

GUEST EDITORIAL

**AN ECLECTIC APPROACH TO DISABILITY RESEARCH: A MAJORITY
WORLD PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the "emancipatory paradigm", which is the research machinery commonly used to explore the social model of disability, provides a limited tool for investigating disability concerns. Although, this approach emphasizes greater control of disabled people over the research process and its production, examples on disability policy research in Afghanistan where the author works proved it to be not universal. This limitation, it is argued, is due to its inherent theoretical limitation when focusing merely on political issues, especially in developing world contexts. Also argued here, is the need for adopting a broader perspective in doing disability researches, such as a participatory one, which incorporates other relevant research approaches and theoretical views within its remits. In a participatory approach, issues of cultural diversity including contextual factors such as religion, political and economic systems are taken into account in the analysis of disability. On a larger scale, this may also call for the endorsement of an eclectic theoretical approach based on "Human Rights" ideals. A Human Rights perspective, with its near universal statements, will also incorporate other views on disability such as medical, social, feminist, and post-modernist analysis.

This paper attempts to answer the question of why research is important at all to disabled people and how the choice of a research method makes all the difference when dealing with disabled people for the purpose of planning policy and services.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the re conceptualisation of disability as a socio-political issue has been coupled with changes in the practice of disability research, towards more of an interpretive "emancipatory" paradigm (1). This movement does not lessen the value of other approaches

to researching disability (e.g. positivist approaches). All approaches add important insights into the understanding of disability issues. Approaches with the non-emancipatory paradigm are, of paramount relevance to disabled people, especially in developing countries where disability policies and provisions are still highly dominated by medical approaches to rehabilitation. The value of the socio-political framework, which underpins research in such settings, is often in question.

CRITIQUE OF THE EMANCIPATORY PARADIGM OF DISABILITY RESEARCH

Research is an essential part of the social inquiry concerning disabled people. In order to plan services for disabled people and in listing priorities, decision-makers require a research method to assess their needs. How best a method can then reflect the real needs in different cultural settings, becomes an important methodological concern in disability debate. All research methods have some flaws, and therefore, a relativist cultural approach, in researching and evaluating projects targeting disabled people in various contexts, seems more appropriate.

Research can be inherently political, and plays an important role in transforming and changing the world, and not only in describing it. In other words, the impact of research goes far beyond theoretical circles, into the life of society. The adoption of a particular research method for example, will influence the suggested solution put forward to deal with disability issues (i.e. influencing societal policies and provisions concerning disabled people). This is the reason why the choice of research method becomes a political decision and should be dealt with as such.

Generally speaking, there are two major approaches in doing disability research namely, the participatory and emancipatory paradigms. Both these approaches support a move away from the traditional methods of studying disabled people as respondents only, and signal a move towards permitting respondents to have more participation and control of the research process and its production. However, the two adopt different means in trying to achieve such a level of participation and control for disabled people, within the context of the research process.

While the "emancipatory approach" has widespread support in industrialised nations, this same approach has a number of limitations when applied to the majority world countries. Its limitation goes beyond academic debate into the life of society, as discussed below. This approach, which emphasises greater control by disabled people over the agenda, participation in the research, and gaining strength in the process, is not universal. The limitation of this model is especially true in developing countries.

Five areas of concern are identified here, where the emancipatory approach to disability research may be unable to provide a comprehensive understanding of disability issues. These are related to theoretical, contextual and methodological grounds, as described in the following sections.

At a theoretical level, emancipatory research has an inherent weakness related to its engagement only in political issues. This way, it tends to ignore other perspectives and views on disability, such as the analysis by feminists and postmodernists. Emancipatory researchers have been under increasing scrutiny by feminist writers and others, for not taking note of the experience of the body and pain, in their research (2, 3, 4). These are real experiences of many people with impairments and should not be neglected or ignored because of the political position of one theory, or research approach.

Postmodernist writers argue further that cultural norms and values should also be manifested clearly in disability research. Shakespeare (5) for example, contends that it is necessary to move away from society alone, for an account of the relationship between disabled people and the social construction of society's cultural values.

The emancipatory approach to disability and disability research has emerged and flourished within Western capitalist society and does not necessarily apply to many parts of the developing world, that are still witnessing early stages of development. In such countries, the needs and opportunities of disabled people are entirely different from those in the west and require different methods of enquiry, explanations and solutions.

Although, increasingly some western theorists argue the value of this approach for developing countries (6), recent debate supports the participatory approach to disability research in these countries (7, 8). This is so, for the reasons mentioned earlier, especially in the context of project evaluation (9).

Whether in developed or developing contexts, the medical needs of individuals will always remain even when social barriers are removed. Exposing such needs via medical research is as important as meeting them. This often makes a big difference to people with impairments, in terms of their functional abilities and subsequent life activities. In the context of post conflict zones such as in Afghanistan, where the author works, many people became disabled in war related activities and require immediate medical and physical rehabilitation.

Within a western welfare system, doing emancipatory research for policy making has proven to be successful in recent years, especially where social ideals dominate. Although this model has become a political privilege for people who identify themselves as "disabled", entitling them to extra support, this has often led to a positive discrimination in favour of

disabled people. This is because the social model is largely concerned with advocacy, lobbying and political activities.

In many countries of the majority world, such a view is a western luxury, as people (whether disabled or not) are struggling to survive and meet their basic needs. This is especially true, when no welfare system exists for support to those who cannot work and for other minority disadvantaged groups including disabled people.

This is also very true in the context of Afghanistan where there is almost no welfare system that exists to support disabled people (10). Those who are identified as war disabled, or the families of martyrs however, receive very small financial support equivalent to US \$ 6-14 per month. They have to go through complicated procedures to prove their entitlement to such support, which involves travel to central places that sometimes cost them more than the entitlement they would eventually receive.

Methodologically, the implication of this debate on doing disability research is that this model lends great support to independent research, carried out mainly by disabled researchers. While it is important to involve disabled people in disability research on an equal footing with other research partners in developing countries, this partnership might not be possible for a variety of reasons. Among such reasons for example, are existing oppressive political systems in society (i.e. the ex-communist regime in Afghanistan). Moreover, as Kitchen argues, disabled people might in fact, choose not to control the research process and production, on the grounds that able bodied researchers are being paid for doing the research (11).

By "over" doing emancipatory research and disseminating findings for policy-making purposes, disabled researchers are becoming their own worst enemies and marginalising themselves. This is likely to happen due to the fact that disabled researchers tend to force too many disability issues on society, when there are other equally pressing issues in that society. This may create a feeling of resentment among members of the public towards disabled people. This is particularly true in many developing countries including Afghanistan, where social ideals do not exist.

THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH IN DISABILITY RESEARCH IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Traditional research in developing countries has conceptualised disability as an individual issue, thus fuelling the general negative attitudes towards people with impairments. Historically and until recently, disability research in these countries has been predominantly controlled by a positivist approach to research, such as survey methods, due to cultural and contextual factors. This has largely affected the way disability was perceived and dealt with, within society.

In many parts of the developing world, where democracy and human rights are not respected, one does not expect to find widespread support for emancipatory ideals. Therefore, a participatory approach to researching and evaluating disability issues seems more appropriate under these circumstances. Such an approach may have a particular relevance to local culture and could play an important part in stimulating awareness about disabled people, towards their disabling societal structure. Yet, there is room for improvement in the participatory approach towards disabled people being a major force in research enterprise.

Participatory research in this context, is an approach which emphasises a high level of involvement of research subjects, at all stages of the research process. This approach has been evolving in recent years, particularly in developing countries, and has been the subject of different interpretations. French (12) and Chambers (13) pointed out that the main aim of participatory research is to involve people in an active way at every stage of the research process. It also aims to educate decision makers and other research partners involved, in doing disability research. Thereby, they can learn about the local culture and specific circumstances of the community, which helps in a better understanding of the needs of these communities when making policy decisions.

Helander (7), favours the participatory approach when studying disabled people's needs in developing countries. He argues that researching and evaluating the needs of disabled people should be the starting point in any plan of determining the provisions required to meet those needs. As people's needs vary and each society sees its priorities differently, researching and evaluating disabled people's needs can best be done when taking into account the social structures and cultural traditions of the given society. Involving outside researchers as well as local disabled people and other research partners, could facilitate this.

Thus, participatory research appears to have a potential for making a discernable impact on disability issues not only in developing countries, but also to some extent in the developed world. This is because it allows a greater degree of participation by disabled people, along with other stakeholders including policy makers, in controlling the research process and its production. In this sense, this method is considered to be a democratic tool, which can accelerate social change.

PARTICIPATORY AND EMANICIPATORY RESEARCH: A COMPARATIVE VIEW

In theory, there are four main differences between the emancipatory and participatory research methods. The first relates to the issue of control over the research process. Emancipatory researchers believe in giving disabled people full control over research production, or, as Oliver (1) and Barnes and Mercer (6) describe it, "ownership of research

production". The participatory method in contrast, is based on full participation, but without necessarily controlling the research production.

It has been proven extremely difficult though, to achieve full control by disabled people over the research process and its production, especially in research that involves academic work (14). In practice, research on disability issues in the academic field tends typically to involve collaboration between professional researchers and disabled people. This has been notable in developing countries where disabled people have often been treated as research objects only. Evidence from Jordan for example, supports such practices in disability research (8).

The second difference is the role of the researcher. Emancipatory research implies that the researcher's expertise should be put at the disposal of disabled people as a neutral resource (1, 15). In reality however, it is very hard to neutralise attitudes and skills as professional researchers. Further, disabled people may not be willing to take part in research at all (10), or might not consider this to be an issue altogether.

The participatory method on the other hand, implies that the role of the outside researcher is seen as that of an expert, although only in research skills, and that the local people or the target group, are the real experts in knowing their situation. Therefore, the role of the researcher here is to get involved in a learning process from and within the locality. Thus, the research acts as a means to facilitate greater involvement of disabled people in the research process.

The third difference relates to the issue of the source of initiative for undertaking the research. Emancipatory research, at least theoretically, encourages disabled people to decide what they need from research, on the basis of their awareness of the local situation. This however, might be possible in situations where social ideals exist and not necessarily everywhere. Participatory research in contrast, is usually initiated from outside the community, whether at national or international level. This may include those working in development and interested in having an overview of a given situation, such as professionals, government officials, and international aid agencies.

The fourth difference is that emancipatory research deals generally with individual and group aspects of liberation (2,16). Capitalist values prevailing in western society have greatly encouraged such notions of individualism in recent years. Participatory research on the other hand, deals with individual development, but within a group setting. Therefore, it is not the individual who is of central importance, but the community as a whole.

The similarity between emancipatory and participatory research methods however, applies in several respects. The first is that both of them have and use a package of methods for

data collection and analysis, which can sometimes be very similar. The second similarity is that both methods encourage the participation of disabled people in the production of research and so to some extent, challenge traditional research. In both approaches, the role of the researcher is changed, as far as possible, from that of controller to facilitator.

In brief, all research methods are flawed and have limitations. What is important here, is the move from treating disabled people as research subjects, into allowing them more power and control as research partners. Thus research becomes a political tool for eliciting social change.

TOWARDS A NEW DEBATE IN DISABILITY RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Unless there is recognition of all personal, social, and other aspects which influence the ways in which disability is experienced and manifested in research, prevalent views on disability research such as the emancipatory paradigm, will only offer limited scope to the understanding of disability issues.

The current debate on disability research suggests that it is necessary to consider elements of other perspectives such as those of the feminists and postmodernists, when discussing research issues. This is useful in drawing a range of insights from these debates and can help to arrive at conclusions for the basis of a new eclectic approach. Such an eclectic perspective on disability research is possible, because of the way in which contemporary politicised forms of discourse (i.e. emancipatory) have often failed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of disability issues.

While emancipatory research has been influential in shaping Western policy on disability in recent years, this however, did not eliminate existing discrimination against disabled people. This points out the need to go beyond the existing structure and into looking at new appropriate theoretical and methodological frameworks to researching disability issues, which are also sensitive to local contexts, including those of the majority world.

Every method entails implicit commitment to a particular theoretical understanding of the social world. This commitment more than anything, emphasises the importance of recognising the diversity of approaches in doing disability research. This is important in acknowledging the fact that the ways in which professionals engage in, and deal with people - within a methodological framework - contributes to the development of a certain theory and understanding about disability and disabled people. Theory itself is part of social action, a set of organising principles, by which social practices (in this case, research approaches) are understood. This understanding in turn, may either legitimise or challenge particular social practices.

Based on the previous analysis, there is an obvious connection between debates on doing disability research and social change in society. After all, disabled people do not live in a vacuum but in a dynamic and complex society. Therefore, it is crucial that debates become more accommodating to include other views on disability and also become culture sensitive. Debate on disability research can be instrumental in subsequent policies and provisions dealing with disabled people.

CONCLUSION

Debate on disability research is a notion created by the west. However, recent discourse suggests that the value of such debate is under-developed within countries of the majority world. Debate on disability research is an under-researched aspect of disability and makes the subject of this paper. Given the obvious impact of research methods on disability issues, this analysis hopes to stimulate a debate and especially invites views on this subject from other writers in the majority world. The aspiration underlying such debate is to emphasise balancing power relations between research partners at both, the methodological and theoretical levels.

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