



## Disability studies<sup>1</sup> and the nature of discriminatory attitudes

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Alongside the development of disability studies (interdisciplinary and critical studies on disability), the awareness of “false universalization of disability” increased. It was realized that both theoretical and practical abuse is to treat disability as the main and even the only factor that binds the environment of people with disabilities. The configurations of the aspects of oppression and discriminatory attitudes have been in fact much more complex and elaborate than it was originally thought according to the promotion of the social model of disability. This article addresses the problem of multiple and simultaneous oppression, in which disability co-exists

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<sup>1</sup> In the original Polish title and text of this paper, I use the term *Disability Studies* in English, without any translation into Polish, in line with the view that the Polish counterpart, i.e. “studia nad niepełnosprawnością” (literally: studies on disability) can be seen as an expression of additional inequality based on associations and usage of the preposition “nad” (on, over). Furthermore, it should be emphasized, following D. Podgórska-Jachnik, that one of the arguments for using the English term in Polish texts may be “the tradition of applying this term that designates specific theoretical assumptions in contradistinction to studies (research) on disability set within different conceptual framework that is sometimes incompatible with or contradictory to the paradigmatic assumptions of disability studies” (D. Podgórska-Jachnik, *Studia nad niepełnosprawnością (Disability Studies) i ruch włączający w społeczeństwie jako konteksty edukacji włączającej*, “Problemy Edukacji, Rehabilitacji i Socjalizacji Osób Niepełnosprawnych” 2016, vol. 22(1), p. 19).

among other factors, e.g. gender, race or age as equally important with respect to marginalization, violation of rights and social exclusion.

**KEY WORDS:** disability studies, discrimination, oppression

## Introduction

The contemporary understanding of how people function is based in the harmonious combination of the “functions and structures of the human body” with the “activity of the individual and participation in various life situations”.<sup>2</sup> The biopsychosocial model, developed mainly for diagnostic purposes, allowed for the more univocal transposition of various aspects of human biology onto social living conditions. For obvious reasons, disability as a social phenomenon dominated in analyses and research related to social divisions and inequalities, leading to over-generalization regarding its “superior status” and “presupposed homogeneity of alienation felt by disabled people”.<sup>3</sup> One could risk saying that, paradoxically, as the social model of disability grew in significance, there occurred an unintentional consolidation of stereotypes that portrayed disabled people as biologically determined solely in terms of deviation from norms related to the build and/or functioning of the body. The recognition of other oppression factors with respect to the social situation of disabled people resulted in a revision of the common disability models and development of new approaches which included co-existence of diverse reasons for social divisions and inequalities. The key insight concerned the relations between gender, race and disability and it resulted in a search of other models that would combine different grounds of discrimination. The global economy and culture at the turn of the 21st century brought out the significance of economic factors which have made disability studies

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<sup>2</sup> *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*, WHO, Geneva 2001.

<sup>3</sup> C. Barnes, G. Mercer, *Niepełnosprawność*, trans. P. Morawski, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2008, p. 72.

researchers notice completely different, socio-economic contexts of disability in the rich countries of the North and much poorer countries of the South. The comprehensive representation of factors that already exert important influence on analyses of disability, though their significance will come to the foreground in the near future, complements the issues related to demography (ageing in rich societies and population growth in poorer parts of the world) and migration. I believe that the topic of this article can be cognitively inspiring, since it reflects that current status of the social, political and academic debate in Poland regarding the dispute on the sources and nature of discriminatory attitudes.<sup>4</sup>

## Grounds of discrimination

It is generally accepted that disability studies were originally the expression of protest against the violation of human and civil rights, which was applied to disabled people in analogy to other groups discriminated due to race, gender or social background. The radicalisation of social movements of disabled people has become a part of the fight for the rights of minorities and discriminated groups, contributing to the social and academic expression of feminist, anti-racist, post-colonial and anti-capitalist ideas.<sup>5</sup>

The expression of the need to combine and intertwine the problems of discrimination was the theory of intersections by the American scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>6</sup>, who, back in the 1970s and 1980s,

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<sup>4</sup> The key examples of this debate are the debates around the gender studies, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the eugenic abortion, the state aid for families with disabled children, admitting refugees and economic immigrants, and individual teaching of students with special educational needs.

<sup>5</sup> See: D. Goodley, *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Sage Publications Ltd., London 2010, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> K. Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, "University of Chicago Legal Forum" Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8.

was researching the black feminism which developed and promoted the idea that one cannot treat the experiences of race and gender as separate and unrelated situations. Hence intersectionality, i.e. the research assumption and attitude that underlined the intersections and correlations between factors causing and reinforcing discrimination, including race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, social class, age and, finally, disability. The intersectionality of the black feminism was based on the premise that a single-aspect analysis, i.e. focused only on gender or race, resulted in a distorted image of the actual experiences of black women. In consequence, it might be concluded that one single factor of discrimination dominates, which is not confirmed through global analyses of social reality or in particular experiences of people exposed to multiple oppression.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding discriminatory attitudes is far more difficult than the meticulous enumeration of factors that cause inequality and oppression in treating specific social groups and individuals. Discrimination is conceived as the consequence of stereotypes and prejudices as well as specific actions that reinforce these negative attitudes. Following the definition formulated in the anti-discriminatory education handbook, discrimination means “improper, selective, harming, ungrounded and unfair treatment of individuals due to their group membership”.<sup>8</sup> Ground of discrimination pertain to the interrelation between the person’s features and his/her group membership, which usually means unfavourable treatment due to grounds belonging to the primary identity, i.e. those which are irremovable due to their native or inherent status, biologically or socially. It should be noted here that the loss of ability in the course of human life broadens the perspective of the primary identity. Simultaneously, it must be emphasised that “the anti-discrimination law refers mainly to the primary elements of identity, i.e. those

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<sup>7</sup> See: *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>8</sup> D. Cieślukowska, *Dyskryminacja*, [in:] M. Branka, D. Cieślukowska (ed.), *Edukacja antydyskryminacyjna. Podręcznik trenerski*, Stowarzyszenie Willa Decjusza, Kraków 2010, p. 108.

which do not choose and which can hardly be changed, if at all. The primary elements become legally protected.”<sup>9</sup> The legal protection is, therefore, less effective if a person decides (consciously and voluntarily) to change the features that may be grounds of discrimination, e.g. political views.

The formulation and enumeration of discriminatory attitudes based on selected grounds consist in indicating the interrelation between different levels of discrimination: individual, institutional and structural. In each of these situations, the interrelations are shaped by binaries: majority – minority, authority – obedience, domination – submission. Therefore, we speak of inequalities which usually have their origin in direct everyday interactions and lead to generalized exclusion of individuals and groups from social life.

The long-lasting dominant position of disability among other grounds of discrimination within disability studies can be understood for several reasons. Perhaps the key reason is the evident and strong presence of discriminatory attitudes towards disabled people at all three levels, i.e. individual, institutional and structural. Treating disability as a universal experience causing “homogeneity of alienation felt by disabled people”<sup>10</sup> has reinforced the conviction of the special significance of the division along the line of ability/disability and the idea that ability is temporal, while disability is universal. Explaining the global problem of disability as the “largest minority”, Dan Goodley wrote:

Disability touches us all regardless of class, nationality or wealth. The term *Temporality Able Bodied* means that many people will become disabled at a certain moment in their lives.<sup>11</sup>

The critical nature of disability studies was also revealed with respect to their own findings that led to the conclusion that it was an evident abuse or even a mistake to speak about the essential and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> C. Barnes, G. Mercer, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> D. Goodley, op. cit.

superior dimension of disability, especially in the context of a deeper analysis of the grounds of discrimination. In fact, it was agreed that all isms and phobias related to discrimination (racism, sexism, ageism, (dis)ablism<sup>12</sup>, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, homophobia) can be adequately and thoroughly analysed only in the context of their real interconnections, e.g. in line with the feminist theory of intersections.

Social, cultural and ideological rooting of the grounds of discrimination is always connected to the controversies regarding the search of the sources of stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory behaviours. In my opinion, the essence of the problem, i.e. the intersectional dimension of various sources of discriminatory attitudes, is well formulated by the authors of *Culture and Psychology*, where we read that those attitudes:

Usually consist of systems of ideas, convictions and opinions expressed by one group towards others and are usually intertwined within its social and cultural structure. Thus, they create a kind of ideology that can be transferred from generation to generation.<sup>13</sup>

## Disability studies and the problems of the Global South

The critical dimension of disability studies is an expression of protest against the social continuance of the marginalisation and

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<sup>12</sup> In the quoted anti-discrimination handbook (M. Branka, D. Cieślukowska (ed.), *Edukacja antydyskryminacyjna.*, op.cit.), one of the terms is “ableism” which, within the framework of disability studies, does not mean discrimination due to disability (this is covered by “disablism”), but a privileged social position of persons that fulfil the ability norms regarding physical and mental health as well as sociological, pedagogical and cultural aspects, which is related to the neoliberal context of the contemporary politics and economics. Importantly, consequences of ableism are not only felt by disabled people, but it is also the ruling principle for the functioning of all members of contemporary developed societies. (see: D. Goodley, *Disability studies*, Routledge. London 2014, p. 21).

<sup>13</sup> D. Matsumoto, L. Juang, *Psychologia międzykulturowa*, GWP, Gdańsk 2007, p. 109.

exclusion mechanisms, at the same time becoming the intellectual and research-based background for dissidence and emancipation movements. Abandoning the hegemony of disability as such in the research on the experiences of disabled people results in a radical theoretical switch, since the constructivist analysis of the individual experience of disability is replaced with a post-structural analysis of the discourse on disability as one of the multiple factors inscribed into the oppressive relations of power, knowledge and domination. The intersectional nature of disability studies in their contemporary version, i.e. in the first decades of the 21st century, finds its expression already at the level of terminology regarding the new models of research on disability, since the traditional approaches (focusing on minorities, social barriers, culture and relations) are pushed out by crip studies, the global South studies, critical studies of ableism and dis/ability studies.<sup>14</sup>

The indication and expression of the intersectional placement of disability and the transfer from constructivism to post-structuralism can be the position taken by Carol Thomas, a sociologist, who defines the contemporary disability studies as the “interdisciplinary space that breaks the boundaries between disciplines through deconstruction of professionalised discrimination and decolonisation of traditional, medicalised notions of disability with socio-cultural concepts of disablism.”<sup>15</sup>

There are evident analogies between all social movements that initially fought for basic civil rights and then engaged more and more in the transformation of social awareness. The black feminism inspired deeper reflections on the complex nature of discriminatory attitudes, indicating theoretical foundations of the academic analysis of social divisions that generated multiple oppression. In the case of new disability studies, the symbol farewell to the 20th century is

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<sup>14</sup> See: R. Mallett, K. Runswick-Cole, *Approaching Disability: Critical Issues and Perspectives*, Routledge, Abingdon 2014.

<sup>15</sup> C. Thomas, *Sociologies of Disability and Illness. Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2007, p. 73.

the focus on problems of the global South instead of researching disability only on the basis of the First World experiences. This is a clear sign of breaking away from the narrative that focuses only on the “person with disability” and on the rich societies of Europe and North America. The further consequence of this approach is the awareness that we speak and write about a person with disability, but it need not be only a wealthy, educated, working, white, heterosexual, middle-aged man, a Christian and a supporter of free market economy, living in an adapted flat in a big city with developed infrastructure and generally accessible culture, education and administration.

Jenny Slater, a leading representative of critical disability studies, wrote a book about the intersecting realities of youth and disability, where she used the personage of Mr Reasonable to show the basic dimension of new analyses. The key point is the relation between disablism, directly concerning the discrimination of disabled people, and ableism which seems to be an expression of the domination of the neoliberal vision of the able bodied (as inscribed into the sequence of dominant culture senses) in the narrative of the human normativeness (reason). Jenny Slater addressed Mr Reasonable in the following manner:

You are the creation of a system that favours specific ways of domination over other people. Due to the ubiquitous, free-market concepts of what is “good”, “ideal” and “normal”, the global capitalism makes your life “reasonable”, while the life of other people around you seems senseless.<sup>16</sup>

The intersection of factors that “make it difficult, limit or prevent” the independent and fully individualised development and functioning is best illustrated by analyses based on the spreading dyad, e.g. the intersection of disability and gender will soon be complemented by considerations of the situation black elderly

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<sup>16</sup> J. Slater, *Youth and Disability. A Challenge to Mr Reasonable*, Ashgate, Burlington VT 2015, p. 1.



women or disabled homosexuals from small towns. The unique challenge to global and critical disability studies as well as research and theories that shape the contemporary special pedagogy in its local dimensions is the recognition of the intersection of childhood and disability. In a broader context, the goal is to take a closer look into the relation between disability and various stages in human life, i.e. the relation between disablism and ageism. A disabled child, without delving into other grounds of discrimination, is a figure of multiple marginalisation and exclusion and has little chance of adapting to the ableism-based model of contemporary culture. A disabled child is deprived of both ability and childhood, while the efforts to raise the level of the ableism-driven adaptation actually deepen the inability to perform development tasks assigned to the earliest stage of human life.<sup>17</sup> The important position of studies on disabled childhood and youth is the expression of the drive to look for sources of discriminatory attitudes in the context of the formative years and includes the prospect of the entire life being dominated by the oppressive relations between power and knowledge. A disabled child will, in time, gain awareness of his or her race, ethnicity and social class as well as sexuality and religion/irreligion, experiencing various dimensions of non-adjustment to reality as well as more or less direct discrimination caused by diverse dimensions of his or her existence.

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<sup>17</sup> See: T. Curran, K. Runswick-Cole (ed.), *Disabled Children's Childhood Studies. Critical Approaches in a Global Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013.

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