

CHAPTER 14 (In 'Disability Studies: Past Present and Future' edited by Len Barton and Mike Oliver (1997); Leeds: The Disability Press, pp. 239 – 243).

Disability and the Myth of the Independent Researcher

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(First published 1996)

At a recent seminar on the relationship between medical sociology and disability theory I was struck by the response from some non-disabled and disabled academics to a call from a disabled delegate from an organisation of disabled people for guidelines on how to deal with requests from researchers for information and collaboration on disability-related research. Although the enquirer was clearly concerned about the ease with which researchers can easily misrepresent disability, those who responded used the request as an opportunity to put forward their own positions as independent researchers. They were concerned that in disability research, as in research generally, researchers must be free of all external considerations and controls in order to produce valid and unbiased results.

Now, given the history of disability research and the way that some disabled people have argued that it has played a role in the oppression of disabled people (see, for example, Hunt, 1981; Oliver, 1990, 1992; Morris, 1992; Abberley, 1992; Rioux and Bach, 1994), it seems quite understandable to me that disabled people and their organisations should be wary of researchers.

What is more difficult to understand, however, is the way in which some academics continue to argue for the idea of the 'independent researcher' without qualification. In my view this is a strategy which is, at best, native and, at worst, misleading.

Setting aside the apparently never ending and seemingly irreconcilable debates about value freedom, 'objectivity' and appropriate methodologies within social science (see Pawson, 1989; Sayer, 1992), in Britain the myth of the independent researcher has its roots in the university system. Historically, British universities have fulfilled at least two main functions. Besides providing a particular form of advanced education for a certain section of the population, they have provided the necessary facilities for a select group of individuals to conduct research on a whole range of issues unfettered by the mundane demands of everyday life. Although this frequently abused privilege was almost exclusively reserved for the middle and upper classes, most

universities, in accordance with their charitable status [sic] provided some form of support through sponsorship and bursaries for those considered worthy, but without.

Today, this tradition finds expression in postgraduate training programmes and fellowships sponsored by either Government funded research councils, such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), for example, or independent grant-making charities and trusts. Moreover, as long as certain academic standards are adhered to and maintained, these schemes give students and academics a unique opportunity to develop their own interests and ideas.

However, the opportunities for students and researchers to pursue and develop controversial and radical new ideas are limited, and, in my view, diminishing. Due mainly to the sustained critique of the social sciences by successive right-wing governments during the 1980s and early 90s, and the introduction of market forces into the university system, postgraduate training programmes are increasingly geared toward the acquisition of 'generic' rather than specific research skills. Also, established scholars with a good publication record are far more likely to get study leave or a research fellowship than their less illustrious colleagues with few or no publications. Furthermore, the recent erosion of job security within the university system, due mainly to the introduction of short-term contracts for new academic staff, can be seen as an implicit if not explicit incentive for anyone pursuing a career in academia to kow tow to convention.

Moreover, this situation has been exacerbated further by the Higher Education Funding Council's (HEFC) Research Assessment Exercise. Introduced in 1992 to bring the 'benefits' of market forces into the university system, and conducted every four years, the scheme grades university departments from one to five. High scoring departments receive significantly more funding from the HEFC than low scoring ones. Hence, those achieving a grade five, termed 'centres of excellence', have far more resources at their disposal than those deemed grade one or two. For academics, this can mean the difference between good working conditions and relative job security or possible redundancy. The two criteria used in the HEFC grading process are: the number and 'quality' of publications produced by individual academics working in a particular department and the amount of research they do. As a consequence, academic staff are 'encouraged' to produce at least four publications every 4 years, and to do as much research as possible.

The 'quality' of publications is judged by the level of 'scholarship' they exhibit. As a general rule, this means that complex and sophisticated analyses

spread over hundreds of pages carry far more weight than relatively short single issue monographs and research reports. Articles published in 'academic' journals which are edited and refereed by academics, are rated far higher than those which appear in 'popular' magazines and newspapers like the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People's *Coalition* or Scope's *Disability Now*. Thus, the more sophisticated and, in most cases, the more inaccessible an academic's work is the more highly rated it is by the academic community.

In other words, the university system, implicitly if not explicitly, compels academics and researchers to write primarily for other academics and researchers rather than for the general public. Or, to put it another way, and with regard to disability research, university based researchers are far more likely to write for other university based researchers than they are for their research subjects-disabled people.

Furthermore, postgraduate training programmes and research fellowships account for only a relatively small part of a research active university department's research activities. Most do research for external organisations on a subcontract basis. Additionally, the more money they can earn from research contracts, the higher their rating on the HEFC Research Assessment Exercise. With disability research this usually means policy related projects funded by health authorities, social services departments, charities and government departments.

For most of these organisations, disability remains a profoundly medical problem which warrants traditional individually based 'rehabilitative' type solutions that are both politically and professionally expedient. In many cases, these organisations are quite specific about their requirements and impose extensive constraints on what researchers can and cannot actually do. This is particularly evident with reference to government funded projects such as those initiated by the Department of Health (DH), National Health Service (NHS), and the Department of Employment (DE), for example.

Indeed, the main principle governing any Government funding of R&D (Research and Development) is the Rothschild principle, laid down in Cmd 4814 and reiterated in the White Paper 'Realising our potential: A Strategy for Science, Engineering and Technology', 'the customer says what he [sic] wants, the contractor does it, if he [sic] can and the customer pays' (DH, 1994a, p. 1). According to the DH's code of practice, research and development commissioned by the Department should be commensurate with its policy and management aims. Furthermore, to ensure quality, research requirements must be informed by 'expert' advice, projects should follow a 'well defined protocol, be subjected to expert peer review, seek to maximise

value for money, and meet agreed targets' (DH, 1994a, p. 1). A typical contract for DH funded research is about nine pages long and in several key areas is very explicit. Besides covering general arrangements for funding, administration and the staffing of projects they include instructions relating to research methodologies. For example, 'Any questionnaire, or forms used in surveys or both which are to form part of the research shall be submitted in draft to RDD (Research and Development Division)...together with explanatory notes, covering letters to respondents and any other relevant documents' (DH, 1994b, p. 4).

Additionally, if, for some reason, the DH, is unhappy with how the research is being conducted then they have a legal right to terminate it as and when they feel appropriate. At the same time, if the research findings 'are vitiated by methodological problems... or otherwise' (?) (DH, 1994b, p. 7) then they are under no obligation to publish them.

It should also be remembered that the pressure on university-based researchers to subscribe to this type of control is intensified by the commercialisation of social research. There are a number of research institutions, both large and small, which operate on a purely commercial basis tendering for lucrative research contracts.

Clearly, then, university based researchers are not free of external considerations and controls. To suggest otherwise is to misrepresent social research in the 1990s. Furthermore, in my view, to maintain the myth of the 'independent researcher' within the context of disability research-or an, kind of social research, for that matter-can only exacerbate the gulf between researchers and research subjects-the very opposite of what is needed.

If disability research is about researching oppression, and I would argue that it is, then researchers should not be professing 'mythical independence to disabled people, but joining with them in their struggles to confront and overcome this oppression. Researchers should be espousing commitment not value freedom, engagement not objectivity, and solidarity not independence. There is no independent haven or middle ground when researching oppression: academics and researchers can only be with the oppressors or with the oppressed.

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