



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction

Jessica Schomberg, Shanna Hollich

Library Trends, Volume 67, Number 3, Winter 2019, pp. 415-422 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/723588>

Introduction

JESSICA SCHOMBERG AND SHANNA HOLLICH

ABSTRACT

In this introduction, the coeditors of this issue introduce, discuss, and provide a relevant framework for the work found herein. Special attention is given to the language of disability and the preferences of those both within and outside of the disability community. A brief explanation is given for each of the theoretical frameworks used to model disability in the existing literature to help provide important context for this issue. Lastly, we include an introduction to each of the articles and highlight some of the common themes they reveal.

CLAIMING DISABILITY

“Disabled” is not a slur. The language of disability is contentious and contested. Institutionally, person-first language such as *people with disabilities* is often considered a safe choice—at least in the United States (Harpur 2012). However, disability activists who are disabled themselves, as are this issue’s editors, often choose identity-first language as a way of claiming our own identities without shame or euphemism (Dunn and Andrews 2015). Throughout this issue, we encourage you to respect the self-labeling choices of those who are members of this community. We also encourage you to seek resources created by disabled people (Brown 2016), and to privilege their language choices over the preferences of nondisabled researchers or caretakers.

Though scholarship about disabilities has been robust in various social science and humanities disciplines for decades, and is increasingly incorporated into applied sciences (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009), libraries have been slow to theorize or systematically examine the experiences of dis/ability in libraries (Hill 2013). This special issue will be geared toward

the experience of being a disabled adult in libraries. Through a combination of empirical research, reflective papers, and theoretical papers, this issue aims to capture perspectives of and advocate for disabled members of our broad library community—including both workers and patrons.

MODELING DISABILITY

There are many possible approaches one can take to examine disabilities and disability theory. Generally speaking, “disablement” occurs when there is a gap between environmental demands and personal capabilities. In a workplace setting particularly, exacerbations of disability include “inflexible working hours, architectural barriers, social prejudice and disincentives from employment that exist in disability insurance programs” (Verbrugge and Jette 1994, 8).

Over the past few hundred years, disability models have gone through ongoing transformations in response to social and technological changes. The development of the concept of disability in the United States was inherently tied to the development of race, as a way of justifying chattel slavery (see, e.g., drapetomania). Prior to industrialization and wage labor, families had more capacity to care for and make use of “partly productive relatives,” but after the onset of “mechanized factory labor . . . employers began to demand workers who had intact, interchangeable bodies” (Rose 2017, 2). In the early twentieth century, employers pushed disabled workers out of the workforce because the worldview of industrialization led them to assume disabled people could not be “efficient, productive workers” (111).

Due to medical improvements beginning in the twentieth century, many conditions that were terminal in earlier times have been transmuted into chronic health conditions (Feudtner 2003). At present, most common chronic health conditions are nonfatal; instead, people live with these impairments for years. These conditions include “arthritis, high blood pressure, chronic sinusitis, tinnitus, hearing impairments, hay fever, chronic back conditions, varicose veins, hemorrhoids, migraine headaches, cataracts, and visual impairments. . . . In the mid and late life, chronic conditions tend to cross diagnostic thresholds, and individuals often accumulate several of them (comorbidity)” (Verbrugge and Jette 1994, 1). The point at which these conditions become disabilities is blurry and contextual. As a result of these factors, the idea of disability is more fluid today than it was in the past—an individual can pass in and out of disability at multiple points throughout their life, and there are some conditions, like the chronic conditions just mentioned, that we may now consider disabilities that were not previously considered as such.

Over time, various models conceptualizing disability have been developed. While these models are presented here in the chronological order in which they were articulated, later models have not completely replaced

earlier models. Some may predominate in certain contexts or regions, but you might encounter any of these models at work today.

Moral Model

The moral model was a pre-twentieth-century view of disabled people as inferior and pitiful, their disability the result of sin or a symbol that they were in need of charity. People with disabilities were typically described in dehumanizing language (Dunn and Andrews 2015). This model continued into the twentieth century for people managing chronic health conditions and helped to form the medical model (Feudtner 2003).

Medical Model

The medical model focused on individual impairments, sometimes referring to the impairment without acknowledging the person. This is still common in medical shorthand and is hugely depersonalizing (Dunn and Andrews 2015). In this model, individual disability is treated as a source of disadvantages “to be addressed with medical correction or government compensation” (Wasserman et al. 2016).

Rehabilitation Model

In the rehabilitation model, disability is a problem, but individuals can learn to cope using strategies or aids. The focus of this model is on recovery (Dunn and Andrews 2015) and on adjusting the personalities of disabled people to condition them not to ask for environmental changes or better wages (Rose 2017). As the rehabilitation model was also closely tied to legislative action, it is worth noting that policymakers’ racialized and gendered assumptions often barred men of color and women from gaining equal access to compensation and rehabilitation programs and life outside institutions (Rose 2017).

Social Model

The social model was a direct reaction to the earlier models and was developed by disability activists. In this model, disability is neutral, not a problem needing a cure or a representation of moral failure. The focus of this social model is on social barriers. This model led to person-first language, which advocates believed would help preserve their humanity and promote individuality (Dunn and Andrews 2015). Person-first language follows the pattern of saying *person* before indicating which condition travels with them, such as *person with diabetes*, *person with autism*. The social model “interprets disability as a construct imposed by external powers (e.g., medical, legal and governmental systems)” (Reaume 2014, 1248). This model also articulates a difference between specific physical impairments (e.g., a broken arm) and socially constructed disability (lack of power-access doors).

One variation of the social model is called the minority model. Disability is still viewed as not a problem requiring a cure or a moral failing, and as either neutral or positive. The focus is on disability as “a distinct diverse cultural and sociopolitical experience and identity” (Dunn and Andrews 2015, 8). This model critiques ableism as a barrier and supports identity-first language as a tool for political advocacy. Identity-first language follows a pattern of foregrounding a person’s disability to acknowledge its formative role in their identity, such as *disabled person* or *autistic person*. This way of boldly proclaiming one’s disability “is also linked to disability culture, which promotes connection, camaraderie, and shared purpose among the diverse range of people with disabilities; it entails pride” (Dunn and Andrews 2015, 259). This model “sees people with impairments as a minority subject to stigmatization and exclusion” and therefore seeks civil rights protections and anti-discrimination laws (Wasserman et al. 2016).

Critical Models

If it were just a matter of making existing society more accommodating, then legislation such as the [ADA should] diminish disability oppression. However . . . unemployment, poverty, homelessness and life expectancy . . . have barely moved, and in some cases have actually worsened . . . studies show that an even greater number of people experience various forms of impairment and actually meet the official classification of disability, without ever being officially counted in the relevant census data. (Rosenthal 2017)

Critical disability studies and the related DisCrit (disability critical race studies) question the assumptions that those who deviate from standards of ability necessarily want to achieve those standards (Reaume 2014; Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2016). These models further assert that disabled people’s lived experiences provide insights necessary to effectively recognize and critique power relationships and challenge “approaches that pathologize physical, mental and sensory difference as being in need of correction, and instead advocates for both accommodation and equality for disabled people in all areas of life” (Reaume 2014, 1248). These critical models examine the intersectionality of disability with other marginalized identities, particularly racial identities, but also gender and class identities and sexual orientations. This is important because people with these identities experience material and judicial impacts that demand “a social, political and intellectual re-evaluation of explanatory paradigms used to understand the lived experience of disabled people” (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, 49).

Partly as a result of these ongoing changes in environmental conditions and personal expectations, the editors of this volume were hesitant to take a rigid approach to the topic of disabled adults in the workplace.

We wanted to use a fluid approach, to provide space for those who identify as disabled and people who advocate on their behalf. Instead of using static and restrictive definitions that operate on a deficit model of disability, we wanted to support works that explore ways of expanding the idea of public space and accessibility. As one of the editors noted elsewhere, “For many of us, when we talk about in/accessibility in libraries, we’re not just talking about things that others experience; we’re talking about ourselves” (Schomberg 2018, 116).

EXPLORING DISABILITY

The concept of disability covers a lot of ground—more different types of disability exist than we could possibly include in a single journal issue. Here we provide insights into a small handful of experiences. Hopefully there will be more written in the future!

Library Workers with Disabilities

This issue includes two personal accounts of being a library worker with a disability, from JJ Pionke and Gina Schlesselman-Tarango.

Pionke walks us along his journey through the accommodations process, from legal requirements determined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to the personal impact of being viewed as faking disability by people in power, even when correctly following all steps in the process. He concludes by providing a framework of inclusion that library managers can use to provide equity for employees with disabilities.

In “Reproductive Failure and Information Work,” Schlesselman-Tarango paints a portrait of her experiences as a cis woman hoping to have a successful pregnancy and the physical and emotional impact of her body’s failure to accomplish this cisheterosexual social norm. She provides an embodied portrayal of this invisible disability, which is rarely discussed or recognized as a disability, by sharing her sense of personal failure and grief.

Christine M. Moeller discusses the intersections between “Disability, Identity, and Professionalism.” She uses the Marxist concept of *precarity* to examine the structural inequalities in the profession that put the burden of accommodation on disabled library workers. She presents suggestions for eliminating barriers to access by encouraging us to reimagine our ideas of professionalism and dis/ability. Instead of demanding a limited idea of body and performance, libraries can begin to recognize and respect disabled people.

In “Claiming Our Space,” Robin Brown and Scott Sheidlower conduct a mixed-methods study of disabled librarians’ perspectives. They advocate that disabled and nondisabled library workers both learn about and appreciate the insights disabled librarians bring to work. They further encour-

age disabled librarians to claim our own space in the field. As part of this, they discuss ableism, some employment differences between being openly disabled and “passing,” and the journey toward self-acceptance.

In “Disability, the Silent *D* in Diversity,” Teneka Williams and Asha Hagood talk about improving the representativeness of disabled people in the workplace without engaging in tokenism. They explore the practical benefits of employing disabled people. They include interviews with disabled employees about their experiences with accessibility campaigns, technology and assistive devices, and hiring. They propose that libraries, in their role as gatekeepers, invite people in instead of closing the doors.

Serving Users with Disabilities

In addition to exploring libraries from workers’ perspectives, these articles also provide insights into user experiences across several different library and patron types.

Catherine Pontoriero and Gina Zippo-Mazur provide a mixed-methods analysis of patrons with disabilities at their community college library. They discuss the types of support available on their campus and ask patrons what their perceptions of service are, comparing the perceptions of disabled and nondisabled students. Through surveying and talking with students, they were able to learn why, for example, eating in the library is a necessity for some disabled students, and why some patrons physically cannot access the library without difficulty.

Emmanuel Ihekwoaba, Roseline Okwor, Austin Mole, and Nnadi Uchenna advocate for services improvements for students with visual impairments. They use Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science as a framework for articulating the importance of providing services and discuss the gaps between the types of information available and the types of information needed in a university library context. They also identify specific barriers students with sight impairments encounter when trying to navigate Nigerian libraries. They conclude with recommendations of how to improve the opportunities available to students with sight impairments in Nigeria.

In their discussion of developing an intentional knowledge commons at Hampshire College, Sasha Conley, Aaron Ferguson, and Alana Kumbier discuss collaborative ways of improving services to students with trauma histories. The knowledge commons is an interdisciplinary learning environment that brings together library services, academic advising, and accessibility services. Because of the collaborative nature of this endeavor and some of the particular challenges their students face, the authors use an action-research approach to develop a continuous improvement process. Their goal was to create a truly inclusive learning environment where all students see themselves in the library, including marginalized

and traumatized students. As a result of their investigations, they are able to provide five strategies for trauma-aware libraries.

Amelia Gibson and Dana Hanson-Baldauf focus their attentions on the public library experiences of parents who care for their adult autistic children. They focus on the role of public libraries as community hubs, investigating whether families of adults with disabilities feel included in and engaged with their local libraries. They discover that for adults with autism, libraries can feel like unsafe and unwelcoming spaces. Additionally, public libraries were ranked as the least preferred information source for parents of autistic adults. They used an independent T-test to compare responses by race and ANOVA to isolate responses by income level, educational attainment, and urban or rural location. As the authors note, “libraries provide valuable services to vulnerable populations” and impact how people navigate their communities.

CLOSING STATEMENT

This project was a labor of love for the guest editors, and we couldn't be more proud of the work contained here. We would like to provide our sincere thanks to the authors, reviewers (listed below), and the editorial staff of *Library Trends* for their support throughout this project. It is our fervent hope that this volume will be the beginning of a more widespread and much-needed conversation surrounding these issues and that future work in this area of scholarship within LIS will build upon the foundations provided here.

Reviewers: Brett Currier, Kathryn Johnston, Amanda Leftwich, Erin Nephin, Jessica Olin, Tom Reinsfelder, Jamie Roberts, Stephanie Sendalau, Ruth Tillman.

REFERENCES

- Annamma, Subini A., David J. Connor, and Beth A. Ferri. 2016. “Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Disability.” In *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education*, edited by David J. Connor, Beth A. Ferri, and Subini A. Annamma, 9–34. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Brown, Lydia X. Z. 2016. “Ableism/Language.” *Autistic Hoya* (blog). December 7, 2016. <https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>.
- Dunn, Dana S., and Erin E. Andrews. 2015. “Person-First and Identity-First Language: Developing Psychologists’ Cultural Competence Using Disability Language.” *American Psychologist* 70 (3): 255–64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038636>.
- Feudtner, Chris. 2003. *Bittersweet: Diabetes, Insulin, and the Transformation of Illness*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Harpur, Paul. 2012. “From Disability to Ability: Changing the Phrasing of the Debate.” *Disability & Society* 27 (3): 325–37.
- Hill, Heather. 2013. “Disability and Accessibility in the Library and Information Science Literature: A Content Analysis.” *Library & Information Science Research* 35 (2): 137–42.
- Meekosha, Helen, and Russell Shuttleworth. 2009. “What’s So Critical about Critical Disability Studies.” *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 15 (1): 47–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/132328X.2009.11910861>.

- Reaume, Geoffrey. 2014. "Understanding Critical Disability Studies." *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal* 186 (16): 1248–49.
- Rose, Sarah F. 2017. *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1850–1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rosenthal, Keith. 2017. "Bringing Marxism to Discussions of Disability." *SocialistWorker.org*. May 9, 2017. <http://socialistworker.org/2017/05/09/bringing-marxism-to-discussions-of-disability>.
- Schomberg, Jessica. 2018. "Disability at Work: Libraries, Built to Exclude." In *The Politics and Theory of Critical Librarianship*, edited by Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale, 111–23. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.
- Verbrugge, Lois M., and Alan M. Jette. 1994. "The Disablement Process." *Social Science & Medicine* 38 (1): 1–14. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(94\)90294-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(94)90294-1).
- Wasserman, David, Adrienne Asch, Jeffrey Blustein, and Daniel Putnam. 2016. "Disability: Definitions, Models, Experience." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2016 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/disability/>.

Jessica Schomberg is the media cataloger/assessment coordinator and currently serves as the Library Services Department chair at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Their work on accessibility appears in *In the Library with a Lead Pipe* and *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, and they will soon be releasing a coauthored book on the topic of supporting library workers with disabilities coming out from *Library Juice Press*.

Shanna Hollich is the collections management librarian at Wilson College. She previously worked as a K–12 librarian, and her work in education and youth services has appeared in *Virginia Libraries* and *New Library World*. Her research interests are general and varied and include issues surrounding accessibility, technical services, social justice, and labor.