

## EDITORIAL

# Research Methods and Practices of Doing Disability Studies in the Global South

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Disability studies has long been based primarily on theories and practices in the global North also in the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*. Today there is an increase in disability research conducted in the global South. Yet, many studies continue to frame data using already existing concepts, debates and research strategies from the global North, focusing less on building theory situated in the global South. The reliance on theories developed in the global North may reinforce the epistemic vulnerability of disability studies in the global South. As disability studies as a whole is concerned with the politics of voice, in this special section, therefore, we explicitly aimed at triggering critical discussion on how to develop research methods and practices in contexts outside the global North. The four papers in this section challenge us and our epistemological and methodological norms towards more nuanced approaches in each research context. The lessons to be learned from these papers go beyond issues in the global South. The great heterogeneity of disability and its contexts, as well as its evolving nature, mean that we must all think deeply about interconnectedness, relationality, and continuity of disability with other phenomenon across different time and space. The global perspective to disability simultaneously teaches us the global structures of inequalities beyond country borders.

**Keywords:** Research methods; global South; power; epistemology

Disability studies has long been based primarily on theories and practices in the global North (Grech & Soldatic, 2016; Grech, 2011; Katsui, 2012; Katsui & Chalklen, 2020). This is not an exception in the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*. Considering that 80% of persons with disabilities are located in the global South, many living in collective cultures (WHO & World Bank, 2011), there is a remarkable gap in our understanding of disability (Grech, 2005; Watermeyer, McKenzie & Swartz, 2019).

Today there is an increase in disability research conducted in the global South. This is to be warmly welcomed. Yet, many studies continue to frame data using already existing concepts, debates and research strategies from the global North, focusing less on building theory situated in the global South (Watermeyer et al., 2019; Grech & Soldatic, 2016). The reliance on theories developed in the global North may reinforce the epistemic vulnerability of disability studies in the global South. Disability studies as a whole is concerned with the politics of voice, and we wanted to highlight this question (e.g., Strnadova & Walmsley 2018) in this special section. We are also interested in the questions of epistemic access and the importance of taking due account of knowledges of those on the global periphery (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Ramugondo, Lepere & Bada 2017).

Taking these issues into account, the journal welcomed Professor Leslie Swartz as an external editor of this special issue on the global South. Swartz is based in Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and has been a pioneer of disability studies on the African continent. He was founding editor-in-chief of the *African Journal of Disability* ([www.ajod.org](http://www.ajod.org)) and has an interest in making indigenous voices, experiences, and theories visible within a decolonial approach.

We explicitly aimed at triggering critical discussion on how to develop research methods and practices in contexts outside the global North. We were interested in distinctive methodological choices in knowledge production process in the field of disability studies in the global South. We wanted to understand how scholars working in the global South on disability issues were contributing to decolonizing disability studies in the context of highly imbalanced power relationships between the global North and the global South.

Swartz and the other editor of the special issue, Hisayo Katsui of the University of Helsinki, Finland, held a symposium on this theme at the most recent conference of the Nordic Network on Disability Research (NNDR) in Copenhagen University in 2019. We also visited each other's institutions to discuss the importance of this thematic area and opened our call for papers for this special issue in 2019. We received 22 abstract submissions, out of which four papers have

successfully been published between 2020 and 2021. In this process, we noticed an obvious fact that identifying reviewers who could review these papers based on their own experiences from the global South was not straightforward. We have highly competent editorial board members who have been tirelessly helping this journal as reviewers and also as authors. For this special section, we actively invited reviewers also from the global South who are not part of the editorial board.

The four splendid, thought-provoking papers are the following:

1. Naami, A., W. K. Mprah, M. Mfofo-M'Carthy, and J. Grischow. 2021. Methodologically Thinking: Doing Disability Research in Ghanaian Cultural Communities.

This paper is based on a collaboration research project of researchers from Canada and Ghana on experiences of disabilities, particularly deafness and physical disabilities. They found methodological challenges pertaining to recruitment strategies, data collection, and ethical considerations of the global North when applied in Ghana. Based on their own project experiences, they argue for the adaptation of international research methodologies into Southern socio-cultural contexts.

2. Chhabra, G. 2020. Insider, Outsider or an In-Between? Epistemological Reflections of a Legally Blind Researcher on Conducting Cross-National Disability Research.

The paper carefully deals with the classic theme of insider-outsider of a researcher through his experiential insights, in which positionality of the researcher is scrutinized. He problematizes simplistic binaries in knowledge production process of disability research, carefully investigates power imbalances, and presents an alternative, more nuanced in-between researcher status in the continuum between the insider and outsider.

3. Bannink Mbazzi, F., R. Nalugya, E. Kawesa, H. Nambejja, P. Nizeyimana, P. Ojok, G. Van Hove, and J. Seeley. 2020. 'Ubuntu Bulamu' – Development and Testing of an Indigenous Intervention for Disability Inclusion in Uganda.

Ubuntu Bulamu signifies a shared set of values that promote well-being, togetherness, and unity (403). This culturally and socially embedded ideology was mobilized in the intervention where many relevant actors participated to seek for their betterment of society with children and persons with disabilities. The trial is novel, though it faced many challenges due to the thinking of participants that encompasses post-colonialistic understanding of own roles and also due to donors' restrictions and frameworks that have to be negotiated with the intervention based on the philosophy of Ubuntu Bulamu. When based on locally embedded understanding of Ubuntu Bulamu, the methodology is naturally and organically defined accordingly without coercing foreign ideas with a top-down approach.

4. Araneda-Urrutia, C. and M. Infante. 2020. Assemblage Theory and Its Potentialities for Dis/ability Research in the Global South.

The authors recognize that Southern disabled bodies are constituted in much more complex ways than those represented by globalized models of disability (340), which is exemplified in the case of Chile through engagement with global discourses of inclusion and economic productivity. Such a decolonial approach and what the authors call 'demodeling' contribute greatly to expanding the current discussion in the global North whose gaze is often internal and not global. The authors invite to research dis/ability with 'a radical openness to ontological uncertainty, preferring multiplicity, heterogeneity, and instability' instead of using essentializing models. Instead, authors argue that the theory of assemblages, or more precisely relationality and assembling, are helpful in understanding the much more complex phenomenon in the global South than the North-based models, when eventually striving for decolonization.

All of the four papers force us to rethink our methodological norms, with the issue of the politics of voice front and centre in these considerations. The papers give us the great opportunity to reconsider what may be termed the normalized or even the geopolitically normate research procedures, and to think about the extent to which epistemic frameworks which are part of the everyday bedrock of much research in the global North are imposed, often unwittingly, on global South research. The papers challenge us and our epistemological and methodological norms towards more nuanced approaches in each research context. The lessons to be learned from these papers go beyond issues in the global South: they highlight very clearly global questions about the politics of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The issues are stark in the global South, but questions of power in all research are of course also relevant to the global North. A true decolonizing of knowledge, therefore, requires that the challenges posed by these papers be considered by all researchers, everywhere – colonial mindsets and colonial practices are not confined to postcolonial contexts in the global South.

The great heterogeneity of disability and its contexts, as well as its evolving nature, mean that we must all think deeply about interconnectedness, relationality, and continuity of disability with other phenomenon across different time and space. The global perspective to disability simultaneously teaches us the global structures of inequalities

beyond country borders. Welcoming scholarship from outside of the global North represents a useful way in which we, as researchers based in the global North and elsewhere, can challenge ourselves and our epistemological traditions, to explore new methodological choices and to start understanding disability not only in a local context but also in the global context. We hope that our commitment to this special section in this journal will stimulate more papers and debate from the global South beyond this special section.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Katsui, Hisayo and Leslie Swartz. (2021). Research Methods and Practices of Doing Disability Studies in the Global South. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 23(1), 204–206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr:841>

**Submitted:** 04 June 2021    **Accepted:** 17 June 2021    **Published:** 09 July 2021

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