

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LIBERATION AND
THE LIBERATION OF SOCIOLOGY

PAPER PRESENTED AT HULL SEMINAR

OCTOBER 1995

Mike Oliver

University of Greenwich

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LIBERATION AND THE LIBERATION OF SOCIOLOGY

In this paper I will argue that much that passes for sociological knowledge is of no use to anyone except sociologists and that if we are to rescue sociology from itself, we must engage in the process of producing sociological knowledge that is both distributed and distributable. If the rescue bid is to be successful, we need to go back to the roots of sociology and rebuild an enterprise which is both critical of what is and visionary about what might be. All this must be located in a sociological discourse which takes public concerns and issues as central to the whole enterprise. Finally, the sociological enterprise must establish a methodology for its modus operandi that is inclusive and liberatory, not exclusive and oppressive.

The emerging sociology of disability will give me the opportunity to develop these concerns further. I shall take as my starting point the distinction that began to emerge at the seminar last year, between what I will call 'alternative paradigm 1' (ap1) and 'alternative paradigm 2' (ap2). In sociological terms ap1 is underpinned by post-modernist theory with its eschewing of metanarratives and its lack of vision while ap2 retains its commitment both to a materialist account of history and its vision of creating a non-oppressive world.

In developing these concerns I shall argue that taking the post-modern route will neither be of use to disabled people in their struggles to liberate ourselves from the chains of our oppression nor will it be of much use in liberating sociology from itself.

Only by taking the materialist route (ap2) will sociology be able to reconstruct itself and in the process, become useful.

Before discussing ap1 and ap2 I need to set my views on the role of knowledge in society, my vision of what sociology should be and my approach to sociological research. These are encapsulated, for discussion purposes, in the following quotes.

(i) THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE

"The transformation of knowledge production is one of the central processes characterising the societies of the advanced, industrialised world. Knowledge production is less and less a self-contained activity. It is neither the science of the universities, nor the technology of industry, to use an older classification for illustrative purposes.

Knowledge production, not only in its theories and models but also in its

methods and techniques, has spread from academia into all those institutions that seek social legitimation through recognisable competence and beyond...Knowledge production is increasing a socially distributed process".

(My underlining)

(Gibbons M, Limoges C, Nowotny H, Schwartzman S, Scott P and Trow M (1994) The New Production of Knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies London Sage Publications)

ii VISION OF SOCIOLOGY

"The drift of sociological theory into social insularity is paralleled by the growing shrillness of public discourse. Sociology must recover its role as public educator. I urge a recentering of sociological theory in public debates and conflicts. Instead of sociological discourses being driven by disciplinary conventions and disputes, theorists should take their problems, themes and language of argumentation from a public world of social and political conflict. Sociologists need to recover the moral impulse of their role, to see themselves less as scientists and more as public educators engaging the issues of the day. I imagine a sociology that can sustain its rich tradition of conceptual and empirical analysis while recovering its public role and authority. If we accept our role as storytellers or social critics, we can revitalise sociology and contribute to the strengthening of democratic public culture".

(Seidman 5 (1994) Contested Knowledge: Social Theory in the Postmodern Era Oxford Blackwell)

(iii) THE NATURE OF RESEARCH

"The emancipatory research paradigm is about the facilitating of a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever level it occurs. Central to the project is a recognition of and confrontation with power which structures the social relations of research production. The importance of the emancipatory paradigm is not attempts it might make to study the other end of existing power relations but attempts it might make to challenge them. however, the development of an emancipatory paradigm is not simply about confrontation with or accommodation to power structures; it is also about the demystification of the ideological structures within which these power relations are located".

(Oliver M (1992) Disability, Handicap and Society Vol 7 No 2)

Sociological theory - post-modernism or political economy?

To facilitate my discussion, I include below a table which has been developed from last years discussion and which appears in my chapter in the forthcoming book (Barton 1996). For the purposes of this discussion, we can ignore the column headed 'Old Paradigm'.

Having provided a diagrammatic summary of the current state of sociology in respect of disability, I want in the remaining sections of this chapter to reflect on my own work in relation to both the old and alternative sociological paradigms. Given the limitations of time and space, I will do this by focusing on theoretical and methodological issues only.

FIGURE 1: OLD AND NEW PARADIGMS

Ways of Understanding	Old Paradigm	Alternative 1 (others)	Alternative 2 (Oliver)
Sociological Theory	(Personal Tragedy)	Socio-Political	Political Economy (Materialist)
	Functionalism	Political Economy (Pluralist)	
	Interactionism	Post-Modernism	
Middle Range Theorising	Adjustment/Loss	Individual Rights	Social Adjustment
	Sick Role	Integration	Inclusion
	Deviance/stigma	Personal empowerment	Collective empowerment
Methodology	Positivist	Participatory	Emancipatory
	Interpretive	Applied research	
		Action research	

The emergence of post-modernism in respect of theorising disability is drawing attention to the important influence of cultural representation in

shaping the experience of disability but, in Shakespeare's work, this appears to be reductionist. Barnes, in the forthcoming book (Barton 1996) suggests that

"He rightly suggests that the cultural roots of disabled people's oppression in western society pre-dates the emergence of capitalism. However.... he implies that all cultures respond to impairment in essentially negative terms. In other words, prejudice against people with impairments is, in one way or another, inevitable and universal".
(Barnes 1995.000)

Barnes then goes on to demonstrate, using historical and anthropological evidence, that this is not the case.

Political economy, at least in its materialist variant, suggests that all phenomena (including social categories) are produced by the economic and social forces of capitalism itself. The forms in which they are produced are ultimately dependent upon their relationship to the economy (Marx 1913). Hence, the category disability is produced in the particular form it appears by these very economic and social forces. Further, it is produced as an economic problem because of changes in the nature of work and the needs of the labour market/within capitalism.

Hence the economy, through both the operation of the labour market and the social organisation of work, plays a key role in producing the category disability and in determining societal responses to disabled people. Further, the oppression that disabled people face is rooted in the economic and social structures of capitalism which themselves produce racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and disablism.

The political economy perspective, therefore, suggests that disabled people are excluded from the workforce not because of their personal or functional limitations (old paradigm), nor simply because of discriminatory attitudes and practices among employers and labour markets (ap1) but because of the way in which work is organised within the capitalist economy itself (ap2)

Methodology - describing, interpreting, understanding or changing the experience of disability?

The central methodological issue concerns the purpose of research and whether this is to describe, interpret, understand or change particular phenomena. As far as disability research is concerned, positivistic and interpretive approaches within the old paradigm have been located within the medical model with its in-built assumptions which see disability as individual pathology. Consequently, most of this research is considered to be at best irrelevant, and at

worst, oppressive (Oliver 1992).

Even where applied or action approaches have been used, they have failed to change the social relations of research production (Oliver 1992), seeing research as a way of informing policy development or improving professional practice. Lacking in these approaches has been the involvement of disabled people in the research process as active participants rather than passive subjects.

The issue that needs to be discussed here is one that concerns the distinction I make between participatory, applied and action research (ap1) and emancipatory research (ap2). To use a game metaphor, it seems to me that the former approaches are concerned to allow previously excluded groups to be included in the 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.

From a slightly different perspective Morrow (Morrow and Brown 1994) makes a similar point.

"The debates about postmodernism have brought to the fore all of the accumulated issues suppressed by the positivist vision of restoring order through science following the collapse of the religious worldview. Given the waning of this totalling modernist vision, we are confronted with its dialectical opposite: infinite fragmentation, difference and particularity as ineluctable features of social life and the foundation limits of social inquiry".
(Morrow and Brown 1994.320)

However, he goes on to make the point that

"The perspective of critical theory involves an attempt to mediate between totalising unification and anarchic fragmentation. The central claim of such a balancing act is that it is our historical understanding of social determination that allows us to envisage alternative worlds".
(Morrow and Brown 1994.320)

These alternative worlds are what Abberley (199G) calls utopias.

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 or postmodernity have 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, of course.

I can live with that as long as participatory research is seen as part of the journey to utopia: for me a society where people with impairments live and flourish alongside everyone else but where disabling barriers and disabling values and attitudes have disappeared. My problem with much postmodernist research (e.g. Lather 1991) is that there is no utopia. The challenge to existing structures of power is all; it becomes the end in itself and not the means to something better.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to begin to outline my own vision of what a liberationist sociology might look like and to suggest that in terms of the sociology of disability, that only a materialist approach (ap2) can achieve such a vision. I entirely accept that I have oversimplified and even misunderstood the postmodernist position herein, but hope that in the seminar, we can clarify and develop these issues further.

Mike Oliver

University of Greenwich 6/9/95

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abberley P (1996) "Work, Utopia and Impairment"¹ in Barton L (Ed)

Barnes C (1996) "Theories of Disability and the Origins of the Oppression of Disabled People in Western Society" in Barton L (Ed)

Barton L (Ed) (1996) Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights London, Longman.

Lather P (1991) Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern London, Routledge

Morrow R with Brown D (1994) Critical Theory and Methodology London, Sage

Oliver M (1992) "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production" Disability, Handicap & Society Vol 7 No 2 pp 101-115

Oliver M (1996) "A Sociology of Disability or a Disabling Sociology" in Barton L (Ed)

Zarb G (1992) "On the Road to Damascus: First steps towards changing the Relations of Research Production" Disability, Handicap & Society. Vol 7 No 2 pp 125-138