

**Disability in Intergalactic Environments:  
the representation of disability issues in *Star Trek***

Ambassador Gina K. Abercrombie-Winstanley and Dr Anne-Marie Callus

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### *Abstract*

The science fiction series *Star Trek* is peopled with various humanoid species living and working together, reflecting the philosophy of its creator, Gene Roddenberry, that diversity is a strength to be celebrated. This is reflected in the Vulcan philosophy of 'Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations'. Among the issues of diversity that feature in many episodes there are those related to disabled people. On the whole, the representation of disability in *Star Trek* encourages the viewer to challenge stereotypes about people with disability and to see them not simply in terms of their impairments, but as people who go about their work in ways which are sometimes different from the norm; simply beings with "differing abilities". This is especially the case for people with sensory or mobility impairments. They may see in a different way, communicate in a different way or move around in a different way, but they still give a valid contribution, and in some episodes it is their very difference that saves the day. When it comes to intellectual disability, however, the representation takes on a more negative turn. This paper considers these different representations of disability in four episodes of *Star Trek: The Masterpiece Society, Melora, Loud as a Whisper* and *Samaritan Snare*.

## Introduction

‘To boldly go where no man has gone before’ is the best known line from Star Trek’s opening sequence. It has created its fair share of debate – from the grammatical accuracy of split infinitives to arguments about whether the use of ‘man’ (which was subsequently replaced by ‘one’) was sexist. The line has also been adopted, and adapted, by the disability rights movement and turned into ‘to boldly go where everybody else has been before’ (Direct Action Network). The point made by this take on the Star Trek line is that what disabled people, who make up 15% of the world’s population and are the largest minority (United Nations Enable), want to do are the ordinary activities of daily life that non-disabled people take for granted.

Disability in the twenty-first century is recognized widely to be not simply a challenge for the individual but increasingly also a concern and responsibility of society. The appropriate public responses to disability issues are nowadays, therefore, seen to be not only limited to providing medical care and rehabilitation services, and to ensuring the welfare of people with disability. There is also increasing recognition of the need to ensure that society caters for the impairment-related requirements of people with disability and that they enjoy their rights as citizens on an equal basis with others. As Driedger points out, this recognition was the main aim of the disability rights movement which developed and grew in the post-World War II era, alongside other minority rights movements. The culmination of the demands of the disability rights movement at the national level can be said to be the enactment of disability discrimination laws in many countries, starting with the Americans with Disability Act in 1990. On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this landmark legislation, President Obama declared that, with the inclusion of people with disability in the mainstream of society ‘America is stronger and more vibrant; it is a better country because of the ADA’ .

On an international level, the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 represents a universal recognition of disability as a societal issue. This Convention, which to date has been signed by 160 countries and ratified by 159, recognizes that

disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (United Nations 2)

For Gene Roddenberry and the scriptwriters of Star Trek, disability is also an aspect of human experience that travels into the distant future and into the depths of intergalactic space. There are many episodes which feature characters who have a disability and where disability issues are brought to the fore. In this paper, we explore the representation of disability in four episodes from the late eighties and early nineties, a time when the demands being made by people with disability were no longer simply the struggle of a small group of people, but had started to be recognized and adopted by governments worldwide. The chosen episodes are as follows:

- The Masterpiece Society (1992) (Star Trek – The Next Generation Season 5 Episode 13)
- Melora (1993) (Star Trek – Deep Space Nine Season 2 Episode 6)
- Loud as a Whisper (1989) (Star Trek – The Next Generation Season 2 Episode 5)
- Samaritan Snare (1989) (Star Trek – The Next Generation Season 2 Episode 17)

## The Masterpiece Society

*The Masterpiece Society* (STNG) is an episode that deals with the place of disabled people in society through an encounter the crew of the USS Enterprise have with a planet, Moab 4, which has been colonized by humans who have gone through eight generations of selective breeding in order to create the perfect society. The Enterprise crew detect an impending tectonic disaster for the planet and contact its inhabitants to warn them that they need to evacuate. Catastrophe is prevented through the joint work of the colony's main scientist Hannah Bates, and Geordi La Forge the Enterprise's chief engineer who was born blind and uses a piece of assistive equipment, appropriately called the VISOR, that allows him to see. The colony is saved thanks to the technology in La Forge's visor. This, he wryly observes is "perfect . . . If the answer to all of this is in a VISOR created for a blind man who never would have existed in your society."

The society that the Star Trek crew encounter on Moab 4 is not a homogenous one – there are men and women, people of different ages and people from different ethnicities. There is no mention of religion – although given Roddenberry's humanist beliefs it is doubtful that religious diversity would be scripted into the plot (Grech). Nor is there any reference to non-heterosexual relationships – the couples featured in the episode are composed of a man and a woman. However, it is the absence of disabled people on the planet that is problematized in the episode. After all, it is they who have been deliberately genetically engineered out of existence.

*The Masterpiece Society* episode brings to the fore issues that are of very real concern for disabled people on planet Earth in the twenty-first century. Advancements in medical technology and in genetic engineering have brought about better outcomes for disabled people with different types of congenital impairments as well as those people who have acquired an impairment following an accident or an illness. These positive outcomes include longer life expectancy and

the reduction of the deleterious effects of impairments, especially when they have been sustained through injury or disease. Conversely, these advancements have also brought questions about the very right to life for disabled people. Among these one finds the issue of allowing abortions of disabled foetuses beyond the normal legal limits for abortions in general, legislation for assisted dying, and pre implantation genetic screening in in-vitro fertilization. These possible practices are predicated on a very negative view of life with a disability as a life of suffering and of a perspective of disabled people as being a burden on their family and their society. This view is explicitly articulated in *The Masterpiece Society* by Bates when she tells La Forge that 'It was the wish of our founders that no one had to suffer a life with disabilities.' Many disability rights groups oppose these eugenic practices, including Not Dead Yet, an American grassroots organization which campaigns against assisted suicide and euthanasia of old, ill and disabled people.

Prusak discusses the objections put forward by the German philosopher Habermas to genetic engineering, objections that are based on the argument that it represents unwarranted intrusions into a person's life right at the very start of that life, thus curbing that person's free will. Prusak writes:

The severely disabled person does not have to vie with alien intentions incarnated in her own body, as Habermas asks us to imagine that the person "at odds with genetically fixed intentions" might. The severely disabled person might well be restricted in her choice of life plan, but the wound to her autonomy would not be the same as the wound potentially suffered by the eugenically programmed person. (40)

As Savona-Ventura and Grech state, science fiction programmes like Star Trek allow us to imagine what human society would be like in certain scenarios. This episode is a particularly good example of this as Belanoff and Piller present to us exactly the scenario that Habermas would write about two decades later. Picard, captain of the Enterprise in the Star Trek – The Next Generation series,

sums it up when he argues that the inhabitants of Moab 4 “have given away their humanity”, “the uncertainty, self-discovery, the unknown - these are many of the qualities that make life worth living. Well, at least to me.” But of course it is not only for Picard that this is so. Some of the inhabitants of this planet, including their chief scientist Hannah Bates, realize this and opt to leave their colony and live among humans whom they had previously considered to be their inferiors and with whom they had refused to associate. Bates goes so far as to turn the logic of selective breeding on its head when she equates it to living in the Dark Ages.

La Forge also has something to say about the deliberate removal of people with disability when he asks Bates what right anyone has to decide whether he, and therefore also other people with disability, should exist. Therefore, away from the dramatic intervention to save Moab 4 and its inhabitants, this episode has two important messages about disability – that disability is part of the human condition and that people with disability have a contribution to make to society.

## **Melora**

The *Melora* episode (STDS9) delves deeper into the concerns of the disability rights movement by highlighting issues around how disability is created, the importance of taking the perspective of persons with disability into account, and the nature of independence. In this episode, the eponymous Melora is a new recruit to the Deep Space Nine base who, since she comes from a low gravity planet, has to use a wheelchair (which she calls a trolley car) to get around on board. Melora’s imminent arrival is the subject of an animated discussion among her prospective colleagues. They wonder “what it must be like” to go around in a wheelchair, “think what she’s been through” during her journey and wonder how “she flies across the room”, that is the private

quarters that have been adjusted for her low gravity needs. Dr Bashir refers to her as “extraordinary”. Already, before Melora has even arrived, she is singled out as being different and special.

The conversation that takes place with Melora, shortly after her arrival at Deep Space Nine, presents most of the disability related issues that are then addressed in this episode:

MELORA: I'm sorry if I seem overly sensitive, but I'm used to being shut out of the Melora problem. The truth is, there is no Melora problem until people create one. This may sound ungrateful, because Doctor Bashir has been wonderfully helpful in the preparations for my arrival, but frankly, I wonder why a medical opinion is necessary in this discussion.

DAX: Julian [Bashir] knows more of your capabilities than any of us.

MELORA: I don't need a medical opinion to tell me my own capabilities.

SISKO: Ensign.

MELORA: I simply object to being treated like someone who is ill.

SISKO: I don't see anybody doing that.

MELORA: Try sitting in the chair, Commander. No one can understand until they sit in the chair.

Melora has come to the base aware of the reactions that she is likely to provoke with her wheelchair. At first, she is very much on the defensive, eager to show that she is an ensign who has come to the Deep Space Nine base to do her duties, just like any other ensign. She does not want the focus to be on her wheelchair, arguing that ‘there is no Melora problem until people create one’. Melora’s statement is based on a clear distinction between the impairment (in her case the inability to move freely in a high gravity environment) and the disability (her not being able to move around the Deep Space Nine base unless she has the right equipment and an obstacle free environment). Melora remarks later on in the episode “What kind of an architect would design a raised rim at every door?” It is not the low gravity way of walking that bothers Melora but the unnecessary obstacles that are unthinkingly created by a society that takes “no or little account of people who have physical impairments” (UPIAS and Disability Alliance 20).

Melora's argument is directly in line with the tenet of the social model of disability which Hasler calls the disability movement's 'big idea'. The proposition of the social model is based on a clear distinction being made between biological impairment (which can be physical, sensory, neurological or mental) and the socially-created disabling barriers that people with these impairments encounter that prevent them from participating in a community-based life on an equal basis with others. The concept of the social model was formulated by the British disabled activist and academic Mike Oliver who contrasts it to the medical model which sees disability as being equivalent only to the individual's impairment and as being only a medical concern. Melora also brings up this issue of the conflation of the everyday concerns of people with disability with medical issues. Shortly after her arrival at the base, she resents having a medical check-up to assess her capabilities, arguing that "I don't need a medical opinion to tell me my own capabilities. ... I simply object to being treated like someone who is ill."

Another important, disability-related issue, raised by Melora in the dialogue quoted above is her aversion 'to being shut out of the 'Melora' problem.' She resents having her needs discussed without being consulted and without her perspective being taken into account. There is a direct parallel here with the battle cry of the disability rights movement 'nothing about us without us'. When persons with disability began to mobilize and fight for their rights it was not only accessibility and community inclusion that they struggled for. They also demanded that their voice be heard, arguing that it is persons with disability who are truly experts on what it means to live with a disability. Again, Melora states this when she says "No one can understand until they sit in the chair."

Later on in the episode, the question of independence is also treated. Melora is fiercely independent, if not always physically then mentally. She is also very keen to press this point home

with her new colleagues, to the point of seeming aggressive, until she is challenged about this by Bashir. “Melora, no one on this station is completely independent. In space we all depend on one another to some degree.” The debate about independence takes centre stage when Melora faces a dilemma with the possible resolution of her gravity-related restrictions. The cure, developed by Bashir, would enable her to walk. But it would mean that she would never be able to go back home to live, but would only be able to visit her own planet briefly, because her body would not be attuned to a low-gravity environment anymore. In the end she rejects the cure, arguing that “maybe independence isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

For persons with disability, in fact, independence does not simply mean doing everything on your own. Jenny Morris, another British disabled activist and academic, has written much about the subject of independent living. Independent living is conceptualized in terms of people with disability living in the general community with the necessary support. What is important for people with disability is that the support provided, whether it is in the form of personal assistants or assistive equipment, enables them to live their lives on their own terms. Although the focus of this episode is on severe mobility impairment, especially the wheelchair, the quintessential symbol of disability, it draws on the fundamental arguments made by activists in the disability rights movement. The issues raised go right to the heart of this movement and have resonance for people with different types and levels of impairment.

## Loud As A Whisper

The arrival on board the Starship Enterprise of Riva, the Deaf protagonist of *Loud As A Whisper* (STNG), is as much discussed by the crew as Melora's arrival is on board Deep Space Nine. However, unlike the Deep Space Nine crew, Captain Picard and his crew are not aware of Riva's disability. Their discussion is on his reputation as a very skilled mediator, mentioning how it was thanks to him that the word 'peace' entered the Klingon vocabulary. It is precisely for this skill that his services have been requested, to intervene in the hostilities on the planet Solais V. When Riva arrives, with his Chorus of three interpreters who can read his thoughts and interpret them into speech, Picard and the rest of the welcoming party have to do a double-take. Their focus suddenly shifts from Riva the mediator to Riva the Deaf Person, making his impairment and his means of communication the most important aspect about him. This is very typical of what happens to disabled people in their encounters with non-disabled people, where it is their disability that becomes the most salient part of their identity.

The Starship Enterprise crew has to make some adjustments to what is for them the unique way in which Riva communicates. Picard erroneously addresses one of his interpreters, rather than Riva himself – a breach of etiquette when communicating with someone through an interpreter. To his credit, he quickly redresses this mistake when he introduces Riva to the rest of the crew and tells them to address Riva not his interpreters. Before this happens, there is a brief discussion of what Picard calls 'this rare form of communication'. For Riva, of course, it is anything but rare – it is simply the way he communicates. Through the Chorus, he explains that deafness is hereditary in his family, saying that "our way of communicating has developed over the centuries and its one that I find quite harmonious."

This can of course be said about *any* human language. In fact, people who were born with a profound hearing impairment and use sign language as their primary means of communication identify themselves as part of a culture, write the word Deaf with a capital D to denote their identification of a part of a linguistic and cultural minority. When negotiations are about to begin on Solais V and the representative of one of the tribes opens fire and kills all three of Riva's interpreters, his means of communication becomes sign language. The android Data quickly learns Riva's language in order to ensure that communication is maintained. Sign language thus takes centre stage in the episode as it is used as the means of getting the warring tribes on Solais V to communicate with each other. Data and Troi explain the reasoning behind this strategy:

DATA: Yes, it is turning a disadvantage into an advantage. Learning sign will be a part of their process of learning how to live together in peace.

TROI: While they are learning how to communicate with Riva, they'll be learning how to communicate with each other.

DATA: And that is the first and most important aspect of any relationship. Counsellor, it took me only moments to learn sign language. It will take them months.

TROI: Time well spent.

Riva turns out to be the ideal person to bring peace to Solais V not only because of his expertise in mediation, but also because his means of communication becomes the means for mediation.

Another interesting aspect of this episode is that Howie Seago, the actor who plays Riva, was also born deaf in real life. The portrayal of disabled characters by actors who have the same disability in real life is a much debated issue in disability rights circles. As Psaila says, while the use of blackface by white actors to depict black characters is no longer acceptable, it is still considered acceptable practice for non-disabled actors to play disabled characters. The arguments in favour of casting disabled actors include the fact that such actors do not have as many opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts for a part in most productions. Additionally, if a

plot does include a disabled character, having a person with the same disability playing the part usually makes for a more authentic and realistic portrayal.

*Loud As A Whisper* is thus another example of the way that Star Trek presents disability issues in an affirmative and positive manner. Together, the three episodes reviewed so far enable the viewer to challenge preconceived, often negative ideas, about disability. They also portray disabled people as giving a worthy contribution to the society they live in, especially when that society understands their needs and provides the means of assistance necessitated by their impairments.

### **Samaritan Snare**

While people with mobility or sensory impairments are given positive portrayals in Star Trek, unfortunately the same cannot be said for those who have an intellectual disability, especially in the episode *Samaritan Snare* (STNG). In this episode, the crew of the Starship Enterprise receive a mayday call from a spaceship which turns out to be helmed by the Pakleds. The Pakled's physical appearance, their rather ungainly movements and their slow and limited language clearly mark them as having an intellectual disability. When communication is established with the Pakleds, Captain Grebnedlog explains in a faltering way that they need help. Throughout the episode, the Pakled's speech is restricted to short simple sentences, which are often repeated: "we are far from home", "we need help" and "we look for things". Some of the Pakled's responses to the questions posed by Geordie La Forge and his colleagues are non-sequiturs and and information sometimes needs to be patiently extracted from them:

Geordi: What seems to be the problem?

Grebnedlog: Our ship is the Mondor.

There are therefore several markers of the Pakled's status as people with intellectual disability.

The Starship Enterprise respond to the Pakled's plea for help to repair their broken ship. The chief engineer, Geordie La Forge, goes on board the Mondor to fix the problem. But it turns out that the mayday call was a trap. The Pakleds acquire technology by relying on 'good samaritans' to board their ship to help, then kidnapping them and asking for technology as ransom. The Pakleds therefore use scheming, low cunning and violence to get what they want.

Riker, the Enterprise First Officer who is standing in for Captain Picard in his absence, goes so far as describing the Pakleds as "curious throwbacks", a phrase that draws from the worst theories about the nature of intellectual disability. Counsellor Troi continues in the same vein when she argues that they are "unwilling to wait for the timely evolution of their species' intellectual capacity". Even if unwittingly, Riker and Troi's argument is taken straight from the seriously misguided ideas engendered by social Darwinism in the nineteenth century about the different rates of evolution of different types of human beings, as discussed by McDonagh among others. It is rather ironic that the characters of a story set in a fictional twenty-fourth century should make use of a real-world theory from five centuries earlier, and a discredited one at that. When John Langdon Down set out the typology of what is today called Down syndrome, and called it 'Mongolism', he was not simply making a comparison with the almond shaped eyes of people with this condition to the eyes of people in Mongolia. He was also drawing on the idea that "non Anglo-Saxons, as well as Anglo-Saxons of lower social classes, occupied a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder" (McDonagh 268). People with Down syndrome, together with other 'cretins' and 'imbeciles' as people with intellectual disability were then classified, were placed in the same category of less evolved humans thanks to what was called 'recapitulation theory'. Riker's

description of the Pakleds as throwbacks and Troi's argument about their needing to wait for evolution to run its course are dangerously close to this theory. Furthermore at no point is the Pakled's ability to travel in space acknowledged as a positive achievement.

As a result, not only does *Samaritan Snare* not portray disabled people in a positive manner, but it also serves to reinforce the worst stereotypes about people with intellectual disability, a group of people who time and again are assigned inferior positions even within the disability sector itself. This perceived inferiority is evident in different ways. Historically, the disability rights movement did not embrace people with intellectual disability within it. As Campbell and Oliver state, this movement initially represented the concerns of people with mobility or sensory impairments and it was only eventually that the concerns of persons with intellectual disability were taken on board. Deal explains how disability is conceptualised by many in terms of a hierarchy, with disabled people who have a physical or a sensory impairment being seen (and sometimes also seeing themselves) as superior to people who have an intellectual disability. Furthermore, as Goodley argues, the social model of disability, referred to above, is not always seen as being applicable for people with intellectual disability since the difficulties they face are often considered to originate entirely from their cognitive impairment, rather than from any socially created barriers.

While, at least within the disability rights movement, ideas have thankfully changed, stereotypes still remain. One prevalent stereotype about people with intellectual disability identified by Wolfensberger is that they remain in a childlike state despite having reached adulthood. This stereotype is also found in *Samaritan Snare*. Troi's argument about their needing to wait for the evolution of their species' intellectual capacity prompts the following exchange:

Pulaski: You make them sound like petulant children.

Troi: Yes. Infantile humans are known for responses of a similar nature.

The crew of the Starship Enterprise, including the captive Geordie, proceed to treat them as children, with conspiratorial glances, condescending remarks and even making sarcastic comments about their limited abilities in front of them - all of which are attitudes that many people with intellectual disability are all too familiar with.

Eventually, the Pakleds are tricked into thinking that they have been given the weapons that they wanted. Reginod exclaims “We are a force now. We will have respect. Power.” Respect and power are precisely what people with intellectual disability need. Not firepower of course, but equal power relationships with those around them, especially family members and staff who work with them. Through such relationships, they can have a say in their lives, control over where and how they live, and choice about the activities they engage in. This is the message put across by a group of people with intellectual disability (Taylor et al.) in the United Kingdom in their book *We are not Stupid*. The book is written in simple English and includes pictures that help make the text easier to understand. These two features may make it sound like a children’s book, but it is not. People with intellectual disability *do* need texts to be written in easy-to-read language and often they *do* need support in learning to a far greater extent than other people. But that does not mean that they do not deserve respect as adults.

## Conclusion

The inclusion of characters with disability in various *Star Trek* episodes serves to highlight various issues that are of concern for disabled people in their struggle for equal rights and full inclusion in society. As can be seen from the discussion of the four episodes chosen for this paper, these issues are often very complex, and the way they are presented in *Star Trek* often challenge preconceived notions of what it is like to live with a permanent disability. This is especially the case when the issues concerned, such as the nature of independence or the need for a cure, are seen from the point of view of persons with disability, or differing ability themselves. On the other hand, it was seen how sometimes stereotypes and misconceptions are reinforced rather than challenged, especially in the portrayal of people with an intellectual disability. This shows how important it is to analyse the representation of disability in series and films such as *Star Trek* within the context of what disabled themselves have to say about their lives and about the obstacles they face to truly gain their rightful place in society, here on planet Earth.

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