Sociology as a Critical and Emancipatory Discipline: Building a Community of Scholars in Sociology and Disability Studies

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Theme of this Paper The Sociology of Disability: Developing a Strong Research Agenda

This paper will reject upon the achievements to date in disability studies, not simply the character and diversity of this work, but the balance of theoretical and empirical work as constitutive elements in this field Wright-Mills' classic formulation detailing the dangers of grand theory and abstracted empiricism will be used as a guide to progress in the development of disability studies. Here, it will be argued that disability studies will be most likely to prosper where it attempts to inform a solid empirical base with critical emancipatory theory. By implication, such progress may be encumbered by too much emphasis on theory or empirics, at the expense of a healthy dialogue between the two. It will be argued that few studies fall clearly into these two extremes of abstracted empiricism or grand theory, but that such terms provide a heuristic mechanism through which we can view available studies This paper will not restrict itself to studies which are unambiguously sociological for two reasons: firstly, that disability studies is a diverse and eclectic discipline; here, the broader term 'social research' captures this diversity. Secondly, that in order to understand the research agenda within the sociology of disability it is important to capture wider contributions to disability studies and how these may have served, to encourage sociological critiques. Whilst this paper accepts a measured input into disability studies from other academic disciplines, it suggests that any emancipatory research must, of necessity be grounded in sociological assumptions and practices.

This paper is designed to stimulate debate by reflecting upon the development of and future prospects for research in disability' "studies and the impact this might have on the perception of disability studies in sociology more generally. By tracing the antecedents of disability studies and by relating these to broader developments in sociology some predictions can be made as to its likely trajectory. However, it is important not to view these developments as inevitable as the conscious direction of the sociology of disability will facilitate and shape this future. This paper will offer a tentative blueprint for the future of disability studies, one which attempts to develop its curricular strengths through both theory and empirical research This, it will be argued, would add further credibility to the sociology of disability whilst also getting closer to the goal of emancipatory research
Wright-Mills' seminal discussion 0£ a sociological imagination and of

'intellectual craftsmanship' (Wright-Mills 1959) makes a number of points which could guide the future shape of sociology in disability studies. Firstly, that of the need to unearth and record the connections between biography and history. Related to disabled people this can be seen as a very clear attempt to link 'voices' with broader theorised structures. Of importance, as Wright-Mills notes:

> 'Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (Wright-Mills, 1959, p9)

Here, the specific experiences and self perceptions of disabled people are only explicable in terms of the socio-historic Context and structures in which such experiences and perceptions are reported. Here, the work of Finkelstein (1980), Gleeson (1991) and Oliver (1990) have provided their own contributions to such a broad social, historical, and economic context or lens through which to view the middle range structures of dependency (Oliver 1990) and economic marginalisation Finkelstein,1980; Gleeson, 1991). These works are of major significance in terms of Wright~Mills formulation in attempting to link what had previously been viewed primarily in terms of individualised biographical accounts, for example Jack Ashley's 'Journey into Silence' or seemingly theoretical quantitative studies (Harris, 1971; Martin and White 1988; Martin, Meltzer and White 1988). The latter can be viewed as failing to address both the biographical and the socio-historical facets of the social life, whilst approximating closely to his notion of abstracted empiricism.

It is my contention that whilst the works of Finkelstein and Oliver had a pivotal and itself historical role in theorising the historical and social context and structuring of disablement, they have provided a starting point rather than an end point in terms of Wright-Mills formulation.   Although Oliver himself makes explicit the need to avoid grand theory and abstracted empiricism a la Wright-Mills (Oliver, 1990, p1) both he and Finkelstein have achieved only half of Wright-Mills prescription of linking history with biography, (by which we can assume economic, political and cultural Structures and constraints). This is not t6 argue in a churlish way that those seminal contributions were not enough, a kind of shooting of the theoretical messenger, but that such reformulation have been bold and necessary correctives to the individual tragedy model of disablement by substituting it with an historical materialist analysis. The value of the history-biography couplet is its insistence on avoiding theory which overlooks or obscures the subtlety of the lived experience, which itself relies on empirical and pain staking research into how individual biography (in this instance disabled people's experiences and perceptions) can be understood in social, economic and historical terms.
Despite the force and emancipatory potential of Finkelstein and Oliver[1]'s work,

it is important firstly that their historical assumptions are tested further through such methods as archive or oral history research, and that historical materialist assumptions of their work are aired in an atmosphere of biographical exploration. Such research would allow scope for an examination of the relative contributions of industrialism and capitalism in the lives of disabled people. Comparative analysis with the former eastern bloc would reveal the similarities and divergences of these social, historical and economic contexts. *A failure to link biography and history seriously risks a resort to grand theoretical tradition* The work of French (French in Swain et al 1993), Morris (1991) and Stuart *(Stuart* in Swain et al, 1993; Stuart in Disability, Handicap and Society, 1992) have helped set the scene for a theoretical debate around both the epistemology of disablement and the importance of patriarchal and 'racial' factors in the disabling process; these will ensure that theoretical debate continues to develop a momentum of its own. A more pressing concern here is the need for an open discussion around the assumed importance of theory and empirical work. It is my Contention that disability studies has not fully escaped the implicit hierarchy of credibility that attaches to theory and empirics respectively. Although there is inadequate space to discuss the broader issue of such a suggested hierarchy of
credibility, it is worth noting that within disability studies the majority of work which attempts to engage with the 'voices' of disabled people has been performed by women or researchers with a feminist consciousness ('would include Barnes' work in this category). Conversely, the theoretical bedrock of disability studies is predorninantly a male activity one imbued with a political consciousness.

It is not my contention that any one of these forms of 'consciousness' are to be valued higher than the other, but that they have been, contra Wright-Mills, assumed to be separate enterprises, ones which are (if sub consciously) viewed as part of a hierarchy of credibility, and that empirical research is something performed by others and used to inform theoreticians, and subsequently the disability movement. This dichotomy is unlikely to be susceptible to research, and it would be inappropriate to squander time on this enterprise, however I believe that the only real way of attaining Wright-Mills biography-history couplet is to encourage the awareness and dissolution of this hierarchy. By doing this disability sociologists are more likely to avoid the perils of abstracted empiricism or grand theory.

The historical study of disability (read impairment) was one firmly rooted in the medical and individual model of disability. However, whilst making such assumptions about the nature of disability, no explicit theoretical offerings were made to support such assertions.

Here, empirical evidence often seemed to 'speak for itself' (Anderson and Clarke, L 1982; Clark and Hurst, 1989; Harris, 1971; Hurst 1984; Jowett 1982'. Kuh, Lawrence, Trip and Creber 1988; Kettle 1979; Locker, 1983; Thomas, Bax and Smyth 1989) with the strength of these images carrying their own implicit messages about the nature of physical difference and disablement. This is not to accept that no theoretical assumptions lie behind such research, indeed most are clearly linked to an administrative or medical model of disablement, but that these ideas are often embedded in and taken for granted by the empirical work itself Here too, some research is more forthright about its theoretical premises although remaining under theorised (Miller and Gwynne, 1972) or fails to grasp fully the models with which it is working and presents confused messages about the nature of disability even though rooted in a sociological tradition (Blaxter 1976; Edgerton 1967; Goffman 1963)

It is the contention of this paper that such reliance upon under theorised and/or disabling empirical accounts of disability has led some disability authors to treat the 'enterprise' of empirical research and its assertions with some suspicion, and conversely to treat theoretical work as the primary activity in disability studies. This is not to argue that such theoretical contributions have not been valuable; much has been epoch making Finkelstein, 1980; McKnight in Brechin, 1981; Oliver, 1990). The upshot is a reluctance to enter empirical work, even where it may provide some of the most powerful emancipatory outcomes. Although emancipatory research has at its core the notion of the including and prioritising the 'voices' of disabled people, this acknowledgement has not been fully reflected in the ongoing research of many disability authors. Whilst the academic division of labour suggests a need for concentration on particular aspects of disability studies, the commitment to emancipatory research has to be translated into research which can best achieve emancipatory aims.

Another result of the down grading of empirical work is that the strength of disability studies, generally in term of influencing more medical/administrative model thinkers (itself an emancipatory activity) and specifically in raising the profile of disability studies within sociology (short of earning a place in the Giddens/Haralambos hall of fame) may have been underdeveloped. This would seem to be borne out by the broad dichotomy of many books into 'theory' (Barton, 1989; Oliver, 1990; Stuart in Swain et al 1993) and policy books (Barnes 1991; Lonsdale, 1990). However, this broad *assertion* masks the relative success of some writers to meld together theory and empirics; that is, in some areas of disability studies this process has developed more fruitfully.

Here, work in the field of 'special[1] education (Booth, Swami, Masterton and

Potts 1992) day centre provision (Barnes 1990) and independent living (Morris 1993) provide a number of excellent syntheses of theoretical insights with original research and policy analysis

The historical and political clamour by disabled people to establish their position as an oppressed group (Driedger, 1989) and the fundamental theoretical revaluation this demanded (Abberley$_1$ 1987; Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1984, 1986, 1990; UPIAS, 1976) has inevitably led to a full blown and diametric response to the individual tragedy model and its administrative and medical sequelae. This in a similar vein to second wave feminism has produced work which is written for maximum impact. This is unquestionably important and has had a key role to play in awakening consciousness of both disabled people and wider society to the merits of social barriers model of disability. However it is important that such confidence in the model does not stifle theoretical developments, and equally that it does not assume a priori, the detailed experience of disablement, nor the nature of social barriers and how they are changing. There is much evidence of such a priori theorising, theory which in its attempt to correct earlier medical model ideas masks and occasionally misrepresents these subtleties of the lived experiences of disabled people. Examples of the dangers of grand theory (we are all perhaps guilty of this at some time) are evident in the works of Finkelstein and Oliver, this reflects their' role in establishing disability studies and of debunking the medical administrative models. Oliver when discussing the dependency created and perpetuated by 'special schooling' notes;

> But it is not only the intrusion of medicine into education which creates dependency …..[ ]….. They (disabled people) also see themselves as pitiful because they are socialised into accepting disability as a personal tragedy to them ...[ ]…. teachers, like other professionals, also hold this view of disability (Oliver, 1990, p92)

Whilst this assertion about dependence is not inaccurate, as dependency is an all too common experience for disabled children, the all embracing and bleak imagery presented tends to ignore the dynamics and practices which do not create this form of dependency (Cole, 1989; Humphries and Gordon, 1992, p46). As a respondent notes in my own research:
The trouble with my (special) education was that the teachers made me too independent, this meant that I never had to rely on others, which it seems to me is a natural part of growing up. However ,as a blind girl I had to have an amount of self reliance to survive (Roulstone, forthcoming)

Whilst this quote still presents special education as something which is not ideal for disabled people, the nuanced experience of this person needs to be

understood fully. If mainstreaming is to be successful. Incidentally, what this quote also Shows quite clearly is the disabled person's own idea of independence which straddles both an administrative and a social barriers approach. It thus displays the complex factors at work in a disabling society What this quote also does is to caution disability writers against any over optimistic assessment of mainstreaming, and that a parents choice not to mainstream may be a pragmatic decision based on a personal evaluation of the nature of mainstream opportunities rather than the result of' false consciousness' Here the discovery of the 'voices' of disabled people and their allies, friends and family may not provide answers that are immediately palatable to social model theorists.

Another example, again taken from Mike Oliver's 'Politics of Disablement' (1990) is his useful discussion of new technology and its impact on disabled people, one which should caution us against a priori judgements, is his discussion of the disabling use of new technology. Whilst accepting that some positive benefits may accrue from new technology, he states:

A start in this direction has been made by recognising that the mentality which allows technology to be used for evil purposes is the same mentality which facilitates the oppression (and indeed the creation) of disabled people. (Oliver, 1990, p127)

The dangers of relying primarily on theoretical assumptions about new technology is that the assumed dominance of capitalist imperatives and militaristic and medical uses of new technology are seen as key bases of judgements about new technology. The empirical work that exists suggests that new technology has massive potential (much of which has already been realised). Here Oliver conflates new technology with the facilitation process and medical /we1fare dominance in the prescription of new technology, and the reality that some disabled people do not receive new technology when they desire it, whilst some disabled people receive it when they never asked for it (Zola in Oliver 1990, p125). Research is beginning to make clear that many disabled people would want more new technology to enable them, whilst provision is inadequate or inappropriate, This process of acquisition risks being hampered by an over reliance on theoretical perspectives not grounded in empirical research (See Ashok et a', 1985; Hawkridge and Vincent, 1985; Rajan, 1985; Roulstone in Swain et a').

There is clear evidence that new technology can provide more enabling domestic, employment and educational environments where the facilitation

process is propitious and where its involves disabled people. A recognition of this can only come through research which explores disabled peoples own voices around the experience of new technologies. Evidence also seems to suggest that many disabled people who report the environmental benefits of new technology often realise these benefits serendipitously, i.e., not in a planned way Roulstone, forthcoming). Empirical research not only provides evidence which refutes any straightforward economic determinism, but which also raises the issue to a position where it may be included in any anti discrimination legislation.

The purpose of these two examples is to illustrate the dangers of veering towards grand theory in the sociology of disability studies. This is not to argue for less theory, but that it should not be dominant, and that it should not over stretch the empirical evidence on which it claims to be based. Nor does this mean that attempts to bring new theoretical projects to disability studies should be avoided, such ideas are already evident in the shift towards post modernist theories of society and in attempts to construct a theory of oppression that can include disabled black people and disabled women (Lonsdale, 1990; Morris, 1989, 1991; Stuart in Swain et al, 1993)

Although theory and empirics do come together in disability studies, such a synthesis is rare or is the product of diverse contributions to a reader collection which brigs together theoretical with research articles (of which Booth et al is a good example). A survey of publications in disability studies would suggest that two major points:

1).   That the explicit evidence of sociological ideas and precepts features in surprisingly few publications in disability studies.

2).   That where sociology does feature the melding of theory and original research is more likely to be evident in under-graduate, post-graduate and post doctoral work (often unpublished) than in the form of established academic publications. Although clearly a small number are eventually translated from the former to the latter (Barnes, 1990).

Put succinctly, the sociological imagination has not been exercised that extensively in empirical terms. What is needed is a more conscious exploration of just how sociologically grounded theory can be used to inform large tracts of unexplored research. This would have the following positive effects:

1).   Of enhancing the research base that sociologists have within disability studies.

2).   Would ensure that sociologists were not perceived as either the grand theorists of disability studies, or as simply the intellectual interpreter/filters of empirical work performed by charities, rehabilitation writers, government sponsored research bodies (OPCS; SCPR; Employment Department)

3).   That the profile of disability studies within sociology will be raised by such a cross fertilisation of theoretical and research activity. It is difficult for example to envisage mainstream sociology acknowledging a sociology of disability where its foundations rest on such diverse constituent elements. It is perhaps for this reason that no single publication has been produced with the title: A Sociology of Disability. Here Mike Oliver's choice of a 'Politics of Disablement' (Oliver, 1990) is instructive; and it would not be inconceivable to suggest a title such as 'Disability: A Policy Exploration'. These each suggest the dilemma and promise of disability for sociologists.

The notion that more links should be made between theory and empirical work carries with it the suggestion that areas which have so far received little sociological attention would be ideal for such linkages. For example further and higher education; disabled people's experiences of health, welfare and employment professionals; the detailed historical position of disabled workers in early industrial society; the employment and unemployment experiences of people with impairments in capitalist societies; the experiences of disabled people in the third and former second world: all of these areas have been under researched, whilst the theoretical frameworks with which to understand these are rapidly becoming available. The question of emancipatory research, a research philosophy which is explicit about its aims in disabled people's lives has to both reflect the most appropriate theoretical perspectives but also has to do justice to these via detailed empirical work. To date the fear of empirical research has developed in parallel to a growing belief in the importance in emancipatory research using the 'voices' of disabled people themselves. Viewed in this light such intellectual inconsistencies can only be explained by a wholesale and historical antipathy towards empirical research.

Logically, any real attempt to tap the voices of disabled people has to be achieved through rigorous empirical research, research that is conscious of the need to translate these 'voices' into a growing sociological literature, one which expands on the depth and breadth of available studies.

Here the position envisioned is one where verbatim accounts of disabled people's experiences feature much more frequently in the literature, where sociological insights lubricate and inform this material and does not 'drive' it.

Such a commitment to these 'voices' would ensure that the diversity of impairment, disability and dependency relations be explored. I predict that this will lead to groups such as older disabled people and black disabled people being more fully represented in the sociology of disability; it might also open up the possibility of more discussion of the interface between impairment and disability.

Implicit in these ideas is the notion that whilst much recent disability theory has been invaluable in changing ideas about disablement, theory and a tendency towards theoretical activity in sociology not only leaves the gap between non sociological empirical research and theory intact, but that theory can very easily serve to obscure the voices of disabled people where they are presented as a priori assertions and where they effectively stop off any empirical corroboration.

Although perhaps an unpopular notion, a dialogue with and a study of the areas traditionally in the province of educationalists, clinicians, para-medical workers and policy writers will not only ensure that sociology itself is seen to have a key role to play ion interpreting the lives of disabled people, but that specific dialogue can provide hard evidence with which to confront mainstream assumptions. This then calls not simply for more empirical work in these areas, but a change in philosophy which encourages dialogue, however painful between sociologists and researchers in the medical, educational and welfare fields.

The call for both more links with empirical work and more actual empirical studies is not the same as arguing for less theory, as Kurt Lewin the American field theorist famously asserted: 'there is nothing more practical than a theory' (Lewin 1951). The theoretical basis of the sociology of disability should continue to develop and take account of the importance of other oppressions in contemporary society. Whilst this paper does not aim to address the question of theory in any detail, it is important to acknowledge how the interplay between theory and original research, and that a more sophisticated repertoire of disability theory will both facilitate and be facilitated by such empirical research. Indeed the emphasis within emancipatory research on disabled research, this itself would militate against any simple theory driven (rather than theory informed) research which might underplay such 'voices'. The request then is that disability sociologists should not assume that the continued development of sociological theory and its relation to disability will of itself provide the general framework for the content of research any more than political or policy solutions are driven by political manifestos.

C Wright-Mills receives the last words as he provides a set of guiding principles

by which sociology in general and disability studies in particular might develop. Wright-Mills suggested that the sociological imagination had to: 1) Establish what are the structures of given society or social formation? 2) What are the specific historical factors shaping these structures. By this we could assume the statutory, political, economic and cultural factors 3) 'What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society....? We could use some sociological licence here and establish how disabling processes are shaped by gender, 'race' and religion? To synthesise these ideas Wright-Mills formulated the following to capture the nature of a fully fledged sociological imagination:

> 'It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self' (Wright-Mills, 1959, p13)

The value of such connections can help establish the distinctions between 'public issues' and 'private troubles'. It was Anne Borsay who first popularised this distinction within disability studies (1986), whilst this was a valuable contribution to the field the question remains: how many writers within disability Studies continue to view public and private experiences as distinct. It is easy to view Wright-Mills formulation as suggesting that we should devote our time to simply defining the public (or social) character of the social life, however, as his biography and history couplet suggest the only true sociology is that which is relational and which captures the connections between these two levels of existence and analysis.

I would argue that the sociology of disablement has much still to learn from Wright-Mills early formulation; a more comprehensive use of his sociological precepts will assist both in sociological enquiry itself, whilst raising the profile of disability studies and disabled people more generally in academic thought.

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