

Disability Studies and Cultural Analysis of Disability: Points of convergence and divergence

--Dr Mitzi Waltz, Senior Researcher, Disability Studies in Nederland

As an academic discipline, Disability Studies originated from discourses put forward by disabled people themselves, to counter hegemonic medicalised discourses about disability and disabled people. It has always had an explicitly emancipatory, and therefore political, side. As Colin Barnes put it, Disability Studies is “the study of the various forces; economic, political, and cultural, that support and sustain ‘disability,’ as defined by the disabled peoples movement, in order to generate meaningful and practical knowledge with which to further its eradication” (Barnes, 2003: p. 9). Barnes’ quote is based on the key Disabilities Studies concept of the social model of disability, which separates impairment (physical or mental ill health or debility) from disablement, the process of putting barriers in front of people who experience impairment, thereby limiting their life choices and causing them harm and distress (oppression).

Disability Studies values non-oppressive research methods, such as participatory and emancipatory research. Research should produce outcomes that involve and improve the lives of disabled people. It tends to be materialist in orientation, with a focus on power dynamics and identity, and can be seen as analogous to other forms of critical theory, such as critical race theory. However, there has also been a significant influence from post-structuralism and feminist scholarship (Thomas, 2007).

Cultural Analysis, on the other hand, is a post-structuralist research method, one that is already widely used by queer and gender theorists, amongst others. It uses an interdisciplinary approach to reading and understanding cultural practices and forms. Cultural phenomena are seen as a location where where meaning is created, and a very broad range of such phenomena can be investigated using the analytical tools employed via Cultural Analysis. These tools are, for the most part, qualitative research forms borrowed from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and literary and film studies. Researchers are expected to employ a critical perspective and to make their personal standpoint explicit.

In the 1990s, there was a marked “cultural turn” in Disability Studies, championed primarily by US-based theorists and academics such as Lennard Davis, although it had some influential European proponents, including Mairian Corker (Barton, 2006). These individuals and others questioned the materialist orientation of traditional Disability Studies scholarship.

As Jay Dolmage puts it in *Disability Rhetoric* (2014), this “cultural turn” offers strategies and foci through which disability can be studied as medicalizing, individuating, hinged, or unhinged from materiality or the social. Cultures and their expressions can be studied for their role in making bodies, and bodies and their expressions can be studied for their role in making cultures” (*ibid.*, p. 100).

The main difference between the two can be seen when answering these questions:

- Who decides what should be researched?
- Who carries out the research?
- Whose interpretations are valorised?
- What is the purpose of the research—what are its intended results or end products?

It is in the answers to these questions more than any specific research method or theoretical point of view that the differences between Disability Studies and Cultural Analysis of Disability come into full view. Not all Disability Studies research lives up to the goal of putting disabled people themselves in the driver's seat, furthering their goals or chipping away at disability oppression, but it is a core value, and Disability Studies research and researchers that fall short are often criticised (for example, Sheldon, 2006). While scholars using Cultural Analysis as a method are expected to state their standpoint, there is an assumption that this is an individual standpoint, rather than an attempt to articulate or further a movement.

There are both opportunities and threats inherent in the Cultural Analysis of Disability approach. Opportunities include opening up intersectional lines of analysis, and questioning the binaries and assumptions that some theorists see as inherent in the social model of disability itself. Threats include the diminishment of organic intellectual contributions to the Disabled People's Movement, and career-making through flights of abstract theorising, potentially at the expense of actual disabled people—a charge that has also been levelled at Disability Studies scholars, of course (*op cit.*).

There are also intersections between the two approaches that go beyond methodology. One point of intersection that could fulfil some socio-political goals of the Disabled People's Movement is work that reveals how all bodies, including disabled bodies, are constructed to some extent through the production and consumption of cultural practices. Theorists like Tanya Titchkosky and Dan Goodley, forexample, manage to meld a strong orientation towards research in service of social justice, without sticking to a purely materialist agenda. These scholars are inching towards a critique of normalcy that is informed by Disability Studies (and by critical race, gender and sexuality studies), within which the analytical tools of Cultural Analysis can be employed.

Both approaches engage with the concept of biopower (Foucault, 1976), the technologies of power that societies use to police and subjugate various human populations. Foucault acknowledges the key role of narrative and myth in effective biopower (and by extension, in resistance to it), and the lived experiences of disabled people provides many clear examples of how narrative and myth can produce particular social relations or transform social relations.

Disability Studies can in turn potentially inform Cultural Analysis, with its insistence on constantly considering who and what research is for, and its attempts (though often partial or flawed) to take research out of the academy and into "real life."

SOURCES

Barnes, Colin (2003) "Disability Studies: What's the point?" Amended version of presentation to the Disability Studies: Theory, Policy and Practice conference, 4 September 2003, Lancaster. Online at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1323&context=gladnet_collect [Accessed 11 April 2016]

Barton, Len (2006) *Overcoming Disabling Barriers: 18 Years of Disability & Society*. London: Routledge.

Dolmage, Jay Timothy (2014) *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Foucault, Michel (1976) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Sheldon, Alison (2006) "Disabling the Disabled People's Movement? The influence of Disability Studies on the struggle for liberation." Presentation to the 3rd Disability Studies Association conference, 18-20 September, Lancaster. Online at: <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/Sheldon-disabling-the-dps-movement.pdf> [Accessed 11 April 2016]

Thomas, Carol (2007) *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.