



The Geographies of Disability: Reflections on the Development of a Sub-Discipline

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Abstract

Geographers' interest in the subject of disability has traditionally been confined to particular parts of the discipline, and usually been of marginal interest to most academics. This has mirrored a broader antipathy to the study of disability in the social sciences although, in recent years, geographical scholarship about space, place and disability has proliferated. In this review article, we outline and assess the significance of this trend, and we comment on the importance of theoretical and methodological developments in the sub-discipline. In doing so, we anticipate the ways in which studies of geography and disability are likely to evolve.

1 Introduction

This time of writing about disability and geography is appropriate, given that 2006 is the 30th anniversary of the declaration by the Union of Physically Impaired People Against Segregation (UPIAS 1976). The UPIAS declaration was a pivotal moment in the disability movement in the UK, because, by rejecting medical and rehabilitative conceptions of disability and, instead, insisting on the understanding of disability as a social and political construct, it began to open up new ways of seeking to understand disablement in society. For UPIAS, the understanding of disability was not reducible to impairment or the medical condition, but was part of a complexity of social and political attitudes and relations that did not value disabled people. In this view, disabled people were conceived of as oppressed by society, in which their status was conditioned by structural, not personal, factors.

What was missing from the declaration and policy prognosis by UPIAS, and in subsequent developments in sociological and social policy research and writing about disability and society, was a geographical perspective or an understanding that social identity and process is not independent of spatial or geographical points of reference (also, see Shakespeare 2006). Early work by behavioural geographers had made some inroads into showing the significance of physical barriers in influencing the movement of disabled people, and providing information and advice about practical ways of

overcoming a barriered built environment (Golledge 1991; Golledge and Timmermans 1990). However, much of this research was highly descriptive of its subject matter, and tended to treat disability as a matter to be solved by recourse to technical solutions or outcomes (see, for example, Golledge 1991, 1993).

This pioneering work nevertheless provided a context for the development of the sub-discipline now known as the geographies of disability, an area of study that has been inspired, not only by the sentiments of UPIAS, but also by theoretical developments and debates in geography. Foremost among these are marxism, social constructivism and materialist geographies and, latterly, those relating to postmodernism and poststructuralism (Butler and Parr 1999; Chouinard 1997; Gleeson 1998; Valentine 2003). In particular, research efforts in the early to mid-1990s sought to interlink, in helpful ways, the physical and technical approaches of behavioural geography to social and political contexts and issues, and, in doing so, to develop a materialist geographical focus for the study of disability and space. Since then, there has been a significant broadening of the subject matter to include studies across a range of spatial scales, subject matter, and the use of diverse methodological, theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

However, despite the significant advances in the study of the geographies of disability, the subject area is still akin to Wolch and Philo's (2000, 138) description of geographers' research of learning disabilities, as a 'small corpus' of work (also, see Hall 2004). This corpus, while lively and important, is characterised by its marginality at international conferences, in geographical journals and textbooks, as well as a lack of influence on debates outside of geography. This is particularly so within public policy circles and the dominant disciplines, such as medicine, health studies and social policy, that, collectively, drive forward both academic and popular conceptions of, and narratives about, disability.¹ There are other significant silences or absences in the subject area too, most notably an ethnocentric bias, characterised by the relative absence of research conducted in places outside of Anglo-American, Australasian and European contexts.

In seeking to comment on, and evaluate, the development of the geographies of disability, we divide the review into three. First, we provide a brief overview of some of the main developments in the sub-discipline. We outline some of the newer departures in the study of geography and disability, and the productive use of literature about the body in seeking to extend the understanding of disability beyond the confines of a medical-social conceptual binary. Second, we reflect on methodological developments, and comment on issues and problems relating to disabled people's calls for the development of emancipatory research. In doing so, we consider disability and public policy, in the light of observations from those seeking to relate geography to practical policy agendas and practices. We conclude the article by outlining what we regard as a progressive research agenda for the future, and anticipate ways in which studies of geography and disability are likely to evolve.

2 The Geographies of Disability: Recent Developments

Some good reviews of research and writings about disability and geography have been produced over the last few years, and it is not the intention here to repeat them in any detail (for example, see Butler and Parr 1999; Chouinard 1997; Dorn 2001; Gleeson 1998, 1999; Imrie 1996; Kitchin 2000; Park et al. 1998; Pfeiffer 2001). Rather, we seek to build on these by evaluating some of the important contributions to the geographies of disability over the last 10 years or so, commenting on their contributions to the understanding of the interrelationships between space, disability and society. An opening observation is that what has emerged, since the mid-1990s, has been a broadening of the substantive focus of studies of space and disability, beyond some of the earlier foci of health, cognition and behaviour, welfare, design and architecture. In particular, the study of disability is evident in most parts of human geography, and not just confined to a specialist or sub-part of the discipline.

However, up to the early 1990s, the study of geography and disability had been the preserve of specific niche areas of research activity, with some scholars, like Park et al. (1998), suggesting that human geography had rarely engaged with studies of disability. What engagement there was included important work derived from, in particular, medical or health geography, with a focus on planning for mental health, and also variants of behavioural geography concerned with mapping patterns of mobility and movement of disabled people (Dear 1978; Dear et al. 1980). The work of Golledge (1991, 1993) was especially important in seeking to explore 'spatial competence' and the interactions between vision-impairment, barriers in the built environment, and the importance of visual cues and/or technologies in facilitating way finding (also, see Golledge et al. 1991). Much of this research was policy and practice-focused, and included, among other things, the production of tactile maps as navigational aids.

This formative research did not question the meaning of the term disability beyond a medicalised frame of reference. Disability was understood, primarily, as a function or outcome of disease or a malfunction of organic body parts that were, potentially, amenable to medical intervention and cure. The significance of socio-political and environmental contexts, in the production of disabling spatialities, was not part of the intellectual frames of reference until later interventions by those adopting a mixture of marxist and social constructivist understandings of disability (Butler 1994; Butler and Parr 1999; Gleeson 1996, 1998, 1999; Imrie 1996). Until then, a positivist paradigm dominated much of the study of geography and disability, with the onus on pattern description and mapping. Gleeson (1999, 23) refers to this early period as one whereby the study of geography and disability was cast adrift in 'atheoretical currents', characterised by a mixture of methodological individualism and responding to the immediate practical needs of policy-makers.²

There were exceptions to this, most notably research about mental health care and the deinstitutionalisation of care facilities and support services, and later the work of Philo (1989, 1995), and others, on the geographies of madness and mental health (also, see Park and Radford 1997; Parr 1997; Parr et al. 2004, 2005; Philo et al. 2005). What was emerging from these and related writings was the referencing to, and use of, aspects of Henri Lefebvre's understanding of geography as 'produced spaces', or spaces that were 'landscapes of power' (Lefebvre 1991; Sibley 1995). These landscapes, for authors such as Sibley (1995) and Laws (1994), were characterised by geographies of exclusion, in which institutionally unjust and socially oppressive practices, through the actions of actors and agents, were intertwined in the production of places marked by the exclusions of particular social groups, such as disabled people (also, see Young 1990).

The focus on the geographies of exclusion has influenced subsequent research, including work on the development and design professions and their role in the production of disabling built environments (Butler and Bowlby 1997; Gleeson 1998; Imrie 1996, 2003, 2006; Kitchin 2000). Here, rather than view physical barriers as determinate and explanatory variables, research has explored the social, institutional and political processes that produce disabling spaces (Gleeson 1998; Imrie and Hall 2001). Access to places is seen as more than a physical or technical phenomenon; it is also embedded in cultural and aesthetic representations and political practices (Siebers 2003). For instance, some interesting work by Hastings and Thomas (2006) considers how social constructions of the nation can privilege forms of embodied citizenship that exclude impaired bodies. Referring to the design and construction of the Welsh Parliamentary building, they note that the architects' drawings and construction plans revolved around normalised bodies.

That such bodies are core to architects' conceptual schema is indicative of societal and aesthetic projections of moral and/or ethical spaces, characterised by places that are rarely sensitive to disability and the impaired body (see Imrie 2003). This is a theme of much recent research influenced, in part, by observations that spatial practices are characterised by cultural oppression and the indignification of disabled people. Sieber (2003), for example, considers how cultural reproduction in art exhibitions and building design represses disability in aesthetic representations. Likewise, interesting work by Driedger et al. (2004), on the self-identity and relationships of people with multiple sclerosis, documents the indignity of disability, in which the physical design of places prevents ease of mobility and movement. Gaete-Reyes (2006), in her study of women wheelchair users, shows how indignity is created by the absence of public toilets or places to perform natural bodily functions.

These types of geographical research point to the recursive relationship between identity and space, by documenting the different ways in which place is influential in how disabled people feel (about themselves). Other

examples include research about disability, identity and the meaning of the home (Allen et al. 2002; Burns 2004; Imrie 2004; Thomas 2004). As these authors note, the home environment is, for most people, a place of privacy and refuge. However, the home, as both a material and discursive entity, interacts with the body and impairment to produce, for some disabled people, paradoxical and contradictory spaces. Thomas (2004) shows this with participants in her research. They illustrate how the home can be a source of comfort and entrapment, and a place that provides privacy, yet sometimes exposure to carers or others who disregard personal or private spaces (also, see Imrie 2004).

Complementing this have been significant developments emerging in the work of scholars concerned with chronic illness and disease, pain and the personal, even biographical, contexts of disability and impairment (Dyck 1995; Moss and Dyck 1996; Park et al. 1994). The work was part of a broader shift in social and cultural geography towards an engagement with embodiment and place, and the study of corporeality and the micro-geographies of disability (Dyck 1995). Much of this research was based on feminist interpretations of the impaired and gendered body, and, in particular, the study of disabled women's struggles to resist pejorative labels or cultural stereotypes. The propagation and use of such labelling has, for Moss and Dyck (1999, 163), reinforced 'socially dominant definitions of deficiency and deviance, as a woman and a body'.

These themes underpin some instructive research in geography about bodily appearance, disability and space, which is challenging preconceptions about what impairment and disability is or how it ought to be defined (Hawkesworth 2001, 2002). This focuses on people with visible skin conditions such as acne, and the ways in which it can be understood in relation to geographical or spatial terms of reference. For instance, Hawkesworth's (2002, 259) study of facial acne in young people shows the active ways in which teenagers relieve their 'spatial anxiety or the threat of feeling less valid at certain moments' by avoiding some places, or by covering or making up the face. Referring to the work of Douglas (1966) and Goffman (1963), Hawkesworth (2001, 2002) usefully draws attention to the fluidity of identity in different settings, the potential of stigma to be present, and rituals and practices associated with seeking to blend in.

The spaces of disability referred to by Hawkesworth can be conceived of as, to use Holt's (2004, 220) expression, 'a set of discursive and performative practices', a theme that is increasingly to the fore in social and cultural geographies of disability (Davidson 2003; Valentine 2003). For instance, Holt's (2004) instructive research of school children shows how everyday attitudes, practices and performances reproduce disability within the micro-spaces of the classroom. Thus, while the school she studied claimed to follow inclusive education practices, Holt's research showed that the use of the national curricula reinforced disabling values about normal stages of childhood mental development. For Holt (2004, 224), the effect of the

school environment is to encourage 'children to regulate their mind bodies in conforming ways', although her research, like that of Allen et al. (2002), suggests that disabled children are not 'cultural dopes' or passive victims but able to exercise active agency.

The focus on embodied narratives and discursive practices is evident in some newer developments in the study of disability and geography. One emerging topic is touch and tactility and the interrelationships between disability, body and the feel of a place (Hetherington 2003). This continues the emphasis, in poststructuralist geographies of disability, of seeking to understand, what MacKain et al. (2006, 2) term, 'the affective aspects of everyday spaces and performances'. For MacKain et al. (2006), the priority is to move beyond the physical mapping of uneven tactility, to the study of personal experiences of tactile senses and spatial practices. This focus is indicative of geographers broadening the scope of studies of geography and disability, particularly in relation to the embodied narratives of subject groups such as children, elderly people and people with learning difficulties (Allen et al. 2002; Hall 2004; Valentine 2003).

Geographers are also problematising the relationships between space, technology and the (disabled) body, in which, for some authors, technology is not a thing in or of itself, reducible to an inanimate object, or a determinant of function. Rather, writers like Gaete-Reyes (2006) conceive of technologies, such as the wheelchair, not as a neutral artefact or thing, but rather as a 'limb-object' or a constitutive part of the body and spatial practices (also, see Le Corbusier 1994). Gaete-Reyes (2006) recalls her time spent in a wheelchair in which its size dimensions, in combination with those of the kitchen, did not permit her to cook for herself. Then, when outside the house, she had to run the gauntlet of those who picked out the wheelchair as a sign of difference. She recalls, 'the reaction of the people in the street, in the mall, everywhere, staring at me and whispering behind my back or sometimes in front of me . . . it made me want to stay confined at home feeling very depressed' (Gaete-Reyes 2006, 60).

In other contexts, though, the wheelchair is medium and means of enabling some independence of movement, and the importance of Gaete-Reyes' (2006) research is its challenge to a singular conception of the wheelchair as necessarily restrictive or restricting of mobility and movement. Driedger et al. (2004) make a similar point in referring to mobility aids as a source of freedom. One of their survey respondents said that 'I call my scooter my legs. If you take away my scooter, you might as well chop my legs off' (Driedger et al. 2004, 128). Likewise, research by Burns (2004) and Imrie (2004) documents the interrelationships between the wheelchair, spatial practice and patterns of movement and mobility. For Burns (2004), the wheelchair is a paradoxical object, simultaneously a means of facilitating access to space and signifier of bodily impairment and difference.

However, the rise of social and cultural geographies of disability has not displaced materialist analysis, and some notable research in this genre is

evident in the expanding subject area of disabling economic geographies (Hall 2004; Wilton 2004a). The works of Wilton (2004a) and Wilton and Schuer (2006) are important in examining the interrelationships between disabled people and labour market opportunities and barriers. As Wilton (2004a, 420) suggests, the changing geographies of work and employment have rarely been related to disability, and geographers 'have had little to say about the implications of these changes for disabled people'. Moving beyond a design or physical determinism, or the view that physical barriers, in and of themselves, determine access to the workplace, Wilton and Schuer's (2006, 186) focus on employers' conceptualisations of, and attitudes towards, disabled people, provides helpful insights into the determinants of 'non-accommodating workplaces'.

While this selective snap shot of specific areas of scholarship in geography and disability indicates the breadth and depth of study, a realistic view is that research has not progressed perhaps in the ways anticipated by Park et al. (1998). An ongoing struggle is to convince geographers to incorporate disability dimensions into their research, in the way that they are more likely to do so with categories such as gender, age, class and ethnicity. This is not an absence peculiar to geography, but is evident across the social sciences. For instance, Sheller and Urry (2006), in proclaiming a new paradigm about mobilities, do not mention disability or disabled people who, by implication, are not incorporated into their new perspective about mobility and movement. In housing studies, discussions about the meaning of the home have, until recently, included every conceivable social category except that of disability and/or impairment. This is a familiar pattern, and one that cannot be dismissed lightly or ignored.

3 The Social Relations of Disability and Geographical Research

An evolving part of the sub-discipline is methodological, and has centred on the development of research methods responsive to debates about policy and user relevance. The study of disability, particularly within sociology, has been in the vanguard of seeking to make the academe work for the good of disabled people, and to develop the social sciences in ways that engage with practical life and politically relevant concepts and ideas. In this context, debates about the responsibilities of researchers in engaging with, and working through, disabled people have come to the fore. Oliver (1992) brought to attention issues about the exploitative nature of the relations of disability research, and said that academic research had done nothing to change the lives of disabled people. Stressing the need to transform the social relations of research production through an emancipatory model of research, he called for a redress in power relations between the researcher and the researched, and a re-positioning of the researcher as committed to the causes of disabled people.³

Oliver's (1992) exhortations have opened up discussion among those researching the geographies of disability, both in terms of how geographers position themselves politically in relation to disabled people and the disabled people's 'movement', as well as the practical implications of designing and carrying out research in this area (i.e. who or what is researched, which research methods are used) (Chouinard 2000; Dyck 2000). In a series of commentaries on 'Disability, Geography and Ethics', in the journal *Ethics, Place and Environment*, contributing authors make a commitment to what Gleeson (2000, 65) terms an 'enabling geography'. This seeks to contribute 'something positive to disabled people; for example, knowledges that can be used to empower disabled people and disempower ableist structures, practices and institutions' (Gleeson 2000, 65). What it means to 'empower' or 'disempower' is, however, more complex, particularly when seen in the context of the practicalities of undertaking research.

The development of participatory and/or ethical strategies by geographers highlights the complexity of the process in which the diverse contexts of both researchers and research participants – from organisational issues, through to individual emotions – shape experiences (see Dyck 2000; Hall 2004; Kitchin 2001; Laurier and Parr 2000; Skelton and Valentine 2003; Wilton 2004b). Dyck (2000) notes that both researchers and disabled people occupy multiple, often contradictory, personal and/or institutional contexts that do not always permit inclusive and/or participatory research (also, see Humphrey 2000). In referring to her previous research in an institution that subscribed to the medical model of disability, Dyck (2000) suggests that it conditioned, in part, how far she was able to convey to healthcare students social theoretical understandings of disablement.

Dyck's experiences are important in raising issues about how geographers negotiate their (privileged) position as producers of research in multiple contexts, and how geographical research can realistically play a role in contesting disabled people's oppression in society (also, see Chouinard 1997; Humphrey 2000; Kitchin 2000). Gleeson (2000, 67) suggests, 'geographers must participate in the political struggle against the socio-spatial formations that oppress impaired people,' a point echoed by others, including Valentine (2003, 379) who calls for 'research and activism to be united in a single political process'. Yet, debates within disability studies have sometimes led to confrontational disputes about the role of the academy and, indeed, a questioning of the legitimacy of, and contributions by, nondisabled researchers to the political goals of the disability movement (Humphrey 2000; Oliver 1992).

These (political) goals are seen, by some, as less likely to be achieved by the use of particular methodological approaches to geographical research, especially those based on scientific method and analysis. Reflecting an understanding of knowledge as context-specific and situated, advocates of emancipatory models of disability suggest that researchers need to be aware of diverse mental, bodily and sensory experiences of place and environment

in developing research strategies and methods. Hall and Kearns (2001, 243), for example, comment that 'traditional' research methods such as questionnaires and interviews 'can fail to represent the geographical lives of intellectually disabled people' (also, see Hall 2004). Similarly, a project by Kitchin (2000), about the opinions of disabled people about social research, shows that most do not like the use of methods that fail to capture the complexities of disability. Such methods include pre-set questions that collect quantitative data and statistics.

These observations suggest that the use of particular qualitative or interpretative methods are a preferred way of giving voice to disabled people's experiences, and open up scope for inclusive research practices. In this respect, there have been some important methodological developments in geographical research that seek to articulate the different ways that disabled people know and experience the world. For example, in a research programme focusing on social inclusion for people with mental health problems, through gardening schemes and 'arts advocacy' projects, Parr (2006) has used collaborative film making with her participants. Likewise, Kitchin's (2000) study of an access group in Newbridge, Northern Ireland, featured interactive and participative practices that provided scope for disabled people to influence the design and outcomes of the research.

An important aspect of methodological development is also evident in relation to the teaching of geography, and geographers have been in the vanguard of trying to create inclusive interactions between tutors and disabled students, particularly through the context of fieldwork (Fuller et al. 2004; Hall et al. 2002; Healey 2003). The pioneering work by the Geography Discipline Network (GDN) provides good examples of interconnecting theory and practice, in using participative methods with disabled students to produce field experiences that have a high pedagogic value.⁴ Similar work is evident at the University of Reading in which a recently completed project on fieldwork in archaeology has sought to widen disabled people's access to higher education.⁵ The project brief states that the challenge is to overcome 'the stereotype of archaeology as a field discipline that may exclude disabled participants. It aims to effect a change of emphasis from 'disability' to ability, rather than excluding or categorising individuals' (Gilchrist 2007, 1).

Despite the use of varied methods and approaches to research and teaching, geographers have highlighted issues and problems in breaking down the (hierarchical) social relations of the academe. Skelton and Valentine (2003) note the potential exclusion of the voices of deaf people, in a context whereby interviews with them are often conducted through sign interpreters. They suggest that transcripts produced from such interviews are the interpretation of the interpreter that may obscure the 'embodied subjectivity' of deaf subjects (Skelton and Valentine 2003, 460). Allen et al. (2002) recount experiences of working with vision-impaired children whereby they felt obliged to filter the data through a social model of disability to satisfy the (institutional) sponsor. This was despite the children's

testimonies and experiences suggesting that they did not feel oppressed or disadvantaged by the environment.

As the latter example demonstrates, geographers researching disability are caught up in broader institutional and political contexts shaping their research practice, raising questions about the role of research 'outside' the academy, and the relationship between research and policy processes. Much research about geography and disability has sought to explore practical experience and policy relevant relationships, perhaps as a consequence of the commitment among many of those working within the sub-discipline to challenging disabling attitudes and practices in society (Gaete-Reyes 2006). Examples of policy research exist in the broadest sense of the term, and not just, as Pain (2006) suggests, in terms of doing commissioned work for, or working with, policy-makers. Indeed, much research in the area might best be termed 'counter-policy research' (Pain 2006, 251), which frequently involves critiquing policies in terms of their impact on disabled people's lives from 'outside' government and often within the context of the local scale.

Perhaps most prominent has been research about spatial planning and access in the built environment, although, as outlined earlier, geographers have also looked at changes in welfare services, including the impact of deinstitutionalisation, and disabled people's relationship to the labour market (Hall 2004; Wilton and Schuer 2006). Such studies look beyond particular initiatives to critique the broader concepts that underpin different policy interventions, as well as spatial contexts that inform them. Thus, Wilton and Schuer (2006) note how a limited definition of social inclusion that equates participation in society with paid employment, underpins welfare-to-work programmes. They show how processes, operating at different spatial scales, impact on opportunities and barriers facing disabled people in the labour market. Likewise, Chouinard (2006) highlights the negative impact of changes in state income assistance policies in Ontario, Canada, on disabled women's relationship to housing.

That said, the contributions that might be made by geographers would appear to be absent from many applied evaluations of social policy interventions impacting on disabled people, which are frequently colonised by those working within the discipline of social policy. This may reflect perceptions about the subject matter of geography (both by geographers and policy-makers), but perhaps also a suspicion among some geographers within the disability arena of working on 'applied' (as opposed to 'critical') policy research, in which they may be perceived as colluding with, or seen as 'uncritical servants' of, the state (Pain 2006, 253).⁶ However, we would suggest that critical contributions can be made by geographers in the context of applied disability research, and that applied and critical research need not be mutually exclusive.

For example, in terms of welfare entitlements and benefits in the UK, geographical variations in rates of incapacity benefit claimants are often

referred to in government policy statements (see, for example, Department of Work and Pensions 2006), while initiatives that seek to engage disabled people in the labour market – such as the New Deal for Disabled People or Pathways to Work programmes – are frequently piloted on an area basis. However, many pieces of research commissioned by the government, which seek to explore ‘claiming behaviour’ and/or the effectiveness of these welfare-to-work programmes, treat geographical areas as little more than convenient containers within which to assess different initiatives, and are devoid of any context about particular locales (see Adam et al. 2006; Sainsbury and Davidson 2006).

Even in those evaluations that compare results from pilot areas against ‘control’ areas that did not have the intervention, there is rarely any discussion of how geographical processes at a range of spatial scales may impact on the initiative, including differentiation between labour markets, the local politics of disability, or processes of governance that operate at the level of the locale. There would, then, appear to be certain disconnections in the relationships between geography and policy arenas that pertain to disability – including those areas that are often associated as being the ‘domain’ of geography (see Edwards forthcoming). A recent call for papers in the journal *Local Environment* (Thomas and Imrie 2006), for example, notes that disability and environmental issues are rarely connected to each other, and that more could be done to highlight the parallel concerns of both the disability and environmental movements, which stress notions of citizenship and the quest for ‘democratic control’.

Edwards (2003, forthcoming) also highlights a lack of engagement with disabled people and disability in the context of urban regeneration policy, despite the fact that regeneration arguably covers a range of activities that impact on disabled people’s lives. In this context, central government policy-makers, administering an urban policy programme, expressed uncertainty as to how or why disabled people’s needs should be seen as relevant to regeneration, partly because of a perception that disability was largely a medical issue that was the responsibility of health and social services. Such perceptions would seem to indicate a need to make greater connections between geography and disability policy research, including disciplines – such as social and welfare policy – which are not traditionally seen by policy-makers as the preserve of geography, but could benefit from geographical forms of analysis.

4 Conclusions

The study of the spatialities of disability is characterised by important research that encompasses a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Geographers are at the forefront of debate about the social relations of research production, and are contributing, in positive ways, to empirical accounts of the specific contexts of disablement in society. These range from the ways in which disabled children seek to influence the micro-geographies

of school classrooms, to disabled people's attempts to cope with poorly designed domestic environments. Geographers are also contributing to new ways of thinking about impairment and the body, and seeking to broaden understanding to incorporate dimensions of disability that stretch conventional definitions of disablement in society. Examples of this include the work of Hawkesworth on facial acne, and the continuing radical body politic research of people like Dyck and Moss.

Like all subject areas, there is still much to be done, and a noticeable absence in scholarship relates to historical geographies of disability, in which there is some need to develop understanding of time contrasts and continuities in the lives of disabled people (although, see Dorn 1994, 1998; Gleeson 1998). This thought was brought to mind by one of us reading a review of Jason Roberts' (2006) fascinating book about the retired 19th century naval officer James Holman, a blind person who travelled more than 250,000 miles on his own through five continents. Holman was part of a culture that did not value experience outside of visual faculties and, as Edmund Burke (1990, 203) said, 'no smells or tastes can produce a grand sensation, except excessive bitters, and intolerable stenches'. Burke's views reveal the depths of disabling attitudes towards vision impaired people at that time, and serve as a reminder of one of the tasks of contemporary social research, that is, to acknowledge temporality as part of the context of disability.

The lack of historical research and/or context in the study of disablement and geography is also compounded by an absence of studies of disability in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. As intimated earlier, too much of our understanding of disability and space is confined to parts of Europe, North America and, to a lesser extent, Australia and New Zealand (although, for exceptions, see Dorn 2001; Komardjaja 2001). The study of geographies of disability is, in this respect, partial and likely to contribute to the dangers of what Pinch (1993) refers to as ethnocentrism and restricted conceptualisation. In addition, there are few comparative studies of disability, and therefore limited outputs of writings that are able to engage with, and reveal, the diversity and differences, the socio-cultural specificities, which underpin the interrelationships between disability and geography.

The significance of geographical research, however, beyond its mapping of the diverse and complex spatialities of disability, is the challenge it posits to the limited theorisations of disablement in society. There is some need to develop theory beyond the dualism of social and medical or individual and collective conceptions of disability, because they do not capture the complexities of disabled people's fluid identities and shifting socio-spatial locations and/or positions (see Edwards and Imrie 2003). Shakespeare (2006) notes that the social model has taken disability studies into a theoretical cul-de-sac, because of its denial of the significance of the body, biology and impairment in disabled people's lives.⁷ This is compounded by its neglect of geography or spatial perspectives, in which space, at best, is conceived of

as a container or backdrop to the social processes and patterns of disability.

The challenge for geography (and geographers) is, we would argue, to extend and develop the theoretical insights of a Lefebvrian-inspired understanding of the production of space, and continue to combine it with the commitment to dialogical social inquiry. Such an inquiry, as we have previously intimated, is arguably not best served by the construction of static categories (i.e. social/medical, disabled/nondisabled, oppressor/oppressed) that have tended to characterise debates regarding the conduct of disability research and theory. Rather, it is one which ought to be intimately connected to space and place, that is, to the specific values and contexts of conduct, the diversity of lived encounters, and embodied experiences, of disability, and the temporal/spatial fluidity of (disabled people's) identities (also, see Flyvbjerg 2006).

Short Biographies

Rob Imrie is Professor of Geography at King's College London. He is co-author of *Inclusive Design* (Spon Press, London, 2001), author of *Disability and the City* (Paul Chapman Publishing, London, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1996), *Accessible Housing: Disability, Design and Quality* (Routledge, London, 2006) and co-editor of *British Urban Policy* (1993, Paul Chapman Publishing, London; 1999, second edition, Sage, London) and *Urban Renaissance* (2003, Policy Press, Bristol). At present, he is editing a book with Loretta Lees and Mike Raco entitled *Regenerating London* (Routledge, London, 2008).

Claire Edwards is Lecturer in Social Policy at University College Cork, Ireland. She worked for a number of years in applied social research in the UK, first for the Disability Rights Commission and then as Senior Research Officer at the Department for Work and Pensions. Her research has been particularly concerned with exploring disabled people's involvement in urban regeneration initiatives, and she has published on these and related themes in a range of journals, including *Urban Studies*, *Sociology* and *Environment and Planning A*.

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Notes

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¹ At the 2006 Royal Geographical Society annual conference, not a single session was organised about disability and geography. Similarly, the 2006 Disability and Society conference, organised by the Disability Studies Association, featured one article by a geographer on a nongeographical theme, and few articles with a geographical or spatial focus. The last eight issues of the journal 'Disability and Society' feature a single article (out of 44 articles published) by a geographer, and on a subject matter tangential to geography.

² In the UK, most funding about disability and space goes to organisations that do not really think of space beyond a container category, or as something that is the backdrop to social action and process. Thus, Reading University's Research Group for Inclusive Design broadly adopts a physical and technical approach to the study of disability, so too the other major research centre, SURFACE, the Inclusive Design Research Centre, based at the University of Salford.

³ These pronouncements were part of a broader genre of work in the social sciences about the ethical roles and responsibilities of researchers (see Gouldner 1971). While it provided some valuable insights, much of the debate propagated static and undifferentiated, oppositional, categories, such as researcher–researched, academic, non-academic, expert, non-expert, disabled person, nondisabled person, etc. There was usually no identification of the complexity of subject positions, both within and between the categories. Relationships between the researcher and the researched were presented as one-way and detrimental to the research object and/or subject, such as disabled people. This was sometimes the case, although alternate stories began to emerge that, in a context of postpositivist study, emphasised the context-specific relations of disability, and the 'messiness' of the research process.

⁴ For details about the Geography Discipline Network, visit the following website: www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/background.htm

⁵ The project is called 'Inclusive, Accessible and Archaeology'. It is a joint venture between the Universities of Reading and Bournemouth, and Professor Roberta Gilchrist directs it. For details of the project, visit www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk/access-archaeology/inclusive_accessible/

⁶ Fuller and Kitchin (2004) contrast critical and radical geographers with those that are noncritical and nonradical. The former are characterised by an ideological commitment to challenge socio-spatial inequalities, and the latter conduct applied research for government and business which, so Fuller and Kitchin (2004) argue, supports the status quo. However, we concur with Pain (2006) that such a dichotomy is unhelpful. Engaging in applied research does not necessarily equate to being uncritical or failing to challenge the status quo (whatever that may be).

⁷ It is commonplace in disability studies, and in the geographies of disability, for authors to state that the social model guides them without saying what they mean or understand by the term 'social'. Part of the task, in developing a more sophisticated theoretical foundation, is to require authors to be much more explicit about (their) social theorisations of disability, not just to state that they are subscribing to a social theory of disability per se, but to say what particular social theory it is that they are referring to and/or using.

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