

DISABILITY STUDIES

Over the past several decades, what we now refer to as "disability studies" has been a powerful influence on policy and practice in regards to people with disabilities. Disability studies has evolved as a means of addressing how people with disabilities have been treated historically and how they continue to be treated. Once seen through a medical model as people who are sick and in need of a cure, through a sociological model where people with disabilities are labeled and stigmatized by others, or through a psychological model where their experiences have been individualized and pathologized, people with disabilities are now being seen through different perspectives. Although medical and psychological models are still present, they are being resisted by a relatively new field called disability studies, its philosophy being that disability is a social construction. While disability studies does not deny that there are differences, either physical or mental, between people, they argue that "the nature and significance of these differences depend on how we view and interpret them" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1994). Therefore, rather than seeking to "fix" a person or to separate him or her from the rest of society, a disability studies perspective would seek to problematize society rather than the individual. The solution therefore lies not in the person, but rather in breaking down the barriers that limit people with disabilities from full participation in their communities and in society in general.

Disability studies seek to examine the social, economic, and political forces that for years have served to marginalize and oppress people with disabilities. The field has emerged over the last several years, drawing on theories and perspectives from sociology, social science, women's studies, cultural studies, and education. It often focuses on the idea that people with disabilities are a minority group who has been discriminated against. In this sense, the study of disability is similar to the study of race, class, and gender inequalities. In addition, disability studies provide the intellectual and methodological tools needed to create disability research and policy. The theories and philosophies of disability studies can then be applied to real issues in the law, in community inclusion, and in public policy.

The field of disability studies continues to grow and change. Recent additions to the field such as feminist disability studies and cultural studies have challenged "traditional" disability studies, and have forced the field to be more inclusive of different perspectives and positions in society. Moreover, disability studies most often focuses on issues around people with physical, rather than cognitive disabilities. One major challenge for the future of disability studies is the inclusion of the experiences of people with cognitive disabilities and how they shape this emerging field.

Reference

Bogdan, R., & Taylor, S. J. (1994). *The social meaning of mental retardation: Two life stories*. New York: Teachers College Press.

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

Information Package on Disability Studies (1998) by Perri Harris and Lori Lewin includes information on recent books, academic programs, and web sites about disability studies. Also included are reprints of two articles about disability studies, one which includes an extensive bibliography, and the other an article and bibliography about developmental disabilities and disability studies. To request a copy, please call 1-800-894-0826

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Some Selected References on Disability Studies

Davis, L. J. (Ed.). (1997). The disability studies reader. New York: Routledge.

This edited reader is a collection of classic and new essays, as well as fiction and poetry, in the field of disability studies.

Ingstad, B., & Whyte, S. R. (Eds.). (1995). Disability and culture. Berkeley: University of California Press.

This edited book takes a global look at disability. Each chapter reflects understandings of disability from different cultures. Its anthropological focus examines the relationship between disability and culture, explaining disability in terms of social processes from a multicultural perspective

Linton, S. (1998). Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity. New York: New York University Press.

In this new book, Simi Linton studies disability in relation to identity. She argues that disability studies must understand the meanings people make of variations in human behavior, appearance, and functioning, not simply acknowledge that these variations "exist."

Linton, S. (1998). Disability studies/Not disability studies. Disability & Society, 13(4), 525-540.

In this article, Simi Linton seeks to define the boundaries between what should be considered disability studies and what should not.

Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (Eds.). (1997). The body and physical difference: Discourses on disability. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

This edited book by Mitchell and Snyder seeks to introduce disability studies to the humanities by exploring how writers have used physical and cognitive disabilities in literature.

Schlesinger, L., & Taub, D. (Eds.). (1998). Teaching sociology of disabilities. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association (ASA) Teaching Resources.

Teaching sociology of disabilities is a collection of syllabi and instructional materials on disability issues.

Disability Studies at Syracuse University

The Disability Studies concentration applies social, cultural, historical, and philosophical perspectives to the study of disability in society. Consistent with the Syracuse tradition, this concentration stands at the forefront of change and new ways of thinking about and accommodating people with disabilities. While it adopts a cross-disability perspective, it devotes special attention to people who have been labeled as developmentally disabled or mentally retarded.

For further information about the Disability Studies concentration, please contact: Steven J. Taylor, Ph.D., Coordinator, Disability Studies Concentration at 315-443-3851 or via email at staylo01@mailbox.syr.edu

This fact sheet is available in alternate formats upon request.

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