

## INTRODUCTION

# Disability and Gender: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Anyone who takes but a brief glance at those who comprise the category “disabled people” has to acknowledge that this is a highly diverse group. Different impairments are only one source of variation. Gender, sexuality, social class and stage of life also create diversity, disabled people belong to all ethnic and racial groups, and live in urban and rural areas of every country and culture of the world. The young field of disability studies has barely begun to explore this diversity. Examination of the intersection of these multiple dimensions of difference is an exciting area of inquiry and a crucially important one in the lives of disabled people, as many of the categories create multiple layers of discrimination and social exclusion.

This Special Issue on Gender is part of the new efforts to transform thinking by exploring how disability and gender (as well as other social categories, such as race, class, age and sexuality) operate together to create the experiences of disabled people. Feminist and disability studies are producing new understandings of disability and gender. Fundamentally, these studies interpret disability and gender (and race, social class, age and sexuality) as interlocking categories of experience that affect all aspects of human existence as they simultaneously structure people’s lives.

Disability studies and feminist scholarship each have their history and traditions. Both fields are characterized by attention to power relations, social exclusion, oppression and other issues related to marginalization. Although there is a growing body of literature combining feminist and disability scholarship, this is a relatively new development in the Nordic countries as well as elsewhere (Barron 2004, Kristiansen & Traustadóttir 2004, Thomas 1999). Disability and feminist research have many similarities. In fact, since the beginning of feminist studies in the mid-20th century, feminist scholars have theorized and written about many of the issues currently debated in disability studies. A key aspect being the distinction and relationship between sex (the biological) and gender (the social/cultural) which parallel the debates in disability scholarship on the separation between impairment and disability (Briadotti 2002, Oakley 1972, Shakespeare 1996). Here, and in other areas, it

seems fruitful to combine the two fields of study in order to further theory and analysis in both fields.

Various other similarities can be found in the work of feminist scholars and disability researchers. Both fields have articulated sharp critique of dominant theories and discourses, among other things for their role in creating, legitimizing and re-constructing negative images of women and disabled people – often in the name of “scientific objectivity”. Feminists have criticized how women’s experiences have been excluded, distorted and trivialized (Reinharz 1992). Similarly, disability scholars have criticized the way in which disabled people have been portrayed as sick, tragic, unfortunate and deviant (Barnes & Mercer 2003). In both fields key concepts such as “gender” and “disability” have been questioned and made problematic (Barnes, Oliver & Barton 2002, Briadotti 2002, Traustadóttir & Kristiansen 2004).

With regard to methodological considerations, feminist and disability researchers alike have been critical of traditional research practices and have drawn attention to the dangers of exploitative research. Instead, both have emphasized the development of new approaches and research practices that are inclusive, participatory, emancipatory and characterized by equality in the research relationship (Barnes & Mercer 1997, DeVault 1999, Harding 1987, Stone & Priestley 1996, Traustadóttir 2001, Walmsley & Johnson 2003).

Because of their simultaneity in people’s lives, many scholars conceptualize disability and gender (and race, social class, age and sexuality) as different but interrelated axes of social relations. In writing about diversity, feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) suggests we use the approach of a “matrix of dominance” to analyse race, class and gender (see also Andersen & Collins 1998). A matrix of dominance makes visible the multiple levels of dominations that stem from the societal configuration of race, class and gender relations. Although Collins does not include disability in her analysis, it is one of society’s social relations that affects individual consciousness, group interaction and group access to institutions, power and privileges.

Approaching the study of disability and gender from the perspective of “matrix of dominance” differs from employing the more common “additive model” that focuses on the independent effects of disability and gender on human experience. The additive model is reflected in terms such as *double discrimination*; a term frequently used to describe the oppression of disabled women (e.g. Deegan & Brooks 1985). Some disabled feminists, for example Jenny Morris (1996), have criticized this approach to understanding disabled women’s lives and pointed out that it is not helpful to think about disability and gender in simple additive terms. Although the effects of disability and gender (as well as race, age, social class, sexuality and ethnicity) do “add up” over time and in intensity of impact, seeing disability and gender only in additive terms misses the social relational connections between them and the particular ways in which different configurations of disability and gender affect individual and group experiences.

The papers presented in this issue reflect many of the characteristics of the new explorations of disability and gender outlined above. They are

interdisciplinary in nature and represent diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. The collection is international in scope with papers from the Nordic countries, UK, USA and Australia.

The first paper by Vigdis Mathisen Olsvik is a study of violence and abuse against Norwegian women with physical disabilities. The purpose of the study was to create a typology of violence, gain better understanding of the context of abuse and the consequences of violence and abuse in the lives of disabled women: a timely study indeed. This is followed by a paper from US scholar Cheryl G. Najarian, who investigates the mothering experiences of college educated Deaf mothers and the connection of this experience to their identities as Deaf. Rachel Mayes, Gwynnyth Llewellyn and David McConnell present a phenomenological study of the experience of pregnancy for women with intellectual disabilities. This is the first study of its kind in Australia as well as internationally. Rachel E. Lovell is a US scholar who has carried out a study in Sweden in which she examined gender differences in the effects that long-term illness has on occupational career. The next paper in this collection is a study that explores the experiences of disabled women in relation to preventative health. The paper, by Kelley Johnson, Ria Strong, Lynne Hillier and Marian Pitts, draws attention to the many barriers disabled women face in gaining access to health services. This section of the journal concludes with a paper by Helen Meekosha in which she examines the intersection between race, ethnicity, class, gender and disability.

The perspectives section of the journal contains a paper by Carol Thomas, based on a presentation she gave at a seminar at the Norwegian Social Research Institute (NOVA) in October 2005. In her paper Thomas reviews different perspectives on disability and gender and reflects upon theoretical approaches and debates. Together the seven papers presented in this issue provide a glimpse of the many and diverse ways disability and gender are approached, studied and analysed by scholars internationally.

As is reflected in the papers in this issue, disability and feminist scholarship are multidisciplinary fields of study that employ a variety of methods and theoretical approaches. Combining these two fields is an exciting undertaking that can provide important advances in scholarship as well as furthering our understanding of diversity in people's everyday lives and how they are affected by both disability and gender. This Special Issue on Gender is a small contribution in exploring the possibilities.

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