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**Background notes for an informal presentation
entitled: 'History: Disability Activism and the Social
Model of Disability, for the student *Disability Action
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History: Disability Activism and the Social Model of Disability

This presentation will focus on the history of disability activism in the UK since the middle of the last century and the emergence of the social model of disability. In doing so it will be divided into four sections:

- 1. History and context**
- 2. the emergence of disability activism**
- 3. the development of the social model and its impact nationally and internationally and**
- 4. disability studies and the role of the academy**

i. History and context

Prior to the 19th century social responses to impairment were complex and ambivalent.

- 1. Ancient world: infanticide**
- 2. Middle ages; witchcraft, evil**
- 3. 1601 Poor Law – Outdoor relief**

Disablement as we understand it today emerged in the 19th century when ancient fears and prejudices became institutionalised into the very fabric of western society.

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1. Urbanisation, Industrialisation, wage labour and the Poor Laws.
2. The emergence of impairment specific charities
3. Medical science and the 'normalisation' of the human body with statistics
4. Eugenics movement and justification for all forms of prejudice.

All of which were to varying degrees prevalent until the end of the second world war. The large numbers of military and civilian casualties prompted the development of social welfare policies which promised change. In the UK examples include:

1. The welfare state – 1944 Disabled person (employment) Act, 1948 national assistance act
2. Growth of 'disability charities – Leonard Cheshire, Spastics Society
3. Medical advances psychotropic drugs
4. Care in the Community.

Discussion

How and in what ways have these developments influenced social responses to disabled people in the 21st century?

ii. Disability Activism

Here disability activism refers to political activity by disabled people. It takes many forms and in the UK can be traced back at least to the 19th century with the emergence of the *National Union of the Blind and Disabled* and the *British Deaf Association* and the marches of the 1930s.

It's important to remember that disability activism is not peculiar to the UK and was evident in many countries across the world and was particularly prevalent following the 'second world war'.

In the UK notable early examples include:

1. the struggles for inmate control in residential institutions such as the Le Court Cheshire Home in the 1950s.
2. The formation of the Disablement Incomes Group (DIG) by two disabled women: Berit Moore and Megan de Boison.
3. A demonstration by disabled people against poverty in Trafalgar Square in 1968.

Due to the colonisation of DIG by professional academics in the late 60s a small group of disabled activists including: Vic Finkelstein, Paul Hunt, Ken

and Maggie Davis and Anne Rae, founded UPIAS in 1974.

UPIAS was especially important it they redefined disablement as a political than a medical problem which could only be resolved by political action led by those who experience disablement: disabled people
See UPIAS: *Policy Statement* (1974) and *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1975).

There followed an unprecedented growth of organisations controlled and run by disabled people and the development of user led services:

1. The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) – Care attendant services,
2. Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People (DCODP) – DIAL UK;
3. Integrated housing schemes (DCODP)
4. Hampshire Coalition of Disabled People (HCIL) Independent Living Schemes
5. Vic Finkelstein was also instrumental with Sian Vesey in the development of Britain's first TV programme devoted exclusively to disability issues *Link* which ran until early 1990s

The turn of the 1970s witnessed

1. The establishment of *Disabled People's International (DPI)* and
2. *The British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (BCODP)*
3. The world's first attempt in 1981 to introduce a law to prohibit discrimination on the ground of disablement – *The Alf Morris Bill* and
4. The first airing of the *Social Model of Disability* by Mike Oliver in J. Campling (1981) *The Handicapped Person: A New Perspective for Social Workers*.

There was a substantial growth of user led organisations in the 1980s and an increasing focus on the need for anti-discrimination legislation (ADL) in the UK.

1. The BCODP had only 7 member organisations at its formation in 1981, its membership had increased to 70 in 1990 and 120 in 1994.
2. From 1985 onwards the BCODP initiated the campaign for ADL. This included research that provided the first quantitative evidence of the extent of institutional discrimination against disabled people in the UK. See, Barnes, 1991: *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination: A case for anti-discrimination legislation*.

3. This led to the acceptance in 1992 that discrimination was a major issue for disabled people.
4. This became the catalyst for a substantial growth in disability activism in the 1990s. A key factor was the formation in 1992 of the *Disability Direct Action Network (DAN)* by Alan Holdsworth and Barbara Lisiki.
5. Disability direct action then became a major feature in the campaign for ADL. Important examples include the national demonstrations against *Telethon* and (1992) and for ADL; both of which attracted over 2000 participants.

Government acceptance of the problem of disability discrimination resulted in the effective takeover of the campaign for ADL by traditional organisations for disabled people led by RADAR (*Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation*) now known as *Disability Rights UK*).

This, coupled with the coming of the DDA, in 1995 precipitated the gradual decline of the BCODP. Thus:

1. Rather than introduce a comprehensive DDA act as promised the incoming labour government set up a committee of disability organisations to address the problem of disability discrimination

2. There followed the setting up in 2000 the government sponsored and largely ineffective *Disability Rights Commission* (DRC).
3. Also in 2000 the BCODP set up the BCODP *National Centre for Independent Living* (NCIL) which became independent in 2002.
4. Declining membership and a lack of direction led to a name change in 2006 to *United Kingdom's Disabled People's Council* (UKDPC).
5. The DDA and DRC were effectively abolished in 2006 and replaced by the Equalities Act and the Equalities Commission.
6. At the turn of the decade UKDPC and NCIL were amalgamated into Disability Rights UK.

At the time of writing there are only two national independent organisations campaigning effectively for disabled people's empowerment: *Disabled People Against the Cuts* (DPAC) and *Shaping Our Lives* (SOL).

Discussion

How might the apparent decline in disability activism be revised in the current economic climate?

iii. The social model of Disability

Since its inception in the 1980s the social model has had a major influence on our understanding of the experience of disablement and finds expression in a number of ways:

a/ Disability Equality Training (DET)

b/ Language – impairment/disability

c/ Definitions of disablement: e.g. *The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*(ICF) – In reality the ‘Socio/psycho/bio model of disability’ not the ‘Bio psycho social model of disability’ as in the UN literature, and

d/ The UN Convention on the Rights of ‘Persons with Disabilities’ – 50 elements covering all aspects of the human experience

d/ The development of Disability Studies

Discussion

How relevant is the social model of disability to the experience of disablement in the 21st century at both the national and international levels?

iv. Disability Studies

The origins of disability studies can be found in the writings of disabled people and their allies. Important early examples include:

Hunt. P. ed. 1966: *Sigma; The Experience of Disability*.

Bowe. F. 1979: *Handicapping America*

Finkelstein. V 1980: *Attitudes and Disabled People*

Shearer. A. 1981: *Disability: Whose Handicap*

Sutherland, A. 1981: *Disabled We Stand*

Oliver, M. 1983: *Social Work and Disabled People*

The establishment in 1986 of the world's first academic journal devoted exclusively to disability issues: *Disability, Handicap and Society* renamed *Disability and Society* in 1992, by Mike Oliver and Len Barton.

Oliver, M. 1990: *The Politics of Disablement*

Barnes, C. 1991: *Disabled People and Discrimination: the case for anti-discrimination*

The term *Disability Studies* did not appear in the UK until 1992 and the setting up of the UG *Introduction to Disability Studies* 30 credit module here in Leeds. The

Disability Studies MA programme followed a year later. The distance learning option came into existence in 1998.

Before this Vic Finkelstein had set up a 10 credit module entitled the *Handicapped Person in the Community* for an OU *Health Studies* course in 1981 and Mike Oliver had a similar course on a Social Workers MA programme at the University of Greenwich.

The important point here is that each of these schemes were set up and taught by disabled people.

Like its two predecessors the programme at Leeds was, from the outset:

- 1/ founded on the social model of disability;**
- 2/ prioritised the work of disabled people**
- 3/ emphasized the importance of the relationship between theory, policy and practice and:**
- 4/ endorsed and promoted the principles of emancipatory disability research**

This resulted in:

- a/ a host of user led research projects (1990 – 2010);**

b/ The organisations of conferences and seminars involving both disabled people and academics (1995 – 2006)

c/ The setting up of the disability press (1996 -);

d/ The disability discussion list (1997 -);

e/ The Disability Archive UK (1999 -)

Discussion

In light of the above and the growth of Disability Studies as an ‘academic’ discipline’, how and in what ways might disabled people and their organisations be involved in the future development of disability studies?

Further Reading.

BARNES, C. Understanding the Social Model of Disability: past, present and future, in N. Watson et al. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, London: Routledge, pp. 12-39, (2012).

OLIVER, M. and BARNES, C. *The New Politics of Disablement*, Tavistock: Palgrave. (2012).

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See also: Disability Archive UK: <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library/> ,

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