

Disability in Geography and STEM disciplines

State of the Art Knowledge

There are several advances in knowledge that need to be applied more widely than they have been: 1). the social construct of disability; 2). the broad range of disabilities; 3). the current use of knowledge and technology, 4). the economic barrier of earned income, 5) limited funding for disability research in geography, and 6) the relevancy of the Disability Specialty Group (DSG) of the AAG.

1). DISABILITY IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED.

Unlike other underrepresented populations, disability historically has sprung from medical constructs which has continues to bias the understandings for disability. In the 1980s disability rights activists changed the disability paradigm from a medical construct to a social construct. This change recognized an impairment as a physical and/or mental condition of the body and/or mind of a person; a handicap as the effect of impairments that restrict activities, and finally, a disability as the restriction imposed by society that does not accommodate the handicap. Essentially, this relocated the “problem” from individuals with impairing conditions to societies that prevent people with impairments from participating in different aspects of society (Oliver, 1990). Thus the solutions are the also responsibilities of society, not the individuals.

Advancement of this state of the art knowledge could occur through the inclusion of:

- Disability & Geography in intro to Human Geography courses and other human geography sub-disciplines;
- Disability as a distinct topic or chapter focus (e.g. *The Urban Order* by John Rennie Short, 1996);
- Disability as a social construct in the STEM disciplines.

2). THERE IS A GREAT DIVERSITY OF DISABILITIES.

The second problem springs from stereotypical and limited notions of disability. Because physical disabilities are more visible and more easily accommodated, they are the usual group of disabilities that come to mind when people think of disabilities. Surprisingly in Geography, early disability research focused on people with mental illnesses who were released from institutions in the 1970s (Wolpert & Wolpert, 1977). Wolpert, mainly known for urban & regional planning, seemed to have a special interest in people with mental illnesses who were deinstitutionalized and a small group of his students notably Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch (and their students), continued to do research that significantly included people with mental illnesses. About 20 years later, accessibility and location studies regarding people with physical disabilities became the norm as people with disabilities began to be more visible and active in society in general. Over time, “invisible” disabilities and people with intellectual disabilities have emerged as under-represented groups within the larger under-represented group of people with disabilities in geographical research. Unemployment of people with disabilities continues to be a focus of research given that the unemployment rate is remains around 70%.

3). THE CURRENT USE OF KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY IS INADEQUATE (Edwards, n.d.). Given the broad range of disabilities and the difficulty of applying research outcomes to practical applications (Edwards, n.d), both information and technology are not immediately or easily useful despite the rapid speed of modern communication technologies. While certain technology has made important positive differences in the un/employment of people with disabilities, it is not the only solution. What has been successful in the employment of people with disabilities has been termed “supported employment” which can be interpreted as the personal supports necessary so that a person with a disability can work. It is not known how many people with disabilities are personally supported in work in Geography and the STEM disciplines.

4). A DECENT INCOME IS A BARRIER FOR RECEIVING GOVERNMENTAL DISABILITY SUPPORTS. It is assumed that STEM disciplines offer competitive salaries which become a barrier for people with disabilities who received federal and state financial supports because an income above a certain amount jeopardizes those necessary, and usually costly, supports. In an obituary of Paul Longmore, a disability rights activist and scholar, Shapiro (2010) summarize this problem: “... federal law puts a limit on how much a person with a disability can earn and still get this kind of assistance. In Longmore's case, if he made too much in royalties from his book — and it got good reviews — he faced losing the government money he depended upon. He hoped to make just \$10,000 off the book, but that was enough for him to miss out, he figured, on \$20,000 in yearly benefits. Social Security later changed the rules on royalties, in something that is now called the Longmore Amendment¹. But other disincentives still exist, which contribute to the high unemployment rate of people with disabilities.” When Dr. Longmore was offered a teaching position soon after he obtained his Ph.D., the salary also conflicted with disability supports funding.

5). LIMITED FUNDING FOR DISABILITY RESEARCH IN GEOGRAPHY DISCOURAGES SUCH RESEARCH. Castrodale and Crooks found that funding for disability research in human geography was difficult to obtain and was not underpinned by a social construction of disability (2010: 96). Strategies and examples of how to do policy-relevant research as well as “disseminating research to non-scholarly venues” were rare (ibid: 97).

6). RELEVANCY OF THE DSG TO YOUNGER SCHOLARS

A concern of the Disability Specialty Group (DSG) of the AAG has been the relevancy of this specialty group to younger scholars. To address this, we will be researching:

- What colleges and university departments offer Disability Geography courses and in what department?
- What Disability Studies Programs offer a Disability Geography course, or more than one?
- Are there any on-line Disability Geography courses?

¹ I am still trying to track down the specifics of the Longmore Amendment which I will bring to the retreat later this month.

- Who is teaching or supervising students in Disability Geography courses? Are the students working in Geography or STEM disciplines?
- How often has a disability geography professor spoken about disability geography in departmental and non-departmental venues, scholarly & non-scholarly venues?

Conclusion: To me, these seem to be the state-of-the-art knowledge problems. I do not see that we, as Disability Geographers, have advanced the knowledge within Geography on a broad scale. As a board member of the group, I have always advocated that we present in other sessions that Disability Geography sessions, which has been somewhat successful. But in the past few years we have not gained as many new members as in early years.

Like broadening active participation in society in general, I think it will take more than the usual strategies (e.g. information & accessibility) to get more people with disabilities working in Geography and STEM disciplines.

References

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