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## Emancipatory Research: Realistic goal or impossible dream?

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### INTRODUCTION

After much critical reflection on my own work (is this what we mean by reflexivity?) during the 1980s provoked by my involvement in the disability movement, I came to the inescapable and painful conclusion that the person who had benefited most from my research on disabled people's lives was undoubtedly me. It also became apparent that there was increasing anger, hostility and suspicion amongst organisations of disabled people that much that passed for 'disability research' was nothing more than a 'rip-off'.

In 1990 I was invited to give a paper on disability research to a conference of academic researchers in Sweden and this gave me the opportunity to reflect on the issues involved. To this day I remember entering the conference room on the first morning with the other researchers, none of whom were disabled, and finding the words 'what do you think you are doing talking about us in this way?' written on the board. No-one except me thought it referred to us; those who even noticed the comment at all simply assumed the board hadn't been cleaned by whoever had used it the day before.

What did we think we were doing: pursuing knowledge for the benefit of humankind? Informing policy and practice? Helping disabled people? Building networks? Developing our own careers? Having a freebie at someone else's expense? All of those things probably and more; but also much less.

In the following year Len Barton and myself were able to persuade the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to fund a project which literally locked disability researchers and disabled people into the same room for a series of seminars which culminated in a national conference and a special edition of the journal *Disability and Society*, 1992, Vol 17, No 2. The

personal experience of this was profound for most, if not all of us, leading one of the researchers to confess as much on Radio 4.

In this paper I'm not going to attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of what's happened since nor a reinterpretation of the ideas and issues that emerged. Instead I want to discuss my own subsequent research work in relation to what I called for both in my paper published in the special edition and from the conference platform; namely for the development of an emancipatory paradigm in respect of disability research. This is, I suppose, what sociologists would call an exercise in reflexivity, if I have understood the term correctly. In order to make this more than an exercise in self - indulgence, I shall attempt to consider some of the issues this reflexivity raises for disability research in general and for 'would be' emancipatory researchers in particular.

## WHAT IS EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH?

In the previous paper I contextualised the emerging paradigm in the following way:

'The development of such a paradigm stems from the gradual rejection of the positivist view of social research as the pursuit of absolute knowledge through the scientific method and the gradual disillusionment with the interpretive view of such research as the generation of socially useful knowledge within particular historical and social contexts. The emancipatory paradigm, as the name implies, is about the facilitating of a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever levels it occurs' (Oliver, 1992: 110).

This was never intended to be an argument against the pursuit of knowledge per se, whether that knowledge be absolute, socially useful or whatever; but rather an assertion that it is not possible to research oppression in an objective or scientific way. As Barnes (1996) has recently argued, you cannot be independent in research oppression; you are either on the side of the oppressors or the oppressed.

In seeking to describe what the emancipatory research project was, I suggested that it might be seen as an emerging new paradigm for undertaking research. The reason for this was simple:

'The issue then for the emancipatory research paradigm is not how to empower people but, once people have decided to

empower themselves, precisely what research can then do to facilitate this process. This does then mean that the social relations of research production do have to be fundamentally changed; researchers have to learn how to put their knowledge and skills at the disposal of their research subjects, for them to use in whatever ways they choose' (Oliver, 1992: 111).

Thus what made it a new paradigm was the changing of the social relations of research production - the placing of control in the hands of the researched, not the researcher.

Building on previous feminist work (e.g. Lather, 1987; Ribbens, 1990), I went on to suggest that there were three key fundamentals on which such a paradigm must be based; reciprocity, gain and empowerment. However, merely attempting to base research on these fundamentals did not necessarily mean working in ways very different from some positivist work and much interpretive work. But changing the social relations of research production meant that it was impossible to incorporate emancipatory work into existing research paradigms.

In this paper I do not wish to review the progress that has or has not been made in developing an emancipatory paradigm for disability research. Instead I want to consider how the only piece of major research I have completed since I outlined the criteria for emancipatory research meets those very criteria. In sum I shall use my own criteria to judge my own work, not the work of others.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF 'DISABILITY POLITICS'

The research to be discussed was jointly undertaken by Jane Campbell and myself (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). Chapter 1 of that book provides both a description of and a rationale for the work we undertook. At this point however, I should make it clear that this paper represents my own views and not those of my co-researcher. Nevertheless, in describing the work undertaken in the following paragraphs, I switch to the use of 'we' rather than 'I'.

The book was neither a complete history of the disability movement nor a comprehensive account of the issues facing the movement today. Instead, based on in-depth interviews with around thirty key activists who have participated in the rise of the movement since the 1960s, it was a series of accounts of why the movement emerged when it did, the issues it faced

during its transition from emerging to emergent movement and the directions it might take in the future.

Crucial to the production of the book were our own roles as both activists and researchers. This we tried to summarise in the following way:

'We approach the research task as activists trying to make sense of our actions, not as researchers trying to be where the action is' (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 24).

## WERE THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF RESEARCH PRODUCTION CHANGED?

In order to examine this key issue, I need to consider first where the idea for the book originated. While it is true that at no point did the movement, however that might be defined, formally commission us to undertake the research, it was an issue that many disabled people and their organisations had suggested was of crucial importance. With a few notable exceptions, little work on the movement had been undertaken and as participants in the movement, we were often part of discussions which articulated the need for such work to be undertaken.

The decision to proceed was an individual one and we negotiated a contract with a publisher. The choice of how to proceed was also ours alone; we decided who to interview, how to interview them and how we would proceed with the analysis. We were aware of the contradictory nature of our position and this was further brought home to us in lengthy correspondence with the then General Secretary on behalf of the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP).

They asked a series of appropriate but difficult questions about who controlled the research, who had commissioned it, what was going to be done with it and where the royalties were going. We answered as honestly as we could; we were in control although participants would be given every opportunity to comment on and change working drafts, no-one had formally commissioned the research, ultimately we were in control and as we had not managed to attract any substantial funding we would jointly share the royalties in order to offset the costs we would incur.

While we wanted the work to be an integral part of the collective movement of disabled people rather than an external commentary on it, we neither had the time, energy or money to make it a wholly collective production. This was less than satisfactory to us and almost certainly so to

GMCDP: While they never formally opposed the work, they did not participate either and an unfortunate though understandable gap remains.

Almost all the other people we approached readily agreed to be involved although changes in personal circumstances meant that not everyone approached eventually participated. In choosing to use unstructured methods, what was discussed was as much in the control of our participants as it was us and was located within their own personal biographies.

Finally, we offered all the participants the opportunity to see both their words and drafts of the complete manuscript before publication. The fact that only 2 took us up on this offer could be seen either as alienation from our emancipatory project in exactly the same way as disabled people have been alienated from most non-emancipatory research or as testament to the trust that the participants had in our commitment not to exploit them! The truth is probably more complex than that and falls somewhere in between these extreme positions.

#### WHO GAINED?

It is undeniable that we, as researchers, gained. We have an extra publication to our names, whatever that is worth. "We will eventually receive royalty cheques though whether they will defray our costs remains an open question. We have been invited to present our work at national and international forums. We have also gained a better understanding of our own personal biographies and our collective history and the relationship between the two.

We hope that our participants would also sign up to the last point. While the feedback we have had so far suggests that is not an unreasonable hope we have not systematically contacted everyone involved. Whether disabled people generally have gained is even more difficult to determine. A review in *Disability Now* (Vernon, 1996) laments our failure to even consider the role of organisations like SCOPE while *GLAD News* is much more appreciative.

#### WAS IT EMPOWERING?

This question is perhaps a false one. As I have argued elsewhere (Oliver, 1992; 1996) empowerment is not in the gift of the powerful; albeit whether they are politicians, policy makers or researchers; empowerment is something that people do for themselves collectively. Disabled people have decided to empower themselves therefore the question that needs to

be asked is whether our work makes a contribution to this process. The question could also be asked in a negative way -is our work likely to contribute to the disempowerment of disabled people?

However, in an anonymous review in *Disability Arts in London (DAIL)*, the reviewer does describe the book as empowering:

'It...got me back in touch with my strong self, my peers, our shared politics. This book's a contribution to my liberation' (DAIL, 1996: 32-3).

### WAS IT PART OF AN EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH AGENDA?

Building on the work of Bourne (1981), I suggested six ways in which this new research paradigm can make a contribution to the combating of the oppression of disabled people:

- 1) a description of experience in the face of academics who abstract and distort the experience of disabled people;
- 2) a redefinition of the problem of disability;
- 3) a challenge to the ideology and methodology of dominant research paradigms;
- 4) the development of a methodology and set of techniques commensurate with the emancipatory research paradigm;
- 5) a description of collective experience in the face of academics who are unaware or ignore the existence of the disability movement; and
- 6) a monitoring and evaluation of services that are established, controlled and operated by disabled people themselves.

In evaluating our own research against this agenda, I should perhaps deal with the easy ones first. I would hope that our work is a faithful account of the experiences of those disabled people who participated and also of those people who would self-identify as part of a collective movement (1). I would also suggest that our book redefines the problem of disability away from it being an individual or welfare one, transforming it into a political one (2), albeit with individual and welfare dimensions. It is also a description of the collective experience of some, though of course, not all disabled people (5). It is not, and was never intended to be, an attempt to monitor and evaluate services controlled by disabled people unless I argue that the disability movement provides a political service to disabled people (6).

While I would hope that our work provides a challenge to the ideology of the dominant research paradigms, I can be less certain what challenge, if any, it poses to dominant methodologies (3). In eschewing objectivity and neutrality and embracing partisanship, we were clearly confronting many of the canons of scientific and social scientific approaches to research. I remain unclear as to whether the methodology and techniques of our work challenge anything at all (3) and (4). If methodology is defined as nothing more than a set of appropriate techniques, then I am not sure whether interviews, questionnaires, participant observation, transcript analysis, etc., are compatible or incompatible with emancipatory research. I am convinced however, that such techniques can only be part of an emancipatory project where, and only where, the social relations of research production have been changed.

So, our work and my own reflexivity requires two key questions to be addressed. The first is - did the research succeed in changing the social relations of research production? My own reflexive answer would be 'nearly but not quite'. On the basis of reading the above and perhaps the book itself, others may come to a less comfortable conclusion. The second key question is - has or is the research contributing to the emancipation of disabled people? I would like to leave the answer to this until the end of the chapter.

## CHANGING THE MATERIAL RELATIONS OF RESEARCH PRODUCTION?

At the seminar series referred to earlier, Zarb (1992) argued that it was not simply the social relations of research production that needed to change if disability research was to be an integral part of a process of collective empowerment, but the material ones also. In other words, it was not simply control of the research process which was an issue but also control of the resources needed to undertake research in the first place which must change. Until then, he argued, only participatory research was possible.

These material relations cannot be reduced simply to money but if we look at the specific issue of funding, we can see that control of the resources remains in the hands of major funding bodies; of which three, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Department of Health and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation were, and remain, the most important. By considering each in turn, I will argue that the material relations of research production (as Zarb called them) have not changed very much at all, even if superficially they may appear to have done so.

The ESRC has funded several major research projects on disability but, in the main, these have been located within existing research paradigms. The exception is the project on 'disabling environments' currently being undertaken at the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) and directed by Gerry Zarb. The idea for this emerged from a joint conference organised by British Council of Disabled People (BCODP) and Social Science Research Group (SSRG) and was published in a paper the following year (Oliver, 1987). This was worked into a specific proposal jointly by Gerry Zarb and myself and submitted to 2 different ESRC research initiatives from the University of Greenwich. On both occasions, the proposal was rejected but subsequently, when Zarb moved to PSI, a revised (though essentially similar) proposal was accepted for funding.

There are, of course, a number of possible explanations for this; the final proposal was the strongest, research priorities have changed, it was considered by different committees and so on. One central fact however is pertinent to our discussion here; while the radical idea and methodology of the original proposal has been retained, the project only achieved funding when it was located within a relatively 'conservative research organisation', one which has a reputation for being a safe pair of hands. The recent history of disability research emanating from the Department of Health offers another interesting case study of the complexities of the relationship between the social and material relations of research production. The Department, it seems, has discovered the 'user' for in the 'Foreword' to a recently published set of documents on Consumers and Research in the NHS (1995), Professor Sir Michael Peckham, Director of Research and Development in the NHS spells out his position:

'The NHS is attaching increasing importance to seeking out and acting upon the views of its users on the coverage and delivery of the services it provides' (unpaged).

As far as disability research is concerned, the Department has established and implemented a National Research and Development Programme for People with Physical and Complex Disabilities. When such a programme was established, a steering group was appointed to oversee the drawing up of the research agenda. The only disabled person invited to join the group was the Director of RADAR, although he is not generally accepted within the Disabled People's Movement as a legitimate representative of disabled people, and is not known within the academic research community for his research experience or expertise.



When the research agenda was drawn up, a new body was constituted to oversee the programme and allocate the funds. None of the members of this Commissioning Group are disabled or representatives of the disability movement but they advise the Programme Director on the scientific merit and value to the NHS of research proposals submitted for funding'. Belatedly the Department did offer to set up a consultative group of disabled people although they were to have no role in the decision making. Quite what they were to be consulted on remains a mystery and not surprisingly, disabled people declined the offer to participate and no such group was ever established. Emancipatory research might still have been on the agenda however, as next to the top of the identified priorities to which the programme was supposed to be working was 'consumer views' and potential applicants were explicitly directed to my original paper on emancipatory research (Oliver, 1992). So far the programme has spent £3.9 million on 30 projects; not a single one of those is located outside the University sector or the Health Service. Despite 'consumer views' being ranked second in order of priority, disabled people have not been involved, no organisations of disabled people have received any of the funding and none of the projects could be called emancipatory; they are all located within the positivist or interpretive paradigms.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is the other major funder of disability research. Since it established its Disability Committee in 1988, it has been committed to consulting disabled people and to funding research which is designed to develop initiatives that disabled people themselves think are important. And as has already been mentioned, the JRF funded the seminars linking disabled people and researchers together. While initial and subsequent research has remained rooted in what disabled people regard as important, little funding has gone to research which could genuinely be called emancipatory.

This is perhaps most disappointing of all. At the end of the series, a set of detailed guidelines were produced (see *Disability and Society*, 1992, Vol7, No 3). These guidelines have been virtually ignored by the research community and even the Rowntree Foundation itself has failed to make explicit use of them in its subsequent funding activity.

This appears to support Zarb's argument that the 'objective constraints' imposed by the material relations of research production are beyond the control of both researchers and researched. He concludes that 'we can still go some way towards changing the social relations of research production, (Zarb, 1992: 127) and suggests that participatory research is

the way to do it. My own problem with this is that participatory research, while it can be used as a vehicle for changing social relations, all too often leaves the relationship between the social and material relations of research production untheorised and untouched. In trying to say something about the complexities of this relationship the issues of politics and praxis need to be considered and it is to these issues that I shall now turn.

## THE POLITICISATION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The two central issues so far discussed can be summarised in political terms as control over process and control over resources. Both are of fundamental importance and the difficulties of achieving either should not be underestimated.

By now it should be clear that even defining the terms on which the research should proceed is not simply a matter of language or science (Oliver, 1996b); it is also a matter of politics. Altman captures this in respect of the definitional battles surrounding AIDS:

'How AIDS was conceptualised was an essential tool in a sometimes very bitter struggle; was it to be understood as a primarily bio-medical problem, in which case its control should be under that of the medical establishment, or was it rather, as most community-based groups argued, a social and political issue, which required a much greater variety of expertise' (Altman, 1994: 26).

The ways in which disabled people have been systematically excluded from the definitional process has recently been described in one incident which captures the nature of this exclusion more generally:

'It is a hot summer day in London in the late 1980s. Gathered together in one of the capital's most venerable colleges is a large number of academics, researchers and representatives of research funding bodies. Their purpose? A symposium on researching disability comprising presentations on a variety of different methodological and other themes, given and chaired by a panel of experienced disability researchers.

Those convening the seminar are proud that it will shine a spotlight on a usually neglected area of social science research. But some in the audience (and one or two others who have

chosen nor to attend) hold a different view. What credibility can such a seminar muster, they ask, when none of those chairing or presenting papers are themselves disabled? What does it say about current understanding of disability research issues that such an event has been allowed to go ahead in this form, when a Symposium on researching gender issues given entirely by men, or race relations research given entirely by white people, would have been laughed out of court?' (Ward and Flynn, 1994: 29).

It should be pointed out that this exclusion has been systematic and disabled people have not been properly consulted by organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys who have been most heavily funded in Britain to undertake such work. Nor has this exclusion been significantly addressed, as I have argued above, by organisations such as the ESRC, Department of Health and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in more recent times.

However, disabled people have begun to resist this situation by producing their own research based upon their own definitions (Barnes, 1991; 1992), the British Council of Disabled People has established its own research sub-committee and in Canada disabled people have produced their own guidelines on what is acceptable and not acceptable research for disability organisations to be involved in (Woodiwill, 1993).

## RESEARCH PRAXIS OR 'HOW DO WE DO EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH?'

As I indicated earlier, the question of doing emancipatory research is a false one, rather the issue is the role of research in the process of emancipation. Inevitably this means that research can only be judged emancipatory after the event; one cannot 'do' emancipatory research (nor write methodology cookbooks on how to do it), one can only engage as a researcher with those seeking to emancipate themselves.

Because of the difficulties this involves, even the most committed of researchers, echoing Zarb (1992), have settled for doing participatory or action research. The problem with participatory and action approaches is that they have tended to reinforce existing power structures rather than challenge or confront them let alone change them. For example, much action research in education is concerned to allow teachers to do their existing jobs better, rather than confront the oppressive power/knowledge structures that currently constitute the practice of education. In a

provocatively titled essay 'Whatever happened to action research?', one commentator concludes:

'Everybody knows what action research is against. But the important and still unresolved question is: what is it for? (Carr, 1995: 102).

Thus participatory and action approaches, it seems to me, share a limited vision of the possible. To use a game metaphor, these approaches are concerned to allow previously excluded groups to be included in the (research) game as it is whereas emancipatory strategies are concerned about both conceptualising and creating a different game, where no one is excluded in the first place.

Zarb (1992), however, has argued that the distinction between participatory and emancipatory research is a false one in that the latter will only be achieved when the material as well as the social relations of research production are overthrown: in other words when disablist late-capitalism has been replaced by a different kind of society. Until then, participatory research is all we have got, unless we want to return to positivist or interpretive approaches.

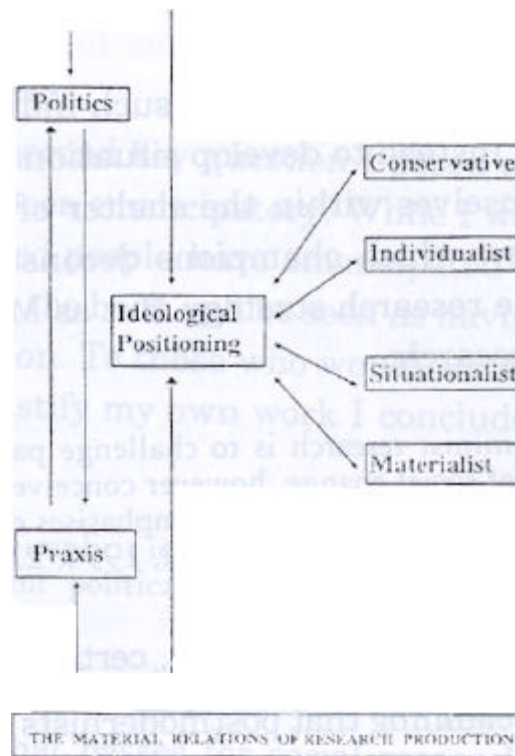
My problem with this approach to research (e.g. Lather, 1987) is that its challenge to existing structures of power is all; it becomes the end in itself and not the means to something better. Participatory and action research is about improving the existing social and material relations of research production; not challenging and ultimately eradicating them. The inevitable result of this, as I pointed out at the beginning, is that we as researchers gain, but mainly at the expense of those whose lives we have researched. While our intentions have been honourable, we remain on the wrong side of the oppressive social and material relations of research production.

#### SHOULD WE GIVE UP RESEARCH ALTOGETHER THEN?

We all, as researchers, have developed personal strategies to cope with two inescapable facts; that we are the main beneficiaries of our own research activities and that we are usually between a rock and a hard place; trapped between the social and material relations of research production with only politics or praxis to help us.

\*\*\*\*\* PICTURE \*\*\*\*\*8

**Diagram 1**



These strategies always are located within particular ideological positions which we as individuals adopt; whether we admit to them or not. There are four main ones, I would suggest, and I shall call these the conservative, individualist, situationist and materialist positions. These are not intended to be pejorative labels and indeed, if I had wished to be polemical I would have called them positivist, renegade, opportunist and radical positions.

The classic recent statement of the conservative position can be found in Hammersley (1995) where he provides an extensive critique of newer approaches to social research before mounting a defence of 'objective research within the liberal university' (see Oliver, 1996a, for a critical review of this position). Bury (1996) adopts a similar position specifically in respect of disability research.

Some like Ray Pahl (1995) take an individualist position and characterise much that passes for sociological research as applying 'increasingly sophisticated methods to what seem increasingly irrelevant topics' (Pahl,

1995: 14-15) and thereafter confines himself to saying 'I am my research instrument', my sample is confined to 'chums of chums' and 'my research - is as much about my own life as it is of others'. Clough takes a similar stand in respect of disability and special needs research:

'An organising concept is that of identity: my identity as a researcher and the identities of the teachers who occupy the ground of the research' (Clough, 1995: 126).

Most researchers however, have not sought such individualistic solutions to their difficulties, seeking instead to develop situationalist responses. Such responses often locate themselves within the shelter of the safe harbour of the postmodernist worldview which champions deconstruction in the here and now as the only possible research strategy. But as Mary Maynard points out in respect of feminist research:

'If one major goal of feminist research is to challenge patriarchal structures and bring about some kind of social change, however conceived, then the postmodern approach, which eschews generalisations and emphasises deconstruction, can only have a limited role in that endeavour' (Maynard, 1994: 22).

Skritic (1995) in his book on special education, certainly does not recognise the limits of deconstruction, claiming that postmodernists can be the architects of reconstruction, saving not only education in America but democracy itself. Shakespeare (1996) makes a more sensible and serious case for situationalist research stressing the need to be independent in certain circumstances but without confusing this with objectivity or neutrality. He concludes:

'I defend the right of researchers to undertake research and develop theory for its own sake' (Shakespeare, 1996: 118).

In my view, the realities of the impact of oppression on the lives of the oppressed make it essential that researchers do not merely resort to individual responses or set sail for the safety of postmodernism. Reflexivity, as I implied earlier inevitably means that, however painful, we must ensure that we examine our own research practice in the context of the current oppressive social and material relations of research production. This reflexivity may lead to uncomfortable conclusions as one Australian educational researcher explains:

'After some years of struggling with education departments in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales to develop inclusive educational programmes I feel like an accessory after the fact, like an accomplice in exclusion' (Slee, 1996: 112).

For, as Len Barton succinctly puts it 'intent is no guarantee of outcome' (Barton, 1996: 6).

## CONCLUSION

Finally then, the second key question I posed earlier needs answering -has my own research been emancipatory? While I would not seek to describe it as such, when disabled people have emancipated themselves (as one day they surely will), I hope the book will be seen as having made a small contribution to that emancipation. To those who would see this as an example of utopian thought used to justify my own work I conclude with a comment from Paul Abberley:

'The Utopias implicit in social theories read themselves back into current analysis and consequent political theorising and (research) practice' (Abberley, 1996: 67).

To those who would seek to dismiss not just my own utopianism but my critique of much that passes for social research as nothing more than the ramblings of someone who can personally afford to say such things -after all I am a professor and I am not interested in gaining big research grants, with or without strings, then the question still remains - which ideological position are you going to admit to adopting?

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