

## **"The body line controversy": a new direction for Disability Studies?**

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### **Introduction**

Disability Studies is a theoretical and research approach which derives from the practical political experiences of the disability movement over the last two decades. While the social model of disability represents a paradigm shift within sociology, it draws upon thinking at the grassroots, as exemplified by documents such as UPIAS' Fundamental Principles of Disability. This paper seeks to develop a comparison between Disability Studies and feminist theory, on the basis of an assumed comparison between the disabled people's movement and the women's movement. It contrasts the DS approach with the academic trend known as Sociology of the Body (SOB), and explores the notion of theory in both these areas of sociological investigation. We will conclude by raising some questions about the strengths and weaknesses of DS theorisation, and reasserting the comparison with feminist theory.

### **Socially constructing difference**

Disability Studies, then, puts its emphasis squarely on disability politics. That is disability is viewed as being the product of a disabling society, not the individual pathological body. Being disabled by society is about the twin processes of discrimination [Barnes 1992] and prejudice [Shakespeare 1994a], which restrict individuals with impairment. This is a structural analysis, based on the notion of disabled people as an oppressed minority group, and disablement as a collective experience. Disability is viewed as a problem located within society and the way to reduce disability is to alter the social and physical environment. It closely follows Marxist and feminist paradigms of social relations.

This ground breaking, social constructionist or oppression analysis based on the work of Finkelstein [1980], Oliver [1990] and others has revolutionised the position of disabled people. The idea that disability was the product of social relations proved to be

a critical mobilising factor in the emergence of groups of disabled people [Hasler, 1993] and the growth of a positive disability identity [Shakespeare 1993]. If disability is created by society then society can equally uncreate it.

"Once social barriers to the reintegration of people with physical impairments are removed, the disability itself is eliminated" [Finkelstein 1980:33]

Disability Studies can be compared to the second wave feminism of the 1960's and 1970's. Mike Oliver's book *The Politics of Disablement* [1990] is comparable to pioneering texts of feminism - perhaps not so much Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* as Juliet Mitchell's *Women's Estate* [1971], or Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* [1977]. . In the same way that for many women Greer's book established the agenda, and Mitchell's book illustrated and explained the social inequality of women, so Oliver's book and the social model of disability came to be seen, by many disabled activists, as signalling a new clarity in the understanding of disablement.

Shakespeare [1996] has already discussed the analytical parallels between gender and disability. The term gender was adopted by Ann Oakley [1972] and other second wave feminists to enable the identification of masculinity and femininity as socially constructed roles in contrast to the notion of the female and male body. Similarly the term disability was adopted by Oliver and his colleagues in contrast to the notion of impairment. Both these intellectual moves represent a displacement of difference from the body, hitherto the defining characteristic, and an identification of social and cultural forces as key in the establishment of subordination.

Disability Studies, like second wave feminism, has committed itself to attacking the political nature of biological essentialism and biological determinism.. The impairment dominated approach to disability is characteristic of the medical profession and professions allied to medicine. Cure and rehabilitation are prioritised and the emphasis is placed on changing the individual. Research and research funding is concentrated in these areas with little or no consideration given to environmental or social issues [Oliver 1990]. The body is seen as 'a composite of technical operations and functional capacities' and provided the advice of experts is followed it is possible to alter the individual for the better [Crawford 1994: 1352]. Given this agenda

it is therefore understandable that DS has adopted a more radical approach to the issue and has concentrated on the oppression of disabled people.

Shakespeare [1996] has argued that the theoretical positions associated with social constructionism within DS and early second wave feminism are to be viewed as political strategies primarily, with particular rhetorical benefits and advantages, for example as mobilising devices. This pragmatic and inherently reductionist stance may be less suited to the academic approach to disability than it is to the political arena. Similar arguments have also been adduced in the case of Lesbian and Gay Studies [Vance, 1989]. Shakespeare (unpublished) also argues that there is an inherent confusion between the social model and the social oppression approaches to disability: taking a post-structuralist perspective, he shows the range of theoretical models which may be appropriate to understanding the construction of the disability category.

If Shakespeare's points are accepted, we have to conclude that DS is both shallow and simplistic in its theorisation. While initial formulations may best be seen as heuristic, opportunistic, rhetorical or pragmatic, sociologists may find a theoretical deficit at the heart of this new areas of sociology. While this does not undermine the validity or resonance of the DS approach, it strongly suggests that theoretical and conceptual work is urgently needed, if the agenda of the disability movement is to be translated into an effective sociological challenge.

### **Sociology of the Body**

Meanwhile, within the heartlands of contemporary sociology, another new agenda has developed, driven almost entirely by theoretical exploration, and with no connection to social movements or political initiatives, and only fragile anchoring in empirical research. This new trend is Sociology of the Body.

"What we need is the reframing of the traditional concerns of social theory - order, function, contingency, rationality and conflict could be mentioned - to understand these as categorical projections of embodiment." [Frank, 1990, 160]

Until the appearance of Turner's *The Body and Society* [1984], at least in English speaking countries, sociology, on the whole, denied the importance of physical, physiological and genetic

factors in human social life [Scott and Morgan 1993]. This may in part have been driven by a fear of sociobiology and social Darwinism, but also as an historical result of the development of sociology. Durkhiem, the founding father of the subject, claimed the 'social' (or 'cultural') for sociology and his descendants are still fighting for autonomy from biological imperialism [Hurst and Woolley 1982]. However, human attributes instead of being missing entirely from the discipline, have formed the basis of many social theories according to the 'absent presence' ideas of embodiment of Shilling[1993]. This omission of the body has resulted in a social or cultural essentialism which has produced an unsatisfactory conception of social relations. However, is sociology of the body, in its current guise, a truly embodied sociology and does it, or could it, intersect with DS?

SOB is certainly a trendy and sexy development. It would be hard to disagree with Frank when he says:

"Bodies are in, in academic as well as in popular culture" [Frank 1990, 131]

but what exactly *are* these bodies that are "in"? SOB is predominantly theoretically driven with a reliance on avant-guard theory for its own sake. There is little or no empirical research and indeed those few studies that have attempted to approach this subject empirically warn against reifying existing theories of the body [Watson et al 1995 a & b]. It would appear that a parallel could be drawn between the Emperor's New Clothes and SOB. Its over-reliance on arcane terminology and dense, theoretical writings serve to obscure its meaning. It appears that there is little of originality or interest being produced but its flowery language and current fashionable status make it difficult to criticise. [Shakespeare and Watson 1995]

We have argued elsewhere that SOB appears to be obsessed with the body as a consumer commodity (Falk 1994), rather than as lived experience. Articles on body building, body adornments and body piercing are favourite topics for discussion, and issues of power, physicality and social relations are neglected. It is when SOB talks about disability (it fails to distinguish between disability and impairment) that its real weakness, from a DS perspective, is exposed. For example Shilling writes:

"We all have bodies, but we are not all able to see, hear, feel, speak and move about independently. Having a body is constraining as well as enabling, and people who are old or disabled often feel more constrained by their bodies than do those who are young and able-bodied." [Shilling, 1993, 23]

or Frank:

"The problem for the disabled is to redefine the parameters of experience according to their own embodiment." [Frank, 1990, 143]

Thus, while we have criticised SOB in general for being ungrounded and overly theoretical, with its dependency on post-structuralism and post-modernism, when it comes to disability, SOB pursues a fundamentally physically determinist line. Indeed disabled people, it seems, exist for Bryan Turner only to show that the body can occasionally, really, be limiting [1992, 41] and is not the completely socially constructed artifice that he refers to in his other work.

### **Reintroducing difference**

Feminism, under the influence of Foucault, post-modernism and post-structuralism has, since the mid-80's increasingly moved towards the concept of sexual difference as opposed to sexual politics [Kappeler 1994/95]. Difference feminists argue that women are neither ideologically constructed nor real historical objects, but are both at the same time [Elam 1994]. The dangers of this approach are recognised in accounts which trace the history of reactionary biologism:

"the Body, the most visible difference between men and women, the only one to offer a secure ground for those who seek the permanent, the feminine 'nature' and 'essence,' remains thereby the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies" Trinh Minhha [1989, 100] *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* Indiana University Press Bloomington

However, this return to difference does allow the lived experience of women to be fully expressed:

"...claims which deny the biological characteristics of lived bodies may prove to be self-defeating if it means that women who are pregnant, undergoing in vitro fertilisation, childbirth, taking hormonal contraception, subjected to female circumcision, menstruation or menopausal symptoms are denied acknowledgement of the sheer physicality and inevitable social consequences of these uniquely female physiological experiences, some of which are universal across cultures" [Lupton 1994:25]

Some feminists claim that an approach built purely on social constructionism fails to account for the lived experiences of women, and thus re-opens the way for reactionist ideologies:

'Pure social constructionism of the kind advanced by the left in the 1960's and 1970's did not appeal to the popular common sense, a failure which contributed to its demise. Into the breach stepped the appeals to common sense notions of human nature made by the New Right, appeals which have found a willing audience.....' [Birke 1986;x]

In much the same way the social model of disability has come under attack from a number of mainly feminist, disabled writers [Morris 1991, Crow in press and French 1993].

"We can insist that society disables us by its prejudice and by its failures to meet the needs created by disability, but to deny the personal experience of disability is, in the end, to collude in our oppression." [Morris, 1991,]

These writers do not see impairment as irrelevant or neutral. Crow argues that impairment is a fact of life for many disabled people and it is the presence of an impairment that that is used to justify the oppression that disabled people face.

"We need to focus on disability and impairment; on the external and internal constituents that bring together our experiences. Impairment is about our bodies' ways of working and any implications that holds for our lives. Disability is about the reaction and impact of the outside world on our particular bodies. One cannot be fully understood without attention to the other, because whilst they can exist independently of each other, there are also circumstances where they interact" [Crow, in press]

This represents a departure from the initial constructionism of Disability Studies: while Abberley [1987] did consider the material basis of disability, he argued that impairment itself was socially caused, and thus did not provide a problem for the social model approach to disabled people's experience. Writers such as Crow, Shakespeare and Morris have been less sanguine, and have demanded a re-examination of the role of physical difference within the disability equation.

In much the same way that difference feminists argue that Second Wave feminism does not accord with the lived experiences of women, so Shakespeare has suggested that 'skeptical disabled people refuse to identify with the new politics, because it did not adequately cover their physical experiences of pain, limitation and so forth.' [in press] Taking a similar line to Birke, Shakespeare states that this weakness in the DS approach could be used by statutory authorities to create schism in the Disability Movement and create a backlash against the Social Model. Articles in the popular press at the time of the parliamentary battle over civil rights illustrate this potential danger.

Our position in this paper is that both DS and SOB have failed to do justice to the physical experiences of disabled people. It is the neglect of disabled people's everyday reality, and also the ignoring of the conceptual developments arising out of the disability movement, and Disability Studies (for example notions of the disabling environment, and the social model) that we as disabled people and sociologists find most disturbing. Given this theoretical framework it is therefore hardly surprising that DS and SOB do not intersect.

As we have articulated earlier, we feel that DS must, in some way embrace the body if it is to continue to play a role in the development of the disabled peoples movement. Oliver [1985] has argued that whilst he recognises there may be a need for what he has termed a 'social model of impairment' it is of no consequence to DS. We would contend that this is an area that is far too important to be left in the hands of medical sociologists and their like. We are not arguing that the body is real or essential, but that what we need is an understanding of the experience of disabled people in terms of the body, rather than the disembodied Cartesian subject. Disability Studies cannot afford to lose sight of the body, we cannot disregard the body anymore than we can just inhabit it [Elam 1994]. Decisions made about disabled people are often set by a physiological agenda. This can lead to

discrimination in the workplace, in housing and in health care provision.

Impairment has been ignored by DS in favour of the structural analysis of the social model. As French [1993:24] has pointed out if disabled people start to talk about difference there is a feeling that there might be a weakening of the disability movement. [The Phillips quote could possibly fit in here] This has led to a neglect of the everyday reality of disabled people's experience [Shakespeare in press]. It is precisely this experience of the impaired body that we as disabled sociologists initially turned to SOB to find but, as outlined above, have failed. We would contend that there are vital and interesting things happening to people and their bodies which could form the basis of a truly embodied sociology and, if approached from a theoretical perspective that avoided the dangers of biological determinism and the reductionism of social construction could form the basis of a more complete theoretical and political strategy [Shakespeare and Watson 1995].

This approach draws on the work of Peter Freund [1988] and has been empirically developed by Shirley Prendegast in her work on menarche and mensuration in school children. Freund by, refusing to take either a social constructionist or biological approach to the issue of embodiment emphasises that a strict dichotomy does not exist.

"Thus to understand the social construction of bodies is to understand how differences that are often taken to be 'natural' are in fact socially constructed in nature. Even if we accept these differences as 'intrinsic' and 'natural', this should not preclude recognising the role that social construction plays in amplifying them' [1988:855]

## **Impairment**

There are obviously dangers to disabled people and the disabled movement if this analysis is adopted. Crucially we are not arguing that impairments cause disability and share the emphasis of Oliver and his colleagues on social barriers. However we maintain that the acceptance of impairment and embodiment is a necessary development for DS and can only increase its relevance to the everyday lives of disabled people. The Social Model of disability could be read so as to suggest that an impairment is not itself already social (indeed our analysis based

on a social and physical dichotomy could also be criticised along the same lines). As Derrida, Wittgenstein and others have argued, all access to nature is structured by language. Just as feminists, influenced by post-structuralism, are moving away from the crude dichotomy implied by the sex/gender distinction [Fuss], so we would seek to avoid any approach which failed to consider the social nature of impairment.

Shakespeare [1995] has previously drawn attention to the denial of physicality in general for the non-disabled population. Indeed empirical research carried out in Scotland in three independent studies points out that while individuals acknowledge a prescribed version of an 'ideal body' in everyday practice they resist or find no personal meaning in such an ideal [Watson et al 1995 a & b ]. As Crawford puts it:

"The body is not only a symbolic field for the reproduction of dominant values and conceptions; it is also the site for resistance to and transformations of these systems of meaning. Cultural meanings are not only shared or given; they are fragmented and contested" [Crawford 1984:95]

We are following the argument of Zola and others that impairment is ubiquitous, that is disabled people cannot be distinguished from non-disabled people on the grounds of their impairment because both groups experience impairment and limitation. What we are suggesting is a normalisation of impairment. If the ubiquity of impairment is accepted then such an approach would enable us to ascertain how people who are not described as disabled maintain their bodies as unproblematic. This suggestion is in line with the classic arguments of Dubos, who considered the idea of "perfect health" to be a mirage, and unattainable dream, and also the work of Antonovsky. We have previously termed this an ethnography of physicality [Shakespeare and Watson 1995]. Essentially we are arguing for a lay perspective on the body, in an attempt to identify what Connell has called 'the body as used or the body-I-am' [1987, 83]. As sociologists we may expect such an approach to yield data pertaining to macro-issues such as class, race, physicality and gender. However Wright, in an ethnography of a Scottish town suggests that the everyday world of individuals is more immediate:

"it is striking that the things which most concern people in Cauldmoss on a daily basis were, in terms of mainstream

sociological theory, generally considered trivia....for instance the cleanliness of childrens clothes, the relative expense of wedding presents, or personal reputation in the village. this was the stuff of status distinctions. Factors deemed to be of sociological importance....occupation, class, voting behaviour, were usually experienced by villagers as the inevitable parameters of their condition, and therefore rather futile to dwell on. Within these bounds they led their lives, exercised by issues that were subject to their influence" [Wight 1993:7]

Culture, structure and people's embodied experiences are not static, they change over time and reflect the contingent and variable nature of our lives[Watson et al 1995a]. Any theory therefore needs to be dynamic. It must also be contextualised. Only by adopting such an approach will it be possible to develop a clear theory which is not overdeterministic. By approaching impairment in such a manner, from the lay perspective we will be able to theorise impairment from the 'bottom up' . As Starabinski has commented 'The most fruitful generalisations are those arising from a fairly precise study of limited topics' (1989).

## **Conclusion**

However, we recognise that the suggestions made in this paper may also be problematic, in terms of the disability movement. While the social model can be criticised for being reductionist, it is accessible and rhetorically potent. Using feminist theory, and any post-structuralist theory, runs the risk of making Disability Studies more abstract, and less relevant to the lives of ordinary disabled people. We may be encountering the horns of a dilemma: accessibility versus adequacy. Certainly, a body of work such as *Sociology of the Body* is not only not engaged, it is also not immediately comprehensible to most people, and we would criticise it for this. And the parallel with feminism which have established also provides a dangerous precedent: as feminist theory has developed, and particularly with the elaboration of cultural feminism, so the relevance of feminism to ordinary women has decreased, and the political impact of feminist thought has lessened. This may be a product of setback and defeat, as Perry Anderson has elsewhere argued in the case of Marxist thought.

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