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## CHAPTER 8

From Critique to Practice: emancipatory disability research

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### **Introduction**

In Britain, the development of a social barriers/model approach to disability (UPIAS 1976; Oliver 1983) was later complemented by the promotion of an emancipatory research paradigm. After its formulation in the early 1990s (Oliver 1992), it quickly exerted a dominant influence in the disability literature. Yet just as the move from a social model to a social theory of disability proved contentious, so there was a gathering debate about how emancipatory ambitions should be translated into empirical field studies. These discussions drew on competing theoretical and social research perspectives, as well as different interpretations of the social model.

The central criticism of 'mainstream' social science by disability theorists was that it ignored or rejected analyses of disability as a form of domination and oppression. Traditional social research was now similarly castigated as disempowering and supportive of an individual model approach. In contrast, emancipatory disability research was not only allied to the social model, it also adopted a radical critique of traditional 'scientific' research claims such as its impartiality and objective processes for validating knowledge. Disability writers stressed instead the participation of disabled people throughout the research process and the significance of this engagement

in their own politicisation and of their experiences in producing knowledge about disability (Barnes and Mercer 1997; Beresford and Evans 1999).

At the same time, the wider policy context was changing: service providers, traditional charities and organisations for disabled people began to proclaim their support for a social model approach, while the government backed measures to involve users in the planning and evaluation of services, including research. However, these initiatives represented a consumerist emphasis in health and social care policy that typically produced a diluted form of user participation. This left a clear divide between mainstream approaches and the user-led model demanded by emancipatory researchers. Disabled people, who followed the social model, considered it was their right to be involved in disability research but also that there were strong epistemological grounds for arguing that this enhanced the quality of research outcomes and service support.

User involvement is not an end in itself but is instead a means of enabling people to assert choices and have control over their daily lives (Lindow and Morris: 1995: 5).

My intention in this chapter is: first, to outline the claims to distinctiveness made in the early 1990s for emancipatory disability research; and second, to explore key issues raised in transferring this blueprint into everyday research practice. I conclude that disability research should allow a more grounded interpretation of challenging social oppression or it will become an 'impossible dream' (Oliver 1997).

### **The emancipatory path**

The most influential contributor to the emancipatory disability research literature in Britain has been Mike Oliver (1992, 1997, 2002). He emulated Jurgen Habermas (1974) in distinguishing three main paradigms in the

history of research: positivist, interpretive and critical-emancipatory. These were aligned with distinctive ways of producing knowledge (instrumental/technical, practical and critical/emancipatory), as well as specific forms of policy-making (engineering/prediction, enlightenment, and struggle). Moreover, each paradigm was associated with a characteristic approach to disability - individual, social and political. The emergence of an emancipatory approach was a response to the perceived shortcomings of the positivist and interpretative paradigms in contesting the social exclusion of disabled people.

More recently, this 'paradigm wars' approach was challenged by social theorists who highlighted differences within, and links between, paradigms (Lincoln and Guba 2000). Additionally, new ways of theorising gained ground, notably postmodernism and poststructuralism. These encompassed novel 'ways of knowing', representation (in experience and text), and styles of research (including its 'quality' or authenticity).

Nevertheless, there remained a broad consensus among 'social modellers' that mainstream social research had 'failed' disabled people:

Disabled people have come to see research as a violation of their experience, as irrelevant to their needs and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life (Oliver 1992:105).

This was bolstered by widespread agreement on the general aims and characteristics of emancipatory disability research (Oliver 1992; Zarb 1992; Stone and Priestley 1996; Barnes 2003). These centred on:

rejecting the individual model of disability and its replacement by a social model approach;

following a partisan approach/ accountable to disabled people/their organisations in their political struggles/ empowerment;

reversing the traditional researcher-researched hierarchy/ social relations of research production, and challenging the material relations of research production; accepting a plurality of research methodologies/methods.

However, criticisms of the early formulations of the social model have been matched by disputes about the implementation of emancipatory disability research in empirical projects.

### **Social model approach**

The orthodoxy has been that the social model of disability provided 'the ontological and epistemological basis for research production' (Priestley 1997: 91). It focused on socially constructed barriers (social oppression).

Emancipatory research is about the systematic demystification of the structures and processes which create disability (Barnes 1992: 122).

However, alternative interpretations of the social model pointed disability research down different paths. Thus, it was claimed that the pre-occupation with the basic divide between disability and impairment ensured that research focused on the structural bases of oppression. Instead, there were calls to widen the ontological gaze to incorporate the feminist maxim that the 'personal is political' and include the experience of impairment (Morris 1992). In response, Vic Finkelstein (1999) re-iterated the traditional UPIAS viewpoint that any such trend would obscure the crucial distinction between disability as a form of social oppression and individual concerns around impairment. He equated social model research with a critical analysis of the 'inner workings of the disabling society' (p. 861), and argued forcefully against it being enmeshed in individual concerns as much as professional or service provider agendas.

In addition, the assumption of a universal/unified standpoint among disabled people was countered by studies of diversity and differences in the experience of oppression, for example, of gender, ethnicity and social class, as well as type of impairment. D/deaf people, people with learning difficulties and mental health system users/survivors all questioned the inclusiveness of the social model. As the notion of a homogeneous category of disabled people with a 'privileged' insight into disability gave way to competing experiences and discourses, the research spotlight shifted to marginalised discourses and hitherto 'silenced' voices (Corker 1999).

A further question mark was placed against the transferability of the social model to different national contexts and cultures. For example, Emma Stone (1997) reported considerable difficulties in conducting emancipatory disability research in China because the social model was viewed as an instrument of western imperialism and at odds with local circumstances.

### ***Partisanship and commitment to political change***

In the 1960s, critical theorists attacked mainstream social science for its defining obsession with objectivity such that entrenched political interests and ways of researching were uncontested. They drew particular inspiration from Paolo Freire (1972) who advocated partisan involvement in emancipatory struggles. Building a bridge between theory and practice was more likely where the researcher's participation in political struggles contributed to raising a social movement's '*capacity for historical action*' (Touraine 1981:145). Such '*conscious partiality*' (Mies 1983) enabled a more flexible approach to theory-building grounded in empirical work that resonated with oppressed people's lived experience of an unequal society.

Hence, a stark choice was outlined for disability researchers: do they wish to join with disabled people and use their expertise and skills in their struggles against

oppression or do they wish to continue to use these skills and expertise in ways in which disabled people find oppressive? (Oliver 1992: 102).

This viewpoint rejected traditional criticism of a partisan approach in the social sciences because it risked a 'rampant subjectivity where one finds only what one is predisposed to look for' (Lather 1991: 52). Nevertheless, some disability writers argued that being partisan should not be equated with following the social model 'orthodoxy':

By insisting on researchers adopting the social model, emancipatory research may restrict the intellectual freedom of the researcher, and their capacity to interpret the worlds and cultures of others (Davis 2000: 193).

A very different concern was that academic researchers worked within a range of personal, professional, and organisational constraints that often clashed with their commitment to challenge the social exclusion of disabled people (Goodley and Moore 2000; Oliver 2002).

Nonetheless, it was generally accepted that disability research should 'explore and identify appropriate avenues for change' (Finkelstein 1999: 862). More ambitiously, twin goals were specified: 'gain' and 'empowerment' (Oliver 1997). Accordingly, Mike Oliver downgraded earlier research in which he was involved – such as *Walking into Darkness* (Oliver et al. 1988) - because of its lack of tangible impact on service provision. However, the reasons why local and national policy makers accept, ignore or reject research findings and recommendations are rarely within the control of the researcher (Maynard 1994). Moreover, research may 'succeed' or 'fail' at several different levels, depending on the criteria employed, and the service location of the different 'stakeholders'.

Thus, 'emancipation' as a research outcome can be

measured in very different ways, as the self-empowerment of disabled people might take several forms: documenting social barriers and oppression, re-evaluating perceptions of disability, and taking political action. Furthermore, empowerment rarely entails a sudden conversion on the road to Damascus, or even a simple progression to social inclusion or 'liberation'. Typically, it is more diffuse, uncertain, and drawn out. This leaves the unsatisfactory prospect that research is judged on its emancipatory effects only long 'after the event' (Oliver 1997: 25). In practice, separating out the impact of specific research projects from wider economic, political and social changes will be an extremely difficult and contentious exercise. A further possibility is that emancipatory research findings are used in unintended ways, perhaps to undermine disabled people's interests. Certainly, user involvement in research has been exploited to provide 'intelligence' for service providers and managers to 'manage' rather than 'empower' disabled people.

This research 'balance sheet' has been largely couched in terms of a stark polarisation between oppressors and oppressed. Nonetheless, in everyday social life, it has sometimes been difficult to agree on this calculation. Oppressors and oppressed were not always easily distinguished, nor were these stable categories across social contexts. Participants did not always agree about their key interests. How should disabled lives be represented, and by whom, when disabled people's voices diverge, or where lay knowledge and analysis is antagonistic to a social model assumption that people with impairments are 'oppressed'? What benefits one group of disabled people might be rejected by others just as disabled people might be implicated in the oppression of other social groups.

In an attempt to demonstrate and reinforce the partisan dimension to disability research, while bracketing evidence of a demonstrable gain, social modellers

stressed the importance of making researchers formally accountable to disabled people (Barnes 2003). The most widely cited exemplar has been the project sponsored by the (then) British Council of Organisations of Disabled People into the social exclusion of disabled people in Britain (Barnes 1991). Its emancipatory credentials rested on its commitment to a social model approach, with control of the project vested in a small advisory group of representatives from organisations of disabled people. However, this was largely based on re-interpreting existing data rather than designing and conducting a 'field study' (Stone and Priestley 1996: 706). Accountability was further highlighted in the importance attached to the dissemination of research findings, particularly in accessible publication formats for disabled people, and more generally to influence policy makers and service providers (Barnes 2003).

Despite these formal checks on partisanship, considerable suspicion endured among disabled people about the 'political loyalties' of non-disabled and sometimes disabled researchers. This echoed Paul Hunt's (1981) denunciation of the 'parasite people'. Undoubtedly, researchers often benefited professionally and materially from their activities (as have those teaching and writing about disability studies). Indeed, it became routine to hear even disabled researchers 'confess' that they were the chief beneficiaries of their work - what Finkelstein (1999: 863) aptly called 'Oliver's gibe'.

### ***Social relations of research production***

Early statements on emancipatory disability research stressed the significance of how researchers positioned themselves with respect to the social and material relations of research production (Oliver 1992; Zarb 1992). Thus, the transformative potential of disability research became dependent on disabled people being 'actively involved in determining the aims, methods and uses of the research' (Zarb 1997: 52). This required a reversal of the

social relations of research production so that researchers:

learn how to put their knowledge and skills at the disposal of their research subjects, for them to use in whatever way they choose (Oliver 1992: 111).

However, full-blown user-control awaited the dismantling of the 'material relations of research production' and ending the restrictions imposed by external funding bodies, service providers and organisations that undertake research, such as universities (Zarb 1992; Oliver 1997). With that proviso, the extent of any transfer of power depended on answers to the following questions:

(i) Who controls what the research will be about and how it will be carried out?

(ii) How far have we come in involving disabled people in the research process?

(iii) What opportunities exist for disabled people to criticise the research and influence future directions?

(iv) What happens to the products of the research? (Zarb 1992: 128).

As an elaboration of this theme, the Wiltshire and Swindon Users' Network suggested a continuum of user involvement in the research process from information provision, consultation, participation, and veto up to (full) control (Evans and Fisher 1999: 108). User-control entailed management of the whole project, including funding, and perhaps acting as researchers as well. Instances of disabled participants assuming full control were rare, but this has been claimed by some groups of mental health survivors (Chamberlain 1988).

In other writings, the aim of 'reversibility' was replaced by a positive collaboration between 'co-researchers and co-subjects' (Reason 1988: 1), with neither 'side' dominating the other (Lloyd et al. 1996). In this process

the research was typified by reflective dialogue, and moving towards jointly agreed understandings, through continuous negotiation – akin to ‘communicative action’ (Habermas 1974).

However, the orthodox tendency in disability studies dismissed participatory research on the grounds that it presumed less than full control by disabled people – even if it was the more realistic option in the current political climate (Zarb 1997). Oliver (1992) simply equated it with playing by the rules of the system and improving organisational efficiency rather than challenging established values or structures. This ignored the several branches to participatory (action) research, and underestimated the,

vital link between knowledge generation, education, collective action and the empowerment of oppressed people (Cocks and Cockram 1995: 31).

Thus, the more radical variants of participatory research included many instructive attempts to explore the processes of ‘collaborative learning’ (Reason 1988; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). These emphasised that researchers should not monopolise knowledge production and that the process of participation was potentially empowering. Attention focused on how lay and academic concepts and theories were integrated, and how researchers responded when ‘lay’ and ‘academic’ accounts differed. In contrast, advocates of emancipatory research too often skated over the processes of analysing and theorising research data and how individual experience was ‘collectivised’ in the face of contrary views or negative audience reactions during the dissemination process (Humphries 1997). A similar ‘oversight’ has been the ways in which power hierarchies within a research team were ‘managed’.

One disciplinary group that embraced ‘participatory’

research was critical ethnography. From this perspective, John Davis (2000) explored the significance of reflexive participation (or exchange of interpretations) in enabling respondents' ideas to shape research design. This entailed practising 'non-authoritarian techniques' (p. 201), with meaningful dialogue between researchers and participants dependent on the researcher bracketing his/her own theoretical preferences, and recognising that disabled participants were 'experts in their own lives' (p. 202). This also required that different perspectives among research participants were properly acknowledged, given concerns about:

The danger of colonization and a silencing of the independent, challenging user voice is ever present (Evans and Fisher 1999: 106).

Not that all disabled people have the time or inclination to take over control of the research production. John Swain (1995) offered a graphic illustration of the difficulties in involving 14-18 year olds at a newly opened college for students with 'special educational needs' in disability research. His experience suggested a readiness to defer to 'research experts', and has been replicated in research with disabled service users:

there was much resistance to the idea that emancipatory research should involve a *reversal* of the social relations of research production (Priestley 1997: 104).

Furthermore, the presumed 'independence' of the researcher might be exploited by the disabled people's organisation to enhance the credibility of its study, most often with service providers. In some instances, this underscored a research relationship built on a 'working partnership towards mutually beneficial outcomes' (Priestley 1997: 104-105).

In Britain, participatory research was boosted by the

support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), a major funder of disability research. It insisted that projects must be located within a social model of disability, include significant and appropriate user involvement, and have a clear potential to improve disabled people's lives. Notable examples have included Jenny Morris' (1993) study of community support for disabled people, and a series of studies of direct payments building on Gerry Zarb and Pamela Nadash's (1994) influential work.

The commitment to user-control raised specific issues for research undertaken with people with learning difficulties (Chappell 2000; Walmsley 2001), but this has produced some of the most imaginative attempts to develop collaborative approaches.

The separation of literature of the social model and literature associated with learning difficulties has created distinct ways of doing research (Chappell et al. 2001: 47). People with learning difficulties have acted as research advisers, interviewers and life historians, as well as leading their own research with some 'external' support (People First 1994; Sample 1996; March et al. 1997; Ward 1997; Ward and Simons 1998; Rodgers 1999; Goodley and Moore 2000; Knox et al. 2000). In these ways, research with people with learning difficulties has moved a considerable distance over the last decade towards their recognition as reliable informants who were the 'best authority on their own lives, experiences, feelings and views' (Stalker 1998: 5).

Nonetheless, some doubts remained (Stalker 1998). Thus, concerns were expressed, even by 'sympathetic' researchers, whether all participants fully understood and agreed with the 'rules of engagement' in disability research:

current models of the consultation and involvement of people

with learning difficulties in issues affecting their lives suggest that the pulls either to the trivial or to the professionally stage-

managed are hard to resist (Riddell et al. 1998: 81-2). The dilemma was how to ensure meaningful participation by people with learning difficulties who have been conditioned into a spectator role by the attitudes of service providers and wider public.

Jan Walmsley (2001) has suggested that participatory research was easier to achieve where the research focus was on improving services rather than data analysis or theory generation. A related issue was the accessibility of the research process and discussions. In the case of people with learning difficulties this entailed being as clear as possible in the use of language, while participants generally might resist theorising lay experience and knowledge. However, these research support issues have received surprisingly little attention.

Greater concern has been expressed at the shortage of disabled researchers (Oliver and Barnes 1997; Zarb 1997). Many barriers must be overcome, particularly the under-representation of disabled people in higher education. In addition, the organisation of disability research has been less than accommodating to individual support needs. The uncertain trajectory of some impairments provided another challenge to project management. A frequent criticism of funding bodies was that they did not recognise that disability research often needed extra time and resources. For example, communication barriers and an inaccessible built environment and transport system often acted as constraints on fieldwork.

The resulting spread of opinion on the role of the researcher in emancipatory research may be illustrated by two very contrasting standpoints. Tom Shakespeare (1997) argued that, 'I don't really care' whether my work is

rated as 'emancipatory research'. He followed his own 'individual and ethical standards, rather than trying to conform to an orthodoxy' (p. 185). While welcoming 'advice and feedback', he did not want 'to be accountable to anyone other than my publisher and my conscience' (p. 186). The roles of activist and academic were clearly separated. In contrast, Vic Finkelstein (1999) warned that, unless radical changes in the social relations of research production were carried through, a new breed of disability research 'expert' would merge that assumed the traditional mantle of 'disabling' professionals.

### **Methodologies and methods**

The early elaboration of emancipatory disability research often conflated 'methodology' (the general approach to research) with 'methods' (specific techniques for data collection, such as surveys or participant observation, processing and analysis). It also treated these as technical or subsidiary matters. Largely because of its determination to ensure that disability research was 'onside' politically, relatively little significance was attached to the choice of methodology in designing disability research (Barnes and Mercer 1997).

Disability researchers have given more attention to the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches. They have mostly followed the emerging qualitative preference in recent social (and particularly feminist) research. This accompanied a dismissal of the quantifying method as positivist, 'pseudo-scientific' and exploitative, that owed much to its use in the widely criticised OPCS disability surveys. Their reliance on postal questionnaires and structured interviews reinforced the expert/lay disabled person divide (Abberley 1992). However, disability researchers have largely ignored debates in 'mainstream' social research about the merits of the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy.

In fact, quantitative research underpinned the 'demonstration' of disabling barriers in Britain and

elsewhere (Barnes 1991, 1992). Moreover, quantitative studies, at least until very recently, have been far more influential than experiential research in persuading policy makers of the social exclusion of disabled people (Barnes and Mercer 1997), just as had been the case with women's oppression (Oakley 2000). Notwithstanding these constraints, few researchers attempted to devise structured interviews and surveys that were 'participant-centred' or encouraged resistance to disabling barriers and attitudes (Kelly et al. 1994; Maynard 1994).

Most often, the qualitative approach was equated with the 'face-to-face' semi-structured interview, or an equivalent focus group, on the grounds that these were located in non-hierarchical relationships and promoted inter-subjectivity. However, there has been little discussion how individual and group interviews compared in the information collected or changed participant understandings. There was an associated emphasis on participant validation, mostly by taking interview data back to respondents for verification of what they said. It was also widely assumed that the friendly relations built up with participants corroborated the quality of interview data.

Attempts to go further and collectivise data analysis (even in a small advisory group) were rare. For example, only two of the thirty key activists who provided in-depth interviews for Campbell and Oliver's (1996) study of disability politics took up the offer to 'validate' interview transcripts or read the draft manuscript. It was candidly admitted that 'we neither had the time, energy or money to make it a wholly collective production' (Oliver 1997: 19). Again, few studies have examined how meanings and interpretations were agreed or how researchers 're-presented' lay participant's views (Shakespeare *et al.* 1996; Vernon 1997; Moore et al. 1998). This contrasts with a considerable feminist literature arguing that choice of methodology really does matter:

We who do empirical research in the name of

emancipatory politics must discover ways to connect our research methodology to our theoretical concerns and political commitments (Lather 1991: 172).

One sign of a changing perspective in recent disability debates has been the developing interest in 'socially situated' knowledge, and the importance of exploring the differences between 'partial knowledges'. Even so, very different views were expressed over claims about the 'privileged' knowledge(s) or experience(s) of disabled people (Corker 1999; Barnes 2003). The notion of different knowledge and experience among disabled people cuts across the distinction between knowledge based on direct experience and more abstract, theoretical formulations (Evans and Fisher 1999). This resonated with a widespread tendency to marginalise lay knowledge in comparison to that of experts or professionals.

The knowledge of disabled people has been dismissed on the basis of their perceived incapacity; that of survivors because of their assumed unreliability and irrationality of their perceptions and understandings and those of people with learning difficulties on the basis of their perceived intellectual deficiencies (Beresford 2000: 495).

In practice, researchers, participants, funding bodies and policy makers prioritised different forms of knowledge, each with its own ontological, epistemological, technical and ethical characteristics and preferences. Hence the significance of asking:

By what means are competing knowledge claims adjudicated and by whom? How are knowledge and mere opinion distinguished? Who is seen to possess knowledge? Who are the gatekeepers in knowledge production and distribution processes? (Stanley 1997).

Traditionally, the criteria for evaluating disability

research diverged across paradigms. In the quantifying approach, the following aspects have been emphasised: internal validity (isomorphism of findings with reality), external validity (generalisability), reliability (in the sense of stability), and objectivity (distanced and neutral observer)... (while those within the interpretive paradigm stress)... the trustworthiness criteria of credibility (paralleling internal validity), transferability (paralleling external validity), dependability (paralleling reliability), and confirmability (paralleling objectivity) (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 114).

These indicated different ways of seeking transparency (for both participants and a wider audience) in how the research process unfolded, from design through data collection, analysis and dissemination (Stanley and Wise 1993; Maynard 1994). Despite this, the application of formal tests of 'quality control' promoted by mainstream research rarely allowed for the specific circumstances of doing research with disabled people, such as supporting communication or confirming shared understandings (Sample 1996; Stalker 1998).

More generally, disability researchers demonstrated little sensitivity to how they might directly and indirectly influence the research process, and if participants deferred to researcher expertise (Lloyd et al. 1996; Davis 2000). The main exception was a presumption about the impact of employing a disabled (rather than non-disabled) person, as researcher. This was illustrated by claims that disabled user interviewers obtained more frank and detailed responses in studies evaluating service provision than professional interviewers (Nicholls 2001; Faulkner and Thomas 2002), and more widely, that:

if a researcher is to empathise with those being researched then it follows that their life history must be as near as possible to that of the people being studied (Barnes 1992: 117).

While a preference for disabled over non-disabled researchers was identified, there was considerable reluctance to extend the matching process, beyond perhaps gender, to include potential influences such as impairment, age, sexuality, ethnicity and social class (Vernon 1997).

The general view has been to ascribe a liminal status to the non-disabled researcher: sometime 'partisan or parasite, partner or oppressor, participant or voyeur' (Humphrey 2000: 77). Nevertheless, some have accepted that non-disabled researchers are capable of producing emancipatory disability research:

I am not convinced that it is necessary to have an impairment in order to produce good qualitative research within the emancipatory model (Barnes 1992: 121).

That accepted, the contrary proposition that disability knowledge might be enhanced by involving a non-disabled researcher (albeit with a social model orientation) because taken-for-granted ideas and practices were more likely to be unpacked has won little support (Humphrey 2000).

Overall, the central message must be that disability researchers should devote more attention to methodological issues; in particular:

how to strike a balance between empirical investigations of embodied and material differences, power relations and inequalities, and critical reflections on how knowledge is produced (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 97).

### **Standpoints and stories**

Emancipatory disability research started out by being grounded in an epistemology that assumed authoritative knowledge can be produced on the social oppression of people with impairments. The aim was to demonstrate the 'real oppression and discrimination that people experience

in their everyday lives' (Oliver 2002: 13). Recent debates within the feminist literature exhibited a wider range of opinions. While feminist 'standpoint' theory offered some obvious similarities, postmodern/poststructuralist theorists, who were attracting growing interest among disability writers, denied that it was possible to agree general criteria for establishing 'truth claims', or even differentiate better or worse accounts of disability.

As an illustration, Sandra Harding (1993) explored ways in which a feminist standpoint epistemology might justify its knowledge claims. She rejected the standard criteria of 'malestream' social research and argued instead for 'strong objectivity'. This included: reflecting critically on the knowledge production process; building research agendas grounded in the experiences of subordinate groups; finding ways to judge some knowledge claims as better than others; acknowledging diversity and contradictions in subordinate groups; recognising that knowledge (about disability) was generated by a historically specific community; and espousing liberatory knowledge. This contrasted with denials from postmodernists (e.g. Lyotard and Baudrillard) and poststructuralists (e.g. Foucault and Derrida) that there were general rules for establishing a relationship between knowledge claims, experience, and social reality. The new theories analysed social research as an enterprise with its own history, norms and power relations (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). This aligned to a postmodern disdain for 'methodolatry', or rejection of general procedures for determining whether knowledge was valid and authoritative.

Foucault (1984) exerted a particular influence with his analyses of different forms of discourse (or ways of specifying what counts as knowledge/power) – rather than their 'truth'. This was exemplified by his study of the historical changes in discourse around 'madness'. The post-structuralist focus on the multiplicity of discourses

(‘truths’ and ‘knowledges’), and studies of the deconstruction of difference, re-invigorated studies of the power of language. Indeed, the postmodern interpretation of personal experience was that while ‘real’ to the individual concerned it was limited and partial rather than generalisable knowledge. This in turn raised the possibility of multiple readings and never-ending deconstructions. For some, explanations of the ‘othering’ of some groups were reduced to a choice between ‘reality determinism’ and ‘discursive determinism’ (Leonard 1997: 11). A more productive option stressed theorising and researching the interface between discourse and the material world (Corker 1999).

The editors of a recent volume on postmodernism and disability, Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (2002), stressed the importance of:

seeing and researching disabled lives as both constrained by social structures and as an active process of production which transforms

social structures’ (p. 15). Post-modern writings claim distinctive theoretical, epistemological and political positions on social reality, the production of knowledge, how the ‘knowing’ disabled person is constituted. However, most of the contributors to their collection devoted little space to spelling out how postmodernism informed their (often very different) approaches to conducting disability research field studies or research discourses.

If there are really no such things as ‘facts’ about the way people are treated, then there is no such thing as discrimination or oppression. Post-modernism is inherently political. It drives the enforced injustices of social inequality into the personal cupboard

of privately experienced suffering (Oakley 2000: 298).

There has been a consensus among postmodernists/poststructuralists that the social model orthodoxy threatened to become an overarching and totalising discourse (Corker and Shakespeare 2002). Yet, for their part, more 'orthodox' social modellers expressed considerable doubts whether a viable alternative was being offered to the methodological approach or political project underpinning emancipatory research.

## **Review**

The emancipatory paradigm promised an innovative approach to doing disability research. This stemmed from its location in the social model of disability, a partisan commitment in challenging the social exclusion of disabled people and a broad accountability to disabled people and their organizations.

However, the bases of emancipatory research have attracted criticism from writers drawing on an increasingly diverse set of theoretical perspectives, while further issues are raised about translating its broad principles into research practice.

Reflecting on a decade's experience of disability research undertaken by, or accountable to, service users and their organisations, two of its early and most vocal exponents have produced contrasting conclusions. Mike Oliver re-iterated his earlier pessimism that it was proving more like an 'impossible dream' than a 'realistic goal' (Oliver 1997, 2002). The lack of policy movement towards promoting social inclusion was mirrored by the continuing pre-eminence of mainstream social research:

From the fetishism on methodology that still haunts the ESRC to government obsession with scientific validity, the positivistic approach to social research continues to dominate its funding (Oliver 2002:3).

Yet from a similar social model vantage point, Colin

Barnes elaborated a more positive case for continuing with emancipatory disability research: when directly linked to disabled people's ongoing struggle for change, doing emancipatory disability research can have a meaningful impact on their empowerment and the policies that affect their lives (Barnes 2003: 14).

This assessment concentrated on its political impact in mobilizing disabled people and challenging social exclusion. At the same time, emancipatory disability research cannot overturn social barriers by itself, although it should aim to contribute to these struggles. Equally, the emancipatory path raises many important methodological issues that should be addressed by disability researchers. In summary, emancipatory disability research must continue to explore disablist views of social reality, and contribute to debates about how this knowledge can be used to overturn the social exclusion of disabled people.

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