CHAPTER 6

Disabled Students in Higher Education: a reflection on research strategies and findings

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Introduction
This chapter has two central concerns. First, findings are presented from an ESRC-funded project investigating the impact of widening access policies for disabled students in higher education. Secondly, it seeks to develop a critique of the strategies employed in the research, drawing on recent theoretical developments in the field of disability studies. Whereas disability studies, like early feminist research, operated with a relatively simple concept of disability as a unitary category, recent theorising has conceptualised identity as subjective, complex and multi-dimensional. We explore some of the implications of these ideas for our own research, and consider whether the use of categories, such as social class and disability, may be justified on the grounds that they may be used to audit social divisions.

Theorising disability: recent developments

A key goal of early social model theory was to clarify understandings of disability and impairment with a view to facilitating the political development of the disability movement. At the heart of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) definition, was the idea of disability as a social relational construct:

> The disadvantage or social restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have [impairment] and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities (Oliver 1996: 22).

   Reviewing the development of a body of work associated with the social model of disability, Thomas (2004) suggested that considerable

progress has been made in amassing evidence on barriers to social inclusion in the public spheres of education, employment, housing, health and welfare services, recreation, media and cultural representation, legislation and so forth (Barnes 1991; Riddell and Banks 2001). Slower progress, however, has been made in documenting barriers in less public aspects of life such as familial and sexual attachments, reproduction, parenting and childcare (exceptions are Shakespeare et al. 1996; Thomas 1998, 1999). In addition, theoretical work on disability as a social relational phenomenon is also relatively under-developed, although Finkelstein (1980) and Oliver (1990) have explored the rise of capitalism and the exclusion of disabled people, whilst Thomas (1999), Morris (1996) and Crow (1996) have commented on the intersections of gender and disability.

Recently, new challenges have been mounted by post-modern and post-structuralist writers, who critiqued the taken-for-granted distinction between disabled and non-disabled people (Corker and Shakespeare 2002; Corker 2003). We shall consider our own work in the light of these criticisms, questioning whether it is possible to research social justice issues without adopting categorical and unitary notions of concepts such as disability. In the following sections, we consider research strategies which have been used to investigate participation in higher education and the way in which our work articulates with such approaches.

Strategies for researching access to higher education
Educational research in the post-war period was informed by the political arithmetic tradition. The establishment of the welfare state prompted researchers to focus their efforts on investigating the extent to which it was succeeding in its goal of creating a more equal society. To undertake this research, ways had to be found of measuring social class, and father's occupation was used as a proxy indicator. Whilst such measures could only be regarded as rough approximations, their use in a range of studies led to their reification. For example, Glass (1954) reported that from 1928 to 1947, 8.9 per cent of all boys from non-manual backgrounds entered university compared to 1.4 per cent of all boys from manual backgrounds. The provision of full fees in 1960 along with the post-Robbins expansion of higher education led to a rise of 50 per cent in university entrance between 1963 and 1968, and by 1989 the number of university entrants had risen by 150 per cent. However, researchers continued to document the persistence of social class inequality in rates of participation by students from particular social groups (Blackburn and Jarman 1993; Egerton and Halsey 1993; Tinklin and Raffe 1999).

Research on rates of participation fed into policy developments on access to higher education by 'under-represented groups'. The Robbins Committee (DES 1963) was followed thirty years later by the Dearing and Garrick Reports (NCIHE 1997a, 1997b). Government documents on lifelong learning (DfEE 1998, 1999; Scottish Executive 1999) called for wider access for students from socially disadvantaged groups, supported by funding council initiatives (HEFCE 1998; SHEFC 1998). Social class remained the main focus of analysis, with gender, ethnicity and gender attracting rather less attention. HEFCE began publishing performance indicators on the participation of under-represented groups in 1998, focusing on participation of students from different social backgrounds and ages, 'efficiency' measured by the proportion of students completing a course and research output. From 2002, performance indicators in relation to disabled students and employment outcomes were published. The performance indicators do not cover gender and they only address ethnicity in relation to employment outcomes (HEFCE 2002). Primacy continues to be attached to measures of inclusion related to social class; information is published on pupils from state schools or colleges, low-participation neighbourhoods and social classes IIIM, IV and V. The disability indicator is based on the number of students receiving the Disabled Students Allowance. The Funding Councils make additional premium payments to institutions based on social class and disability indicators. The benchmarks published in relation to each indicator are based on the performance of other comparable institutions in the sector and are intended to signal to institutions whether they are performing better or worse than expected.

Critiques of the categorical approach

It is evident that research and policy on access to higher education have been informed by the categorical or neo-realist approach criticised so extensively by post-modern writers, although some researchers have adopted a much more reflexive and critical approach. For example, Archer (2003), whilst working with traditional conceptualisations of social class, provided an excellent critique of the way in which such measures are developed and deployed. She questioned the accuracy and validity of the measures of social class employed by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which underpin the performance indicators developed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). For example, she noted that all those who are economically inactive are classified as 'other', and in certain parts of the UK the number thus classified may be as high as per cent of the population. The categories were defined with men rather than women in mind, and do not

accommodate easily families where mother and father have different occupations. In addition, as the service sector expands, more jobs are likely to be classified as IIINM, but in terms of substance, pay and degree of autonomy, these may differ little from jobs in the old manufacturing sectors. Furthermore, the categories are based on the assumption that the young person retains the social class of their family until they have an independent job. However, with the collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s, there has increasingly been a delay in the young person having an independent occupational location. The category assigned to them on the basis of their father's occupation may therefore have little subjective validity.

Similar criticisms of accuracy and meaningfulness have been made in relation to the measurement of ethnicity (Modood and Acland 1998) and disability (Riddell and Banks 2001). Indeed, categories used to measure disability may fly in the face of social model thinking. For example, in order to assess participation in higher education by disabled students, UCAS forms invite students to allocate themselves to one of the following categories: dyslexia, unseen disability, blind/partially sighted, deaf/hard of hearing, wheelchair user/mobility impaired, personal care support, mental health difficulties, multiple disabilities, other disability. Whilst these categories attempt to characterise an individual in relation to their impairment, recent writing in disability studies (Priestley 2001; Riddell and Watson 2003) underlines the wide range of identity positions held by disabled people, which are influenced but not determined by their impairment, generational and cultural locations.

Opponents of categorisation, drawing on the work of theorists such as Williams (1961, 1977) and Bourdieu (1990), maintain that social class, disability, gender and ethnicity should be seen as negotiated and fluid identities. In addition, categorical data, employed as a tool of managerialist culture, are criticised by those opposed to the growth of the 'audit society' (Power 1997). However, categorical data may also be used in pursuit of social justice goals (Scottish Executive 2000), and monitoring of institutional performance against equality indicators is promoted by the Equality Commissions and Government Social Inclusion Units. A number of innovative studies of access to higher education have adopted multiple strategies, using fixed categories to analyse statistical patterns of participation, whilst also exploring the way in which particular groups of students negotiate their identities within particular institutional contexts (Archer 2003). Our research on access to higher education by disabled students attempted to adopt this eclectic approach, and in the following sections we present and critique our

strategies and findings.

The research project
The data reported in this chapter are drawn from the ESRC funded project *Disabled Students and Multiple Policy Innovations in Higher Education* (R000239069), conducted by researchers at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh between 2001 and 2003. The research consists of three main elements: (i) analysis of statistical information from the Higher Education Statistics Agency; (ii) a questionnaire survey administered to all universities and HEIs in England and Scotland; (iii) case studies of 56 students in eight universities and HEIs, four in England and four in Scotland. The institutions selected reflected sectoral diversity, and included pre-92 universities (ancient, red-brick and plate-glass), post-92 universities and HEIs. Within each institution, we invited disabled students to participate in the research and the group of students we worked with reflected diversity in terms of gender, nature of impairment, social location and age. The student case studies were conducted by means of interviews with the student, lecturers, the disabled student's adviser and a senior manager. In addition, researchers met each student in a range of settings on three separate occasions over a period of a week.

Participation by disabled students over time and by type of impairment
A key question was whether the proportion of disabled students in higher education was increasing or decreasing over time. Table 1 suggests that a modest increase has taken place since 1995/6. On the other hand, the change might simply reflect an increased willingness to disclose an impairment. Table 2 reveals some interesting changes in relation to the impairment category in which students place themselves. Dyslexic students in 1999-2000 had become the biggest group, making up a third of the total. There has also been an increase in students disclosing a mental health problem, and a decrease in hidden impairment category. Those with personal care support needs continue to be the smallest group, accounting for only 0.3 per cent of the total.

Table 1:
Percentage of disabled students in HE, 1995-6 and 1999-2000

%	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9 1999/00
First degree	3.7	4.4	4.7	4.9 4.8

Other undergraduate	3	2.9	3.3	3.4 3.5
Postgraduate	1.7	2	2.4	2.6 2.9

Table 2:
First years known to have a disability by type of impairment, **1995-6, 1999-200**0

%	1995/6	1999/00
Dyslexia	17.9	32.7
Unseen disability	48.6	29.7
Blind/partially sighted	3.9	3.5
Deaf/hard of hearing	7.1	5.8
Wheelchair user/ mobility impaired	4.9	4.4
Personal care support	0.2	0.3
Mental health difficulties	1.8	3.3
Multiple disabilities	3.6	7.3
Other disability	11.9	13.0
Total first years	448199	525140
Total known to have a disability	15754	22290

In each impairment category, there were significant associations between gender and impairment, and these differences are apparent in each impairment category. In relation to some impairments, the gender gap is particularly marked. For example, two thirds of dyslexic students in post92 universities are male. Whilst Tables 1 and 2 suggest clear trends, these may reflect 'real' changes in the nature of the disabled student population in HEIs, or in the social acceptability of disclosing particular types of impairment and adopting particular disability identities.

Participation of disabled students in higher education by social class and ethnicity
We also wished to explore the relationship between various aspects of the social identity of individuals in particular institutions. Information is requested on the UCAS form about the occupation of the applicant's parent/guardian or, where entrants are aged 21 or over, the occupation of the person contributing the highest income to the household. This information is then coded by HESA into a social class grouping using the OPCS 1990 standard occupational classification, with the student classified on the basis of their parent's occupation. In practice, this

information was missing for 66.3 per cent of students and analysis should therefore be treated with caution.

Despite the potential problems posed by student's reluctance to reveal their parents' occupational status, some interesting patterns emerged. In old universities, there were no marked differences in participation of disabled and non-disabled students by social class. In new universities, disabled students were slightly more likely to have come from the more advantaged end of the spectrum than non-disabled students (Figure 1). Overall, the data pointed to the high level of social stratification which characterises British higher education. In England, social classes I, II and IIINM account for about two thirds of the population but 80 per cent of students in pre-92 and 67 per cent of students in post-92 universities. In Scotland, which prides itself on its more egalitarian tradition (Paterson 1997), 78 per cent of students in pre-92 universities and 67 per cent of students in post-92 universities were from I, II and IIINM. The social class background of disabled students (81.5 per cent in English pre-92 universities and 79 per cent in Scottish pre-92 universities) was virtually identical. It has been suggested that widening participation in HE by disabled students will have a general democratising effect on the sector. However, these figures indicate that the composition of the population of disabled students was, if anything, slightly more socially advantaged than non-disabled students in particular sectors.

Information on ethnicity was available for over 92 per cent of the undergraduates in the dataset. It was not possible to break students down into all the ethnic groupings in Scotland, because the numbers were too small for analysis (Figure 2). However, a broad comparison of white and non-white students revealed that disabled students were significantly (p<.001) less likely to come from minority ethnic groups than students with no known disability. This was true in all sectors except for HEIs in Scotland. Overall, there were more non-white students (both disabled and non-disabled) in English institutions than in Scottish ones, with the percentage of non-white students ranging from 5.8 per cent to 19.3 per cent in England, compared with 1.7 per cent to 4.1 per cent in Scotland. These figures again suggest that there are no grounds for believing that including more disabled students in higher education necessarily challenges wider social inequalities. Preece (1999) reported that forty per cent of minority ethnic students were located in London, predominantly in new universities. In both England and Scotland, a significantly (p<.001) higher proportion of disabled students in pre-92 universities were white. Thus, whilst social class stratification among disabled students mirrored that of the wider population, stratification

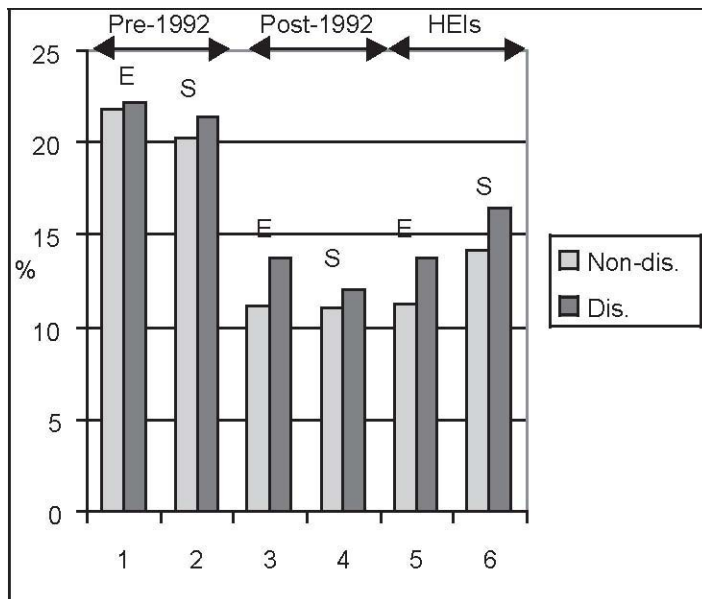along lines of 'race' among disabled students was even more marked than among the wider population.

Figure 1:
Percentage of undergraduates from social class I
by sector and country

To summarise, taking these categories at face value, the inclusion of disabled students in higher education tends to reinforce rather than challenge existing patterns of social stratification. The social class profile of disabled students mirrors that of non-disabled students in different types of institution in England and Scotland, with a disproportionate number of middle class disabled students in the more prestigious pre-92 universities. In terms of other social factors, disabled students are more likely than other students to be white males aged between 19-24 years. This is related to the fact that the largest group of disabled students are dyslexic and these are likely to be male, white and middle class. This suggests that there may be many disabled students from less socially advantaged backgrounds who are currently not being included in higher education. Given that relatively socially advantaged disabled students are admitted to higher education, there still appear to be some inequalities in terms of the level of degree classification they obtain, which in England is lower than their non-disabled counterparts and in Scotland is more spread.
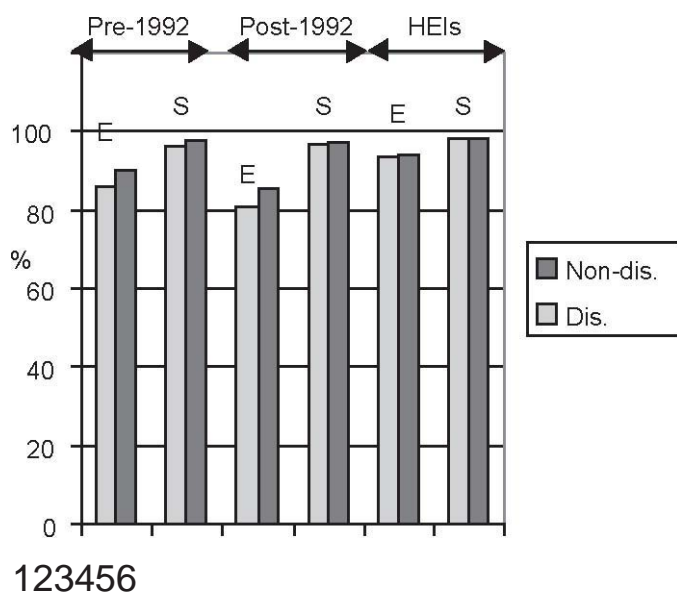
Figure 2:
Percentage of undergraduates who are white by sector and country

There are three key points to be made about these data. First, data which appear to be relatively 'hard' become far more problematic when the provisional and relative nature of categories is recognised. This is particularly the case in relation to social class, where information is only available for a minority of students. Secondly, it is impossible to understand the extent to which disabled students are included without taking into account a number of aspects of their social location. Institutions with a particular social class and ethnicity profile appear to recruit disabled students who reflect the predominant characteristics of that institution. Considering disability in isolation from other social characteristics of students may give the impression that a higher degree of social inclusion is being achieved than is actually the case. Thirdly, given the association between social class, ethnicity and disability, it is evident that the category of disability may be too simplistic to capture the experience of disabled students. Disabled students may not be defined by others or define themselves in relation to their impairment. They may also be categorised by social class, ethnicity, gender and the nature of their impairment. Indeed, the analysis presented above raises the possibility that disability may not be the over-riding category. In order to understand the negotiated identities of disabled students, we discussed their experiences and observed them in a range of situations. Brief cameos of four students are presented below.

Morag

Morag, was a second year student studying Classics and Scottish History at an elite pre-92 Scottish University. She had attended a Scottish independent girls' school where her dyslexia was identified by the Dyslexia Institute and a psychological assessment at a university. She had chosen the University because the Wider Access Co-ordinator had responded positively to a phone call and invited her in for discussion. Also, her father had been a student at the University. She had been made a slightly lower offer than usual because of her dyslexia. She received the equipment element of DSA which was used to buy a PC and specialist software. Mostly she did not need any special adjustments, although she did get extra time in exams. Although exams were marked anonymously, once the code had been broken, special allowances might be made for poor spelling. However, Morag felt that lecturers did not understand the full extent of her difficulties, for instance, she was restricted in her use of vocabulary because of a fear of misspelling words. Her life at University was fairly quiet. She lived in a women's hall of residence and socialised mainly with the other students there. However, a quiet town-based social life was normal for many students and Morag therefore did not feel different. She felt that Christianity rather than disability was an important part of her identity.

Lewis

Lewis was in his first year at a Scottish University studying History. He had left his local comprehensive school to work as an apprentice fitter and turner. After six years undertaking 'heavy work', including a spell in a restaurant which left him 'hacked off', he decided to go to University and enrolled for an Access course at the local FE college. One University was 'on the doorstep so it seemed straightforward to come here.' However, just before he was due to start, Lewis was involved in a serious accident that left him with major head injuries. The University Disability Service provided a very high level of support, ensuring that assessments were conducted quickly, a DSA claim was made and note-takers engaged. Lewis was provided with a small laptop computer and note-takers for each lecture. Overall, he felt that the University had given him excellent support. He described himself as 'generally quite dull' and his life at university as 'quite boring'.

Fellow students were described thus:

these people are all very clever people, you know what I mean.

Which makes them seem a lot older than 18. Especially since

they are all the same, you know.

They were contrasted with people from the small town where he grew up and still returned to:

It's fine when I go home. I still see some people I knew ten years ago, they know what happened to me...they make allowances for it anyway.

Despite receiving excellent support, Lewis felt alienated from the University. In addition to his head injury, which he recognised had caused him major physical and psychological problems, other factors such as age and social class may have had an effect. However, despite his difficulties with balance and walking, Lewis did not see himself as disabled.

Peter
Peter was in the second year of an undergraduate degree at a post-92, inner city Scottish University studying for a professional qualification in social work. He had a visual impairment from birth and required text to be magnified. He also used voice-to-text software. Peter had received little support in his mainstream school and left with no qualifications and feeling 'disenchanted'. Subsequently, he attended his local FE college but decided to stay at home to look after his new-born daughter. He later undertook an Access Course and obtained a place at a local university which would allow him to continue to undertake childcare. Peter found the academic and administrative support provided was inadequate. The Students Awards Agency for Scotland took a long time to process his claim and the University would not fund support before the cheque had arrived. Lecture and seminar notes were required in advance but these were rarely forthcoming and were often of poor quality. Peter described himself as a highly politicised disabled person who was willing to argue for his rights:
I probably do think of myself as a disabled person, but disabled in the sense that I'm disabled by society, not by my physical disability. So it's more a kind of political definition I would give. I don't tend to see myself disabled in the negative sense. But I think a lot of it has come from my education.
At this point in his life, however, Peter did not have much time to engage actively in university politics, focusing his energies on completing his course and being a good parent to his daughter.

Terry

Terry was a 27 year old student studying for an MSc in Deaf Studies at an elite pre-92 English University. His father was a physician and he described the family as 'middle class' and 'not rich but privileged'. At the time of the research, Terry was an active member of the deaf community both within and outwith the university. He was diagnosed as having hearing difficulties at a relatively yearly age, but was not allowed to learn sign language or connect with the deaf community:

when I was growing up I was kind of kept separate from the deaf community. I remember growing up and asking if I could learn sign language and kind of being refused time and time again. I remember at the age of 12 and 14 and 16 kind of being insistent about learning sign language and again, as I said, being refused.

On leaving school, Terry went to a University in London, where he learned sign language. After a brief period in another university, he moved to his current institution. He was extremely active in university politics, representing disabled students in the students' union and also for the NUS. He had also founded a new union for deaf students.

Some of Terry's lecturers could use BSL, but others required sign language interpreters and these were not always available. As a result, Terry had taken advice from two solicitors and was planning to bring a case against the university under DDA Part 4, on the grounds that it had failed to make reasonable adjustments. Despite this very high level of involvement, Terry still felt isolated:

I feel cut off from university life as though I can't really participate socially within groups. I can't go along to open lectures…here at the Centre for Deaf Studies it's easy because there are other deaf students and within the corridors there are academics I can talk to but other students in other departments won't necessarily be able to do that.

Cathy

Cathy, a mature student, was in the fourth year of a degree in Sociology and Politics degree at a pre-92 Scottish University where 85% of students are from state schools or colleges. Cathy had a physical impairment, acquired as an adult, which meant that she had difficulty walking and sometimes used a wheelchair. Cathy was from a working class background and left school with no qualifications. After travelling, she spent two years at college before entering university. Cathy's perception was that her status as a single parent with money problems was more salient than having an impairment. She complained, for example, that a course in women's studies was held from 3-5pm which

made it inaccessible to those with childcare responsibilities:

I can't get back to get my little girl after school. Now I pay excessively for the childcare service. Classes that are late I can't do….I've had to see lecturers more about asking for extensions and they are never very forthcoming and it's got nothing to do with disability. I've got a child, I get her to bed, I sleep with her from 8-10 and I set an alarm and get up and work till two at night…I don't believe in the assessment system. I know it's meant to be fair assessment and everyone's got the same chance, but that's rubbish. Some of my friends are out working every hour God will send. Others, their parents pay for everything.

Cathy perceived there to be a difference in identity and awareness between those born with an impairment and people like her who acquired it later in life:

From what I've seen of my friends who are born disabled, they are very comfortable with it and call me a guest sometimes. 'Oh, here's the guest'. And my uncomfortableness is wrong. Well, not wrong …it's the whole thing of becoming disabled once you have developed as a person or been born disabled…If there was a group, I'm sure that you would find that most people had been born disabled in it.

She particularly objected to being grouped into a special area at venues such as theatres with other disabled people:

Sometimes when you get out somewhere because it's accessible, you almost feel like it's "Freakers' Ball". It's horrible.

These necessarily brief and selective extracts indicate the range of identities and experiences of higher education among the 'case study' participants. The nature of a person's impairment appeared to have a significant impact on their identity and experience, and it was possible to distinguish between impairment and disability effects. For example, a deaf PhD student was uncertain about whether to pursue an academic career because of difficulties she encountered participating in and facilitating seminars. She preferred to lip read, but found it difficult having to teach a large number of students who changed every year. The disabling effects of society were evident, and arrangements might well have been made to allow her to teach fewer students in more consistent groups. However, she was doubtful that, even with such adjustments, teaching was what she wanted to do.

Students with dyslexia also did not identify closely with students with other impairments, but were prepared to use the term 'disabled student' strategically to obtain IT equipment and examination allowances. A number of students with significant impairments, on the other hand, expended much energy in trying to 'pass' as 'normal', underlining the strong normalising pressures in school and higher education. The permanency, visibility, and age at which an impairment is acquired also seemed to have a major impact on individuals' identity. Overall, students who had a view of disability as a political and social relational category were in the minority. It was also evident that students were aware of a range of identities informing their experience and sense of self, and prioritised different aspects of their identity at different times in their life and for a range of strategic purposes.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by discussing calls from within disability studies to move away from binary conceptions of disability in order to develop more subtle understandings of its social relational aspects. Subsequently we discussed post-war approaches to researching access to education, which traditionally employed categorical data. However, there has been a rejection of binary understandings of social class, gender, and ethnicity, with a new emphasis on exploring the subjective meaning of these divisions within everyday contexts (Reay 1998; Ball 2003). Whilst social theorists have increasingly drawn attention to the inadequacy of binary social divisions, equality policies and legislation emphasise the need for institutions to monitor their performance by employing fixed categories to evaluate participation rates of under-represented groups. Even when researchers employ qualitative methods to investigate cultural experiences of particular groups, categorical conceptualisations of disability, social class, gender or ethnicity generally underpin their analyses. The research discussed here attempted to combine an analysis of patterns of participation in higher education with an investigation of the way in which individuals negotiated their position in higher education by deploying a range of cultural identities. We believe that the combination of these two research strategies provided insights into the complexity of patterns of participation and negotiated identities.

The quantitative data reveal the problematic data of the labels employed, not just in relation to disability but also in relation to social class, 'race' and gender. They also indicate that the term disability cannot be seen as a master category. Wider patterns of social stratification in HE were reflected in the social composition of disabled

students in particular universities. Middle class white students occupied a disproportionate share of places in pre-92 universities, and this pattern prevailed in relation to the distribution of disabled students in different institutions. Despite the fact that disabled students are a highly selected (and self-selected) group, they still have poorer degree classifications than other students, although their completion rates are better. This suggests that disability works in complex ways with a range of other variables to structure the experiences of those identified as disabled. These inter-relationships between variables have important implications for policy and practice, and could not have been accessed without the use of categorical data.

The qualitative data presented here illuminate the way in which students negotiate identity within the constraints of their individual biographies and social locations. Like the quantitative data, the case studies suggest that impairment and disability are major factors in students' lives, but are not necessarily always the defining aspect. Unsurprisingly, the social context of particular institutions plays a major part in determining the experience of impairment and disability. In the 1980s, feminists expended a great deal of energy in trying to decide whether patriarchy or capitalism had primacy in structuring women's lives. The question remained unanswered, possibly because it was not the right one to ask in the first place. The arguments made by Anne Phillips (1999) in *Which Equalities Matter?* are probably more helpful in emphasising that individuals accentuate and privilege particular aspects of identity in order to attain political and strategic goals. This may be useful in thinking through the relationship between disability and other 'equality' categories.

Finally, despite the fragility of the categories employed in the modernist project of tracking inequalities over time, we believe that this is a worthwhile endeavour, so long as it is backed up by careful attempts to place these findings in the context of lived experience.

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