Encounter in the public realm: Being recognised, becoming known, forming relationships

Ilan Wiesel, UNSW
Christine Bigby, La Trobe University
Social inclusion:

• Promoting the social inclusion of people with intellectual disability is a key role of support workers

• Dimensions of social inclusion:
  – Social, political, economic
  – Community presence: Use of community facilities available to everyone
  – Community participation: meaningful relationships both within and outside of ‘distinct social space’
Encounter: between ‘presence’ and ‘participation’

• Fleeting interactions with strangers (‘encounter’)
• Encounter is an important aspect of social inclusion:
  – Opportunity to become known and form new relationships
  – Recognition, conviviality
Supporting ‘encounter’

• How can support workers assist people with intellectual disability experience encounter with strangers?
Research methods

- ARC Linkage involving La Trobe University, UNSW, Kent University, Yooralla, Jewish Care
- 4 research sites in Victoria (Caulfield, Boronia, Wantirna, Sale)
- 27 Participants with intellectual disability
  - Low to moderate levels of disability
  - Living in group homes or an independent living ‘cluster’ model
- 160 hours of qualitative observations
- Interviews and focus groups with support staff
Before leaving the house

• The practice of ‘enabling encounter’ starts long before leaving the house:
  – Training (communication skills development)
  – Planning (where and when to go and for what purpose; schedule; staff-client ratio)
  – Preparation of person with intellectual disability before going out (clothing, money)
Encounter support while out and about

- The focus in this presentation is on the observed practices of support workers enabling (or disabling) encounter while out in public, including:
  - Initiating encounter
  - Maintaining an encounter once it has started
  - Preventing, taking over or terminating encounter
Initiating encounter

• Breaking the barrier of non-interaction between strangers
  – Formal introduction
  – Inviting gesture, eye contact
  – Prompting person with disability to initiate conversation
  – Setting up fun, engaged ‘façade’
  – Awkward encounters when support workers ‘push too hard’
Initiating encounter

At the counter Larry says hello to the young male shop assistant, who smiles back and tells him how much the coke is. Larry hesitates as if waiting for more conversation, so the support worker steps forward and introduces Larry. The shop assistant shakes Larry's hand and says pleased to meet you. (Larry, Boronia)
They then go off to find the spaghetti. They can’t seem to find it so they ask a female staff member. Gavin, at support worker’s urging, initiates the conversation with the staff. (Gavin, Sale)
Maintaining an encounter once it has started

• Passive presence:
  – Minimal direct interference in the interaction
  – Monitoring of interaction and readiness to step-in when needed
  – Reassuring presence
Maintaining an encounter once it has started

Larry stops [a female stranger] by standing in front of her. He asks her for her birthday then for her age. She is very uncomfortable and looks around for help. The support worker steps forward, letting her know (non verbally) that he is there. She relaxes a little, and answers Larry’s questions briefly. Larry offers to shake hands. She does so very briefly, then leaves abruptly. (Larry, Boronia)
Maintaining an encounter once it has started

• Support worker as interpreter, assists two strangers to understand each other’s words, gestures and actions despite cognitive differences
  – Two way interpretation
  – Explaining unconventional behaviour, potentially threatening to some people
Maintaining an encounter once it has started

While waiting at the café counter, a woman walks past. Peter puts his hand on her arm and she stops and looks at him questioningly. The support worker explains that he wants to roll up her sleeves. The woman makes no comment but allows Peter roll up one of her sleeves. Peter is very happy now and turns back to pick up his glass of water. The woman – who was juggling a tray full of food and drinks in her other arm while Peter rolled up her sleeve – walks away with a smile. (Peter, Boronia)
Maintaining an encounter once it has started

• Support worker’s intervention in interaction as a means to *change people’s values and behaviours* in the longer term.

• Educating ‘the public’:
  – Demanding and ‘teaching’ direct, respectful interaction with person with intellectual disability

• Educating person with intellectual disability:
  – Encouraging interaction as skill-building practice
  – Criticising ‘inappropriate’ forms of interaction (i.e. ‘silliness’)
Maintaining an encounter once it has started

The hair dresser washes Naomi’s hair while they talk. While rinsing her hair, Naomi loudly proclaims "ow". The hair dresser understands that this is one of the ways that Naomi expresses herself and not necessarily an expression of pain. She checks if Naomi is ok, then keeps going while Naomi laughs.

“It’s not dirty”, says Naomi.

“Not now”, says the hairdresser.

Naomi keeps talking along this vein until the support worker intervenes, saying, "You need to stop being silly or we'll have to go home."

Naomi and the hair dresser ignore her.

(Naomi, Caulfield)
Preventing, taking over or terminating encounter

- Support workers’ practices which limit opportunities for encounter
  - Exclusion of person with intellectual disability from conversation between support worker and a stranger;
  - Support worker Interacting ‘on behalf’ of person with intellectual disability
  - Prevention or termination of encounter by support worker (often to ‘get on’ with planned schedule, or to avoid confrontations)
Preventing, taking over or terminating encounter

Con sees a little girl with her head down on her Dad’s shoulder. Con rubs her back and the two smile at him. The support worker has come up behind them and takes over the interaction – talking to the little girl and her father, and standing in Con’s way. Con walks away unnoticed. (Con, Wantirna South)
Conclusions

• Encounter an important aspect of social inclusion
• Key role for support staff in creating opportunities for encounter, and assisting people with intellectual disability manage such encounters
• Facilitating encounter – a very challenging job!
  – The challenge of initiating encounter
  – A very fine line between facilitating encounter / taking over encounter
References

