside and play?
Kira:	Usually, or I'll go to bed or read a book.
Facilitator:	When you watch this, you go outside and you're playing or doing whatever you're doing, do you come back to thinking about the show that you watched earlier or do you just not?
Alexis:	Nopes.
Lisa:	No.
Kira:	I only think about the really funny parts and that's about it.
Alexis:	I know and then I forget about it sooner or later.
Kira:	Me too!!

The final three statements from Kira and Alexis shape many of the implications and

conclusions to be drawn from this study. "I only think about the funny parts" connects

directly to my conclusions that sarcasm and laugh tracks directly follow examples of exploiting characters' differences. For Kira and Alexis to conclude their discussion by agreeing that they eventually forget the programs, fails to acknowledge the tremendous power of hegemony that shapes all interactions and perceptions.

Lack of Supporting Literature

As for supporting literature, this research journey began with it, veered far from it and then came back to its origin. Originally, I had anticipated that most of this dissertation's supporting literature would come from a combination of two different foci: (1) disability studies, and (2) media and popular culture. The disability studies literature (as cited throughout this study) provided critiques of media regarding normalization of character and character image. In addition, I discovered critiques of societal role and character acceptance from the disability studies literature, specifically in the areas of oppression, dependency, and social class and access to resources.

The media literature (as cited throughout this study) provided a multitude of studies related to adolescents and television viewing. However, literature regarding adolescent media, though plentiful, proved to have limited scope. The vast majority of the studies focused upon adolescents' television viewing in regard to sexuality and violence.

As my own study unfolded, I saw the interpretations of my participants lead away from the disability studies literature due to the lack of characters with disabilities portrayed in the television programs. The media and popular culture literature also had limited connections to my study. As I analyzed and re-analyzed my interpretations and

searched fervently for literature to support them, I concluded that I was treading into

unchartered territory. Then, as I came to understand the profound effects of laugh tracks

to convey societal norms, I anticipated finding supporting literature. Searches came up

short, providing historical information and analysis of the semantics of the actual laugh

tracks but lacking examination of the power they held for reinforcing societal norms.

Many times, I fought the urge to shape the existing literature to fit my

interpretations. I attempted to make connections, but often found them weak and

superficial. Yet, I returned to the pool of disability studies literature and expanded the

focus of my research to include notions of difference. The lack of available supporting

literature that truly supported the findings of this study was troublesome because on a

daily basis television programs aimed at adolescents send messages that are interpreted

by that audience in ways that cause them to reject that which varies from the ever-

changing and unreachable norm. Drake (2004) identified the ever-evolving notion of

normality in the following way:

> Normality (in its essential fiction) is highly unstable and fragile within the
> individual and society as a whole. It is the very fragility of the belief (as well as
> the idea(l)) that makes representations of disability so popular, important and
> pervasive. (p. 104)

Consciously or unconsciously, the participants in my study drew conclusions about the

characters, their peers, and themselves based on this non-existent and ever-changing

notion of normality.

I sensed a strong parallel between the actions of the television characters and

those of my participants. Neither the characters nor my participants internalized the

messages of acceptance promoted through the adolescent television programs. The

adolescents in this study were able to reiterate the messages of acceptance articulated through the television programs; however, they then immediately and swiftly utilized examples that refuted their previous statements about acceptance and repeated the dysfunctional and unrealistic patterns that appeared moments earlier on the television programs. It is imperative that more research be done in this area. In addition, television programs need to be examined for their lack of participation of characters with disabilities and the message that sends about society.

The most crucial social implication of this study is the lack of acceptance of difference reiterated by adolescents that is veiled in pervasive and cruel humor in the programs that they watch. With so much time and effort spent on researching violence and sexuality in the media, this societal underpinning of accepted and humorous exclusion is the hidden message that may do even more violence than the obvious research topics of sex and violence.

<div align="center">Participant and Character Parallels</div>

Maddie:	Now London, remember you're pathetic, alone, and nobody loves you.
London:	(defensively) And you're a poor, scrawny-legged freak!
Maddie:	Uh, I was talking about your character.
London:	Oh, well, then so was I (cheerfully).

I found the numerous parallels between the adolescent television program characters and the adolescent participants in this study of great significance. Several parallels existed between the characters and my participants. First, and foremost, a definitive pattern of lack of acceptance of difference occurred during the 30 minute television programs and the 60 minute focus group sessions in which the individuals said

the "right" thing and did the "wrong" thing. Then if someone noticed they were doing the "wrong" thing, they self-corrected without internalizing the message. The adolescents followed an almost identical pattern by effortlessly verbalizing the program's moral social message regarding acceptance. Then, when talking freely, they strongly contradicted the messages they had just reiterated. On the few occasions that they caught themselves in this contradiction, they would use phrases such as, "not saying that's ok" or "but still." Stating a message, and then not following it again unless discovered, exposes a hidden message about a deeper societal lack of acceptance of difference.

Participants also referenced personal identity similarities between themselves and the characters. The participants in my study often used forms of the verb "to be" in describing how they, their friends, or family members were like the characters on the programs. Although at times they would say phrases such as, "I am like" more commonly they would say, "I am" or "she would be." The relationships they felt with these characters were often described as "I love her" or "she's funny" with Kira in particular mentioning in multiple focus groups how she wished she had relatives who were like the characters. While viewing the episode of *That's so Raven* (Waddles, 2004), she made this comment about the character of the grandmother who was portrayed as vivacious and sarcastic, "She's really funny. I'd love to have a grandma like that."

In addition, both the television characters and the focus group participants used humor and sarcasm frequently. The adolescent participants seemed to be mostly strongly drawn to those characters who used sarcasm at the expense of others. The focus group participants similarly used sarcasm within the focus group discussions, although with

much less fluency than the characters. It was clear, however, that the participants

interpreted humor as a necessity in the programs. "Funny" made the programs worthy in

their interpretations and made the characters "cool," even if the humor cruelly

emphasized the differences of others.

<div align="center">Implications</div>

Broad Societal Implications

The societal implications of the intolerance of diversity in the characters

portrayed on the television programs and the focus group participants are integral to

examining society's view on disability and difference. Stereotypes and oppression based

on difference are repeatedly represented in the television programs. Not only are the

represented, they are portrayed as accurate representations of societal norms.

In highlighting the connection between media stereotypes and oppression, Drake

(2004) found:

> Stereotypes are very useful in the identification of relations between social
> groups (the oppressed and the oppressor) and, as such, are both revealing
> of a wider social framework within which, in this case, disabled people are
> seen. Equally, stereotypes can be highly empowering and enjoyable for
> the oppressed in revealing the true nature and picture of their social
> relationships: I am right, society does see me this way, I am not imagining
> it. (p. 102)

The oppression evident in the television episodes shown to the adolescents in this study

originated in stereotypes about many kinds of differences and perpetuated them by

denouncing difference as humorous and worthy of oppression. A dialogue from the

episode of *The Suite life of Zack and Cody* watched in the focus group (Eells & Correll,

2007) exposed a multitude of stereotypes about disability, and reinforced the perpetuation

of them by making them humorous:

Mr. Moseby	(enters lobby of hotel and a basketball hits him on the shoulder) Ouch. Zack! Cody! No basketball in the lobby!
Zack and Cody:	(walk to Mr. Moseby and pick up basketball)
Cody:	What makes you think we're playing basketball? (looks down at the ball in his hand)
Laugh track inserted	
Cody:	Oh.
Male teenager:	Yo. Toss the rock.
Cody:	(tosses the basketball as the camera pans out to show that the male teenager is with a group of four other male teenagers who are all in wheelchairs)
Mr. Moseby:	Oh, (walking toward males in wheelchairs who are encircling a round table) you gentlemen must be the Rockland Rollers (tone of voice changed from annoyance at Zack and Cody to excitement, however he is worried about property damage to the table) Watch the..oh, ho, ho, ho (nervous giggles as he places himself between the boys and the table). Wonderful. Welcome to the Tipton. Now, over here boys (begins to walk out of circle).
Male teenager:	Heads up (as he throws the basketball which flies over Mr. Moseby who had squatted in fear. The basketball hits the bell at the hotel counter)
Laugh track inserted	
Estaban (bellboy):	(runs away from a customer and stands up straight and serious by the bell) Yes.
Laugh track inserted	
Mr. Moseby:	False alarm, Estaban. (a basketball comes from behind and hits him on back) Oh!
Daryl (coach):	(African American coach of Rockland Rollers rolls down hotel lobby ramp in his wheelchair) Yo! Chill! What are you boys thinking tearing up this man's hotel? Y'all trying to make the coach look bad?
Rockland Rollers:	(line up their wheelchairs in three straight lines to reply in unison) Sorry, coach.
Laugh track inserted	
Mr. Moseby:	Children who listen to adults, how refreshing.
Laugh track inserted	

Daryl:	(condescending tone to Mr. Moseby) And you lettin' them tear it up.
Mr. Moseby:	(obediently) Ok.
Laugh track inserted	
Cody:	(accusing tone) Yeah, how come they can play basketball in the lobby and we can't?
Mr. Moseby:	(uncomfortable) Ya, it, it, it's just. You know. Ah, I didn't want to. I mean. They're...
Daryl:	In wheelchairs?
Mr. Moseby:	Are they? I hadn't noticed (forces seriousness then giggle uncomfortably)
Laugh track inserted	
Daryl:	(stares seriously at Mr. Moseby)
Mr. Moseby:	(in a cheery tone) Shall I check you in?
Daryl:	Sure.
Mr. Moseby:	(cheerily) Ok.
Daryl:	Thanks man.
Laugh track inserted	
Daryl:	Hey, listen. For future reference, just because a person is in a wheelchair, doesn't mean you have to give them special treatment.
Mr. Moseby:	Of course (laughs nervously). Now, why don't you just sign here for the rooms? (hands Daryl the bill)
Daryl:	(surprised) Whoa, partner. Man this is steep. Man, I can't believe you won't give a brother in a wheelchair a break (sets bill back on counter).
Laugh track inserted	
Mr. Moseby:	(taking bill and writing on it) Perhaps a special adjustment can be made.
Daryl:	What did I just tell you about giving people in wheelchairs special treatment?
Laugh track inserted	
Mr. Moseby:	(whining and apologetic) Ok, I'm so sorry. How can I make it up to you?
Laugh track inserted	
Daryl:	How 'bout a discount?
Laugh track inserted	
Mr. Moseby:	Ah, but, but, you just said (nervously speaking). We just had the whole conversation about (pause) the whole (pause) you know what (raises voice). Just pay what you like.
Laugh track inserted	
Mr. Moseby:	(basketball hits him in the face) OK! (throws arms up and raises voice) It's free!

| Darly: | (turning to teenagers) Who threw that? |
| Rockland Rollers: | (all point to someone other than themselves, including Zack and Cody) |

Laugh track inserted

Mixed messages about stereotypes, such as the example above, give credence to the stereotypes and continue to present an "us" and "them" dichotomy. Oppression and uncomfortable characters were prevalent in the scene but instead of addressing these societal messages, stereotypes became the humor and lesson of the scene.

After watching the episode of *The Simpsons* (Grearney & Reardon, 1995), Charlie's reaction to Homer's weight gain showed his belief in the stereotype that people need to be normalized as quickly as possible, "I wouldn't even have made Homer do push-ups. I'd say liposuction right now and then." Holtzman (2000), whose research examines what media teaches about what is normal and acceptable, identifies three ways in which stereotypes are perpetuated. The first is by limited exposure, such as not including characters with disabilities. The second is through the range of characters portrayed with one or two character types consistently repeated. Finally, stereotypes are conveyed through simple characters, rather than complex characters. All of these methods of perpetuation of stereotypes were prominent in the episodes that the focus group participants and I viewed.

Since programs geared toward adolescents have taken over many of the primetime television slots (Irlen & Dorr, 2002), the connection between popular media's influence on adolescents' understandings about disability and difference needs to be a topic of societal concern. Given youngsters' heavy exposure to this medium, which perpetuates stereotypes and oppression, society needs to consider the current and future

impact on adolescents who may or may not be informed consumers of the media. Hegemony is perpetuated as adolescent television consumers utilize television to form judgments, opinions, and otherwise construct their attitudes about people with disabilities based on television portrayals which they so frequently view. As Apple (1990) noted, "...hegemony acts to 'saturate' our very consciousness" (p.5) which is occurring daily as uninformed adolescent consumers are continually bombarded with perceived societal norms on television programs.

Teacher and Pre-service Teacher Implications

Teachers, both in-service and pre-service, are "trained" to work with children. As I stated in Chapter 1, prior to my doctoral studies I had not considered disability to be socially constructed. I was not taught to be a critical consumer of hegemonic practices in education. Teachers are given the tremendous responsibility of spending a considerable portion of their students' lives with them, developing mutual relationships in the social context of schools (Murray & Greenburg, 2006). If teachers are to educate adolescents about society's perpetuation of stereotypes and oppression through hegemony, teachers much first become critical consumers themselves. Pre-service and in-service teachers need to become aware of media's effect on adolescents and the detrimental effect media has on shaping adolescents' perceptions about disability (Siperstein et al., 2007). Teachers must question how their students interpret these messages in relation to their personal lives.

A recurring question that I grappled with as I watched the programs and listened to the focus group discussions was, "What do adolescents, who possess the very

characteristics that are being judged on the television, feel about their personal

differences upon watching characters with the same differences become the objects of

discrimination?" Martin and Gentry (2005) strongly suggest that media plays a part in

influencing what constitutes an acceptable level of physical attractiveness. What do

adolescents feel, for example, when watching an episode of *Kim Possible* in which Ron

noticeably gained weight (McCorkle, 2007a), and the principal, Mr. Barkin, ordered Ron

to the front of the classroom, poked his stomach and said to the class, "Here is what an

unbalanced diet looks like, people. Don't avert your eyes. Look at it!" When watching

this scene, and the many other episodes that dealt with weight, I wondered what

overweight adolescents felt when they watched this program. Did they worry about

feeling humiliation in the presence of their peers? I wonder about the child whose parents

can only afford to buy them glasses at Wal-Mart or a similar venue, who turns on their

favorite program, *Hannah Montana*, only to see Lilly hold up her glasses that are

perceived as hideous while stating, "Never let your mother buy you glasses at a place that

also sells tires." What about the adolescent who finally acquired enough courage to start

a club or organization, then turns on *That's so Raven* to view the following dialogue

(Poryes & Sherman, 2005):

Chelsea:	Alright, Eddy. Are you sure you don't want to join the Beekeeper's Club?
Eddy:	Ah, no. I'm allergic.
Chelsea:	Oh, to bees?
Eddy:	No, to nerds.

Although there are a multitude of examples such as those mentioned above, I

would like to draw attention to one more sequence of comments in an episode of *Hannah*

Montana entitled "Get down study-udy-dy" (Green & Christiansen, 2007). Rico, a character who was advanced several grades in school due to his perceived superior intelligence, makes very quick but poignant statements of sarcasms. When Hannah Montana is taking a test that she is worried about, Rico matter of factly states, "Don't worry lollipop, you can always marry money." Later when all the students' tests are complete and on the teacher's desk, Rico picks them up and states, "By the look of these tests, you losers need all the help you can get." Statements such as these not only undermine messages of acceptance of diversity, but perpetuate stereotypes and encourage oppression of people with physical and intellectual differences in society and in school settings.

In the programs I viewed for this dissertation, academic scenarios included characters using sarcasm in classrooms, hallways, and various academic settings. The use of sarcasm and humiliation were commonplace, often occurring between classmates, teachers, principals and other adult characters. Teachers and pre-service teachers need to educate themselves on what their students are viewing and then explicitly model alternative means of interactions instead of the discriminating and dehumanizing use of sarcasm and humiliation present in the contrived television schools. Effective teachers need to understand the larger social context in which they are working and in turn become culturally responsive teachers (Grant & Gillette, 2006).

Teachers need to critically analyze society's hegemonic practices and examine the perpetuation of stereotypes and oppression that their students are exposed to through media. When students are discussing television programs that they frequently watch,

teachers need to make themselves familiar with this programming in order to critically

examine the messages that are perpetuated through this medium. Then, the pre-service

and in-service teachers need to hold explicit discussions with their students in order to

make the students critical consumers of the television they are watching. As educators, it

is our responsibility to "educate" our students by first listening to them, discussing with

them, and then modeling acceptance of difference that they should incorporate into their

personal epistemologies.

Parental Implications

Kira:	My dad used to always let me watch wrestling. Then one time I ended up getting in a fight with this one kid that made fun of me and ever since then I wasn't allowed to watch wrestling.
Facilitator:	You can't watch it anymore?
Lisa:	I LOVE watching wrestling.
Alexis:	(laughs)
Kira:	I'm not allowed ever since the fight I got into (laughs).

As apparent in the dialogue above, Kira's parents restricted her television

viewing. She was the only adolescent in my focus group who acknowledged parental

input regarding television viewing. However, as Steyer (2002) noted, we must also

acknowledge that it would be difficult for parents to shelter their children from all media

exposure given media's saturation of so many aspects of society. He continued, "Too

often, parents feel blindsided by the media, surprised and sickened by what their kids

have been exposed to" (p. 50). When I began viewing the 41 selected television

episodes, I knew that my children had watched several programs that were aired on the

Disney Channel. Yet, as I transcribed the program scripts, I was "surprised and

sickened" at what I had allowed my own children to be exposed to. The messages were delivered quickly but carried powerful punches. One such example was the following scene from *That's So Raven:*

Cory:	Guys, there's something I got to tell you. I don't do anything that I don't want to do. [I] appreciate the respect.
X Squad leader:	Dude, you're the biggest WIMP we've ever met.
X Squad members:	(laugh)
Cory:	Ok, I guess I got some bad advice here. Ok, what do I have to do?

I had dedicated years of my life advocating for the embracement of people's differences, and I had let my children watch programs that promoted a very contrary message. I assumed that I was not alone in naively believing in the "safety" of such programs. Winn (2002) encouraged parents to understand the power of the programs, examine how they affect the children and the family life, and begin taking the steps to deal with it. Parents need to talk with their children about what they are viewing on television while asking questions to determine the adolescents' perceptions of the messages and characters. Parents need to watch the adolescent programming first to determine if it is appropriate and acceptable for their children. Finally, parents need to listen to their children and help them construct meanings from the programming that do not further promote hegemonic oppression of marginalized groups.

This is not to say, however, that parents are the sole gatekeepers to the stereotypical and oppressive images presented through adolescent television programming. The accountability for responsible television programming extends beyond the parents and the home.

Media Implications

An additional gatekeeper can be the media. Steyer (2002) strongly advocates that

the media be held accountable:

> It is long since past the time when the media industry itself, and particularly the
> top executives of these huge media conglomerates, took sustained and serious
> responsibility for the products and content that they are marketing to kids, for
> shaping our culture and values. They must be held accountable. Period. (p. 22)

This study revealed the importance of including more characters with disabilities in

adolescent television programs. In addition, the discourse analysis (Gee, 2006) conveyed

the necessity of examining how such programs are constructed and the meanings they

convey. Parents cannot do this alone; this is a complex issue that needs to be responsibly

undertaken at a systematic level by the media. However, including more characters with

disabilities does not mean simply adding secondary characters with disabilities. The

positive effects of adding characters for heightened awareness must be weighed against

the impact of misconceptions that may be presented based upon how the characters are

portrayed and any misconceptions or distortions of the nature of difference that may

occur (Sacks & McCloskey, 1994).

Producers of such programs must be made aware that the information they present

shapes what adolescents believe, regardless of whether the information is "solid,

accurate, and factual or sketchy, inaccurate, and fictional" (Holtzman, 2000, p. 12).

Consistently presenting the nature of difference as humorous, socially uncomfortable and

unacceptable educates people about difference, and this current form of education has

negative consequences. While media creates disabling barriers, it is important to acknowledge the possible origins:

> From the cradle to the grave, entertainment media in the form of prime time television and popular music and film offers images that are often repeated over and over. These images can either fill in the gaps of our learning, reinforce what we have already learned, or challenge previous learning. (Holtzman, 2000, p. 31)

There is hope, however:

> This can be a result of several factors, including the intense competition of the marketplace, filmmakers' hiding behind the guise of creative license, lack of proper research, and poor role preparation by performers. Because they have access to huge international audiences, filmmakers have an ethical and social responsibility to accurately inform the public. (Safran, 2001, p. 231)

It is not impossible to restructure the portrayal of television characters if television and filmmakers challenge themselves and the industry. An additional quote from the disability studies literature summarized this point, "The disabling 'social barriers' in the lives of people with impairments can be indentified *and challenged* because socially created barriers can be dismantled" (Thomas, 2004, p. 22). Again, principles from the disability studies literature have applications to the nature of difference in television.

Adolescent Implications

Not only do teachers, parents and media makers need to change; so do the adolescents. They need to transform from passive viewers to critical analysts. As ubiquitous and powerful as media images are, students are not taught to read the messages at a level that subjects such messages to scrutiny (Eisner, 2002). Whether taught at home, at school, or in outside venues such as Y Groups, adolescents need to be made aware of hegemony. They need to acknowledge that they have been unthinkingly accepting and striving to attain unachievable societal norms. Adolescents need to

become aware of the ways in which they judge themselves and others, ways that often perpetuate stereotypes they do not see. A study by Irlen and Dorr (2002) conducted in a manner similar to this study but analyzing moral dilemmas in adolescent programming confirmed the importance I found of interviewing adolescents and analyzing their discussions about television content in order to determine how it influences their view of self and the world. They found, as I did, that popular television programs "may be excellent teaching tools, presenting real-life illustrations of dilemmas involving serious issues that adolescents face" (p. 13). Television programs are teaching adolescents; whether we use them as tools for addressing societal issues becomes the question.

It is crucial that adolescents develop an awareness of how media images work and in what ways they impose themselves on our consciousness (Eisner, 2002). By examining the world around them, a world represented by television, adolescents can more fully understand the way they relate as individuals, as group members, and societal members (Alexander & Hanson, 2005).

Researcher Implications

The disability studies literature provides a solid framework from which to expand the critical research that needs to be conducted in this area. It is an under-researched field, yet minute by minute and hour by hour, adolescents watch these programs that implement humor at the expense of others' differences and come to expect it and find it amusing. Placement of laugh tracks confirmed this. Not only do these programs illuminate society's present lack of acceptance, but more research is necessary to discover if these programs further exacerbate this lack of acceptance.

Although I was able to locate research about adolescents and their relationship with popular culture, especially with television as the medium (Collins et al., 2004; Irlen & Dorr, 2002), and research connecting social construction of disability and popular culture (Connor & Bejoian, 2006; Drake, 2004; Finkelstein, 2004; Safran, 2001; Thomas, 2004), I failed to locate any research that examined adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about disability based on what they saw in popular culture, particularly through the medium of television. In addition, continued research in the area of stereotypes is needed, not in specific areas such as race or gender, but in an overall popular culture lack of acceptance of difference in adolescent television programming.

It is imperative that researchers begin to seek the voices of those that they represent in their research. If we claim that adolescents are influenced by the media, we need to listen and talk with the adolescents to interpret the degree to which they are influenced and in what ways. The power of listening to adolescents cannot be underscored. In order to determine their interpretations and constructions of media images and messages, we must ask them and truly listen to what they have to say.

Importance of Listening

The importance of listening and allowing adolescents their voices was strongly revealed in this study. Prior to conducting the focus group sessions, I had identified these as priorities. I had read Heshusius' (1995) advice about listening to children and had believed I understood the power of listening. However, I continually fought the urge to correct the participants every time they used offensive language such as "retard" or every time they engaged in dialogues that contradicted their prior statements of acceptance. As

I began transcribing, I realized all of the interpretations that would have been lost had I stopped and corrected them, which I am now aware that I have unconsciously done frequently as a teacher and a parent.

All too often during the course of my research, I found that the current studies represented the voices and interpretations of the researchers; the lack of adolescent voices speaking of their own experiences presented a void in the research. After struggling but allowing their voices to speak uninhibitedly, I became a strong advocate for the voices of the adolescents to be heard.

Conducting focus groups with sixth grade students was not without its difficulties. Listening to adolescents state troublesome interpretations that completely contradicted everything that I wanted to teach them about acceptance of diversity was challenging. However, the depth of their interpretations could never have been understood if they were not given the opportunities to express their thoughts.

As researchers, it is crucial that we seek the opinions of those that are most impacted by that which we are attempting to research. By listening we can better understand that which the participants involved in the research share. The interviewer-interviewee relationship becomes one of narrator and listener (Chase, 2005). Clearly, the power of listening in qualitative research cannot be understated.

Reflection

The intent of this study was not to provoke guilt in parents who have let their children watch similar programming or in adolescents who engage in similar dialogues on a daily basis. Additionally, the intent was not to criticize the adolescents who agreed

to participate in this study. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with these unique and caring individuals. They opened up their hearts and minds, freely letting me enter a relationship of uninhibited trust. As I transcribed the focus groups alone in my office late at night, I found myself smiling and laughing aloud at their unadulterated laughter and grieving for the way in which they have been influenced by society to continually transform themselves to meet an unachievable norm.

My intent was to share these dialogues in an effort to allow others to read and interpret based on their own background experiences and prior knowledge. I beseech all readers of this study to do the same: interpret without judgment. These adolescents, like so many of their peers, are eager to share their thoughts. There is much to be learned about the hegemony perpetuated by television programming intended for adolescent audiences, if only we listen.

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APPENDIX A

SCRIPT FOR FOCUS GROUPS

My name is Paula.

In a minute I would like to get to know each of you. First, I would like to explain a little about why we are here today. While we talk, and while you watch the tv show, please feel free to help yourself to the snacks and soda. (Snacks and soda will be available when the adolescents enter).

Today we're here to talk about tv shows people your age are watching. I want to know what you think and feel when you watch tv shows like this one. We don't have to decide if the show is good or bad, we are just going to talk a little about it.

Anything you say will be confidential. I won't go around saying who said what. I will record, with the voice recorder, and have the video as a backup only so I can take notes later. Sometimes it is hard to write down everything people say, even if you write fast. So I will record now, and then later I will go back and listen to what you had to say. I will write down only what was said, not who said it.

Let's introduce ourselves.

Please tell us your name, age, and about how many hours you watch tv each week. If you want, you can tell us your favorite TV show.

The television program we will watch today is called____. It is shown on (weeknight) nights on (channel). Have any of you watched this program before? If you have seen this episode, please be patient in watching it again. The clip will be about ## minutes long. Does anyone need a bathroom break or to get anything else before we start? After the show is over I will ask you a few questions about it, but it will not be a test. You do not need to memorize anything from the show. The questions will be more about your feelings on the show and characters.

*******Play television clip*********

Now I have a few questions to ask you about the program you just watched. I will throw out a question for the group. My hope is that you will be able to have a discussion about each question. You do not need to say your answers just to me. Talk to each other, ask questions of each other....just have a general conversation. You do not have to agree with each other or come to a group consensus. I'd just like to get everyone's thoughts out in the open. The point is to have a comfortable discussion. Just talk to each other, and remember that later, when I take notes, I will only write down what was said, not who said it.

Any questions?

Let's begin.........

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What did you think about this show?

2. What was happening?

3. What did you think about the characters in this episode?

4. Who was the "hero" of this show? Why was he/she the hero?

5. Who were the "cool" characters and the "uncool" characters? How could you tell?

6. Who, from this episode, would you want to be friends with? Why?

7. Did the people in this show remind you of any people that you know? Please explain.

8. How and why were some people in the episode treated differently than others?

9. Would you recommend this episode to your friends? Why or why not?

10. If you were to rewrite the ending of this episode, what would it look like?

11. Did you like this show? Why or why not?

Extra:

12. What do you think the people who wrote this show want you to understand?

What do you think the message in this show was supposed to be?