

Section 10: Cultural representations

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Learning objectives/key points

- Role of cultural representations in the oppression of disabled people... and in the transformation of their social status
- How important is culture? Cultural disability studies vs materialist perspectives
- Standpoint as a key issue
- Nondisabled representations of disability
 - Underrepresentation and misrepresentation of disability in media productions
 - Common (gendered) stereotypes of disability

Cultural representations of disability

Note: “culture” is understood here in the broad, anthropological sense (a set of social norms)

Anthropological/sociological perspective

→ identifying collective representations/structural patterns underlying a given example/individual representation of disability

→ representations of disability must be understood in relation to a broader system of social inequalities based on disability Ex.

Comment on Stella Young's 2014 Ted Talk « I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much »

https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much

How does Stella Young connect the examples she shows to broader cultural representations?

Why are these representations problematic in her experience of disability?

Cultural representations of disability

Anthropological/sociological perspective

- Individual representations must be understood in relation to a broader system of social inequalities based on disability: structural ableism rather than individual prejudice (//racism and sexism)
- « *disablism* [/ableism]: the ideological antipathy to what is considered to be undesirable physical, sensory or mentally – related difference or « abnormality » in western culture » (Thomas, 1997, p.623).

Cultural representations of disability

Role of cultural representations in the oppression of disabled people... and in the transformation of their social status

- Demeaning, stigmatizing representations (see this section)
- Vs reappropriation of cultural representations by DP themselves as a leverage for social change (collective mobilization, disability arts and culture... cf next section)

Cultural representations of disability

How important is culture? Cultural disability studies vs materialist perspectives

A cultural disability studies perspective: “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)

Cultural representations of disability

Limits of this perspective, as stressed by more materialist critiques:

- Overestimation of the role of culture, with the risk of putting too much trust in the effects of symbols: « dissolving real problems in the soup of ‘attitude change’ » (Abberley, 1987)
- A research agenda that moves away from disabled people themselves: : “cultural disability studies writers generally seem much more interested in texts and discourses than in the ordinary lives of disabled people” (Shakespeare, 2013).

Standpoint as a key issue: in examining disability representation, first look at WHO is speaking

“Assumptions that our lives are not worth living are only possible when our subjective realities find no place in mainstream culture”

Jenny Morris, *Pride against prejudice*, 1991

Contemporary media stereotypes

Underrepresentation of disability

UK studies from the 1980s to the 200s = DP
represent around 1% of characters in fictional TV
programs (Cumberbatch et al)

Contemporary media stereotypes

Misrepresentation of disability

- A narrow range of fictional characters
- DP not depicted as ordinary members of society
- Tendency to mobilize nondisabled experts to talk about disability

(Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p.189-190)

Gendered stereotypes

- Media representations of disability tend to favor male characters
- The representation of disabled women as a potential source of conflict within feminism (Morris, 1991, chap.4)

Nondisabled narratives of disability

5 common nondisabled narratives of disability
(Garland-Thompson, 2005)

1. Biomedical
2. Sentimental
3. Overcoming
4. Catastrophe
5. Abjection

Presentation 10.1 [Burns and Haller, 2015]

Burns, Shawn, and Beth Haller. 2015. “The Politics of Representing Disability. Exploring News Coverage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.” *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 25(2): 262–77.

Presentation 10.2 [Scully, 2008]

Scully, Jackie Leach. 2008. « Narratives of disability: models and mentors », p.107-131 in *Disability Bioethics: Moral Bodies, Moral Difference*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.

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