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Who is "Able" to Know About Our Without-Ability? Rethinking the Politics of Disability Research

Kay Ivcko
Independent Scholar
James Brighton
Canterbury Christ Church University
Andrew J. Gibson
Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University

Introduction: The Politics of Disability Research

Contemporary social disability studies emerged from the activism of disabled people who in very complex and challenging ways contested ableist social structures, but also the ways in which research was (and is) hegemonic that expressions. At the forefront of the challenge in the UK were Paul Hunt (Morris and Priestley, 1996), Vic Finkelstein (Finkelstein and Stuart-Cassell, 1992) and the Disabled People's Direct Action Group (Hunt, 1981). Collectively, the ideas and practical ideas of these early Better and Course-to-have-been communications have moved on to inform a wide range of research and practice, including the Disabled People's Movement (Campbell and Oliver, 1996), Impairment Focused Research Organisations (IFRO), Inclusion Britain and Disability Studies Research Programmes (DSRP). However, Better and Disability Studies Research Programmes (DSRP) have been criticised for being "Able" to know about our Without-Ability, and for being "able" to know about our Without-Ability. Contemporary disability studies scholars and practitioners are disabled people and referential wider social projections about disability. For example, Miller (2017) and Shakespeare (2018) have argued that the Disabled People's Movement (DPM) and Better and Disability Studies research from a social model lens (e.g. Disabling Society, Enabling Society) (Hunt 1981: 10) 1980s and Oliver's (1990) deposition of disabled people throughout their work was discriminatory and inflammatory, positioning disabled people as "victims" and "scroungers" (Oliver, 1990). Shakespeare (2018) argues that such "disability activism (Minkman) "is not possible and now can be an essential, functioning, and non-functionally unidentified or constructed as well. The real possibilities are those the Better and Disorder who grow thy feeling on "Able" and "able" (Shakespeare, 2018). Shakespeare (2018) argues that the Better and Disorder who grow thy feeling on "able" and "able" (Shakespeare, 2018) highlights the politics of disorders and unconformity, specifically disability studies research, and the ableism that underpins it. Shakespeare (2018) argues that:

> Disability studies emerged from the activism of disabled people who challenged ableist social structures, and who in many ways were the "experts" on disability. Disability studies has been criticised for being too "able" to know about our Without-Ability, and for being "able" to know about our Without-Ability. Critics argue that disabled people with had negative experiences of participating in research, and that research has been a site of oppression and discrimination. Disabled people have been positioned as passive participants and inequality and exploitation has been the norm. Contemporary disability studies scholars and practitioners are disabled people and referential wider social projections about disability. For example, Miller (2017) and Shakespeare (2018) have argued that the Disabled People's Movement (DPM) and Better and Disability Studies research from a social model lens (e.g. Disabling Society, Enabling Society) (Hunt 1981: 10) 1980s and Oliver's (1990) deposition of disabled people throughout their work was discriminatory and inflammatory, positioning disabled people as "victims" and "scroungers" (Oliver, 1990). Shakespeare (2018) argues that such "disability activism (Minkman) "is not possible and now can be an essential, functioning, and non-functionally unidentified or constructed as well. The real possibilities are those the Better and Disorder who grow thy feeling on "able" and "able" (Shakespeare, 2018). Shakespeare (2018) argues that the Better and Disorder who grow thy feeling on "able" and "able" (Shakespeare, 2018) highlights the politics of disorders and unconformity, specifically disability studies research, and the ableism that underpins it. Shakespeare (2018) argues that:
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research, the experiential and political differences within categories of identity, and the problems of static binary positioning. We attempted to resolve these in a politics of *dys*-identification as an alternative to either normative identity politics or the wholesale dismissal of them.

Firstly, then, sharing a simplistically defined disability identity does not necessarily prefigure a shared politics, identification or experience. Nor does it guarantee either the politics, quality or outcome of the project. Secondly, it is important to pay attention to the differences between disabled people, in terms of how we are categorised and how we self-identify. Highlighting difference is key to recognising and respecting a diverse range of voices and experiences, as well as challenging problematic homogenous categorisations. Indeed, disabled people are often attuned to the significance of differences between us – and not just as Paul and Nasia illustrated (in Kay's research, above), but also in terms of categories of privilege such as class, sexuality, gender and "race" which break up rather than unify disability identities. Fractures in identification such as these may position Kay as much more politically at odds with research participants who are elite disabled athletes than James, despite her being a wheelchair-user and him identifying as able-bodied.

Thirdly, simplistic identity politics reinforce binaries of ablebodied and disabled and risk shoring up the essentialist norms which the medical model emerges from and reproduces. At the same time, the problems of identity do not detract from the need for a position around which to establish a collective politics. Political solidarity is integral to the ethos and practice of disability studies research and activism, as well as movements for change more broadly. For us, a politics of dys-identification enables us to avoid the traps of simplistic and essentialist identity politics while maintaining a clear political rallying point for our work.

Overall, our analysis of *dys*-identification has attempted to shift some of the conventional structures and assumptions within disability research. Rather than legitimacy being affiliated to particular body types/capacities, legitimacy is earned/evidenced through non-disabling practices and identifications. These practices and identifications challenge us all, regardless of our bodily, sensory or "mental" configurations and require us all to develop collective politics and practices which challenge the disabling world and engender social change. Overall then, the experiences, identities and politics we have explored in this paper have led to a new politicised relation to ourselves, one another and disability research. We have found this to be both politically salient and productively fruitful, and we hope it will generate further exploration and discussion.

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Endnotes

1. Some researchers in disability studies have challenged this framework for example on the basis that disability researchers should also be able to critique the disability movement rather than solely being accountable to it (Shakespeare, 1996).
   Return to Text

2. I should note, however, that many of these things have only become possible during my adulthood because of cultural and legislative changes in the UK (e.g. the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and the 2010 Equality Act) which, while far from perfect, have improved accessibility and rights disabled people.
   Return to Text

3. Workplace and welfare assessments seem to be the only places where a wheelchair does not symbolise being "genuinely disabled" or guarantee entitlement to adjustments and/or benefits and services.
   Return to Text

4. I, Andrew, still live with PMR five years on and had a recent flare-up that necessitated me going back on high doses of prednisolone.
   Return to Text

5. Leder (1990) inadequately acknowledges that disability and femininity undermine the possibility of bodily unconsciousness because they are structured in ways which draw constant attention to the body as, indeed, does racialisation.
   Return to Text

6. Asking how people prefer to be greeted is good practice for supporting diversity in intercultural as well as disability contexts.
   Return to Text

7. It is important to point out that it is not just ablebodied people who make such errors I. Kay, have also made social blunders in encounters with people who have different disabilities to me.
   Return to Text

8. Names used are either chosen by the participants or given by me where participants did not express a preference.
   Return to Text

9. This is not to suggest that disabled people who cycle bicycles do not face barriers, they certainly do, but they are different to those faced by people who use non-standard cycles such as recumbents trikes and handcycles (Inckle, 2019; 2020).
   Return to Text