

## **Compulsory able-bodiedness and the stigmatised forms of nondisability**

**ROBERT MCRUER (2006A, 2006b[2002])** introduced the concept "compulsory able-bodiedness". In this article I clarify the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness and discuss the concept's functioning. I argue that the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness hampers destabilising able-bodiedness. Instead, able-bodiedness should be theorised and discussed in ways that put focus on tensions inside the apparent coherence of the category of able-bodiedness.

### **Compulsory able-bodiedness: theorising "the nonidentity"**

Disability studies and movements have questioned the hegemonic meanings of disability and shown that citizenship and political membership are saturated with ideology which relies on the admiration of ability (e.g. Siebers 2008; Hughes 2001). In this article my main concern is McRuer's idea of compulsory able-bodiedness, and the potential of that concept for theorising able-bodiedness. McRuer's concept names the unnamed able-bodiedness which still

"masquerades as a nonidentity" (McRuer 2006a:1). However, I contend that theorising able-bodiedness by using the concept of *compulsory* able-bodiedness does not put enough focus on the tensions that reside inside the apparent coherence of the category of able-bodiedness.

According to McRuer compulsory able-bodiedness describes a cultural understanding which posits disability in terms of lack or imperfection. On the other hand able-bodiedness is seen as robustness and normalcy. He argues that when disability is subordinated in the hierarchic dichotomy disability/able-bodiedness appears as normalcy, the condition which appears as normalcy is actually a compulsion (McRuer 2006a; 2006b). Michael Warner has pointed out that the idea of the normal is only possible because there is something which can be seen as abnormal. Following Warner, McRuer argues that the abnormal/normal dichotomy functions in ways that make it difficult to resist normalcy. When the alternative to normal is being abnormal, being normal or "being one of the rest of us" is tempting (Warner 1999). McRuer points out that according to *Oxford English Dictionary* "being able-bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labour". In consequence able-bodiedness is seen as normalcy. Still, McRuer is far from suggesting that disabled people should be seen as normal. Instead, following Warner, he sees the very idea of normalcy as a target of criticism (McRuer 2006a:6–8). Already in the 1940s, Georges Canguilhem pointed out that the concept of normal is not free from evaluation. In the nineteenth century, normal came to mean right and healthy (Canguilhem 1943/1978:90–91).

The idea of compulsory able-bodiedness draws not only on Warner but also on Adrienne Rich and lesbian feminism. Rich formulated the concept of compulsory heterosexuality to name the idea,

that heterosexuality is not an inborn sexual preference, but an institutional compulsion. This notion could be seen as a precursor of queer thinking on heterosexuality, because according to lesbian feminists, heterosexuality is not only a personal preference. Yet there are fundamental differences between the idea of a compulsory heterosexuality and for instance the definition of heteronormativity, introduced by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. For Berlant and Warner heteronormativity means institutions, practices and structures of understanding that make heterosexuality seem privileged and coherent. They claimed that heteronormativity is distinct from heterosexuality, which is why in some contexts "forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative". For Rich, however, heterosexuality was a compulsion for all women and the differences between different heterosexual cultures could not change its compelling nature (Berlant & Warner 2005:309n3; Rich 1980). What I am suggesting here is that even though the privileged position of able-bodiedness is something within which we are all formed, the stigmatised forms of able-bodiedness could be sites in which the refusal of ability could happen.

I argue that cultural figures like the non-swimmer and the fat challenge the idea that able-bodiedness is a coherent category. I am not suggesting that everyone is disabled in some way (cf. McRuer 2006a:157; Linton 2006), and I don't even find productive the question whether disability is a universal category or a minority position. In this article, my concern is not which people can be labeled under the category of the disabled or the able-bodied. Instead I am paying attention to the hierarchies of ability.

The stigmatisation of the fat female body has been discussed widely (e.g. Harjunen 2004; Bordo 1995; Sedgwick & Moon 1993), but the dominant meanings of the cultural figure of the non-swim-

mer in Nordic countries are not recognised as part of the politics of ableism. As disability studies scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009) contends, politics, which reinforces the belief that able-bodiedness reflects fundamental humanity, affects all bodies. In the next section I ask how Campbell's argument differs from McRuer's idea on able-bodiedness as a compulsion.

Berlant and Warner argued that heteronormativity makes heterosexuality seem not only privileged but also coherent. Following their line of argument I contend that able-bodiedness can only keep its primary and privileged position when able-bodiedness can appear coherent. Its coherence, however, is always contextual or provisional (cf. Berlant & Warner 2005). In this article, my point is to demonstrate that in Finland non-swimmers threaten the coherence of able-bodiedness. In different contexts, certain forms of bodies are stigmatised and seen as correctable deviations from a presumed ideal body. In the Nordic context the position of non-swimmers shows the boundaries of able-bodiedness. In the Netherlands the discussion about the status of cycling has the potential to unsettle the apparent coherence of the category of able-bodiedness. When women cyclists are seen as emancipated this illustrates how even the bodily form represented as emancipation can evoke new stigmatisations, and can become a standardised way of moving which all women should fulfil (Opmeer 2004).

McRuer (2006a:2) argues that compulsory able-bodiedness is interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality. Rich (1980) argued that compulsory heterosexuality is supported by patriarchy, which was defined by radical feminists like Rich as the fundamental oppression which unites women throughout the world. This idea of patriarchy has since been highly critiqued because it sees women as a homogeneous group and does not take account to

several differences between women like class or "race" (Butler 1999). According to Steven Seidman (2010) the concept of compulsory heterosexuality masks all other sexual hierarchies except the distinction between homo- and heterosexuality. In consequence, the concepts of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality are actually stabilising dichotomies instead of destabilising them. In the framework of compulsory able-bodiedness only disability can resist compulsory able-bodiedness and McRuer suggests that disability refers to the gaps and dissonances of bodily, mental or behavioral functioning that is associated with able-bodiedness. He disputes the view that because no one can inhabit all the features associated with able-bodiedness one could conclude "that we are all disabled". I agree with McRuer (2006a:156–157) that the reasoning that we are all in some ways disabled obscures the fact that the distinction disability/able-bodiedness is hierarchic and I read his discussion on how the "universalising" idea of disability can function in complex ways keeping in mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2008) formulation on universalising / minoritising discourses on homosexuality. Sedgwick (2008:9) maintained that it one should not ask, whether the universalising or the minoritising discourse is the truth about homosexuality. Instead one should discuss how those discourses function, what those discourses perform. In my view McRuer's discussion draws on Sedgwick's formulation on universalising/minoritising. This kind of viewpoint shows that the question whether disability is a universal category or a minority position is not productive (cf. Sherry 2004).

Even though McRuer is not exactly defining what bodily, mental or behavioural forms could be labelled as disability, he hesitates whether the non-disabled can call themselves *crip* and whether there is a risk that this kind of identification reinforces "a patronis-

ing tolerance". McRuer probably assumes that non-disabled crips do not personally confront compulsory able-bodiedness, and that the only position that non-disabled crips could have is self-evidently the position of an ally (McRuer 2006a:37). My point here is that it is difficult to pay attention to the nuances of abilities and to the constant cultural struggles on proper bodies and abilities by using a conceptual tool that carries the history of the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. Cultural struggles on abilities do not always explicitly concern disability/able-bodiedness. This divide is evidently an important dichotomy but not always a sufficient point of view. The idea that McRuer develops on able-bodiedness as a compulsion resembles the argument Rich had on compulsory heterosexuality. For Rich the differences between various heterosexual cultures do not change the compelling nature of heterosexuality. Similarly, McRuer does not question able-bodiedness as fixed and coherent.

### **How to crip able-bodiedness**

A number of disability studies scholars (e.g. Hughes 2001; Oliver 1990; Siebers 2008; Wendell 1996) have paid attention to the hierarchic dichotomy disability/able-bodiedness and argued that the category of disability is constituted through the idea of autonomy. The hierarchy between disability and able-bodiedness is only possible because the non-disabled can be seen as independent and autonomous. I argue that the meaning of able-bodiedness should be changed if the aim is to benefit those who are seen as disabled, and I also suggest that the category of able-bodiedness should be discussed critically and carefully as Alison Kafer has pointed out. She has suggested that non-disabled feminists should "criticize the institution of which they are a part" (Kafer 2003:79). Dichotomous thinking about (dis)ability prevents us from recognising cultural

struggles on proper bodies and abilities. It also prevents non-disabled people from cultivating bodies and practices that might be interpreted as a failure of ability.

McRuer's idea of compulsory able-bodiedness is insufficient when we want to change the meanings of able-bodiedness or investigate how non-disabled people are targets of ability policies. The concept rather stabilises the cultural dichotomy disability/able-bodiedness and makes it difficult to analyse practices that reinforce the hegemonic discourse of able-bodiedness as a condition that enables one to do almost anything (cf. Siebers 2008:10, 117). As I suggested in the previous section the question whether disability is a universal category or a minority position is not a productive one and I agree with McRuer that slogans such as "you are only temporarily able-bodied" or "if we live long enough, we all become disabled" should be understood as rhetorical and political points which can work differently in different contexts: these rhetorical points simply do not destabilise disability identity (cf. Hughes 2007). They can make possible the questioning of able-bodiedness as a natural or apolitical identity but they do not actually make any concrete effort to analyse cultural understandings of ability (McRuer 2006a:200–201; cf. Hughes 2007).

Fiona Kumari Campbell suggests that within disability studies the attention should not be only on disability but also on ableism. To her, ableism is a belief that standardises bodies, and projects certain bodies as perfect and examples of the fundamental humanity. What is interesting is that her definition of the concept makes it possible to investigate how the disability/able-bodiedness dichotomy affects all bodies. She points out that the concept of ableism has been defined in many ways and often the definitions posit disabled and nondisabled people as fixed groups (Campbell 2009:5–6). Ac-

cording to Simi Linton, for instance, ableism is defined as discrimination in favour of the able-bodied (Linton 2006:161). This definition of ableism, however, supports dichotomous thinking about (dis)ability, and supposes disabled and non-disabled people to be groups that have discrete and distinct interests. Campbell has analysed the pathologisation of non-disabled people who desire disabilities or people with disabilities on the one hand, and the internalised ableism of disabled people on the other. The point of view Campbell has on (dis)ability is undichotomous. It makes it possible to see how hegemonic ability norms shape all bodies and how those norms could be questioned (Campbell 2009).

### **The term crip**

Theatre scholar Carrie Sandahl has analysed the meanings and uses of the term crip. She notes that the term crip includes not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well and she emphasises that the term crip is fluid and can be claimed by those whom it did not originally define. According to Sandahl even a non-disabled person might use the term to refer to oneself (Sandahl (2003:27). In my view this kind of identifying should not be seen simply as "patronising tolerance" because non-disabled crips could also actively resist uniformity and criticise the system of which they are supposed to be a part. Crippling able-bodiedness changes the hegemonic meanings of able-bodiedness. In my view, it questions the dominant contradictory ideas that the able body "can be trained to do almost anything", and that able-bodied people are all alike (cf. Siebers, 2008:10, 117). Instead of policing who can claim to be crip, I read the discussion of the term crip (Sandahl 2003; McRuer 2006a) as performatives that are actually making it possible for non-disabled people to identify as crips. Po-



siting crip as a fluid term that can also be used by non-disabled people, as Sandahl and McRuer are implying, enables it to destabilise the cultural dichotomy disability/able-bodiedness. Crip destabilises the dichotomy regardless of the risk of appropriation that McRuer mentions (McRuer 2006a:37).

In some cases non-disabled people really do affirm the able-bodied/disabled binary and reinforce a patronising tolerance. Crippling able-bodiedness should always focus on critiquing the ableist culture and questioning the idea that able-bodied people are all alike. We should keep in mind Campbell's (2009) careful consideration on ableism which emphasises different locations and discourses where ability is reinforced. To investigate the different "contours of ableism" one has to recognise the taken-for-granted ideas that concern our bodies. I for instance find that a non-disabled person learning sign language or moving with a wheelchair and noticing the inaccessible environment does not change any hegemonic meanings of able-bodiedness.<sup>1</sup> Even though such practices can sometimes be practical or expressions of solidarity, these well-meaning gestures do not question the apparent coherence of the category of able-bodiedness. The able-bodied still appears as someone who can do almost anything, and can even become disabled *for a while*.<sup>2</sup> Instead of ending up reinforcing the notion that non-disabled people are people who share something with each other and can do almost anything, I want to lift up shameful and stigmatised forms of nondisability, that is, non-disabled who cannot fulfil demanded skills and abilities. By stigmatisation I mean the hegemonic assumption that the person with a stigma is not quite human (Goffman 1963:5).

In the next two sections, I will analyse Finnish discourses on swimming skills. My reading draws on Campbell's (2009) definition of ableism as a culturally significant presumption that abilities

that are seen as normal are something we are all aiming to fulfil. As an example of how ableism forms also non-disabled people, I analyse official and pedagogic texts that handle swimming and a documentary titled "I'm afraid of swimming" (*Pelkään uida*, Trötschkes & Hastrup 2004).

### **The non-swimmer and able-nationalism**

In this section, my concern is national worry about non-swimmers in Finland. I will investigate official and pedagogic texts that include Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, discussions on swimming in the Finnish Parliament over the last ten years, as well as text books and research about swimming.

It has already been proposed that sports were, among other things, a source of nationalism in Finland in the early twentieth century, and that establishing swimming as a form of physical activity in the nineteenth century was inspired by new ideas of hygiene and health (Kokkonen 2008). Swimming was also part of the military training and swimming skills were seen as an important quality of a soldier (Matkaniemi 2010). In this preliminary discussion on swimming skill my aim is to show that if we want to consider the meaning of able-bodiedness especially in a Nordic context, the cultural position of non-swimmers should be scrutinised.

According to the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education "instruction in physical education is based on the national traditions of sports and exercise". The Curriculum sets as one of its objectives that pupils will learn "basic swimming skills". "The good performance" in swimming requires that by the end of the fourth grade the pupil should be able to swim in diverse ways in swimming-depth water (Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004).



*Graduation of the "Swim Bachelors" at Mustikkamaa outside Helsinki in 1939.  
(Photo: Väinö Kannisto. Courtesy: Helsinki City Museum)*

In the National Core Curriculum the term "swimming skill" is used. Swimming in this context is substantially a skill that one has to develop and improve. In an American study on motor learning written for teachers of physical education and coaches, the term skill is defined as an action that has a goal. Skills are distinguished from abilities so that skills are something that can be trained, whereas the term ability defines a general capacity of the individual. However, ability as a capacity that can influence whether a performer becomes skilled is not independent from training (Magill:7-9, 270-278). That is to say, the person who possesses the capacity for some actions

is more likely to become a skilled performer of those actions. Since able-bodiedness is defined as being competent for physical service (*Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary*) or being capable of normal physical exertions (McRuer 2006a:7–8), able-bodiedness connotes capacity and aptitude. The able body is in cultural understanding a body which "can be trained to do almost anything" (cf. Siebers 2008:10).

As Susan Bordo (1995) has suggested, the developed body has come to mean that one cares about oneself and it suggests that one has the ability to "shape one's life". The ability as a character of an individual is something that has to be performed: the correct performance shows the apparent inner aptitude (cf. Butler 1991:24). The position of non-swimmers shows that an able body regardless of its apparent naturalness is governed and policed. What is interesting in the context of swimming skill is that sometimes the swimming skill is used as a synonym for the swimming ability. The Finnish Association for Swimming Instruction and Life Saving uses both terms "swimming skill" and "swimming ability" (Suomen uimaopetus- ja hengenpelastusliitto 2008b). Within this discourse, the swimming skill is both the skill and the ability – something that can be trained and something that one has the capacity to do. Both the ability and the skill are something that can be governed by authorities.

It has already been mentioned that taking care of one's health has been conceptualised, especially in the Finnish context, as a personal responsibility towards the nation (Mietola & Lappalainen 2006). This "responsibility" belongs, in my view, especially to those bodies which are understood to be able and to possess capacity. These bodies sustain "the national traditions of sports and exercise".

In 2010 Paula Risikko, the minister of health and social services, gave a speech in which she emphasised that "a swimming skill is an

important civic skill, and that is why it has to be guaranteed to all children". Five years earlier, Tuija Brax, a Member of Parliament, suggested that it should always be mentioned in the school report of the sixth grade if the pupil can swim. In her written question in the parliament Brax referred to research results, which show that 66 per cent of all adults in Finland possess the swimming skill (Helakorpi et al. 2003). According to Brax, to standardise the mention of the swimming skill would encourage municipal authorities to observe the swimming skill of children. The concern about poor swimming skills was also voiced as a written question by M.P Sanna Lauslahti, who in the spring of 2011 noted that "swimming skill is a civic skill". Lauslahti was concerned about people who drowned, and argued that through the swimming skill drowning accidents could be prevented (Lauslahti 2011).

The research Brax was referring to was conducted by the National Public Health Institute, which from 1978 has been tracing the health and the way of life of adults aged 15 to 64 (Kurki & Rajala 2004). The swimming skills of adults were investigated through a survey which was carried out in the spring of 2003. According to the survey 66 percent of adults can swim 200 meters, of which 50 meters is on the back. Being able to swim 200 meters, including 50 meters backstroke, is defined as a swimming skill in Finland. The Finnish Association for Swimming Instruction and Life Saving uses this definition, which the association also calls the Nordic definition of the swimming ability (Suomen uimaopetus- ja hengenvpelastusliitto 2008a).

These discourses on swimming skills tell about ideals of adulthood and citizenship. The adult who cannot swim is, according to these discourses, only a quasi-citizen. This brings to mind the argument that is often proposed in disability studies, that citizenship

and political membership rely on the ideology of ability and in order to become a member of the human community and a political subject one has to display certain skills (e.g. Siebers 2008:179–182). Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell (2010) call this kind of idea, which puts abilities and disabilities in the service of the nation, able-nationalism. In a Finnish context, the discourse on swimming skill could be read as one form of able-nationalism.

I have translated the Finnish term "*kansalaistaito*", which Risikko and Lauslahti use, as "civic skill". In Finland, no motor skill except swimming is named as a civic skill. The term "*kansalaistaito*" could be translated in English both as civics and as a civic skill. Civics was one of the core subjects in Finnish schools from the 1960s to the 1990s. The goal of civics had been defined in the 1960s as developing skills which lead to "a healthy attitude towards life" (Lappalainen 2006:163). The purpose of the subject was to reinforce safety in people's everyday life and in that way benefit the whole society (ibid.). Swimming skill is usually associated with safety. This becomes very clear in the written question of M.P. Lauslahti who argues that swimming skill pre-empts fatal drowning accidents. Her argument is similar to that of The Finnish Association for Swimming Instruction and Life Saving (2008b) which says that swimming ability saves one's life.

Even though the swimming skill is said to save one's life, its importance is not questioned, even though the relation between swimming skill and safety is in question. According to sports studies scholar Tommi Pantzar the importance of being able to swim should not be explained by arguing that it can increase safety, because most of the people who die in drowning accidents can swim. The purpose of Pantzar's study on non-swimmers was to explain why some adults cannot swim and how swimming teachers could support non-

swimmers to learn that skill. Pantzar's study belongs to the field of physical education, and in this context the importance of being able to swim is not questioned. He argues that for him the reason why he sees the swimming skill as important is the big number of non-swimmers, and he argues that if those people who cannot swim would learn it, the swimming ability would be significant for them "at the individual level" (Pantzar 2005:10). In the next section, I will trace this idea of swimming skill as important at the individual level.

### **The shameful non-swimmer**

In 2004 The Finnish National Broadcasting Company (YLE) screened Rita Trötschkes and Mats Hastrup's documentary "I'm afraid to swim" (*Pelkään uida*). This documentary tells the story of three adults who are learning to swim. The documentary was self-described as: "The story of three people and about how swimming inability and aquaphobia have restricted their life. It shows how the phobia can develop and how it can be overcome. During the lessons, which are meant for adults who have aquaphobia, the adults are taught without pressure to be comfortable in water and eventually to have fun in the pool. Slowly the fear ends, the confidence in the water increases, and the swimming skill develops. To overcome the fear gives self-confidence" (Su 18.7.2004 *Pelkään uida*).

Sean is soon to join the army and he wants to succeed in the swimming test. Susanna has always avoided situations where swimming is required. She says that as a school girl she usually had a letter from her mother explaining that Susanna could not swim. Later, as an adult, she used excuses ranging from menstruation to forgotten swimsuits to avoid ending up in the pool. According to Susanna, there is in many social situations a pressure to be able to swim. Sisko Leena says that, as she was born in Upper Savolax where all



the waterways were wild rapids and because in her childhood there were not any swimming schools, she never learned to swim. The documentary shows how Sean, Susanna and Sisko Leena change from non-swimmers to nearly-swimmers and finally swimmers and to adults who are not ashamed of themselves. For this taxonomy I am inspired by Mike Oliver's idea to divide people into walkers, non-walkers and nearly-walkers. He argues that the fact that nearly-walkers can sometimes choose whether to walk or not reveals that walking is anything but an apolitical way of moving. To choose not-walking "exposes the ideology of normality" (Oliver 1993). This story of becoming normal is in its familiarity highly critiqued by queer and disability studies scholars. It is still necessary to show the new contours of that progress story. So my point here is to investigate the shameful non-swimmer to whom choosing to swim seems to be the only option within the ideology of ableism.

Let's think about shame. Elspeth Probyn claims that shame is not a pleasurable emotion but that is not to say that shame would be insignificant. Even though shame can be a feeling which makes it difficult to resist stigmatisation, shame can show what is almost unintelligible in one's social sphere. Shame as an emotion which embarrasses is a problematic emotion for a citizen because, according to Probyn being ashamed is considered itself shameful (Probyn 2005:2).<sup>3</sup> When Pantzar argues swimming skill is significant "at the individual level" (Pantzar 2005), we could perhaps read this as implying that being able to swim is so significant because through the swimming skill one could be proud and not ashamed of oneself.

Sisko Leena says that "this inability to swim was such a shame", and she continues: "When I moved to Tampere to study it was just horrible that all the others were swimming in the pool and I was just standing in the children's pool. Ashamed, I left the children's



pool when a kid asked her mother, 'Why is that lady here in the children's pool?' I started to avoid all swimming situations ... I just regret that had I been able to swim earlier I could have had an opportunity to enjoy swimming with my children."

Sisko Leena, Susanna and Sean do not mention safety at all when they are talking about their inducements to learn to swim. Nor are they talking about any frightening situations with water. Discourses on aquaphobia prevent positioning swimming in a framework in which it can be investigated as a social norm. For Sisko Leena, not to be ashamed of herself motivates her to learn to swim. Susanna emphasises social situations in which she had not been able to be herself because she had been using different excuses to avoid swimming. Sean says he wants to get rid of "his inability", and the oncoming military service with its swimming tests motivates him. Sean tells us that as Finland has always been described as the Land of Thousand Lakes, swimming is an essential part of Finnish culture, especially during the summer. Shame has been argued to be generative (e.g. Probyn 2005). In Sisko Lena's story, shame is certainly generative, since it transforms a non-swimmer into a skilled swimmer.

The documentary ends in sequences where Sisko Leena, Sean and Susanna are introduced as people who are pleased with themselves. Sisko Leena dives into the bottom of the pool. She says that she has lost eight kilograms after starting to swim. Sean has had a haircut and is now wearing a military uniform. He says that he wants to become a better swimmer. Susanna is wearing a diving suit and is speaking of her scuba diving experiences. She had always admired Jacques Cousteau and earlier couldn't even dream of diving. Next summer she is going to attend a diving safari. The documentary underscores the fact that the swimming skill Susanna now has makes it possible for Susanna to shape her life and to become the person

she has wanted to be. To be the non-swimmer is posited as being restricted, whereas to be the swimmer is posited as being self-confident and the person one really is.

As a non-swimmer Susanna was very aware of swimming performance as an important skill in social situations, and she knew how she could avoid it. Sean connects swimming skill with the Finnish culture where "people swim a lot and want their children to have that skill". The documentary implies that swimming skill is important because it makes it possible for a person to be "one of those people who swim". Nevertheless, non-swimming is posited as a problem of the individual and to be a non-swimmer means to lack an essential skill. The worry about Finns' poor swimming skills is stated both in the speeches of Finnish politicians and in the documentary that I have been analysing. However, the worry has different contours in different contexts. Politicians are worrying about drowning accidents, and in the stories of three (former) non-swimmers the worry is about failing to become a person one has wanted to be and failing to be oneself with others. In the politics of ableism (Campbell 2009), it is alleged that abilities which are seen as normal are something we all want to possess. The non-swimmer, in this context, is only waiting to learn to swim. To question the progress story that says that the more abilities people have the more developed is the society, means that the failure can actually make possible new forms of able-bodiedness (cf. Halberstam 2011).

## Conclusions

To be critical of ability norms entails investigating not only discourses of disability but also how non-disabled people reinforce and refuse ability. The aim of the analysing of Finnish discourses on swimming skill has been to illuminate how able-bodiedness can be

critically studied. McRuer's idea of compulsory able-bodiedness is an insufficient insight in the project that aims to investigate many nuances of ability, because in the framework of compulsory able-bodiedness the separation between disability and able-bodiedness is the only cultural distinction that is analysed. Dichotomous thinking about (dis)ability hampers us in recognising cultural struggles on proper bodies and abilities. It also prevents nondisabled people from cultivating forms that might be interpreted as a failure of ability.

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## NOTES

1. Helsinki deputy mayor Hannu Penttilä was challenged by the biggest daily newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, to move with a wheelchair in the center of Helsinki. Penttilä does not usually move with a wheelchair, and the aim of the challenge was to highlight the inaccessible environment in the Helsinki city center. When the occasion was over Penttilä pointed out that it was quite easy to move with the wheelchair in public spaces but it could have been difficult to access restaurants and stores in the city center ("Pyörätuolikelaus..." *Helsingin Sanomat* 2008.) This challenge shows that non-disabled people may have solidarity to explore difficulties that inaccessible environment causes to wheelchair users but in the end that kind of experiment may not generate anything else but a relief on the able-bodied status one has and compassion for dis-

abled people. The compassion some non-disabled people feel for people with disabilities is actually not far from pity (see Sandahl 2003:42).

2. Here I am using italics to emphasise that to wheel once in order to notice the inaccessible environment is a quite different thing from using a wheelchair most of the time, or to identify as transabled (someone who wants to be disabled). On transabled-discourses see Campbell 2009; [www.transabled.org](http://www.transabled.org).
3. For a discussion on emotions, citizenship and disability studies, see Donaldson & Prendergast 2011.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln prövar nya grepp för att teoretisera kring kroppsfullkomlighet (able-bodiedness) och fokuserar särskilt på Robert McRuers begrepp "compulsory able-bodiedness". Författaren hävdar att detta begrepp inte räcker till som analytiskt redskap för att kritiskt studera funktionsfullkomlighet, och inte heller idén om att alla kommer att bli funktionshindrade om de lever länge nog. I stället borde funktionsfullkomlighet teoretiseras och diskuteras på sätt som fokuserar på spänningar inom den skenbara koherensen hos begreppet funktionsfullkomlighet.

McRuers idé om obligatorisk funktionsfullkomlighet jämförs med Fiona Kumari Campbells teorier kring ableism. Campbells definition av ableism gör det möjligt att undersöka hur dikotomin funktionshinder/funktionsfullkomlighet påverkar alla kroppar. Campbells idé gör det således möjligt att destablisera funktions(för)hinder. Artikeln hävdar att begreppet obligatorisk funktionsfullkomlighet inte ifrågasätter att denna är fixerad och koherent.

För att ge ett exempel på en mer nyanserad analys av funktionsnormer, som efterlyses i artikeln, undersöker författaren finska diskurser om simkunnighet. Det empiriska materialet består av officiella och pedagogiska texter, bland annat den finska nationella läroplanen för grundskolan, diskussioner om simning i den finska riksdagen under de senaste tio åren, forskning om simning inom



idrottsvetenskap och en dokumentär kallad "Jag är rädd att simma" (*Pelkään uida*) som sändes av YLE 2004

Materialet om diskurserna kring simkunnighet antyder att simkunnighet är viktigt eftersom det gör det möjligt att vara en av dem som simmar. Och ändå framställs bristande simkunnighet som ett problem för individen. Att vara icke simkunnig framställs som att vara begränsad, medan att vara simkunnig är att ha självförtroende och att vara den man egentligen är. Icke-simmarens position visar att den funktionsfullkomliga kroppen är styrd och övervakad.