The Interactionist Position

The research orientation that provided the theoretical and practical framework for this book is the stance in the social sciences that is called *interactionism.*[1] What is most applicable in interactionism is that the individual is regarded as an active agent, determining the nature of his or her world by giving meaning to it through his or her interactions with it. Interactionism is a commitment to seeing and accepting meaning in the physical environment in terms of the ongoing dialogues and acts of human beings.

The interactionist position is synonymous with an empathic commitment to understanding another person. Interactionism is not observing; it is being with. An important aspect of the stance is that through empathy one conveys that one values the other person and his or her world. As Carl Rogers has said, "It is impossible accurately to sense the perceptual world of another person unless you value that person and his world—unless you in some sense care."[2]

The research strategy for this book has been mainly a form of the psychosocial interview; we talked with disabled people and have been present in their world without using a prescribed formula to interpret it. A portion of the material was obtained by participants who were physically disabled. However, we chose to collect most of the data as able-bodied individuals and not by posing as disabled people. Role playing would have been a limiting experience; and those who are physically disabled do not confine their activities to events or situations with others who are disabled. In view of the aim—to disclose the meaning of the physical environment to its inhabitants—the researcher's relationship to the world into which he is looking should be one of *empathic presence.* If the researcher is genuinely concerned about the lived experience of disabled people and honestly respects it, then his or her picture of that world will be very close to the world as it is experienced by disabled people.

From among the many disabled people inter-

viewed, seven were singled out who were designated the *key informants.*[3] Part 2, Profiles, is devoted to these people. The selection of the key informants was an instrumental step in uncovering environmental needs that have implications for proposed and planned environments for the physically disabled population. For, as with any other population, disabled people who use wheelchairs do not share the same personality. Nor are they a group or a gang with corresponding traits and characteristics. Some are determined, some are not, and others represent all the stages between the two extremes. The key informants had to be those whose acts and biographies revealed active wants and the accomplishment or the state of accomplishing personal goals. They pointed the way by their adeptness in identifying, constructing, and using meaning in their environment.

From the seven profiles and many other encounters with the disabled community and the community at large comes Part 3, Networks. This section recognizes the more formal networks, principally those of government and private agencies, which provide disabled people with social services, but it focuses on the other contacts that assist or contribute to the social life of disabled people. These contacts are most evident in grassroots organizations initiated and maintained by disabled people themselves. When viewed as a network, these indigenous organizations and their linkages are the context in which Berkeley is distinguished by disabled people from any other place.

In Part 4, Places, the environmental supports necessary for living independently are reported. Environmentally, this is the most significant section. Disabled people historically have been subject to environmental deprivation. Physically and socially, they have been confined to a limited number of settings. In Berkeley disabled people are expanding their horizons, introducing new environments as well as changing old ones for new needs. This section is organized according to the framework of archetypal places developed by Mayer Spivack, who has proposed thirteen places that he feels must be accessible for one to lead an optimal life.[4] This schema has been employed not only to organize the data but also for purposes of comparison, so that disabled people can be seen in relation to an optimal human schema.

In Part 5, How to Research, we pose some questions to ourselves as designers: beyond taking a position, what can we tell other designers who wish to design environments that are truly barrier free? What tools and methods are available for understanding those who are different from ourselves, so as to proceed with that understanding in our professional work? In Part 5 four ways of gaining an awareness of the environmental needs of others unlike ourselves are described, using physically disabled people as a case in point. We discuss techniques and methods for gaining an awareness which we feel comfortable with and which we have used in our professional work and teaching.

The Epilogue contains a few essential thoughts that came to mind only after the study was completed. Finally, a photographic Catalogue gives some clues about how simple it is to alter the environment to make it work if time is taken to observe how people do it for themselves.

and always have the option of refusing a job they do not want. The arrangement is clearly reciprocal, whether as an exchange of funds or services, and Peter is able to use the system with no residual guilt or obligation. This is not true when his mother is meeting most of his needs. When Peter is home, therefore, he spends a great deal of time in bed reading and sleeping. "It's fine for two or three weeks. I usually need a vacation after Berkeley, but I could never live like that again."

Peter's life since coming to Berkeley has been constantly changing and evolving. "I've had four roommates and I'm now moving into a house with some able-bodied people for the first time. I've had more than sixty attendants and I'll be living in my third place. I've gradually become involved in several disabled rights groups, both locally and statewide. I've become a vegetarian and my hair has gotten longer. I'm well on my way to a doctorate. What I expect is a future of continuing change and growth."

Mary Ann Hiserman

Mary Ann Hiserman is thirty years old. She was born in Salinas, California. Until five years ago, when she came to Berkeley as an undergraduate student, she had lived with her parents. Mary Ann is confined to a wheelchair. At four years of age she contracted arthritis, and at six years of age she contracted polio. In many ways her disability stems from having had these illnesses in childhood. Their effects marked her physical development. She has partial use of her arms and hands and can walk with braces, but with great difficulty. She prefers to use her power wheelchair both in and outside the home. With some assistance she can transfer between her chair and a full-sized automobile. This gives her a certain mobility that more-severely disabled people do not have.

Mary Ann is entering her second year of the three-year professional degree program in architecture. She lives off campus with a female friend, who is also disabled. Mary Ann has a part-time volunteer job with the Berkeley Housing Office. She also does volunteer work in the disabled community and works on the university campus in disabled affairs. She has no difficulty in fulfilling these many commitments, moving freely with the aid of a power chair to school, job, and meetings around city and campus.

Mary Ann has been in Berkeley for almost five years. During this period her self-awareness and the development of her potential for an independent life have been most remarkable. Until Mary Ann was twenty-two, she had not left the company of her parents, especially that of her mother, who served as her only attendant every day of Mary Ann's life. The overprotectiveness of her home environment led Mary Ann to see herself as severely disabled because she could not develop the ability to look after herself. Today she speaks somewhat resentfully of that period. "Parents have a lot to do with encouraging or discouraging independence in their disabled child. I was not allowed to be independent. My mother went with me wherever I went, even to school and back. And so I grew to need her for everything: to take me places, buy things for me, wash my face."

At twenty-two Mary Ann felt strongly that she wanted to live under other circumstances, even though she was fully aware of her need for the kind of security that home and parents provided. She spent three months at Rancho Los Amigos in Downey, California, a well-known rehabilitation center 350 miles (563 kilometers) from her home. The purpose of being there was to train for a more independent life. Nevertheless she reported, "When I returned home none of my training was of any use. Nothing at home was as accessible as it was at Rancho." She found herself in the same situation she had left. A year later, Mary Ann made a second trip to the center, this time ostensibly to find out about corrective surgery on her elbows. Actually, she was more interested in finding a way to leave home. She remained only two weeks; it was determined that surgery was not practical. Again, she returned to Salinas.

Looking back, Mary Ann feels that two important things occurred while at Rancho Los Amigos. It was the first time she met other disabled people her own age and "had a good time" with them. This was helpful in modifying her fear and disdain of other disabled individuals. Also on the second trip, she learned of the program at the University of California at Berkeley that brought disabled students to the campus. She resolved to join it herself. With the help of interested neighbors at home, she persuaded her parents that she should go. In the spring of 1972, Mary Ann entered the Cowell program. She was then twenty-five years old.

The first few weeks were emotionally difficult for Mary Ann, and though she was soon to adjust, the process of adjusting told her much about herself. At that time "my mental outlook toward independence was pure fright. When I lived at home with my