

On disability, humour and rabbit holes

Clark, Janine

DOI:

[10.1080/09687599.2022.2103792](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2103792)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Clark, J 2022, 'On disability, humour and rabbit holes: a personal reflection', *Disability & Society*, vol. 37, no. 9, 2103792, pp. 1541-1545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2103792>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



On disability, humour and rabbit holes: a personal reflection

Janine Natalya Clark

To cite this article: Janine Natalya Clark (2022) On disability, humour and rabbit holes: a personal reflection, *Disability & Society*, 37:9, 1541-1545, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2022.2103792](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2103792)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2103792>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 348



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

On disability, humour and rabbit holes: a personal reflection

Janine Natalya Clark

Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This Current Issues piece offers a very personal reflection on the issue of disability and humour. It is about the author's relationship with humour in the context of an acquired neurological disability. This Current Issues piece explores the topic of disability and humour. While humour is not a novel theme within disability research, the author approaches it from the perspective of her own personal experience of living with an acquired neurological disability. The article highlights some of the complexities of humour in the context of disability, noting that the line between humour and offensiveness can be extremely thin. The article discusses two particular disability 'storylines' identified by Bertilsson Rosquist (2012) – the 'socially critical storyline' and 'the storyline of "disability humour"'. It adds a third storyline, in which disability and humour can happily co-exist, but without disability necessarily being the direct object of that humour. The neurologist Dr Allan Ropper has described neurology patients as disappearing 'down a rabbit hole'. For the author, humour is way of adapting to the 'rabbit hole' – but without disappearing down it.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 January 2022

Accepted 17 July 2022

KEYWORDS

Disability; humour;
'rabbit hole'; neurology

Looking for the 'person inside'

Boxing Day 2021. I spent most of the day, and the next couple of days, reading the eminent neurologist Dr Allan Ropper's book *Reaching Down the Rabbit Hole*. Once I started it, I struggled to put it down. The book is a collection of fascinating stories about some of the many patients with complex neurological conditions that Dr Ropper has met and diagnosed during his career. I found the title intriguing. As Valle notes, "down the rabbit hole" has come to signify a bizarre or difficult state or situation where things do not make sense' (2011, 185). This is sometimes how I think about my disability. Ropper specifically

CONTACT Janine Natalya Clark  j.n.clark@bham.ac.uk

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

links the idea to neurology. Relatively early in the book, he reflects: ‘That’s neurology in a nutshell. Your patient disappears down a rabbit hole [...]. You can’t just sit there, so you go down the hole after the patient’ (Ropper and Burrell 2014, 29). My neurologists have come down the hole after me to a certain extent, to help me understand – and perhaps, more importantly, to accept – what is happening with my brain and why it no longer works the way it used to. However, they cannot dig me out of the hole, because over time it will lose some of its strangeness and become something more familiar.

When I read Ropper’s book, what resonated with me the most – even more than the rabbit hole analogy – was the part where he poses the important question: ‘How do you begin to understand a sick brain?’ I like the response that he gives. According to him, ‘The only viable answer [...] is that you do so by engaging the person inside, and you do it on a case-by-case basis’ (Ropper and Burrell 2014, 7). More than just like his answer, I deeply appreciate it because since becoming physically disabled two-and-a-half years ago, due to a neurological condition, I sometimes feel – a view that others with disabilities may empathize with – that the ‘person inside’ has got somewhat lost. By this, I do not mean that I have lost a sense of who I am. Far from it. But I worry that perhaps other people do not see the person inside, particularly those who did not meet me or know me ‘previously’. When those whom I have never met ask me if I am ok and need some help, if I have had an accident, if my condition is long-term – questions that complete strangers have asked me – it reinforces my sense that the disability is the first thing that people see now.

Who, then, *is* the person inside? When I think about this, something that immediately springs to mind is that I am someone with a keen sense of humour. I have never had a problem with people jesting with me or pulling my leg. But how do you pull someone’s leg when their legs are the obvious manifestation of their disability? The bigger point is that since I became disabled, what I particularly miss is other people’s humour and being the object of that humour. I worry that I am now seen as somehow ‘off limits’ in this regard.

The value of humour

Humour is not a novel topic within disability studies (see, e.g. Anesi 2018; Coogan and Mallett 2013; Macpherson 2008; Vorhaus 2015). However, what I offer in this Current Issues piece is a very personal reflection on it – consistent with the fact that humour itself is highly individual. I am particularly struck by Albrecht’s comment that ‘Discovering humor in disability is difficult because we have to be able to laugh at ourselves’ (1999, 67). I completely agree with him on this point. What he goes on to say next is even more significant, namely that ‘disability humor can also be liberating. In some instances, laughing at oneself or with others redefines the experience’ (Albrecht 1999, 67).

Two personal examples illustrate this point. The first is that I was recently speaking on the telephone to someone whom I have known in a professional capacity for more than a decade. I will call him Jim. He asked me how I was and suggested that perhaps there would be some new treatment options. 'Maybe', I reflected, 'but the fundamental problem is that my brain no longer communicates properly with my legs.' After a brief pause, Jim responded that he has the same problem whenever he has had too much to drink. This amused me, particularly as I often think I look like a drunken spider unable to properly coordinate its legs. But it was more than that. Through his effort to make me laugh, what Jim also did was to effectively challenge – even if he did so unwittingly – my sense of being 'different.'

Turning to the second example, several months ago I was walking with my crutches in a local shopping area when I heard a voice behind me say 'Slowly.' I turned round to see a middle-aged man in his 50s. He said it again with a twinkle in his eye. He made me smile, largely because 'slow' is my default (and only) speed now. A short while afterwards, I saw the man again. He was sitting outside a coffee shop and as I approached, he declared: 'I think you are milking it. Yes, definitely milking it.' Some people with disabilities have regularly had to deal with claims that they are 'milking the system' or 'faking it' (see, e.g. Ryan, 2020; Walker, 2012) – an idea encouraged by popular comedy sketches such as *Little Britain*, in which one of the characters was a 'malingering, not-disabled disabled person' (Williams, 2020). Had I frequently faced abuse, I might have reacted differently to the man's comments. Certainly, if I had always been disabled and had experienced many years of insensitive remarks, insults or hostility from certain members of the public, as some people with disabilities regrettably have (including when they seek to make their voices heard [see, e.g. BBC, 2021]), I might have been less inclined to see the funny side. It was clear to me, however, that this man was not being malicious. We chatted briefly and I thanked him for making me laugh. It was as if he recognized that behind the disability, there was a person with a sense of humour that he could playfully rib without causing offence.

Disability storylines

Bertilsdotter Rosqvist observes that there are two main humour-related 'storylines' within disability studies (2012, 236). One of these is a 'socially critical storyline [...] which covers humour that is disabling or denigrating' (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2012, 237). I am opposed to any humour that is disempowering and offensive; and as Anesi points out, 'For the disability community, a longstanding relationship to humour often has been at their expense' (2017, 727). It is, however, important to stress that sometimes the line between humour and offence can be a very fine one. Indeed, I fully recognize that some people with disabilities might regard the comments that I discussed above (from Jim and the other man) as offensive.

The key point is that whether humour is construed as offensive will often depend on many different factors, including an individual's particular circumstances, the context in which comments are made and the intent behind them. It is for this reason that Graefer and Das call for 'a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of offensive humour' (2020, 151). Significantly, this is an agentic approach because it focuses attention on some of the strategies that individuals actively use to 'avoid the "ugly" feeling of offence' (Graefer and Das 2020, 158).

This accent on agency, in turn, links to the other 'storyline' that Bertilsdotter Rosqvist identifies, namely 'the storyline of "disability humour"' (2012, 236). Disability humour refers to 'any humor that centers disability or is offered by disabled persons' (Reid et al. 2006, 631). It thus brings to the forefront some of the reasons why people with disabilities – or indeed anyone that is dealing with challenges, adversity or difficult life situations – may use humour. Fundamentally, humour can be an important adaptive response, but, again, context is hugely significant here. Different types of humour (including black humour) can foster wellbeing in different contexts (see, e.g. Samson and Gross 2012, 382).

I would, though, also like to complexify a storyline that 'centers disability'. My disability is one part of who I am – and a part that I am still getting to know and learning to live with – but it does not define who I am. To the two storylines that Bertilsdotter Rosqvist highlights, therefore, I would add a third. This is a storyline in which disability and humour can happily co-exist, but without disability necessarily being the direct object of that humour (although it can be).

According to Valle's brief synopsis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*,

While sitting idly on a riverbank with her sister, Alice sees a White Rabbit, clad in a topcoat and clutching a pocket watch, scurry past and down a rabbit hole. Curious girl that she is, Alice follows the rabbit down the hole and falls a very long way down into a hallway with locked doors of all sizes. She finds a key to a door, but the door is too small for her to go through. She drinks the contents of a bottle labeled DRINK ME, which causes her to shrink to a size too small to reach the key. Then, she eats a cake labeled EAT ME and grows so tall that she hits her head on the ceiling and begins to cry – her tears flooding the hallway (Valle 2011, 185).

My own experiences in the 'rabbit hole' are dissimilar from Alice's. Things are not too small for me, and I am not too big for them. Yet, they are different; and things that were once easy for me (and that I used to do without much thought) are now everyday challenges. I will learn to live in this new world and to adapt to it. But I am more than just a person in a rabbit hole. The 'person inside' – the person that I have always been – is still there, and humour, for me, is one way in which to both demonstrate and reaffirm this.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Albrecht, Gary L. 1999. "Disability Humour: What's in a Joke?" *Body & Society* 5 (4): 67–74. doi:[10.1177/1357034X99005004007](https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X99005004007).
- Ropper, Allan, and B. D. Burrell. 2014. *Reaching down the Rabbit Hole: Extraordinary Journeys into the Human Brain*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Anesi, Juliann. 2018. "Laughing Matters: Humour as Advocacy in Education for the Disabled." *Disability & Society* 33 (5): 723–742. doi:[10.1080/09687599.2018.1453782](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1453782).
- BBC. 2021. "Comedian Rosie Jones 'More Determined' after Abuse from Question Time Viewers." October 8. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-58846736>
- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hannah. 2012. "The Politics of Joking: Narratives of Humour and Joking among Adults with Asperger's Syndrome." *Disability & Society* 27 (2): 235–247. doi:[10.1080/09687599.2011.644933](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.644933).
- Coogan, Tom, and Rebecca Mallett. 2013. "Introduction: Disability, Humour and Comedy." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 7 (3): 247–253. doi:[10.3828/jlcds.2013.22](https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2013.22).
- Graef, Anne, and Ranjana Das. 2020. "Towards a Contextual Approach: Audiences, Television, and 'Offensive' Humour." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23 (2): 149–164. doi:[10.1177/1367549417742014](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417742014).
- Macpherson, Hannah. 2008. "I Don't Know Why They Call It the Lake District They Might as Well Call It the Rock District! The Workings of Humour and Laughter in Research with Members of Visually Impaired Walking Groups." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (6): 1080–1095. doi:[10.1068/d2708](https://doi.org/10.1068/d2708).
- Reid, D. Kim, Edy H. Stoughton, and Robin Smith. 2006. "The Humorous Construction of Disability: 'Stand-Up' Comedians in the United States." *Disability & Society* 21 (6): 629–643. doi:[10.1080/09687590600918354](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590600918354).
- Ryan, Frances. 2020. *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.
- Samson, Andrea C., and James J. Gross. 2012. "Humour as Emotion Regulation: The Differential Consequences of Negative versus Positive Humour." *Cognition & Emotion* 26 (2): 375–384. doi:[10.1080/02699931.2011.585069](https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.585069).
- Valle, Jan W. 2011. "Down the Rabbit Hole: A Commentary about Research on Parents and Special Education." *Learning Disability Quarterly* 34 (3): 183–190. doi:[10.1177/0731948711417555](https://doi.org/10.1177/0731948711417555).
- Vorhaus, John S. 2015. "Capabilities, Human Value and Profound Disability: Capability Theory and Its Application to Theatre, Music and the Use of Humour." *Disability & Society* 30 (2): 173–184. doi:[10.1080/09687599.2014.990086](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2014.990086).
- Walker, Peter. 2012. "Benefit Cuts Are Fuelling Abuse of Disabled People." *The Guardian*, February 5. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/feb/05/benefit-cuts-fuelling-abuse-disabled-people>
- Williams, Zoe. 2020. "Little Britain Is Coming Back. But Was It Ever Really Funny?" *The Guardian*, January 22. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/shortcuts/2020/jan/22/little-britain-coming-back-was-it-ever-really-fun>