



**LONGING TO BELONG.  
SPACES OF (NON-)BELONGING IN THE  
LIFE TRAJECTORIES OF PEOPLE  
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AND  
ADDITIONAL MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS.**

Gentle Teaching Conference 2019 (Ghent), 18/09/2019

Dr. Lien Claes

# INTRODUCTION

# CONTEXT OF THIS PRESENTATION

- Phd research (2008-2014) on ‘jammed’ life trajectories of three persons with intellectual disability and additional mental health problems
- Multiple qualitative research methods
- Interdisciplinary marriage of Disability Studies & Social Geography



Mensen met een verstandelijke  
beperking in een vastgelopen situatie

Onderzoek naar levenstrajecten vanuit een  
kruisbestuiving van de theoretische perspectieven  
Disability Studies en Social & Cultural Geography

Lien Claes

# THEORETICAL MARRIAGE

- ‘**Disability Studies** is an emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship that critically examines issues related to the dynamic interplays between disability and various aspects of culture and society. Disability Studies unites critical inquiry and political advocacy by utilizing scholarly approaches from the humanities, humanistic/post humanistic social science and the arts.’  
(Gabel, 2005, p.1)
- ‘**Critical social Geography** examines the diverse sociospatial processes that regulate and reproduce social exclusion and marginalization as they affect women, ethnic minorities, sexual dissidents, disabled people and so on. Simultaneously, this ‘critical agenda’ has been accompanied by a heightened concern that the geographer’s research on social oppression and exclusion should be sensitive to the life experiences of marginalized groups.’  
(Kitchin & Hubbard, 1999, p.195)

# BELONGING, WHAT'S IN A NAME?

- Basic human need: being someone, feeling attached
- Being part of the 'social fabric'
- Ambivalent for people with ID and mental health problems:
  - Medical-psychiatric view: normative categorisations and clear boundaries
  - Mainstream society: social participation and belonging are hindered
  - PHD research: people long to belong and actively seek 'spaces of belonging'

# MY STORY OF JOHN

# JOHN

‘I had imagined something different. In fact I don’t gain anything with it? I thought I would gain something for my future. We will see. If I am bored, you’ll notice.’



# JOHN

*“Dear Lien, First, I want to thank you. You give me courage. When I’m not doing well, you always got me over it. I already said, I don’t know what I should do without you. You have something that others don’t have. You are always kind and pleasant company to go somewhere. I always enjoy to go somewhere with you. The day our collaboration stops, will be a black day. I will miss you. [...] In the period we have been working together, you have become the best friend I have. I had never expected you to be like that. Honestly, the first time I saw you, I thought: “What should I do with her?”. I have never thought that we would do something together. After some time, I had to change my mind. If I would have stopped, I should have regret because you became my best friend. Lien, I hope we’ll never separate because I’ll never friend such a friend. I could not imagine losing such a good friend. I would not survive. You’re not only a good friend but also a big support. (...) I wouldn’t find a similar friend. That’s why I pamper you a bit when you visit me. You earn that.”*



# GENTLE TEACHING SPACES

# SPACES OF BELONGING, BONDING & BRIDGING

- ‘These other identities are often much more important to how our relationships operate. When we empathetically engage with each other, differences between us become much less relevant’ (Evans, 2012)
- Neo-liberal emphasis: professional distance, efficiency, reporting
- Spaces of bonding: mutual relationships, hospitable niches, emotional support, sharing thoughts/emotions, doing things together
- Spaces of bridging: making broader connections and networks

# (IN)CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

# THOUGHTS ON MUTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Pedagogy of desire
- Relational citizenship (Pols, 2006): interconnection, interdependency
- Relational conceptualisation of Disability Studies: ‘aims to challenge neoliberal managerialism and instead puts forward an approach of openness to relationality, to an ongoing process of becoming, in dialogue with others, both in and across communities.’ (Davies & Gannon, 2009, p.4)
- ‘Pedagogical encounters are characterised by a willingness to listen and be open to others, respect for differences, however they may be expressed and a sense of empathy, a closeness that creates bonds’. (Ceppi & Zini, 1998 in Davies & Gannon, 2009)
- Rinaldi (2005, p. 184) describes this idea of dialogue ‘not as an exchange, but as a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result.’

Dr. Lien Claes  
Practice assistant

[lien.claes@ugent.be](mailto:lien.claes@ugent.be)

DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION  
Research group of 'Disability Studies'