Concerning the role of everyday discourses on disability in the realization of disability policy, this qualitative study focuses on the problematic meanings of disability and of being disabled in 45 fictional texts about a disabled woman and man (21/24) written by non-disabled graduate students and welfare professionals. The traditional individualising understanding of disability was dominant in the discourses of the texts, especially in those about the disabled women which also repeated othering discourses. The socio-environmental understanding was echoed as well, but mainly in the texts about the disabled men. I discuss the possible practical consequences of the polarised and gendered discourses for disabled women and men, and for the disability policy. I suggest that there is a need to develop critical consciousness of the harmful everyday discourses on disability, especially among professionals working with and for disabled people, as social workers.
In the past two decades, Western welfare states have executed many legislative renewals in order to achieve social equality and full participation for disabled people in all fields of life and society. This is also the case in Finland (Kumpuvuori & Högbacka 2003; Saloviita 2005), where the study at hand has been carried out. Irrespective of the positive progress in the official disability policy in general, there still exists a significant gap between the official principles of and statements about the full participation and inclusion of disabled people (e.g. National Council on Disability 1996), and the reality faced by disabled people, for example, while seeking access to public places and transportation, to disability services, or other supportive services which could make participation and inclusion possible (Kumpuvuori & Högbacka 2003; Metteri 2004). According to United Nations’ reporter Bengt Lindqvist (2000), this gap is still common all over the world, regardless of the level of the development or the economical situation of the society, and is also identified in other Nordic countries (e.g. Barron 2001).

One explanation for this contradiction could be in our culture and its public discourses constructing, circulating and representing common sense truths about and meanings of disability. Susan Wendell states (1996, 51–55) that the biggest obstacle in the deconstruction of disabling social restrictions and barriers, for example by legislation and socio-political reforms, lies in the othering cultural constructions of disability, which produce otherness for disabled people. This othering means that disabled people are represented as distinct and apart from the assumed normality as well as apart from the ‘normal’ and the ‘natural’ majority (Wendell 1996, 60–61). Mark Priestley (1999, 27–54) stresses the role of individualising cultural discourses and representations of disability, which prevent the realization of enabling disability policy, for example, in social work and other welfare services. These discourses and representations present disability as a personal problem and limitation caused by a person’s physical or mental impairment, and disadvantages faced by disabled individuals as unavoidable and natural consequences of their impairments.

Thus, in this article, I study textual discourses on disability in order to question everyday language and expressions of disability and ideas of disability produced by them. The aim of this qualitative study is to identify and discuss meanings given to ‘disability’ and ‘being disabled’, especially those ones which can be seen to be problematic for disabled women and men or for disability policy in general. This is a part of my broader research project with four sub-projects that focus on gendered and oppressive forms of disability discourse (see Reinikainen 1999, 2004a, 2004b).

I follow the core idea of Foucauldian discursive approach. According to it, our social reality, ideas of ourselves, other people, and phenomena around us are formulated and defined in and by discourses producing meanings, identities, subject positions, truths, and consequences (Foucault 1981 & 2002; Meijer 1993; Hall 1997).
that discourses do not just reflect social reality but construct and reconstruct it in continuous process. Discourses also bear cultural values, beliefs and attitudes, and social hierarchies directing people’s orientation toward each other, as well as social treatment of individuals and groups. Because the dominating concepts, definitions, and images of disability have mostly been created and produced by non-disabled people (Morris 1991 & 1993), I focus here on disability discourse produced by the members of the non-disabled majority.

Writing task – a method of gathering everyday discourses on disability

The text material analysed in this article includes 21 stories about a disabled woman, and 24 about a disabled man written by 45 non-disabled persons. The texts were collected in 1998 by asking four groups of people to write a short life story about an unknown disabled woman or man. The participants had instructions and 25 minutes to write the story about either a disabled woman or a disabled man, whose picture was in the instruction paper. The woman in the picture was sitting in a manual wheelchair and the man in an electrical one. The purpose of the picture was to make the existence of the person’s impairment and gender ‘bodily’ real, and yet to give as little information as possible about these unidentified persons. The writers received no background information on the persons in the pictures. The writers were asked to give an identity to the disabled character (name, age, marital status, family and other relationships, etc.) and to tell something about her or his history, ongoing activities (e.g. work, hobbies), plans and prospects for the future, issues dominating his or her life at the moment and her or his biggest joys and disappointments.

Of the 45 writers, 21 were graduate students of social work (6), social policy (7) and psychology (8), and 24 were professionals working in the fields of social services and health care and taking part in a complementary training course. The writers’ ages varied from 19 to 57. Because of the participants’ educational and/or professional orientation towards women-dominated fields, the female over-representation among participants was unsurprising: 39 of them were female and six male. The low number of male writers does not allow comparisons between the texts written by women and men, but such a comparison has not been my aim in the first place. Nor has it been my aim to make comparisons between the texts written by the students and the professionals.

Although the structure of the 45 stories mostly followed the themes given in the guidelines, each of the texts was somehow unique. Because of the limited space of the article, the whole text material – including about 80 transcribed pages – and its contents cannot be described here in detail. The texts had variation concerning their length (from 85 to 387 words), contents, tone and emphasis as well as the features
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given for the disabled person and for his or her life situation, among other things. On the other hand, the most dominant discursive manners of the texts producing ideas of disability and of being disabled were easy to identify after having close read the whole text-material several times. In the context of my broader research project, I have previously studied these texts from two other perspectives: on the one hand, I have focussed on the gendered meanings of the disabled body, and on the other hand, I have studies the gendered subject positions, roles and spaces given for the disabled woman and man in the texts (Reinikainen 1999 & 2004b).

How can we expect these stories to reflect or represent general cultural and everyday discourses on disability and not just the writers’ educational and/or professional background and their personal views on and attitudes toward disability? Due to the fact that disability issues have not been systematically incorporated into the curricula of social policy, social work or psychology at the Finnish universities, and since we do not exactly know the writers’ personal interests, knowledge and experiences of disability issues, we can at the least assume that their understandings about disability have been influenced by popular and commonly shared narratives and discourses on disability circulated in our society and culture. As Dennis Casling (1993) has demonstrated, even socially and politically aware people can easily repeat the harshest cultural images and stereotypes of disability, when they are asked to write about disability. Casling’s demonstration shows that average university education, professional expertise or knowledge does not routinely offer immunity against ordinary cultural discourses and ideas of disability.

In constructing ideas of others, people have a social stock of narratives with separate sections for different social groups in their usage (Hänninen 2000). According to Meijer (1993, 368), single texts, such as the fictional stories here, are always constructed by using already existing texts “which echo and repeat one another and in which certain cultural attitudes, gendered identities, fixed ways of seeing and of thinking are re-enacted and constantly constructed” (ibid.).

Single texts are not fully unique and personal products, nor are people’s ideas and attitudes. As Märten Söder (1990) and Karl Atkin (1991) have pointed out, people’s ideas about and attitudes toward disability are always framed and structured by hegemonic ideas and discourses that prevail in society. Writers of the fictional stories might be aware of ‘negative’ or ‘prejudiced’ ideas of disability, and try to avoid them, but still, applying Meijer (1993, 368), they are more or less ‘stuck’ in the web of general discourse and language giving them certain limited ways to talk and think about disability or disabled people. While discourses are changeable in general, common ideas and everyday discourses about disability seem to change all too slowly; and new ones, when they appear, do not replace the old ones easily. For this reason, I claim that discourses in the texts I have analysed are still valid today.
Texts in sympathetic and unsympathetic reading

Applying Foucault’s (2002) perspective on researching texts, my main interest is in the texts themselves and in the manners they produce meanings of ‘disability’ and of ‘being a disabled woman/man’. Because meanings produced by words are always interpretations already excluding other interpretations (Foucault 1998), focussing on ‘what is not said’ in texts is as important as focussing on ‘what is said’. In my qualitative analysis sympathetic and unsympathetic manners of reading alternate. The first manner focuses on ‘what the texts are saying’, and tries to understand and explain the texts and their discourses, for instance, by narrative conventions. To be able to question and problematise everyday discourses on disability, I need an unsympathetic manner of reading. In addition to taking a critical look at ordinary phrases, expressions and ideas of disability, I focus on ‘what the texts do not say’, and by that, on what sort of interpretations of disability the texts are excluding.

The texts are not going to be judged in terms of the writers’ personal orientation, motives or attitudes toward disability and disabled people. Also, rather than comparing the texts with the ‘documented reality’ or the ‘real experiences’ of disabled people, I am interested in ‘reality’ produced in the texts. Since disability discourses, like any other discourses, have real socio-political effects and consequences (Foucault 1981; Meijer 1993; Hall 1997), I am concerned about the possible consequences of the meanings of ‘disability’ and of ‘being disabled’ produced in the texts for disabled women and men and for the realization of disability policy.

My sympathetic and unsympathetic reading covers the whole text material, which is the basis for my general findings. These general findings are also supported by a content analysis of all 45 texts. In order to point up problematic discourses in the meanings attached to ‘disability’ and ‘being disabled’ as well as some gendered differences in them, the detailed analysis presented in the next two sections focuses however on 10 texts that are quoted in the extracts.

Meanings of ‘disability’: internal and external limitations

Disability, or rather Markku’s illness, is going to make his life more difficult in the future, but living day-by-day is his principle. (F37dm/w32)

Sometimes limitations caused by impairment are disappointments. (F23dm/w57)

Mostly the texts produced disability as a personal problem, difficulty and limitation caused by the person’s impairment or illness. The texts treated disability and impairment, or illness, as one and the same thing. They made no distinction between impairment or chronic illness as a physical feature of a person and disability as a phenomenon or socio-political issue.
The equating of disability with impairment can be seen as a ‘natural’ common sense idea, and be explained with the traditional medical and individual views of disability (e.g. Oliver 1990). However, it is not entirely innocent. It defines the origin and cause of disability and leads us to a certain source of problems, difficulties and limitations, as well as to a certain source of solutions of them. While locating the origin of disability in a person’s impairment, the texts pointed to the disabled person as the main source for solving the problems related to disability. Many of the texts presented the disabled person’s involvement in physical rehabilitation and willingness or capability to mental adaptation as the main keys to the success and felicity of the disabled person, or at least to getting one’s life back in balance:

Tiina has to work hard both for physical rehabilitation and improving and remaining psychic well-being. And this process still continues. (F4dw/w27)

Pentti’s life values changed along with the accident. As a reason for his survival, he mentioned that “when you cannot do anything for things, at least you can influence your own experience with your own attitude”. (F29dm/w44)

In some texts, the focus was also shifted from the individual and his or her internal limitations to the external circumstances, as the next extract shows:

In spite of his impairment, he has been able to live a quite “normal” life of the youth. With the support of the city, he has got a good residence in a service flat, where the residence is planned so that it is easy to move there by the wheelchair. Jukka has a car of his own, with it he can move. (F5dm/w42)

In spite of one’s impairment is a very ordinary phrase in everyday disability discourse. It is used to praise a disabled person and his or her achievements and personal toughness, and therefore it is usually seen as a ‘positive’ expression. However, in unsympathetic reading, it produces two intertwined and problematic meanings of disability. Firstly, the phrase implies that difficulties or restrictions the disabled person may face are primarily caused by her/his impairment. Secondly, it reveals that the disabled person’s achievements are results from his or her personal special qualities and talents with which the person has been able to overcome all odds, including his or her impairment.

The last part of the extract turns the focus to external preconditions of a “normal” life to the disabled man. These external preconditions come from the society in a form of accessible housing. Several of the texts pointed to the role of the society either in creating or in removing barriers, in most cases as the latter:

Going further off the area of the centre² is easy for Markus today. He is happy that physically disabled people are more and more taken into account in public vehicles and in street planning. (F43dm/w22)
Discourses used in the above examples seem to echo our official disability policy that supports a view of disability as a relation between a disabled individual and his or her society and environment. This socio-environmental view recognises, among other things, the importance of accessible transportation and built environment for disabled people, and these are also the issues frequently represented in the media. On the other hand, the extracts above can also be seen to echo existing beliefs that the Finnish society has already taken into account all needs of disabled people (Kumpuvuori & Högbacka 2003, 16).

One interesting feature in the references to socio-environmental issues is that they occur mainly in the texts about the disabled men. These texts pay some attention to external pre-/conditions of the activities and participation of the disabled man, whereas the texts about the disabled women concentrate foremost on finding these pre-/conditions in internal factors, as in the woman’s state of mind and emotions:

Sirkka (45 year old) got impaired five years ago in a car crash on her way to work. ... A bad depression slowed down the healing of impairments. For about a year, she was crawling in self-pity looking for and thinking about the things she had lost, all that she would have to go without after this. She didn’t want to have control over her new reality. She was bitter about the fact that she couldn’t work any more.

In rehabilitation, about a year after the accident, she met Jouko who had also got impaired in an accident 10 years ago. Jouko was younger than Sirkka and had had his crises earlier, but Jouko, through patient conversations and meditations, was able to open up Sirkka’s bitterness and to canalize it away from her. Now, Sirkka is working, doing physical exercise, and she goes dancing with Jouko. She enjoys outdoor excursions. She is also the internal trainer in her workplace. (F20dw/w34)

As in the text above, the biggest obstacle for the disabled woman, besides her impairment, seems to be her state of mind and a feminine disposition to over-emotionality and bitterness. According to Sue Cambell (1994), women and disabled people, among many other disadvantaged people in society, are most likely to be labelled as being bitter and oversensitive (also Barnes 1992). Interestingly, the texts reserved bitterness and extreme emotionality as life dominating and restrictive attributes for the disabled women only.

Bitterness and/or over-emotionality as well as emotional adjustment referred to in the texts can be seen to echo a psychological approach to disability that has had a strong influence on professional approaches and practices toward disabled people and on the cultural representations of disability (Oliver 1987 & 1990). It has become common for both disabled and non-disabled people to talk about disability with psychological vocabulary and interpretations. Although the usage of psychological discourse
in the texts can be explained and understood, we need to notice that just as medical discourses on disability, also psychological ones tend to individualise disability as a personal problem, particularly for a disabled woman.

Becoming and being disabled, and gendered otherness

Next, I focus my reading on those parts in the texts that produce ideas about ‘what is it like to be a disabled person’ and ‘what happens to a person when he or she gets impaired’. Rather than listing all the attributes connected to the disabled women and men in the texts, I will pay attention to discursive features with which the texts construct meanings of ‘being disabled’ in relation to ‘being not disabled’.

One of the most general formats of public disability discourses and narratives are ‘sick narratives’ that tell about personal experiences of becoming chronically ill or impaired and disabled (Tighe 2001, 527). This format focuses mainly on the medical condition, the person’s changed life and his or her coping with the medical condition. The influence of the sick narratives, and other dominant medical disability discourses (e.g. Barnes 1992; Darke 1998; Thomas 1999), is apparent in the texts. Of all the 45 texts, 39 name or explain the character’s disability, using medical diagnoses, labels or categories, although the instructions of the writing task, on purpose, did not ask for this kind of information. According to the most common explanations, the disabled person had been impaired in an accident (e.g. in traffic, sport, or diving) or by a disabling illness (e.g. multiple sclerosis, polio, muscular atrophy) during childhood or adulthood.

Consequently, the descriptions of the transformation from non-disabled to disabled, and of the changes in one’s life after becoming disabled are inherent parts of the texts. It is interesting, however, that the descriptions of this transformation are expressed very differently in the texts about the disabled women and the men. The texts about the disabled men concentrate on describing the men’s ‘present’ life. In addition, the men’s life before the impairment is not missed with great sadness or regret, or it is not missed at all. The texts about the disabled men do not make ‘a long lasting and drastic drama’ about becoming disabled as the texts about the disabled women do. None of the texts about the disabled man produce discourse such as in the next extract from the text about the disabled woman:

She is just coming from a therapy session. She has been going to therapy for years. She goes to therapy because of the accident in which she lost her mobility, due to which she lost her spouse. She is depressed and has attempted suicide a few times in the past. She has been unemployed since the accident, she hasn’t got any hobbies left and her activities are very minor in general. (F16dw/m35)

Whereas the text number 20 about the disabled woman (F20dw/w34), quoted earlier in this paper, produced finally a “happy end” in its narration, this quote leaves the woman
in her misery to continue her coming to terms process with her changed life and being disabled. It produces and underlines otherness – exclusion from normality and normal life and activities – as a part and fate of being disabled for a woman. Just as disability and problems related to it are explained by very individualising discourses in the texts about the disabled women, likewise the woman’s otherness is individualised as a matter of her psychological and mental inability to adjust.

The texts construct both the disabled women and their life situations through dichotomies between the character’s earlier and later life as well as through repeating or implying hierarchical and value-laden orders between ‘healthy/ordinary’ and ‘disabled/extraordinary’. Several of the texts describe the disabled woman as well as her life before disability with extremely positive attributes and qualities:

She was conscientious, honest, trying her best, a worker everybody liked. The car accident, when she was 30 years old, changed her life. At that point, she had had all opportunities ahead of her. (F14dw/m40)

Discourses as this imply that becoming disabled throws a disabled woman in the middle of something totally opposite to a supposed normal life, in a life where there are ‘not many opportunities left’.

One of the texts about the disabled woman refers implicitly to what is a ‘normal’ position for disabled people, or for disabled women:

I haven’t had to stay in the bed. With my home assistant I run the household just like everybody else. I act in different kinds of organizations as an activist... I play basketball in a group of wheelchair-players. ...My future is open. I study journalism and mass communication at the Open University. A journalist? I don’t accept the role of a pensioner for myself or the position of remaining apart.³ (F36dw/w38)

The first and the last sentence seem to indicate expected positions or destinies for disabled people. The use of negatives in these sentences refers to the existence of discourse and ideas by which remaining apart is a normal destiny for disabled people, or for disabled women in particularly. On the other hand, the use of the negatives makes it possible to offer many active and ‘normal’ positions for the disabled woman, and in this way, to rescue her from the ‘normal destiny’ of disabled people, from otherness.

As an interesting feature, the disabled men in the texts did not need this sort of discursive rescue from otherness. Becoming disabled did not cause any crucial biographical disruptions or permanent significant changes in the men’s fictive lives. The texts portrayed the disabled men mainly in traditional male roles as paid workers, fathers and husbands, and having active social lives, as if these were self evident and natural issues and not exceptions. In the texts about the disabled men, being disabled was closer to ‘normality’ than to dissimilarity, abnormality or otherness.
Conclusion
In conclusion, the texts about the disabled women and men produce and echo diverse discourses and meanings of ‘disability’ and ‘being disabled’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the traditional medical and psychological, and thus individualising discourses are dominant in the texts. In these discourses, disability is a personal problem and a limitation caused by a person’s impairment or illness, and the disabled person is the main source of both problems and solutions in disability. But the texts also echo socio-environmental meanings of disability, by pointing to external factors that can either enable or disable the disabled person’s living and participation in society.

However, the texts about both the disabled women and men lead us to notice that the diversity of the meanings and the discourses are gendered. The individualising discourses dominated particularly the texts about the disabled women, underlining a disabled woman’s individual responsibility of coping as a disabled person, and ignoring the external factors of coping, except in one ‘special case’. As well, the texts about the disabled women defined meanings of ‘being disabled’ using the othering discourse, emphasising that being a disabled woman does not belong to the range of normality and normal life. In contrast, the texts about the disabled men emphasised a disabled man’s belonging to ‘us’, that is ‘normal people’, and to mainstream life and society.

Although my interpretations of the texts are not the only possible ones, they are conceivable from the chosen perspective. With my unsympathetic and critical manner of reading and interpreting the texts, I have aimed at emphasising that also seemingly ‘positive’ discourses require a critical examination.

Discussion and practical implications
The point of departure for this article was my concern about the existing gap between the declared general goals of disability policy and the lived reality of disabled people. Believing that everyday discourses on disability have a role in constructing and maintaining this gap between the principles and the reality, I have analysed in critical manner textual discourses about disabled women and men produced by non-disabled writers, asking what these texts tell us about ‘disability’ and ‘being disabled’.

When thinking from the perspective of the goals of disability policy, this study has both good and bad news. The good news is that the discourses of the texts echo the socio-environmental ideas of disability to a certain extent. This can be considered promising for further recognition of the external factors that are significant for the equality and full participation of disabled people. However, the bad news is that the individual interpretations of disability still dominate, not the socio-environmental ones. This raises a question of how the socio-environmental understanding of disability can successfully promote the inclusive goals of disability policy in discursive surroundings where the traditional individual discourses on disability have such a vivid and
hegemonic position. This question is relevant also in the other Nordic countries, as the socio-environmental understanding has been a prevailing approach in the official disability policy in the Nordic countries since the 1960’s or the 1970’s (Tøssebro 2004; Gustavsson et al. 2005).

Another major result of this research that demands our attention is that the discourses echoing both the socio-environmental understanding of disability and the political ideals of equal rights and opportunities were connected rather to the disabled man than to the disabled woman. In addition, otherness was connected especially to the disabled woman. This gendered bias in the texts shows the significance of the gender dimension in disability discourses. It also raises several questions for further critical thinking and examination. How are disabled women and men treated in society? What issues do we focus on when disabled women and men are seeking access to the mainstream society and demanding the fulfilment of their equal rights and opportunities? Will the main solutions and preconditions for these goals be found inside or outside the disabled person, depending on the person’s gender? These questions are highly relevant also for social work with disabled women and men.

As Jenny Morris (2001, 178) points out, social inclusion, as the goal for disability policy, cannot be accomplished as long as conditions which maintain exclusion stay untouched. Mairian Corker (2000, 447) suggests that discourses can be as harmful and exclusive, on both individual and institutional level, for disabled people as some material circumstances. Therefore, I suggest that we need to pay attention to the existing discursive conditions of disability policy, including the everyday language and representations of disability and disabled people. The gendered differences in disability discourses, which this research has pointed out, obligate us also to keep our eyes and ears open to differences and variations in the discourses and to take their possible consequences into serious consideration. I would direct these obligations especially at those professionals who work in social and other welfare services and, therefore have power over their disabled clients. By developing critical consciousness of potentially harmful disability discourses, by which we all are influenced, professionals could prevent their undermining effects for their own practises and decision making concerning disabled women and men, and thus enable the realization of disability policy.

Endnotes:
1) The texts are identified by codes as this:
   ‘F37dm/w32’ means Fictional text number 37, written about the disabled man by a 32-year-old woman.
2) Here the ‘centre’ refers to an institution with supported accommodation services and activities for people with disabilities.
3) Unlike most of the texts about the disabled woman and man, this one was written in the first person.
   Usually the texts were written in the third person.
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Summaries

Hversdagsleg umfjöllun um fótluð: Fyrirstaða árangursríkmar stefnu í málefnum fatlaðra?

Hvæða hlutverki gegn hversdagsleg umfjöllun um fótluð þegar hrinda á í framkvæmd stefnumörkun í málefnum fatlaðra. Það er gert með 45 frumsömdum textum um fatlaða konu og karl (21/24) rituðum af ekki-fótluðum brautkráðum nemendum og fagfolki í velferðarþjónustu. Hinn hefðbundni, einstaklingsbundni skilningur á fótluð var rikjandi í umfjöllun um textana, sérstaklega í þeim sem fjölluðu um fatlaðar konur, en einnig kom fram endurtekin öðrun (othering) í umfjöllun. Skilningur á félags- og umhverfisþáttum endurómaði einnig, en aðallega í texta um fatlaða karla. Ræddar eru mögulegar praktiskar/ raunverulegar afleiðingar af klofni og kynbundinni umfjöllun fyrir fatlaðar konur og karla, og aðrir þessa á stefnumörkun í fótunarmálum. Margt bendir til þess að þróf sé fyrir að þróa gamnýndum um þann skaðu, sem hversdagsleg umfjöllun um fótlu geti hæft í fó til þess að, sérstaklega meðal fagfolks, eins og félagsráðgjafa, sem vinnur með og fyrir faltlað folk.

Lykilorð: fótluð, rökren nálgun, stefnumörkun í málefnum fatlaðra, einstaklingsbundin umfjöllun, öðrun (othering) í umfjöllun.