Section 4: Bringing impairment back in
The social model and its critiques

Disability and society, 2016

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Learning objectives/key points

- Political and social science critiques addressed to the social model
- Limits of the impairment/disability distinction
- Interest and limits of the analogy between disability and gender and racial oppressions
- Impairment is socially constructed…
- … and yet it exists and it matters.

→ The sociology of impairment as a way to discuss social constructionism

- An alternative framework: disability as the result of an interaction between individual characteristics and environmental factors (interactive/relational perspective)

Group brainstorming

Drawing on pre-course required readings (notably Shakespeare, 2013) and group brainstorming, list critiques addressed to the social model, distinguishing:

- Political critique (think in terms of the limits of its efficiency to mobilize DP and advance their social status)

- Sociological critique (think in terms of the limits of its capacity to reflect the experience of DP)

Outline

"The most brave and transformative move in the history of political thought"… And yet? Political critiques of the social model (Shakespeare, 2013)

- The political pitfalls of getting rid of impairment
- The limits of the barrier free utopia

Sociological critiques: Beyond the impairment/disability distinction?

- How to distinguish the biological and the social
- Impairment itself is socially constructed
- The importance of impairment

An alternative conceptualization: disability as an interactive process

Political critiques of the social model (Shakespeare, 2013)

The political pitfalls of getting rid of impairment

- Legitimacy of impairment-specific organizations

- Status of cure and rehabilitation

- Irrelevance of disabled people as a category? (→ notably issues of measurement)

Political critiques of the social model (Shakespeare, 2013)

The limits of the barrier free utopia?

- Natural environments

- Impairment-specific accessibility needs

- Practicality

- Barrier removal vs alternative provisions needed for some?

Sociological critiques of the social model: beyond the disability/impairment distinction?

- Impairment/disability distinction = at the heart of the social model

- The sociological critique: 3 different and interconnected arguments:
  - The biological and the social are not so easy to distinguish
  - Impairment itself is socially constructed…
  - … which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist nor matter → hence excluding impairment from the sociological analysis of disability is a problem.

Sociological critiques of the social model: beyond the disability/impairment distinction?

The biological and the social are not so easy to distinguish (Shakespeare, 2013):

- Disabling barriers play a role when one has an impairment

- Impairments often result from social action: industries, wars, poverty (Abberley, 1987)

- Whether an impairment matters depends on social circumstances (ex. dyslexia)

Sociological critiques of the social model: beyond the disability/impairment distinction?

Impairment itself is socially constructed

// feminist critique of the initial sex/gender distinction (which resulted in defining sex as « purely » biological, pre-social) → sex itself is socially constructed (Butler, 1990).

Transfer of this perspective into disability studies (Tremain, 2005) → impairment itself is socially constructed

Main proof : diagnosis is variable accross space and time (ex. ADHD, autistic spectrum disorder…)

Sociological critiques of the social model: beyond the disability/impairment distinction?

Impairment itself is socially constructed… **Yet it exists**

« the dangerous error is to confuse diagnosis with impairment. […] none of [the] uncertainty, heterogeneity and gradation implies that there is no underlying biological impairment causing a decrement in species-typical functioning. […] The idea of Down syndrome is a social construct, but Down syndrome is not a social construct » (Shakespeare, 2013)

Underlying risk of seeing impairment as a pure idea = negation of the embodied experience of pain and deficits.

Sociological critiques of the social model: beyond the disability/impairment distinction?

Impairment itself is socially constructed… **Yet it exists and matters**

- **Liz Crow** (1996)**:** need for DP to reconceptualize the experience of impairment in their own terms, as opposed to medical knowledge

« External disabling barriers may create social and economic disadvantages but our subjective experience of our bodies is also an integral part of our everyday reality » (Crow, 1996, p.210)

- **Carol Thomas** (1999, 2007, 2010): concept of impairment effects: « the direct and unavoidable impacts that impairments (physical, sensory, intellectual) have on individuals' embodied functioning in the social world ». Impairment effects are « bio-social » in character (Thomas, 2010, p.37, quoted by Bê, 2012)

- **Carol Thomas** (1999, 2007): importance of the *psycho-emotional* dimension of disablism: how disablism shapes DP's subjectivities (lack of self-esteem, personal confidence)

Sociological critiques of the social model: beyond the disability/impairment distinction?

Impairment itself is socially constructed… **Yet it exists and matters**

- Its impact/importance is highly variable

- Consequence of taking impairment seriously: medical diagnosis and treatment cannot be reduced to bio-power (Shakespeare, 2013)

- The importance of impairment in the majority world (Meekosha, 2011)

An alternative conceptualization: disability as an interactive/relational process

Alternative perspectives developed in Quebec (Fougeyrollas & Beauregard, 2001), France (Winance, Ravaud & Ville, 2007) and Scandinavia (Gustavsson, 2004)

→ Disability as the result of an *interaction* between personal characteristics and environmental factors

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