Disability Studies Quarterly
Fall 2001, Volume 21, No. 4
pages 97-104 <www.cds.hawaii.edu>

The Malfunction of Barrier-Free Spaces in Indonesia

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Introduction

Third World countries have a common heritage and legacy of colonialism and poverty (Drakakis-Smith 2000: 2). Indonesia, a Third World country in Southeast Asia, experienced Dutch colonialism for three and a half centuries, 1602 - 1945 (Bunge 1983: 15 & 42). More than half a century since its independence, the nation is still preoccupied with "coping and surviving" (Parnwell and Turner 1998: 148). Nonetheless, Indonesia as well as Asia in general has enjoyed economic gains since the early 1970s until the Asian currency collapsed in 1997 which led to unexpected regime change in Indonesia (Mehmet 1999: 117-118).

This financial collapse has engendered inflation, migration, unemployment, and unrest which are daily concerns across much of Southeast Asia (Chatterjee 1998: 5). In Indonesia this economic crisis persists even today as the national currency, the rupiah, continues to devalue. Prices for basic necessities are increasing making the problem of poverty and survival critical to the state. In this precarious situation, streets become the loci of social, economic, and political struggles against all kinds of adversity. Authorities lose their power to prohibit illegal actions and stern prohibition may provoke contagious mass anger that aggravates the socio-economic chaos of the city. This is the overall social and economic situation of Bandung, the capital city of the province of West Java where I live and work. As a woman with an ambulant disability my familiarity with the barriers of the streets is based on personal experience in dealing with impediments in everyday activities.

In 2000 I was in Japan to research barrier-free design. Obviously, this post-industrial country in Asia is enormously advanced in the implementation of barrier-free design whereas ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) developing countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh, only began to pay official attention to the removal of physical barriers in 1993 (UN ESCAP 1995: iii). Observing the curb cuts and orderly behavior of street users in Japan, I conclude that barrier-free environments in Indonesia will not materialize until people's quality of life is enhanced. This includes reduction of illiteracy and the increase of access to information and participation in

economic and political decision-making (Hood 1998: 863).

With a focus on the street, this paper aims to understand the malfunction of barrier-free spaces in Indonesia by first studying the cultural background that situates people with disabilities in society. The way the general population uses and occupies the streets reflects the relative invisibility of people with disabilities. The city of Bandung is examined as a case study.

The Problem

Golledge (1996: 406) argues that poor and disabled people face similar disadvantages because both groups have limited access to personal unassisted travel, economic and social resources, political power, and activity spaces. This generalization allows us to see the similarities between disadvantaged groups. While people with disabilities throughout the world endure "social oppression and spatial marginalization" (Gleeson 1999: 2), in Indonesia poverty and "shame culture" exacerbate their difficulties.

On the streets one very rarely sees ambulant disabled people using mobility aids such as leg braces, crutches, walking canes, and wheelchairs. Occasionally one notices ambulant disabled and elderly people traveling without these aids and blind people with canes. For underclass people who are disabled and very poor, the streets are the public spaces most suitable for begging.

Generally, people with disabilities are not pedestrians (Gleeson 1998: 96). Being ever-conscious of their physical limitations they are on the streets for definite purposes such as waiting for public transport. They are not strolling consumers, people in circulation, and idlers (ibid).

Given these contingencies, I will consider the following questions: What kind of people with disabilities will appear in public? To what extent are barrier-free spaces useful? Which socio-economic class(es) will mostly use these spaces: the middle class, underclass, or both? The middle class makes significant progress because of their higher education and possible professionalism. Their preoccupation with coping and surviving is lessened and barrier-free spaces become relevant.

Background

The Culture of Respect for the Elderly

In the family-oriented society of Indonesia, disabled and elderly people can get human assistance for their physical limitations. The influence of lingering feudal relations (Komardjaja 2001: 82) is another determinant that upholds the respect for older persons and people in authority. The social system recognizes the unequal status of the "patron-client" relationship (Kleden 1990: 352). The patron is supposed to be more knowledgeable, to bear complete responsibility, and to undertake initiatives. The client is considered inexperienced, in need of guidance and advice, and obliged to carry out to patron's instructions (ibid). In such a culture the elderly are respected for their rich experiences. Very rarely do they enter a nursing home; not only is it costly, but it also brings disgrace to the family.

In developing countries of Southeast Asia the aging population is on the increase and co-residence between elderly members and young adult generation is a common arrangement (Knodel and Debavalya 1997: 7). The family provides care and as respected members elderly

people are not supposed to live independently. A barrier-free environment would thus appear less useful for them.

The Culture of Shame for Persons with Disabilities

In determining whether barrier-free environments are essential for people with disabilities, we firstly need to understand the dynamic of human conduct. Heller's (1985) theory of shame focuses on the ethical regulation of human action and judgment. She makes a clear distinction between the moral feelings of shame and conscience both of which are formed by authorities of human conduct. The authority of shame is external and resides in the "social customs - rituals, habits, codes or rosters of behaviour," whereas the authority of conscience is practical and represented by the internal voice (ibid., p3). Shame is an inborn feeling, but conscience is acquired through life experiences (ibid., p52). In a society where forms control people's lives, the norms and rules remain uncontested and taken for granted and moral behavior is developed through shaming (Cote 1992: xx). Indonesians hold the general rule of sameness and fear to step outside its boundaries.

In the culture of shame visible physical appearance is more significant than the invisible forces that control attitudes. In such a society it is not easy for disabled people to be accepted (Ototake 2000: 218 - 219). When persons with disabilities wish to be independent, they have to face the external authority of normalcy. The situation engenders conflict when they have to make a choice between values that they conceive to be superior, essential, real and rational, and the more conventional values (Cote 1992: xxi).

My friend Wati (a pseudonym), who uses crutches, pursued a Master's degree in a university where she every day she had to surmount a vexing obstacle: a concrete barrier that crossed the public sidewalk leading into the classroom building. She had to sit down on the barrier to lift up her braced legs, turn her body towards the school, and place her legs on the other side of the barrier before going down several steps to reach the classroom. This illustration exemplifies her inability to use the body in ways that are socially acceptable or normal (Butler and Bowlby 1997: 420). However, the authority of conscience ruled her behavior so she could ignore her embarrassment at appearing odd. Given our similar personal experiences, Wadi and I share the same motivation to "ignore people's thoughts and stares" and "be willing to get dirty" if we wish to take part in social life. However, we also feel very awkward asking for help from people we do not know. Sometimes we face unavoidable steps with handrails and we need a human arm to hold so that we can go up or down.

Coming from the middle class and being professionals, we are moving towards a "conscience culture" typical of modernity (Cote 1992: xxi). We take responsibility for our actions and this self-determination liberates us from feeling ashamed to appear in public despite our visible disability.

Movement on the Streets of Bandung

City streets in Asia are places where people spend most of their days (Harrison & Parker 1998), an indication that outdoors activities are more valued than indoor life. Like on the streets of Indian cities, it is difficult to move in a straight line in Bandung (Edensor 1998:209). Pedestrians confront obstacles underfoot and in front (ibid) and have to be alert to possible harm caused by the different speeds of various vehicles maneuvering for space. The slow movement of

a tricycled pedicab that uses human energy results in the congestion of other vehicles and the faster speed of motor vehicles scares off pedestrians. The continuous flow of traffic and the quick timing of the red traffic light cause pedestrians to be indifferent to the rules of crossing the street. They cross at any time and from any point they wish since waiting for the traffic flow to subside is futile. Pedestrians assume drivers to be responsible for their safety (Komardjaja 1997). As vehicles literally cover the road, pedestrians have to thread their way between the cars.

Sidewalks along main roads and thoroughfares are strategic sites for economic activities of low-income and informal traders who hardly leave space for pedestrians. Added to this are the tricycled pedicabs and motorbikes parked on the sidewalks. One can find at dawn ad-hoc wet markets that occupy half the width of the vehicular road and which may continue until late morning. Only when most of the items are sold out do hawkers and vendors vacate the space leaving behind a mound of litter. Walking down the street is often a sequence of interruptions and encounters that disrupt smooth passage (Edensor 1998: 209). There are many features of the built environment that prevent easy passage: high, cracked and uneven sidewalks, narrow and open drains, the absence of fences or barriers at the edge of a descent, continuous water flows, and haphazard construction.

In the disabled-unfriendly city of Bandung there is no space for the mobility of people with disabilities. The middle class usually have domestic helpers who can be ordered to run errands. While Wati and I treasure independent living, we also depend on our helpers who save us from troubles on the streets. Wati finds it impossible to negotiate the barriers of the street. I, on the other hand, must nerve myself to surmount obstacles of walking along the edge of a vehicular road, of getting on and off the public van, of crossing the street, and of walking on uneven sidewalks. These difficulties are not so much due to my disability since everyone on the street is likewise struggling for any form of survival.

Failures in accessibility

Three examples show how accessibility fails to function adequately after construction projects are completed, illustrating a lack of recognition of barrier-free access.

1. In Yogyakarta, a city in the province of Central Java, a pilot project of accessibility included part of the sidewalk along the thoroughfare of Malioboro. This was changed into a footpath with guiding blocks for blind people. Its length of 150 meters, notably in front of the parliament building, resulted in an obstacle to the long established practice of parking motorbikes on the sidewalk.

2. There used to be a ramp at the entrance of the bank I frequent. In 2000 a cubicle for the ATM was erected on this short ramp occupying the entire space. Since then, I use the staircase and have to ask strangers to lend me physical support as I ascend. I go down anxiously on my own.

3. In the central railway station of Bandung a platform was raised so passengers could easily enter the wagons. There was a steep ramp to get on the platform and the sign indicating wheelchair accessible hanged on a nearby pole. In 2000 the ramp was transformed into a staircase with a steep and narrow ramp next to it.

The value of independence, as understood in the West, is not in the tradition of a collectivist society. Prospects for the creation of barrier-free spaces in Indonesia are dim as a result.

Discussion

In response to the appeal of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) to build barrier-free environments, the Indonesian government has made timely efforts such as issuing the technical guidelines for physical access in 1998, installing ramps in front of different buildings on the campus of the Ministry of Settlements and Regional Infrastructures in 2000, and conducting national seminars. These actions, however, do not lead to the realization of barrier-free spaces. The resulting ineffectiveness of these spaces is attributable to the following constraints.

Poverty in Indonesia

The government has to prioritize the improvement of per capita income, employment and education, health, sanitation and clean water, low cost housing and land acquisition. Its preoccupation with coping and survival leaves hardly any resources for the development of equity, social justice, the meeting of basic human needs, democracy, environmental awareness, and welfare (Drakakis-Smith 2000: 8; Parnwell & Turner 1998: 162). It is not surprising that the special needs of people with disabilities are not considered a priority in Indonesia's list of survival concerns.

The Economic Struggle for Survival

All sorts of economic struggles for survival that take place in public domains are tolerated at the expense of chaotic traffic and the transformation of mainstream pedestrians into jaywalkers. The ideal of disciplined behavior on the part of pedestrians, peddlers, and drivers is culturally unthinkable and the enforcement of rules remains weak. On the streets persons with disabilities are ignored (Kraus 2001). Each street user is so immersed in her/his own struggle, that there is hardly room for altruism (Parnwell & Turner 1998: 162).

Misuse of Street Accessibility

If ever curb cuts and ramps are installed, the main users might be the low-income people from the informal sector. The accessible facilities will most likely be used to push and pull carts and mobile eating-stalls, and by motorbikes and bicycles to access the sidewalk or vehicular road.

The Uncertain Lifespan of the Barrier-Free Spaces

The malfunction of the sidewalks fitted with guiding blocks for persons with visual impairments, as well as the transformation and misuse of ramps, reflect people's "sheer unfamiliarity" (Ototake 2000:215) with the needs of persons with disabilities for convenient personal mobility.

Conclusion

Two conclusions may be derived from the foregoing discussion.

1. Marginalization of people with disabilities is not deemed a significant problem in contemporary Indonesia.

The current unstable social, economic, and political conditions impact on people from all

sections of life. In a culture of coping, tolerance and survival, marginalization is not an issue. Only when basic human needs have been met and social justice and equity are assured can people with disabilities demand access.

2. Barrier-free spaces do not function effectively.

The misuse of the streets documented here, points toward the malfunction of other barrier-free spaces as well. Whilst the construction of barrier-free environments is meaningful and useful for people with disabilities, we must also be realistic and anticipate future breakdowns.

According to this pessimistic assessment, the creation of barrier-free spaces will not be immediately successful. Once the physical changes begin they will progress, albeit slowly (personal communication with Kose 2000). For the time being, people with disabilities should take advantage of the mainstream value of human assistance to access and make use of the built environment (Komardjaja & Parker 1999).

Acknowledgements: To Deb Metzel my thanks for her great help to make this paper readable.

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