Section 3: From stairs to stratification: the social production of disability

Disability and society

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Learning objectives/key points

- Origins, definition and implications of the social model of disability

- Sociological perspectives on the social production of disability: stigma, oppression, cultural representations

- The social model as an occasion to reflect on the political underpinnings and implications of social science knowledge:
  - Initial connection of the social model to disability activism, and its meaning for the disability movement
  - Influence of the model on policy categories, based on the case of the evolution of the conceptualization of disability at the level of the World Health Organization (WHO)

Group brainstorming

Drawing on pre-course required readings (notably Oliver & Barnes 2012; Shakespeare, 2013) and group brainstorming, show:

- How the social model transformed the research agenda regarding disability

- Why the social model was instrumental in the collective mobilization of DP

Outline

- *"Turning the traditional definition of disability on its head"*
  - Naming the traditional definition of disability: the medical/individual/"personal tragedy" model
  - From nature to culture
  - From individual to society
  - The political meaning of the social model for the disability movement
- *Variations on the social production of disability: different sociological perspectives*
  - Disability as stigma
  - Disability as oppression
  - Disability as discourse
- *What influence did the social model have on disability as a policy category? Evolving WHO definitions*
  - The 1980 International classification of impairments, disability and handicap (ICIDH)
  - The 2002 International classification of functioning, disability and health (ICF)

"Turning the traditional definition of disability on its head" (Shakespeare, 2013)

"[...] it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (UPIAS, 1976).

- Naming the traditional definition of disability: the medical/individual/"personal tragedy" model
- From nature to culture
- From individual to society
- The political meaning of the social model for the disability movement

The individual/medical/ « personal tragedy » model

- Disability as an *individual* characteristic,

- Generally analyzed in *medical* terms (a functional limitation)…

- … and as a *tragedy*: something negative, which should be prevented, treated or cured (Oliver & Barnes, 2012)

→ « Lives not worth living » (Morris, 1991)

From nature to culture

- The social model denaturalizes the representation of disability

"the disability movement was following a well-established path of de-naturalizing forms of social oppression, demonstrating that what was thought throughout history to be natural was actually a product of specific social relations and ways of thinking" (Shakespeare, 2013) //sex-gender distinction

- Disability/impairment
  - Impairment: "lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism in the body";
  - Disability: "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (UPIAS, 1976)
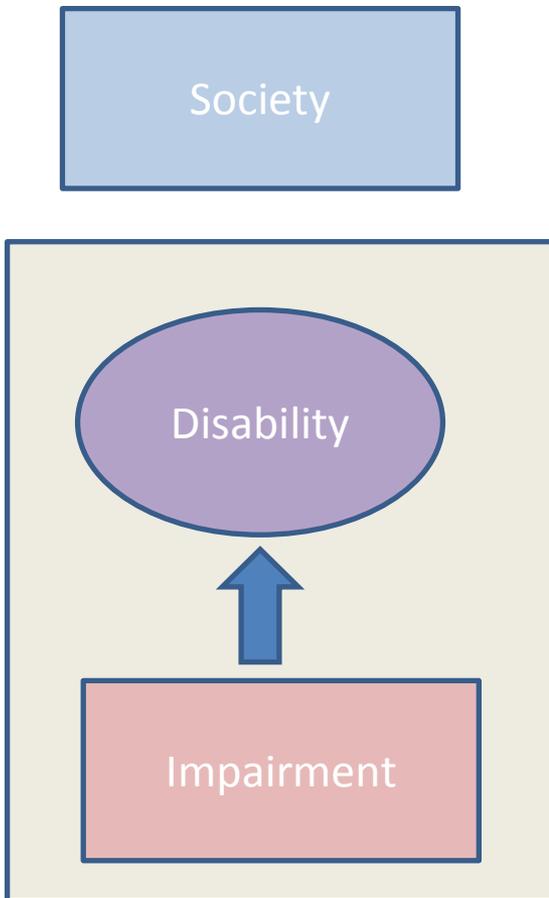
From individual to society

- From individual characteristics to social disabling barriers (obstacles, oppression, stigma, discrimination)

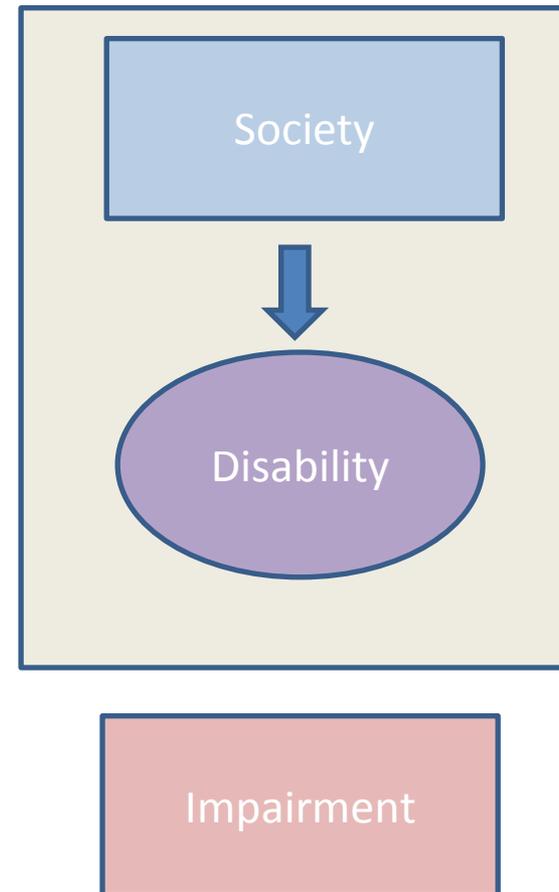- Resonance with the sociological perspective (identifying « the social in the individual » (Oliver & Barnes, 2012)
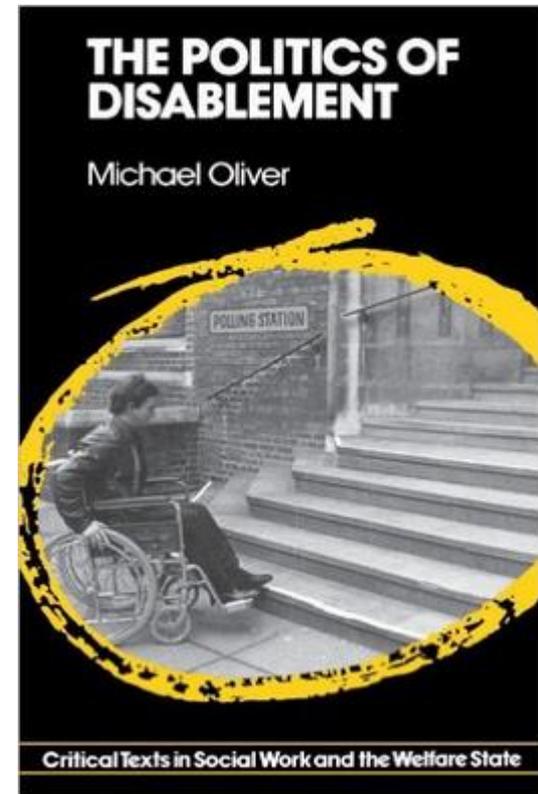
Impairment/disability in the medical and social models

Medical model

Social model

The political meaning of the social model for the disability movement

- Turning disability into a *collective* and *positive* identity

- Denaturalization → possibility for social change (if disability is socially produced, it can be socially undone) → *barrier removal* as a political goal

- Undoing social barriers as a collective responsibility → replacing charity with *rights*

Application/Group brainstorming

→ Turn medical model assertions into social model assertions

Variations on the social production of disability: different sociological perspectives

- Micro/macro

- Structures/Discourse

Disability as stigma

- Symbolic interactionism

- From stigma to stigmatization

« The attitudes we normals have toward a person with a stigma, and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what benevolent social action is designed to soften and ameliorate. By definition, of course, **we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human**. On this assumption we exercise **varieties of discrimination**, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, **reduce his life chances** ». (Goffman, *Stigma*, 1963, p.5)

Disability as oppression

Paul Abberley (1987): disability as oppression

- Systematic disadvantage, supported by ideology, this being neither natural nor inevitable.

- Forms of systematic disadvantage:

  - Material (connection to capitalism)

  - Social and psychological (cf interactionist perspective)

  - The body as a site of oppression « both in form and in what is done with it » (Abberley, 1987, p.14)

Disability as oppression

Vic Finkelstein (1980): a materialist, evolutionary model of disability (UK)

Phase 1: agriculture and small industry. DP participate at least partially in the production process. They are seen as individually unfortunate but not segregated

Phase 2: industrialization: exclusion of DP from the production process; segregation and institutionalization

Phase 3: liberation from segregation, renewed participation in production process

Critiques (Oliver, 1986):

- Historical inaccuracies

- Idealization of pre-industrial phase

The ideological dimension of disability as oppression: Carol Thomas (1997) on disablism

« the meaning of the term *disability* is *not* the condition or functional consequence of being physically or mentally impaired. Rather, *dis-ability* refers to the disadvantaging affects – referred to by many as the « social barriers » - faced by people with impairments flowing from *disablism*: the ideological antipathy to what is considered to be undesirable physical, sensory or mentally – related difference or « abnormality » in western culture. Disability is a form of social exclusion and not a product of impairment *per se* » (Thomas, 1997, p.623).

Disability as discourse

- Cultural disability studies: a focus on cultural representations of disability (influence of post-structuralism, 'cultural turn')

    – Ex.: Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's definition: "disability – similar to race and gender – is **a system of representation** that marks bodies as subordinate, rather than an essential property of bodies that supposedly have something wrong with them" (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p.1557-1558)

    – See section 6

What influence did the social model have on disability as a policy category? Evolving WHO definitions

1980 International classification of impairments, disability and handicap (ICIDH)

Origin: WHO commissioned Philip Wood to extend the scope of the International classification of disease to include long-term and chronic illness

Typology: impairment/disability/handicap

- **Impairment**: "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function"

- **Disability**: "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being"

- **Handicap:** "a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors) for that individual"

(WHO, 1980, quoted by Oliver & Barnes 2012)

What influence did the social model have on disability as a policy category? Evolving WHO definitions

Criticism by disabled people based on the social model →
revision started in 1993

→2002 International classification of functioning, disability
and health (ICF): disability as an outcome of the
interaction between health conditions and contextual
factors, including environmental and personal factors.

→Environmental factors include social attitudes,
architectural characteristics, legal and social structures

→New typology: impairment/activity/participation

Conclusion: a model for what? Discussing the theoretical status of the social model

- A definition of disability: what disability is
- An explanation of disability: where it comes from
- A theory of disability: how it works, what it means socially
- A guide/lense for doing disability research
- An impulse for political action
- A guide for measuring disability
- A guide for administering disability policy?

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