THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE: DISABILITY, DIVERSITY,
AND ISSUES OF POWER IN ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

This essay explores the location of disability in adult education by critiquing the research on power, privilege, and diversity through a critical disability theory lens. The essay includes a definition of critical disability theory, a discussion of power, privilege, and diversity in adult education, followed by an examination of three issues: function, minority group status, and language, voice and visibility.

Persons with disabilities are marginalized, the intent of reasonable accommodation is misunderstood, and the existence of the minority group—people with disabilities—in adult education is barely acknowledged. Disability is often forgotten, overlooked, or dismissed by adult education as too *special* a category (Berube, 1998). And yet a simple car accident can make any of us a person with a disability. As we live longer, it becomes increasingly likely that we may experience disability becoming a member of this minority group. Disability rights activists refer to this phenomenon as temporarily able-bodied (TAB). The term TAB "breaks down the separateness of 'us' and 'them'" (Zola, 1993, p. 171) emphasizing instead a continuum of experience. Disability is a fluid concept subject to methodological bias, the distortion of cultural bias, and a specific context. "Disability identification is a judgment on the human condition, and its statistical summary represents more than a simple enumeration of those who are disabled and those who are not" (Fujiura & Rutkowski-Kmitta, 2001, p. 69). At what point does a physical anomaly become a disability and who decides--the individual or society--when one is a person with a disability and a member of that particular minority group? Due to medical advances, there are growing numbers of the "well" disabled who are demanding access to opportunities for education and training, work, and leisure. A person with a chronic or degenerative condition may still have the capacity to perform work tasks and may wish to engage in formal learning activities.

The purpose of this paper is to critique the research on power, privilege, and diversity through a critical disability theory lens. The discussion will include first, a definition of critical disability theory, second, a discussion of power, privilege, and diversity in adult education, followed by an examination of three issues: function, minority group status, and language, voice and visibility.

Defining Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theorists maintain that disability is socially constructed, that what disables is the environment, rejecting the objectification of people with disabilities and their portrayal as victims (Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996). Critical disability theory maintains that discrimination against people with disabilities is so ordinary that it is invisible. Disability should be recognized with true minority group status, instead of viewed as an individual anomaly. To take this a step farther it is the created environment that is disabling not the physical, cognitive, or mental variation that an individual experiences (Hahn, 1988). Public attitudes as well as physical space make up the environment.

Critical disability theory examines the institutional structures that stand in the way of the "serious struggle for the right to paid, integrated employment and full participation in the mainstream of life (Oliver, 1996, p. 24). Disabled people have redefined disability "as the social barriers, restrictions and/or oppressions" faced and professional interventions are seen as adding to the problems (Oliver, 1996, p. 10). Thus, invisibility means one's experiences are not even considered an inconvenience they are simply not considered at all by society, by service providers, and others.

Critical disability theory questions the reduction of disability to finite categories to be counted, and defined using such critical divisions as normal vs. pathological or the competent citizen vs. the ward of the state (Linton, 1998). Asch (2001) proposes a human variation approach suggesting that instead of maintaining the dichotomy--disabled or not disabled--we should determine how to modify the environments so that they are not disabling.

People with disabilities have a unique voice emerging from unique individual and group experiences. While disability scholars have "fought hard to get disability included in the race-class-gender triad" (Davis, 2001, p. 535), inclusion in this triad happens only in the disability studies literature not in the adult education literature. In order to theorize disability as a public issue it must become as visible as the race-class-gender triad.

Power, Privilege, and Diversity

Power is the control, use, and protection of economic, political, and social resources and the conscious or unconscious use of these resources against others. Privilege is an "unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic or into a particular class." (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 173). Power in adult education is seen in terms of identity politics, marginalization, and access to economic, political, and educational resources. As Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) point out while adult educators acknowledge that power resides in the dominant white majority we rarely admit that this concentration of power is deliberate and intentional. It is so ingrained that there is a lack of realization that it exists. But able-bodied Americans will rise to protect their privilege whenever they feel it is threatened. People with disabilities feel this backlash when a request for an adaptation to the environment (so that access might be gained to education, work, civic, and leisure activities) is treated as if the adaptation provides an unfair advantage. The hostility continues until that adaptation moves into the mainstream as a new convenience for all.

As a society we fail to see accessibility where disability is concerned as necessary to full integration. Or that we create spaces that others cannot enter physically or metaphorically because we see disability as an intensely individual personal problem; denying that disabled people share experiences of discrimination in common like (acknowledged) minority groups (Oliver, 1996). We do not imagine having delayed access to materials, entering buildings from poorly marked entrances, often at the rear, or denying entrance into public buildings for some disabled adults, restricting participation in the social, civic, and political life of the community as segregation and discrimination and we should.

Adult educators, investigate issues of power and privilege in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation without being members of these groups (Brooks & Edwards, 1997; Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 1998; Rocco & West, 1998; Tisdell & Taylor, 1995). When discussing multicultural issues, we rarely concede that disabled people are a minority group with shared experiences of discrimination and few opportunities for education and employment (Ross-Gordon, 1991). The study of disability and institutional and structural barriers to educational access should not be seen in isolation from the work already being done on power and privilege in adult education. Instead, disability should be integrated into the stream of research on power and privilege. The study of disability and institutional and structural barriers to education and employment should be connected to the work on power and privilege in adult education.

Issues

The three issues explored in this critique are: function, minority group status, and language, voice and visibility.

Function

The functional limitations paradigm emerges from the medical model of disability (Hahn, 1988). Functional limitations are defined by the choices society makes when constructing environments and attitudes people cling to about disability, disease, and capability (Charlton, 1998). It is based on the assumption that disability is a condition of the individual that is dealt with through professional interventions that repair medical complications or rehabilitate functional limitations (Oliver, 1996). Critical disability theory maintains that functional demands exerted on individuals by the environment are determined by public policy, which is driven by public attitudes (Hahn, 1988) and challenges the individual blaming images that exist within a structure of routine oppression in everyday life (Moore, Beazley, Maelzer, 1998).

Most adult educators use this medical model focusing on functional limitations or vocational limitations (Hahn, 1988), when writing and researching disability. Adult educators write about disability experiences as they relate to transformational learning (HIV/AIDS) (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998), specialized health education programs (Wise, Yun, Shaw, 2000), literacy and adult basic education (learning disabilities) (Jordan, 1996; Ross-Gordon, 1989) and education and workplace accommodations (Gadbow & DuBois, 1998). Disability is rarely explored as a social construct, a political concern, or an experience that warrants a theoretical framework in adult education. As Wilson (2001) admonitions us we need to understand power in terms of function, and as a social and political reality.

For instance, most adult educators consider disability disclosure and accommodation, as a simple matter of function and practical consideration, overlooking the sociocultural and political ramifications. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires adults to disclose information about the disability, provide requested documentation, and suggest accommodations (P.L. 101-336). The responsibility to disclose and seek accommodations rests solely on the disabled person. Our workplaces become places of risk for disabled people when considering whether to disclose or not and how much information is appropriate (Dyck, 1999). The disabled person is at a disadvantage when requesting an accommodation because the information can be used in ways that diminish the worth of the individual, or simply to discriminate against the individual. Disability studies scholars charge us to "consider the mechanisms that a society uses to make disabled people economically vulnerable, powerless, and isolated" (Linton, 1998, p.122).

Minority group status

Under the medical model disability is seen as an individual condition dispersed across the population rather than a collective experience forming the basis for collective action (Barnartt, Schriner, & Scotch, 2001). The minority group model pushes for disability to be seen as a form of social oppression and a matter of civil rights. Oppression is maintained by a hostile environment built to include disabling barriers that perpetuates institutional discrimination (Williams, 2001). For human and civil rights advocates equalization of opportunity can only be achieved by enhancing accessibility to all of society's systems and structures. For instance, "justifiable discrimination which locates the problem within the disabled individual rather than the barriers in the environment" (Marks, 1999, p.78) allows an employer a way to avoid hiring disabled individuals.

As a society we fail to see accessibility, where disability is concerned, as a socially determined event. With race and gender we realized that denying access to all male or white clubs, restrooms, restaurants, jobs reserved for white men, was systemic discrimination against a minority group. As a society we have yet to acknowledge as discriminatory when we create spaces that others cannot enter physically or metaphorically because we see disability as an intensely individual personal problem; denying that disabled people share experiences of discrimination in common like other minority groups (Oliver, 1996).

Language, voice and visibility

The way disability disclosure is perceived has more to do with whether or not the individual can pass as able-bodied or not, rather than a reaction to a specific disability. As Linton maintains, "What is absent…is the voice of the disabled subject and the study of disability as an idea, an abstract concept" (1998, p. 87). Disability has been isolated in the specialized applied fields where specific disabilities are overemphasized as explanatory variables and organizing schemes. Using specific disability as an organizing variable continues the objectification and medicalization of disabled people silencing voices and perpetuating invisibility.

There are words to discuss disability as an individual problem; an issue of physical access, or a medical need searching for a cure. We have treated disability only as an impairment to be viewed as deficit, less than normal for so long "that we are deficient in language to describe it any other way than as a 'problem'" (Linton, 1998, p.140). Many have struggled with issues of power and privilege in terms of race or gender and found the language to join the conversations. And yet in discussions of diversity, power, or privilege, disability if mentioned is "like a guest invited to a party but never introduced" (Linton, 1998, p. 88). Adult educators lack the language to discuss disability as socio-political issue.

Making Connections

Disability is rarely explored as a social construct, a political concern, or an experience that warrants a theoretical framework in adult education. Since we rarely consider disability as an issue of power, or think of ourselves as teaching or recruiting students with disabilities it may not seem like an important issue. However, 10.2 percent of first year students in 1996 self-reported as having disabilities, a larger percentage than African Americans self-reporting in the same class (Chronicle of Higher Education, January 7, 1997) and these numbers are growing. A large number of these students have invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, or back injuries. Some of these students are entering college to study a field that does not require physical labor or skills diminished or altered by the disability.

Research should be conducted that facilitates personal liberation, recognizes individual rights, and attends to the agenda of people with disabilities (Moore, et al. 1998). This agenda includes access to and participation in education, meaningful work, and participation in the civic and social life of the community. As some in adult education invited in and made space for African American and feminist scholars, we need to make visible disability so that students feel comfortable with exploring research agendas centered on their experience with disability and society.

Novice scholars in adult education have few mentors with whom to discuss disability as a social construct or a political designation. When presenting this work at conferences, students come to me to discuss disability, its impact on their lives and research, or how their experiences as disabled people are invisible or discounted by teachers and peers. As I listen to these students, I hope for them, but I know all too well I am an imposter crossing a border conducting research on a socially and politically constructed experience that I have yet to have or truly understand. I have come to this knowledge of disability studies and I know it has a place in my field. As I struggle with the words and my right to use them, I continue because the voice of disabled people is not heard and must be. Yet how does research conducted by an able-bodied person contribute to our knowledge of disability as a socio-political construct? Disability theorists maintain it is in how the questions are framed (Linton, 1998). My struggle extends beyond language and asking the right questions to my pragmatic view of the world as a place that can be fixed if only we can imagine the possibilities.

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