



## **Cultural Representations of dwarfs and their disabling affects on dwarfs in society**

Erin Pritchard  
Liverpool Hope University  
Hope Park,  
Liverpool  
L16 9JD

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Dr Erin Pritchard

*Historically, they [dwarfs] have borne the labels “freaks” and “oddities”; they have been collected as pets, displayed as spectacles, and treated as comic relief (Adelson, 2005a: Front cover, inside).*

## **Introduction**

Dwarfism is a visible disability with strong connections to various forms of entertainment, including folklore and lowbrow entertainment. Throughout history, as within the current media, dwarfs<sup>1</sup> have often been a popular form of entertainment, not so much for any talents they might have, but due to their distinctive appearance, in particular their small stature (Adelson, 2005a). How disability is culturally represented can affect how it is understood and, subsequently, how those with the disability are treated within society. Media narratives that misrepresent disability produce dominant societal beliefs about disability (Haller, 2010). How these beliefs affect dwarfs in society has largely been ignored. Kennedy (2003) argues that dwarfism is a social disability, as dwarfs receive a lot of unwanted attention due to their appearance, including staring and verbal abuse. In their report about the medical and social experiences of dwarfs, Shakespeare et al. (2010) found that over 90% of their participants had been stared at or pointed at, whilst 77% had received verbal abuse. This paper questions, first, whether the social prejudice dwarfs encounter is influenced by cultural representations of them and, second, what strategies they may use to deal with these encounters. Whilst it is not

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<sup>1</sup> The correct term to use to refer to someone with dwarfism is often contested. Terms include “dwarf”, “person with restricted growth”, “person of short stature”, “person with dwarfism” and “little person” (Little People of America, 2015). The term “dwarf” is the most common term used both medically and socially, particularly within the UK.

uncommon for people who look different to be stared at within society (Garland-Thomson, 2002) or for disabled people to receive verbal abuse, it is important to recognise what causes these reactions. Gerber (1993) suggests that the exhibition of people with bodily differences is a form of social oppression and exploitation that contributes to the reproduction of the prejudices and discrimination that they face. Recognising whether cultural representations of dwarfs play a part in the unwanted attention that dwarfs receive can help to challenge how they are treated within society.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of some of the cultural representations of dwarfs, both past and present. It shows how dwarfism is still popular within the entertainment industry, in particular within lowbrow entertainment that exploits their height. The second part of the paper engages with the experiences of dwarfs living in the UK and the way in which cultural representations can affect them in society. Barnes and Mercer (2010) suggest that the effects the media have on how disabled people are treated within society is limited. Engaging with the way in which cultural representations affect dwarfs in society should aid in building new knowledges. The last section explores how dwarfs think perceptions of dwarfism can be altered in order to challenge perceptions of dwarfs and, subsequently, the way they are treated within society. The data used in this paper are derived from a doctoral study concerning the social and spatial experiences of dwarfs living in the UK.

### **Cultural Representations of Dwarfs**

Shakespeare et al. (2010) point out that dwarfs are very prominent within popular culture, including mass media, and suggest that there is a cultural fascination with them. Their appearance is often associated with humour or mythology. The dominant cultural

image of the dwarf is that of a happy, outgoing, and entertaining person, usually male (Shakespeare et al., 2010: 20). It is the perception of the dwarf as an entertaining person that is of particular relevance to this paper.

Dwarfism is one of the few impairments that has been used as a form of entertainment for others throughout history, including within royal courts, freaks shows, and circuses (Adelson, 2005a). The Victorian Freak is a classic example that demonstrates how people with visible and often rare impairments, including dwarfs, were used for entertainment purposes. Dwarfs' height was their only reason for being on display. The purpose of the freak show was to expose those whose bodies deviated from the norm in such a way that their physical traits dominated the entirety of the persons exhibited (Garland-Thomson, 1996).

Whilst freak shows have practically vanished, there still remain forms of entertainment that use dwarfism as a form of amusement. Heider et al. (2013) point out that dwarfs often pursue careers in the entertainment business that exploit their physical appearance. An example is the "Kingdom of Little People", a theme park in China where the staff all have dwarfism and are the park's only attraction. People pay to go to see dwarfs in small houses, take photographs of them, and, later on, watch them dance in various costumes. This theme park is reminiscent of the "Midget Cities" that were part of the freak shows across the USA and parts of Europe during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Howells, 2005). Whilst it is argued that the dwarfs in the Kingdom of Little People are escaping discrimination that they experience, other disabled people who face similar discrimination do not do this. Kennedy (2003) points out that other disabled people, including wheelchair users, do not rent themselves out.

Humour has been derived from dwarfism throughout history, and that historical link remains unbroken to this day, with dwarfs still evident in contemporary humour in a way that other minority groups are not (Martin, 2010). This includes humour within films and television shows as well as in lowbrow entertainment and stand-up comedy. Haller and Ralph (2004:4) argue that “cultural codes of conduct tell many societies not to laugh at people who are physically different”. Yet, in relation to dwarfs, representations of them often encourage people to laugh at them. This is not to suggest that other impairments have not been used for humorous purposes, or are not laughed at, but they are not promoted as humorous in the same way dwarfs that in the entertainment industry are (such as by being rented out or thrown across a bar for amusement purposes).

In the UK’s entertainment industry, there are various agencies that “hire out” dwarfs for entertainment purposes, such as “The Mini-Men” and “Cheeky Events”. The Cheeky Events web page advertises dwarfs as a form of amusement:

*Cheeky Events are one of the very few agencies that can provide you male or female dwarfs for rent. What you need them for, or would like [sic] them to do, is entirely up to you (within reason of course!), but our clients often use them for promotions, singograms or as waiters or even for wind-ups (Cheeky Events, 2016).*

Adelson (2005b) points out that, due to online publicity, the demand for dwarfs in lowbrow entertainment has increased. There exist numerous online agencies that can provide a dwarf for hire, including Cheeky Events, The Mini-Men, and Little Yet Large. These agencies promote dwarfism as a form of entertainment and can be considered modern-day freak shows. In the same way that the freak show allowed audiences to gaze

at an extraordinary body, firms such as Cheeky Events allow their clients the chance to be entertained by dwarfs whose main form of entertainment is their height.

“Dwarf throwing” is another form of lowbrow entertainment that is unique to this minority group. Adelson (2005b) suggests that dwarf throwing is a form of entertainment that continues to class dwarfs as “freaks” or “spectacles”. Dwarf throwing, as the name suggests, involves an average-sized person, who is usually inebriated, throwing a dwarf across a bar and onto a mattress for entertainment purposes. Through replacing a common object, such as a ball, dwarfs are dehumanized and used for humorous purposes. Due to the popularity of dwarf throwing, it is not uncommon for dwarfs in society to be picked up by other people (Adelson, 2005b). Thus, the sport can affect how they are perceived and subsequently treated within society.

In relation to mass media, dwarfs are rarely depicted as ordinary human beings, or shown as disabled people, but are instead depicted in a voyeuristic manner that is mostly related to humour or mythology. Gerber (1996) points out that, whilst there have been few film or television roles available to dwarfs, those that have mostly dwell on their dwarfism and fail to present them as ordinary human beings. Dwarfs are prominent in films such as *Freaks* (1932), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Austin Powers* (1999, 2002), *Time Bandits* (1981), and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1971, 2005), where their dwarfism is their main feature and played upon in a comedic or fantasy way. A dwarf is rarely an ordinary human being, but rather a mischievous being, happy to be ridiculed and always to be laughed *at* rather than *with*. In mythology, dwarfs play a prominent role along with elves, leprechauns, imps, dragons, and unicorns. Dwarfs in mythology are understood to be men with long beards, wearing

Vikings' helmets, and often carrying axes; female dwarfs seldom make an appearance (see, for example, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy).

There are numerous reality shows featuring dwarfs, such as *Little People Big World*, *The Little Couple*, and *Little Women LA*. Whilst Backstrom (2012) suggests that some reality shows that feature dwarfs help to show them as everyday people, and thus may counteract some of the more voyeuristic representations, Askcharity (2006) found that documentaries focusing on disabled people often had a negative effect, due to the way they were represented. Therefore, it is important to engage with the purpose of the documentary and its content in order to see whether or not it presents dwarfism in a realistic way.

Adelson (2005b) points out that there is an emerging shift in the way dwarfs choose to be represented; they are working towards being "defreaked" in order to provide a more positive representation of dwarfism. With increased employment opportunities, effected through disability legislation, more dwarfs are accessing forms of employment other than in lowbrow entertainment. There is decreasing acceptance of dwarfs being employed within certain entertainment industries because of the way those industries socially construct dwarfs.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Methodology**

Research concerning disability considers the importance of research in contributing to the elimination of socio-spatial barriers restricting disabled people (Chouinard, 2000). Using finding from an ethnographic study, the aim of this paper is to bring about new knowledges concerning the possible factors contributing to the social experiences of

dwarfs and how they can be challenged. It should also help to bring about new knowledges concerning dwarfism, which is relevant, given that social research in relation to dwarfism is limited. As Shakespeare et al. (2010: 20) point out, dwarfs are subject to cultural fascination, but academic neglect.

The project adopted a feminist methodology, which is relatable to disability research because it seeks to advance knowledge and the interests of a minority group and because it rejects positivist research. Those who are not in a privileged position in society, including women and disabled people, will, according to feminist epistemology, have a different way of constructing knowledge and will interpret it differently. The positionality of the researcher and the impact the research could have on dwarfs were taken into account.

### **Positionality / Reflexivity**

Research concerning disability is often characterised by an interest in the personal (Worth, 2008). I am a dwarf and the project was very personal to me, as I wanted to know whether or not the experiences I have had due to my dwarfism were also common amongst others with dwarfism. From personal experience, I became aware that cultural representations of dwarfs could affect how people perceived dwarfs. Berger (2013) suggests that being an insider gives the researcher an advantage in knowing about the topic. Being aware of many of the socio-spatial barriers and social restraints that I, as a dwarf, have encountered meant that I had an understanding of what issues to explore. I have grown up and seen dwarfs in various forms of media and noticed that, because of their dwarfism, the way they are represented is often inaccurate, as they are never shown as fully human or as people experiencing the realities of dwarfism. The intention



in carrying out disability research with a personal connection is not to evoke pity, but to show and to give an insight into disabling environments (Chouinard and Grant, 1995). The research would gather together the views and experiences of other dwarfs. Their views and experiences might be similar or they might differ markedly; whichever the case, their accumulated testimonies would add validity to the account of the lives of dwarfs that the research would generate.

Drawing on feminist understandings of research, Chouinard (2000) argues that researchers must take into account their academic position and understand that, even if they themselves are disabled, they must not claim to speak for all disabled people. Although I have dwarfism, which makes me an “insider”, I am also an outsider due to other identities, such as my age and nationality, and even the type of dwarfism that I have. Even if the researcher has the same disability as the research participants (in this case dwarfism), their views and experiences may differ (Chouinard, 2000). Worth (2008) points out that other differences, including age, class, and ethnicity, can affect experiences of disability. In one instance, a participant from Southeast Asia spoke of some of her experiences as a dwarf living in the country of her birth. She then went on to tell me that part of the reason she had moved to the UK was due to the way in which her disability was seen and treated in her home country, something which I could not relate to. Moreover, having a different form of dwarfism from some of the participants gave me new insights into experiences of which I was previously unaware, and in which I, as a researcher, became interested. My positionality helped in the creation of new knowledge, but could also affect how the data was gathered and interpreted; by recognising my positionality, I was able to take steps to reduce any such adverse effects.

## The Participants

The data used within this paper are derived from doctoral research that focused on the social and spatial experiences of 22 dwarfs living in the UK. As dwarfism is a rare disability, the geographical location of the participants was not limited to any specific area of the UK. The majority of participants were female; their ages ranged from 19 to 68 years of age. Shakespeare et al. (2010) suggest that there is a greater willingness amongst females to participate in research concerning dwarfism. The majority of participants had achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism.

Category		Number
Gender	Female	20
	Male	2
Age	16–25	3
	26–35	10
	36–45	3
	46–55	2
	56–65	3
	66 +	1
Type of Dwarfism	Achondroplasia	16
	Acromesomelic dysplasia	1
	Hypochondroplasia	1
	Spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia congenita	2
	Russell–Silver syndrome	1
	Undiagnosed	1

### **Table 1 - Demographic breakdown of participants**

Participants were recruited through various dwarf organisations, the social networking site “Facebook”, and through the method of snowballing. All initial contact with these organisations was made through the gatekeepers. When recruiting through dwarf organisations, business cards and leaflets were distributed at events held by the organisations and through advertising the project in various newsletters. To recruit participants via Facebook, an advert was placed in various forums for dwarfs. Due to Facebook’s widespread use (over 1.65 billion users worldwide) and various forums, the site offers an easy way to reach participants (Brickman Bhutta, 2012). Using Facebook provided the opportunity to recruit dwarfs who were not part of any dwarf organisations, thereby diversifying the research group and strengthening the research’s validity. Nine participants were recruited through dwarf organisations, nine through Facebook, and the rest through snowballing. The group of participants can be considered diverse and provide a range of views, opinions, and experiences. After completion, participants were sent the key findings, which findings were also sent to several dwarf organisations based in the UK.

### **Research methods**

The methods used to gather the data were semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation exercises. Semi-structured interviews provide unique access to the lived world of participants and an insight into their experiences (Kvale, 2007). Interviews are an appropriate method for gathering the lived experiences of dwarfs because they allow interviewees to share their experiences and opinions. Interviews were conducted either as face-to-face interviews or as telephone interviews. Telephone interviews were incorporated for logistical reasons: due to the rarity of dwarfism, participants tended to

be sparsely located across the UK. Trier-Bieniek (2012) argues that people have become more accustomed to using virtual forms of communication, including the telephone. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and were later transcribed. Participants were offered their transcripts in order to review them and to ensure that they were content with the end product. Reviewing transcripts to ensure their accuracy aids the provision of valid data sets (Thomson, 2011).

For photo-elicitation exercises, both photographs and maps were shown to further understanding of the way in which participants experience public spaces. Photo-elicitation uses photographs to evoke comments, memory, and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview (Banks, 2007: 65). Six photographs were chosen, all of different spaces, including a shopping centre and a high street. The aim was for the photographs to prompt participants to point out what social or spatial barriers they were likely to encounter and how they would respond to those barriers.

The manual method of coding was used in order to draw out patterns and themes within the data (Basil, 2003). All themes were colour coded, using different coloured highlighters, and themes were grouped together. A thematic-analysis approach – drawing out relevant themes through reading and re-reading each transcript – was applied (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis is the search for themes that emerge as being important to the research being conducted (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The main themes were: spatial barriers, social restraints, disability perceptions, and cultural representations. These themes would be used to construct the data chapters, whilst the sub-themes would be used to construct the sub-headings within each data chapter. Each transcript was read carefully in order to generate themes that would then help to answer each research question.

## **Ethics**

Prior to conducting the fieldwork, numerous ethical issues were taken into consideration in order to minimise any physical or emotional harm to the participants or the researcher. The ethical guidelines set out by Newcastle University were followed and Newcastle University's ethics committee approved the research before any fieldwork was carried out. Prior to carrying out the field work, a risk assessment was completed which covered any potential risks involved and how they could be avoided.

Before conducting the interviews, an information sheet and a consent form were given to each participant, which each of them was asked to read through and sign. The consent form indicated their rights as participants, such as the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The participants were given time both to read through the forms and then to ask questions for clarification. The contact details of the researcher were on both forms, so as to enable participants to contact the researcher with any issues they might have regarding the research. After the interviews had taken place, personal information, such as participants' home addresses, was destroyed to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Cloke et al. (2000) suggest that ethical considerations are especially important when carrying out qualitative research because qualitative methods provide more detailed information about participants than quantitative methods, thus according less privacy. For the purpose of confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms and any demographic information has been made vague. As Shakespeare et al. (2010) point out, anonymity is important when conducting research with dwarfs due to the rarity of their conditions and the fact that a lot of dwarfs know each other through being members of

various dwarf organisations. As dwarf organisations and the method of snowballing were used to recruit participants, it was evident that participants would be easily recognisable; it was therefore important to provide them strict anonymity.

### **Cultural constructions of dwarfism**

Cultural representations are a contributing factor to discrimination against disabled people within society (Barnes, 1991). The way that dwarfs are presented may shape people's perceptions of them and, subsequently, the way those people interact with dwarfs. Focusing on cultural stereotypes and personal beliefs, Heider et al. (2013) show that people perceive dwarfs as weird, incapable, and childlike, and that they are objects of entertainment. Building upon this notion, Jade claims that representations affect the way people expect her to respond to those who perceive her as funny on account of her dwarfism:

*They [Dwarfs in entertainment] were either funny or scary and that's how people reacted towards me constantly: I was either funny or scary. Still, some of that happens today: people expect you to be up laughing and joking all the time, and if you're not, it's because you are not a nice person or because you have a problem accepting your own shortness (Jade, 47 years of age, face-to-face interview).*

Representations that construct dwarfs as humorous or mythical are likely to create a distorted perception of them. Barnes (1992) suggests that stereotypes of the disabled, perpetuated in the media, including on television and in films, create assumptions about disabled people and thus affect attitudes towards them in society. Jade makes a link between the way dwarfs are portrayed and the way that, consequently, she is expected

to behave in society. Shakespeare et al. (2007) suggest that dwarfs are assumed to have a particular personality trait by other members of the public. In this case, the trait is humorousness, so if Jade is not laughing, it is presumed that Jade is not pleasant and that she cannot accept her own shortness, which people connect with humour. It is not to presume that Jade is miserable or that she does not have a sense of humour, but rather that she does not want to use her height as a source of amusement for others. "Other members of the public tend to see dwarfs as figures of fun" (Shakespeare et al., 2010: 30). Jade further points out that name-calling in society is encouraged by the use of certain names in the media:

*I used to be called Bridget the midget. When I was growing up a song came out called Bridget the midget and, of course, everyone at school would call me Bridget for ages. It wasn't really bullying, it was just them associating, because that was the first time on television that they had seen somebody tiny... It was on Top of the Pops<sup>2</sup> and really popular. From then on, it became acceptable to use that term from then onwards, because it had been seen on the television and that (Jade, face-to-face interview).*

Jade was automatically associated with "Bridget the midget" because they had a distinctive bodily characteristic in common. The fact that the name contains the word *midget* can be seen as offensive, given that every participant interviewed recalled finding that name very offensive and that it is a term that they would never use to refer to those with dwarfism. The term *midget* derived from the freak show and is considered offensive by the vast majority of dwarfs (Kruse, 2002). The term is still used within the media, and

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2 *Top of the Pops* was a music show on British television at the time.

in comedy venues (Martin, 2010) which gives it an acceptability to use within society. Other names that they have been called have also originated from the media, including films.

*Everywhere I go they just say, "that's a midget" or "that is a Mini-me". It is all those characters and they are all quite funny characters (Myraar, telephone interview).*

The Character to which Myraar refers to is played by the actor Verne Troyer, who has appeared as the character 'Mini-me' in two of the three Austin Powers films.<sup>3</sup> For Myraar, saying "that is a Mini-me" shows that her dwarfism is connected to a film character. Referring to her as "a Mini-me" shows that Myraar is not a dwarf in a conventional sense, but a "Mini-me" who is, as Myraar points out, portrayed as "funny", which again connects dwarfs with being funny. Haberer (2010) argues that Mini-me's role in the film builds on existing stereotypes of dwarfism: He does not speak and is often infantilised by his father (loosely speaking), Dr Evil. Amanda also mentions names she's been called which relate to film and television characters:

*I have been called "Mini-me" and been asked where Snow White is. It happens quite often. I think people are just trying to show off to their friends. They think because a dwarf in film or on TV is OK with it we must all be OK with it and enjoy people making fun out of our height (Amanda, face-to-face interview).*

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<sup>3</sup> Austin Powers is a popular series of films which came out in the 1990s.



Through certain dwarfs' allowing themselves to be ridiculed on television or in film, Amanda thinks that it gives permission to other members of the public to make fun of all dwarfs. This is because their identity is connected to the representations, so however the dwarf within the media responds to treatment is an indication of how it is acceptable to treat dwarfs in general. Heider et al. (2013) suggest that the high number of dwarfs who capitalize on their height in the entertainment industry creates a cultural perception of dwarfs as objects of amusement and entertainment.

One of the representations mentioned most often in the interviews was *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, which is not only a popular fairy tale, but also an animated film created by Disney. Disney is one of the most popular film-producing companies, whose films are aimed predominately at children. Disney's animated version of *Snow White* was Disney's first film, made in 1937, and remains one of its most popular, attracting a wide audience. Adelson (2005a) points out that, if asked to recall a film which features dwarfs, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is the most popular answer. As well as the Disney version, there are also regular theatre productions of the story, making the dwarfs a very well-known set of characters. Elkin (2015) argues that unlike other characters in the Pantomime, dwarfs cannot leave behind their height after the show in the way that other actors can leave their costume. This also means that other dwarfs may be perceived and treated in a similar manner. Lydia points out how *Snow White* is used by other members of the public to mock her and a friend:

*...The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs stereotype. When I was in Blackpool a few years ago to see a friend who was in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, we went out for a meal and people started singing behind us "Hi-Ho" (Lydia, face-to-face interview).*

The song Lydia is referring to is a well-known song, sung by the seven dwarfs, in Disney's animated version of the classic fairy tale. Disney is famous for creating animated musicals and many of the songs are very well known within society. Their experiences demonstrate that some other members of the public associated Lydia and her friend with the popular fairy tale, thus affecting how they were treated. Ivy further mentions how it can affect the way children interact with dwarfs:

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: they always play a comic part, really, and it's a thing that makes people laugh. I mean, it's difficult for parents to take their children to see Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and encourage them to laugh, and then, when they come out the theatre, somebody like me walks along and they tell them not to laugh. It must be very confusing for that to happen to a child (Ivy, telephone interview).*

Ivy believes that the representation of dwarfs in *Snow White* influences the way people, especially children, react to dwarfs in society. Shakespeare (2000: 2) points out that "as children grow up, they learn about disabled people through books, films, and legends which they encounter", and so, real disabled people are understood in terms of fictional stereotypes. A dwarf's bodily difference is easily recognisable and, thus, it is easy to make the connection between a dwarf on stage and a dwarf in the street. If a child has no other point of reference to a dwarf, then their perception is likely to be shaped by the one on stage. This can lead to avoiding spaces that perpetuate these stereotypes:

*I never want to be next to a poster advertising Snow White; I never want to be beneath the sign saying "Snow White", because I never want to be that photo opportunity for someone with a camera phone (Naomi, face-to-face interview).*

Participants spoke about being stared at in all the interviews, but seven mentioned also being photographed, which can be seen as an extreme form of staring (Garland-Thomson, 2002). What Naomi demonstrates is that she is careful where she goes in order to try to reduce the number of photo opportunities which are likely to occur in places where there are media images or representations of dwarfs. Shakespeare et al. (2010) found that 63% of their participants felt unsafe when out in public and often avoided particular locations. Naomi is anxious about being in spaces that contain these representations in case they provoke unwanted attention. This anxiety may arise from past experiences which, as Naomi pointed out, previously involved references to *Snow White*, and thus Naomi employs her own strategy to try to avoid any recurrence of such experiences.

To minimise any risk of receiving unwanted attention influenced by cultural constructions of dwarfs, Steve discusses alongside his wife, Joan, the reasons he now avoids certain areas:

**Steve:** *I was going to a gym. It was in the leisure centre and was right next door to a comprehensive school and the time that my gym class was finishing was the school's lunch time. I was coming out of the gym as they were coming out of the school and, nothing directly at me, but I could hear the circus tune*

*being whistled as I was walking towards the car and I just took no notice of it and just carried on.*

**Joan:** *"Snow White" sort of tune as well.*

**Steve:** *I just didn't go back there. I don't need to put myself in that position.*

**Joan:** *It spoilt something for Steve.*

**Steve:** *Yeah, and it was working as I was losing weight. But I stopped going and found another gym (face-to-face interview).*

Steve and Joan are a married couple whose interview was conducted as a paired interview. School children, who Steve later pointed out were teenagers, mocked his height by relating him to popular representations of dwarfs. In circuses, people are encouraged to derive humour from and to mock performers, including dwarfs (Bogdan, 1996). This encouragement is still evident and demonstrates the way in which a popular representation of dwarfism is used to mock dwarfs in society. Although Steve has since found another gym, demonstrating a good alternative, he was nevertheless restricted as to which gym he can go to. Had the teenagers not mocked his height, which mocking was encouraged by cultural representations of dwarfs, Steve would not be restricted as to his choice of gym.

### **Challenging Cultural Constructions**

Although it is still acceptable to use dwarfs for amusement purposes, often in derogatory roles that construct dwarfism in a negative way, there are a growing number of dwarfs actors refusing these roles. To further challenge stereotypical representations of dwarfs, several participants suggested giving dwarfs more of serious and/or true-to-life roles to play, as opposed to being figures of fun:

*...I think what we need to do is put out more positive images. I was quite proud of Eastenders when they cast a dwarf as a teacher and I loved that (Anne, telephone interview).*

*It would be nice to see more dwarfs playing characters like the one in Eastenders instead of always being the fool. I think it would make some people realise that we are not all stupid and that we have normal lives. A lot of dwarfs have normal jobs, but that is not shown and, so, people just think we are all panto actors (Amanda, face-to-face interview).*

Eastenders is a well-known UK soap opera and has an international audience. British soap operas, such as Eastenders, are based on people living in British society, although they may not truly represent British life due to their often over-dramatised storylines. Showing a dwarf as a school teacher can be seen as a more varied portrayal of a dwarf, in comparison with something from mythology or someone to laugh at. Sancho (2003) suggests that showing disabled people on television with minimal focus on their disability, but shown in a way which portrays them as being just like anyone else in society, helps to increase acceptance of them. The role of a teacher can be seen as a normal everyday portrayal of a person, showing a dwarf in a more positive and realistic role – a far cry from the mythical and humorous portrayals that encourage people to treat them differently, such as by laughing at them. Having a dwarf playing the role of an everyday person helps to challenge misconceptions of dwarfs, especially when that dwarf appears in a popular soap opera seen by millions of people living in the UK. It reduces the novelty value that their short statures are accorded. Obviously, not all dwarfs work as teachers, but still, the role is different from other representations of dwarfs, such as mythical creatures and comedy props for stag-dos.

Other participants also spoke about the potential that documentaries have in challenging stereotypes:

*I think it is more to do with awareness. A lot of people need to watch the documentaries and not make the programme funny. I think it will give them a very different picture of us. I think TV programmes, more than anything, need to change as a lot of people watch TV (Myraar, telephone interview).*

The majority of participants mentioned documentaries as being a good way of changing representations of dwarfs and, therefore, helping to change people's perceptions of dwarfs within society. Reality shows featuring dwarfs help to "destigmatise" them by showing them as ordinary people (Backstrom, 2012). Producing more documentaries on dwarfism can be seen as a productive way of challenging the representations of dwarfs that currently exist, supplanting them with more realistic representations of dwarfs. Heider et al. (2013) point out that a particular television channel, called The Learning Channel (TLC), has produced reality shows which aim to dispel stereotypes of dwarfs through showing dwarfs engaged in everyday activities, such as raising a family and working. Although documentaries may have the potential to change representations of dwarfs, Kayleigh mentions a particular reality show which, due to its content, she thinks can have an unwanted affect on how other members of the public perceive dwarfs:

*I am very concerned about what Channel Four is bringing out, the reality TV show based on a panto...as it just feeds into the myth that everybody who has dwarfism works in panto (Kayleigh, face-to-face interview).*

The show Kayleigh is referring to, is a reality show that focuses on a group of dwarfs getting ready for a pantomime in which they play the seven dwarfs from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This can reinforce the stereotype that all dwarfs take part in pantomimes. The show reinforces people's idea of dwarfs as objects of ridicule within society, instead of showing dwarfs in a more positive and realistic portrayal. Although some dwarfs may take part in pantomimes, not all of them do. None of the participants interviewed mentioned taking part in a pantomime, not even Kayleigh, who works as an actress but rejects roles that stigmatise dwarfs. A reality show that falsely represents dwarfs and plays on existing stereotypes will reinforce the idea that it is acceptable to ridicule dwarfs.

Documentaries aim to disseminate information about their subject, in this case dwarfs, in order to change their viewers' opinions of and attitudes towards that subject (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Although documentaries can help to show the real lives of dwarfs, Askcharity (2006) suggests that particular documentaries, such as "shock docs", can have a negative effect upon the people they portray. This is not to suggest that documentaries cannot help to change attitudes, but rather that caution is needed in order not to present a documentary which resembles more a modern-day freak show than an educational programme giving a more everyday representation of dwarfs. Whilst Backstrom (2012) argues that reality shows can help to "destigmatise" dwarfism, it must be noted that this depends on the content of the reality show and how it represents dwarfs.

## **Discussion**

It is apparent that, when dwarfs access public spaces, the negative reactions towards them from other members of the public are often influenced by cultural representations of dwarfs. Barnes and Mercer (2010) suggest that the lives of disabled people are

affected by the negative reactions they receive from other members of the public. It seemed that, in most cases, members of the public found it acceptable to mock dwarfs for fun, often relating them to dwarf characters which they deemed humorous and mocking them by singing songs sung by the film characters.

A strategy for avoiding unwanted attention is the avoidance of spaces where one is likely to receive it. Dwarfs tended to avoid spaces where they perceived an increased likelihood that they would be laughed at or harassed (Shakespeare et al., 2010). It is apparent that dwarfs' avoidance of spaces is affected by the way other members of the public react towards them, often relating them to cultural representations of dwarfs. A space is not always disabling because of the physicality of the space, but because the attitudinal environment therein disables people who look different (Hawkesworth, 2001).

Although reality shows may be a good way of challenging and changing people's attitudes towards dwarfs, those shows have to *challenge* stereotypes instead of playing on them. Backstrom (2012) points out that reality shows act as a replacement for freak shows, which are no longer as popular as they once were. With the demise of freak shows, reality shows may provide another way for people to view dwarfs.

The final way in which dwarfs can become more accepted is by placing them in roles that are more varied and true-to-life, as opposed to mythic or humorous. Although dwarfs' bodily appearance will still be very visible, their dwarfism has the potential to be read differently, which may result in less unwanted attention. Whilst there are still actors with dwarfism who will accept roles that perpetuate negative stereotypes of dwarfism, there are a growing number who are refusing these roles, such as the Emmy award winning actor Peter Dinklage. Peter Dinklage, who has achondroplasia, stated in an interview that



"[c]ute elves and buffoonish leprechauns were generally off the menu" (Lawrence, 2015). Peter Dinklage, most famous for his role in Game of Thrones, is well known for refusing stereotypical roles associated with dwarfism. This demonstrates a possible changing shift in the way dwarfism is constructed. Showing dwarfism in a more challenging way would offer dwarfs the chance of normality; as Kayleigh pointed out, dwarfs within films who are not ridiculed are not used to mock her. Thus, mass media has the potential to change attitudes towards dwarfs.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the cultural representations of dwarfs, including within mass media, and how they affect the way that dwarfs are perceived and treated within society. Dwarfism appears to have a strong cultural representation attached to it and is still popular within the entertainment industry, where it is often seen as something to laugh at. The majority of participants think that these representations contribute to the negative reactions they receive from other members of the public, and this was evident in the experiences they shared. These representations exist partly because many dwarfs still consent to using their dwarfism as a form of entertainment. This paper adds to Adelson (2005b), who suggests that dwarfs are turning against the exploitation of dwarfism within the entertainment industry, through showing how cultural representations affect them in society.

It is apparent that these negative reactions affect how dwarfs negotiate public spaces, such as by avoiding spaces where they have received or think they will receive unwanted attention that is influenced by cultural representations. For many dwarfs, their avoidance behaviour had more to do with being apprehensive about a space than it had to do with adverse past experiences. Avoiding spaces can be seen as a strategy to reduce the

amount of unwanted attention one receives in public. Overall, representations of dwarfs are part of the social barriers that dwarfs encounter and, thus, can be seen as a contributing factor to dwarfs' disablement.

Providing a more varied representation of dwarfism can help to change perceptions of dwarfism and, thus, the way other members of the public perceive and interact with dwarfs. Depicting dwarfs in everyday situations and playing everyday characters (e.g., as a teacher) can help to challenge existing stereotypes of dwarfs. With regard to reality shows, it is important to take into consideration the aim of a given show and whether or not it challenges existing representations of dwarfs.

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