

# What does disability bring to sociology?

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## Abstract

*This paper makes a case for sociologists to centralise disability in their work. We start by acknowledging the influential work of Richard Kilminster, not least his scholarship that interrogates the long-term development of the sociology of human knowledge. We then explore the view that disability brings with it a realisation that sociology presumes human ability, that sociology is deeply ableist, that sociology is disrupted by disability, that sociology needs disabled people, and finally, a journal such as Human Figurations should always have disability close by. Foregrounding the possibilities offered by disability as a driving subject of research and scholarship we suggest that sociology can only survive by plunging into the heady mix of multiple identities and transversal desires.*

## Introduction

All of the papers within the recent special issue of *Human Figurations* on the sociology of sociology in long-term perspective make a consistently strong case for the enormously rich contribution that Richard Kilminster has made in elaborating and extending Norbert Elias's work. We would also like to acknowledge Richard's work. One of us (Dan) had the pleasure of working with Richard for a short time in the early 2000s in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds. Dan was there, primarily, to work with and learn from colleagues in the Centre for Disability Studies – at the time, *the* international centre for sociological disability research. While no longer based in Leeds, Dan continues to be preoccupied with disability (as does Katherine) and with the promise of sociological theory to understand disability.

Richard's work is renowned for interrogating the long-term development of the sociology of human knowledge: an inquiry in which he draws on the work of Elias amongst others. Now, what is interesting about these kinds of sociologists is that they have enjoyed or endured different kinds of figuration or depiction over the last few decades. This work has been dismissed as peripheral, self-indulgent and deeply academic by the pragmatist, the social-policy researcher, or the socio-politico activist. Those invested in understanding how knowledge is generated are miscast as philosophers, and are often considered to be oddities only interested in the workings of their own theoretical canons and depicted as strange creatures dislocated from the real problems of everyday life. To the idealist, writers such as Kilminster are absolutely crucial: they are necessary actors in a wider project of deconstructing the origins and process of human knowledge, the associations with experts, politicians, industries and media and – more broadly – the inclusive or exclusionary nature of knowledge production. Idealists are, though, questioning of sociologists of knowledge, especially if those sociologists embody select groups in society and fail to engage with the ways in which sociology has served the purposes of those dominant societal groups that have tended to be over-presented in sociology's ranks. As C.

Wright Mills (1959: 37–44) observed, social sciences have tended to be overly represented by the normative, white, middle classes whose own interests and ambitions have become rolled into the typical preoccupations of those disciplines. Idealists, then, would seek to challenge a sociology that lacks self-criticality about its own preoccupations and biases. We demand the development of a sociology that is responsive to emerging and, at times, oppositional contributions. We are thinking here of the postcolonial deconstruction of an epistemological whiteness in sociology and other social sciences (for some guiding readings we would suggest Wynter 2003 and Gilroy 2018). We are reminded of the powerful impact queer theory has had on heteronormativity within sociological discussions (e.g. Epstein 1994). We are grateful to the many feminist sociologists who have unpacked the malestream terrain of much sociological investigation (e.g. Jackson 1999). And we find ourselves drawn to the transformative potential of critical disability studies – and the contributions of disabled sociologists – as they take to task the normative centre of sociological debate.

We consider our own perspective as straddling pragmatism and idealism. We want to change the world, no doubt, from the exclusionary mess of the contemporary moment (where more and more disabled people are falling into positions of material and immaterial poverty) into a more compassionate and equitable space. But we also believe that there is nothing more politicising than a body of useful sociological knowledge: for this reason alone we are idealist in our activist pursuits. So, we cherish writers such as Kilminster and others for opening up sociological questions about knowledge and, indeed, sociological questions about sociology. And we recognise that their contribution does not stop with them: they demand the continued critique of the ways in which sociology approaches human knowledge.

So with these deliberations in mind we offer some responses to the question: what does disability bring to sociology and, crucially, the sociological study of human knowledge? Our brief essay echoes many of the key points of analysis developed by the authors in the recent special issue of *Human Figurations* (Górnicka, Ó Ríagáin and Powell 2019) although we do plough a specific theoretical furrow by foregrounding, centralising and reclaiming disability as *the* phenomenon from which to think about the world. And in this reclaiming, we seek to offer a number of provocations. So, for the remainder of this paper we will explore the view that disability brings with it a realisation that

- Sociology presumes human ability;
- Sociology is deeply ableist;
- Sociology is disrupted by disability;
- Sociology needs disabled people;
- And finally, a journal such as *Human Figurations* should always have disability close by.

## Sociology presumes human ability

What kind of human being does sociology have in mind when it is going about its work? Clearly, good sociologists will consider the human being to have some kind of marking (to borrow Zygmund Bauman's 2000 terms) in terms of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, gender, nation and place. No sociologist worth their salt would assume that the object and subject of study – the human being – is untouched by society. However, when one starts to pick at the often superficially laid out language of sociological theory one reveals a number of troubling assumptions at play. Consider these well-worn terms: mobility, aptitude, achievement, emancipation, labour – the bread and butter no less of sociological thinking. Each of these will be subjected to deep social, structural, cultural and relational analyses, drawing on a host of theoretical persuasions,

revealing a number of differing explanations. What remains constant, however, is the hidden assumption that, give or take the impact of inequality or power, human beings have an in-built predisposition to be able to labour, move, achieve and become emancipated. This assumption of normative able-bodied-and-minded-ness has been singularly deconstructed and rejected by critical disability studies theorists. Writers such as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2015), for example, have asked us to consider to what extent academic, artistic or political knowledge holds in place, without question or questioning, normative ideas of the functioning, capable and autonomous individual. Indeed, they argue that, when disabled people do succeed in the social world (in education or work), they do so as 'able-disabled' people. Success is measured in terms of how one fits with what, following Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009: 5–6), can be termed species-typical standards of human performance. And species-typical behaviours and resources – such as labour, achievement and emancipation – are widely assumed to be species-defining behaviours and resources. When sociological theories and human knowledge draw on these ideas that conflate species-typical behaviour with normative (and assumed) human functioning then there is a danger that only certain kinds of human being are valued in our knowledge production. The reality is that we are not all born equal – nor are we born equally able. There is an urgent need, therefore, for sociology to subject its ontological assumptions to substantive critique.

## Sociology is deeply ableist

The assumptions of human ability described above hint inwardly at a more deeply ingrained problem with human knowledge and sociology's role in the development of this knowledge. Ableism refers to an unconscious and systemic belief in the universal appeal of the species-typical human being. Ableism is an ideological position that positions people to think of the world as being dominated by species-typical individuals (Campbell 2009). And ableism undergirds commonly held ideas associated with the valued citizen of contemporary society. Following Goodley (2014: 23), this citizen is cognitively, socially and emotionally able and competent, biologically and psychologically stable, genetically sound, ontologically responsible and assumed to be hearing, sighted, mobile and walking. This is a normal citizen: sane, autonomous, self-reliant, reasonable, law-abiding and economically viable. And those of us that are white, heterosexual, cisgendered, male, adults, breeders, living in towns, speaking a standard language, based in Western Europe and North America find it easier to fit with this normative construction of global citizenship (see also Goodley 2020). Ableism is but one ideology that underpins this constitution of the individual, drawing upon other exclusionary perspectives such as heteronormativity, sanism, white supremacy and patriarchal privilege.

There is no doubt that sociology and sociologists have made serious in-roads into contesting, destabilising and troubling capitalist and neoliberal systems that create the ideal conditions for the incubation of ableism. However, we need to acknowledge the ableism that is ingrained in the system, the flows and the workings of sociological knowledge. Sociology has valued the sane and encouraged the reasonable. Sociology has welcomed in the cognitively able and socially competent. In our universities, where sociology has flourished, we have witnessed the reconstitution of sociology as a handmaiden to normative, conservative and widely accepted views associated with individual competition, meritocracy and self-sufficient autonomy. University campuses continue to be places of rampant racism and are in urgent need of decolonisation (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019). Sociological curricula are not immune to these critiques. When normative standards of so-called meritocracy continue to dominate our schools at a time when universities evolve day after day through the language of entrepreneurship and during a contemporary moment when cognitive capitalism informs how we sift, support or separate human beings in terms of their possession of certain cognitive abilities (Carlson 2001), one wonders where sociology is to critique these widespread assumptions.

## Sociology is disrupted by disability

If our first two responses were somewhat downbeat in their direction of travel, then these final three musings have a more affirmative feel to them. When Mike Oliver (the first Professor of Disability Studies in the United Kingdom and a high-profile disabled activist) wrote his seminal text *The Politics of Disablement* (1990), he initiated the development of disability studies, which was to have a profound influence on how sociology went about its business. For a long time, disability was an object of sociological scholarship. Disability and disabled people were phenomena created by processes of stigma and categories of human inability requiring professional support. Disabled people, according to these typical reflections, were key passive recipients of welfare systems – systems set up to mask the wider inequalities of capitalism. When the work of Oliver and others entered the sociological scene, disabled people moved from being objects to subjects of knowledge. Disabled people surveyed the socio-political landscape and offered their evaluations of the exclusionary conditions of life experienced by many disabled people. Disability became a grounding, foundational and initial consideration: a place from which to start theorising the world. Such a move was and remains an incredibly powerful one to adopt, simply because disability has been ignored or sidelined by much mainstream sociological thought. Think, for example, of the development of the new sociology of childhood – a literature that has been incredibly powerful in terms of ensuring the researchers, policymakers and a myriad of health, education and social care professionals take seriously the aspirations of children and young people (e.g. Prout 2005; Prout and James 1997) – a shift Norbert Elias alluded to in his essay ‘The civilising of parents’ (2008 [1980]). The perspectives of children and young people with physical, sensory and cognitive impairments will, by their very nature and detail, throw numerous spanners into the normative workings of childhood studies. These normative ideas circulate through well-worn tropes of child development that assume a form of ableist typicality. As Runswick-Cole et al. (2017) demonstrate, it is only when we bring in the worldviews of disabled children and their families that we start to disrupt how childhood, educational milestones, developmental markers and family are normatively understood.

## Sociology needs disabled people

Disabled people’s politics, arts and their community activism are a necessary antidote to some of the often bland and normative formations found in (non-disabled) sociology. We are thinking here of the community building, arts and digital engagements of a group of co-researchers on our current ESRC funded project ES/PO01041/1 Life, Death, Disability and the Human: Living Life to the Fullest. [1][#N1]. These co-researchers – young disabled women who are living with life-limiting and life-threatening impairments – are challenging us to think again about everyday concepts such as quality of life, happiness, education, ambitions and aspirations. In a recently co-authored paper (Liddiard et al. 2019), the co-researchers ask us to pause and think again how we, as sociologists, theorise and understand the human. In the paper, they bump up against contemporary, fashionable and well-worn theorisations of the posthuman to ask: what about those normative humanist desires that live within us all? Disability, in this sense, disrupts the smoothness and ease of sociological theorisation, pulling us back to think again about the kinds of analytical twists and turns that we might usually take. Disability has the potential to disrupt the typical, the usual, the expected and anticipated. Disabled people and their intellectually generative ideas bring a much-needed shot in the arm to sociological thinking. One need only cite the pioneering work of the disabled feminist researcher Carol Thomas (1999; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; 2004; 2007), whose writings on feminism, medical sociology and mainstream sociology demonstrate the many nuanced ways in which disability works upon sociology. Whether this be rethinking standardised ideas around young carers, the psycho-emotional experiences of impairment, the personal and political problematics of a corpus of feminist theory that assumes its activists to be non-disabled, through to

the pathological versions of impairment peddled by many medical sociologists, Thomas has always been at the vanguard of sociological critique. And more than this, she has ensured that disability is a proverbial thorn in the ableist side of sociology.

## And finally, a journal such as *Human Figurations* should always have disability close by.

Hopefully, we have made a strong enough case for disability's presence and potential. We do, though, want to make a further argument for having disability close by to us. Disability identities are oftentimes associated with other marginalised identities (Whitney 2006). Any reference to or acknowledgement of disability will certainly permit engagements with other peripheral human beings (or 'outsiders', to use the terminology of Elias and Scotson 2008 [1965]). One way of couching this is in terms of the Missing Peoples' Humanities (Braidotti 2018: 49), a space between academia and actuality that enjoys a transdisciplinary exuberance and thus 'provides theoretical grounding for the emergence of a [...] supra-disciplinary, rhizomic field of contemporary knowledge production' (Braidotti 2018, 52). It is not simply the case that sociology must shake of its image as a dull, white, middle-aged, middle-class entity of Western Europe and North America; sociology can only survive by plunging into the heady mix of multiple identities and transversal desires.

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