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**Alex Cockain (2024). *Learning Disability and Everyday Life*. Abingdon, Oxon:
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Learning Disability and Everyday Life offers an account of Alex Cockain's life with his brother Paul. Paul is a middle-aged man who has labels of autism and learning disability. The account is ethnographic in texture, and Cockain draws on an impressive array of theory relevant to disability studies including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, phenomenology and a good deal more. He also makes liberal use of disability studies literature in advancing his analysis and arguments. The book shows how apparently mundane moments and practices in Alex and Paul's everyday lives are produced by the hegemonic forces which saturate our social world: D/discourses, power relations, normalcy, ableism and disablism, and so on. In other words, all the usual suspects are here, and they are used to illuminate not just Alex and Paul's everyday lives, but the ways in which other people including neighbours, doctors, and Government bureaucrats respond to autism and learning disability, and people who carry such labels, in their everyday lives.

The book is divided into twelve chapters across five parts. The first part comprises two chapters which are largely concerned with methodology: ethnography; the ethics of researching a learning-disabled person who is also your brother; discourse and deconstruction, and so on. The second part places more emphasis on the analysis of conversations about, with, alongside, and for Paul. The third part is concerned with

ostensibly public places and how they co-constitute disability – and, often, exclusion. The fourth part analyses encounters at home, outside the home, and in places in-between. The fifth part presents a set of images of ‘things’ – in the phenomenological sense – produced by Paul, such as paintings or marks made on brochures, which he calls ‘paperwork’, as a way of foregrounding his presence and enabling him to contribute to the discourse produced by and about him in the book.

Now, to consider these constituent parts in more detail. The first part is called Dis/orientating directions. In the first chapter, the discussion of theory and methodology is interwoven with ethnographic observations from everyday life in ways which aim to be – and to my mind succeed – in being deliberately disorientating. Whilst there have been exhortations to embrace disorientation in disability studies before, such as by Ryan Parrey-Munger (Parrey, 2020), I have to confess I was not convinced by Cockain’s assertion that such disorientation is vital. Indeed, as early as page 6, Cockain acknowledges people might be tempted to stop reading. I admit that by this point I was finding the text so frustrating and irritating that I found I often had to put the book down and will myself to carry on reading it. Such deliberate disorientation, combined with theoretically dense and sometimes convoluted prose, would also seem to work against the book’s stated desire to appeal to persons with lived experience of disability, particularly learning disability.

Happily, the subsequent sections move away from this disorientating conceit. Part 2 is about conversations, and focuses on language and discourse. It starts by giving very useful summaries of things like Foucauldian D/discourse and Derridean deconstruction in the constitution of learning-disabled subjects, and then uses them to analyse moments

from everyday life – a neighbour trespassing in the garden to berate Cockain for Paul’s continued presence in the neighbourhood; Paul’s nocturnal restlessness; filling in a benefits form and the like. These vignettes are presented as forms of activism; instances of resisting or rejecting normativity, in a similar vein to Documaci’s *Activist Affordances* (Dokumaci, 2023). Paul is characterised as rejecting authorising and normative discourses through his actions – his very being - and thus affording opportunities to question expectations of normalcy. As Cockain pertinently asks at one point, in relation to Paul’s approach to eating, just why is chicken in the morning “not normal” and get “normal” in the evening? Such moves enable Cockain to position Paul as a teacher; someone who can give us all cause to pause and reflect on how the world is, why it is that way, and how it might be different.

The third and fourth parts of the book develop these themes through analyses of Places, the encounters that happen within them, and how both are shaped by the broader sociocultural milieu. These include walks through the city, a trip to a supermarket which does not go as planned, a visit from a social worker, and the time Paul spends in his bedroom. Throughout the analysis, Cockain is careful to attend to his own role in constructing and policing Paul’s behaviour in ways that often result in him reinforcing the normalising discourses he is subjecting to critique. This is very effective in showing both how powerful these discourses are, and how many if not all of us are complicit – Cockain would perhaps say enmeshed – in their construction and propagation.

Tom Shakespeare (1996: 137) memorably and provocatively criticised the neurologist Oliver Sacks – whom Cockain cites at one point - for presenting detailed case

studies of disabled people as entertainment, casting him as “*the man who mistook his patients for a literary career*”, in reference to the title of Sacks’ bestseller. In stark contrast, Cockain’s reflexivity highlights his compassion for Paul, who I finished the book feeling quite fond of, despite never having met him in person. Ultimately, this book offers a uniquely detailed, textured, erudite and theoretically sophisticated ethnographic case study of two people’s everyday lives, and how they are shaped by learning disability and the sociocultural processes and possibilities that attend it.

Works Cited

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