

Editorial

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The Importance of Disability Research

Why is disability research important? When asked this question I tend to respond by revising it in my head (if not out loud). Why is disability research so important? Why is any research important? I might go on in this vein but my point is that disability research has the potential to improve understandings of the most fundamental aspect of the human condition —namely, the diversity of minds and bodies. Whatever our history, geography, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or religion, we have, have had, and/or will have a profoundly intimate relationship with disability. It is, after all, via the very diversity of minds and bodies that we are ultimately unified.

Disability, for me, has a uniquely universal importance. There are many ‘marked bodies’ in culture, owing to widespread prejudicial attitudes about gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so on, but what makes disability distinct is its ‘unambiguous ability to impact every other identity category at any time’ (1). No matter how marked someone’s mind and/or body may be in terms of other identity categories, the prospect of impairment if not disability is essentially inescapable and becomes greater with every passing day. To make the transformation, if and when there is one to make, all it takes is ‘the swerve of a car, the impact of a football tackle, or the tick of the clock’ (2, p. 4). Accordingly, there is a well-known truism at the heart of disability studies, namely, that if we live long enough, we all become disabled, or perhaps even that disability is the ‘one identity that each of us will, at some point in our lives, inhabit’ (3, p. 197-98). In other words, we are disability and disability is us.

In the academy, the universal importance of disability has become evident in the cultural artefacts on which many lessons, courses, projects, and critical works are based. In the humanities, for example, the disability that is associated with minds and bodies reveals itself as a ‘potent symbolic site of literary investment’ (1, p. 49). Illustrative of persistence in contemporary writing (4), most works contain ‘some reference to the abnormal, to disability, and so on’ (5, p. 43). What is more, the abundance of disability within cultural representation reaches right back to antiquity.

Although not before time, the universal importance of disability is becoming increasingly recognised on courses around the world. In the United Kingdom, for example, there was an Open University course in the 1970s, the launch of Disability and Society in the 1980s, and the establishment of the University of Leeds’s Centre of Disability Studies in the 1990s. Such significant advances in the emerging field of disability studies were not exclusive to the social sciences, especially in the United States, as was demonstrable in the inauguration of the Disability Studies Quarterly, Lennard Davis’s Disability Studies Reader, and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s book series, *Corporealities*. In the twenty-first century, moreover, monographs, edited books, book series, journals, research centres, seminar series, conferences, and networks have proliferated on a truly international scale. Indeed, my own institutional base, the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies, has engaged with disability research in all these respects.

For all that, since the early days of disability studies, some of the most well-known scholars in the field have been troubled by the very nature of disability research. The main concern was that prevalent attitudes toward disability may well have been uncovered as a result of research, but those who carried out such work thereby participated in the disabling social relationship (6). Most obviously, researchers who adopted a deficiency perspective were likely to render disability as individual limitations or incompetence (7). In these terms, knowledge about the universal importance of disability could not be separated from the conditions in which it was gathered (6). Any such research was said to have little influence on policy and to make no contribution to improving the lives of disabled people (8). Disability research, therefore, was deemed at best irrelevant and at worst part of the society that was disabling to people who had impairments.

Thankfully, in the Anglo-American context, many of the early concerns have now been addressed by the increased influence of disabled people on disability research. This progress is demonstrable in two key ways. First, in the social sciences, the growing appreciation of the British social model since the 1990s has had a significant impact on researchers

who, rather than following the interests of politicians, policy makers, and professional academics, have started to pursue an emancipatory disability research agenda (9). The contention is that, when directly linked to the on-going struggle for change, emancipatory work can influence policy and thus contribute to improving the lives of disabled people. Second, in the humanities, it is recognised that textual analysis provides a remedy to the exhaustion of people-based research (10). The rationale is that, exhausting only the researcher, this kind of work provides close and revealing readings of cultural texts that are products of the society that has been recognised as disabling. That is to say, representational methodologies offer another way of researching disability without contributing to ableism and disablism.

Although potentially problematic, then, disability research is highly important and becomes increasingly so as we advance into the coming decades of the twenty-first century, where

more of us are likely to live long enough to become disabled. The Anglo-American progress that I mention here should be recognised around the world and, more excitingly, those of us working in the United Kingdom and the United States have much to learn from our colleagues elsewhere, whose work may be less widely disseminated. To stress the point, I repeat that it is via an appreciation of diversity that we are unified.

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