

# The role of theory in disability research – springboard or strait-jacket?

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*Abstract: This article is an elaboration of a key-note speech presented at the annual conference of the Nordic Network on Disability Research in Copenhagen 2001 discussing the role of theory in disability research. The discussion is based on reviews of disability research, mostly from Scandinavia and Britain. Two types of non-theoretical perspectives and three types of theoretical perspectives were found in the reviews. Strengths and weaknesses of the different perspectives are discussed and a typical Scandinavian perspective is identified.*

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## **The ‘theoretical temperature’ of disability research**

Theoretical development is regarded as one of the cornerstones in most disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields of knowledge. The object of this article is to explore the role of theory in disability research. In 1990, I was invited together with Mårten Söder (Gustavsson & Söder 1990), by FUB (The Swedish National Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities), to review and comment on the current social research concerning people with intellectual disabilities. One of the most striking results of that review was that a majority of the studies we examined lacked a theoretical perspective and theoretical analyses. Instead, they were dominated by a non-theoretical

perspective, that we called *the reformer’s perspective*. This perspective first of all defines the researcher’s role as that of a controller of ongoing reforms and programs. When I was invited to give a key-note speech at annual NNDR conference in Copenhagen 2001, it occurred to me that it might be timely to once again ‘take the theoretical temperature’ of current social science disability research. In this current review of recent publications, I have focused on British and Scandinavian disability research.

In preparing for this article, I also included articles more recently published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* and the British journal *Disability & Society*. In addition to this I also included 19 doctoral dissertations published during the years 2000 and 2003

in Sweden and Norway (two in education, one in special education, two in psychology, two in sociology, and one in social work) and some other publications that I have come across during the last years.

### **The absence of theoretical approaches**

The dominance of the non-theoretical reformer's perspective, that was found so striking in research on intellectual disability in the review of 1990, could not be found in this later review of disability research. Of course, it is possible that the position of theory could be weaker in studies concerning intellectual disability than in disability research in general, but a comparison of recent publications does not support such an explanation.

However, two non-theoretical perspectives were found in the reviews carried out in the beginning of the new millennium. The first was that which had been identified in our earlier review, which we named the reformer's perspective. As indicated above, this perspective is characterized by an underlying normative and technological agenda. Typically, programs with the object of improving such as integration or empowerment are understood as valuable in and of themselves. As a consequence, the first priority of disability research, from this perspective, is to monitor if reforms and programs have worked or not. Bogdan and Taylor (1988), refer to this perspective as 'the does-it-work' approach. In our review in 1990, Söder and I interpreted the

dominance of this perspective as a typical expression of a research tradition developed in an ideological, practice-oriented field. In the 1970s and 80s, the disability research agenda in the Scandinavian and most other Western countries was, to a large extent, set by politicians and professionals engaged in reforms aimed towards integration and normalisation. Furthermore, disability research, at least in Scandinavia at the time, engaged many new researchers with earlier experience from working in disability services, most of whom had a very limited experience of theoretical work.

An interesting discovery in the more recent review was the appearance of a new non-theoretical perspective. The common characteristic of this perspective was that the authors argued for an increased emphasis on the experiences of people with disabilities in disability research. Drawing on a distinction made by the North American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993), this position can be described as an argument for radical *experience-near perspectives* (cf. Gustavsson 2001).

### **The celebration of experience-near perspectives**

A few examples of this experience-near perspective could be found in the Nordic publications, but the most elaborated expressions of this non-theoretical perspective were found in the articles published by British Disability Studies researchers.

The interest in personal experiences of disability is not difficult to understand. Generally, knowledge about disability has been discussed from the perspectives of professionals and service-provider experts. This has been highlighted especially in the British Disability Studies tradition, where influential researchers with a personal experience of disability also have articulated a powerful critique concerning the earlier lack of interest in the experiences of people with disabilities. It has even been argued that traditional disability research, to some extent, has contributed to the existing oppression and marginalization of people with disabilities (Oliver 1996).

The radical experience-near model proposed by John Swain and Sally French (2000) can be seen as an alternative to traditional disability research. They present, what they call, a new model for understanding disability based on disabled people's own positive experiences, called *the affirmative model*:

In this paper we argue that a new model of disability is emerging within the literature by disabled people and within disability culture, expressed most clearly by the Disability Arts Movement. For the purpose of discussion we call it the affirmative model. It is essentially a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle

and life experience of being impaired and disabled. This view has arisen in direct opposition to the dominant personal tragedy model of disability and impairment, and builds on the liberatory imperative of the social model (Swain & French 2000, p.569).

The first, and most obvious, expression of the experience-near perspective in their article is the idea that research should be based on personal experiences of disabled people and that such experiences have a special validity in illuminating what it means to live with a disability, experiences that tend to be forgotten by non-disabled researchers. A Malaysian woman with a visual impairment, who was cited by Swain and French, for instance, introduced an unusually positive way of understanding her disability in telling how the situation had separated her from a poor and neglectful family and enabled her to go away to a good school at the age of five. She stated:

I got a better education than any of them [brothers and sisters] and much better health care, too. We had regular inoculations and regular medical and dental checks (Swain & French 2000:574).

Thus, experiences of being impaired may also give disabled people a heightened understanding of the oppressions other people endure. French found, for instance, that the visually impaired physiotherapists she interviewed could find such advantages in their own professional work.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, the experience-near perspective is expressed in the article by Swain and French in their argument that a priority should be given to experiences of disabled people in the analysis of how disability should be understood. Theory, they argue, only plays a secondary role. In concluding, the authors write that theories are rarely explicit in the validation of experiences of disabled people, but are often explicit in invalidation of such experiences. Therefore experiences should be allowed to speak for themselves. 'Quintessentially, the affirmative model is held by disabled people about disabled people. Its theoretical significance can also only be developed by disabled people who are "proud, angry, and strong" in resisting the tyranny of the personal tragedy model of disability and impairment' (Swain & French 2000, p.581).

### **The call for theoretical perspectives**

Disability researchers have for a long time called for theoretical perspectives. In our report reviewing research in Sweden, Söder and I (1990), argued for theoretical perspectives as a way of transcending the reformer's 'does-it-work'-approach. Mike Oliver (1999), among others, has also pointed to the importance of theory, stressing that only theory allows the researcher to go beyond individual experience, which, in turn, is necessary in order to discover and understand the influence of oppressive social structures. Providing faithful accounts of individual experiences is never enough for

emancipation, he argues. The idea is that disability research needs the analytical springboard that a theoretical perspective can offer in order to further our understanding and increase opportunities for emancipation of people with disabilities.

My recent review clearly shows that theoretical approaches occur very frequently in present disability research. The 'social' model seems to be the single most frequently-cited theoretical perspective, especially in British disability research (cf. Beckett & Wrighton 2000; Davis 2000; Llewellyn & Hogan 2000; Dowling & Dolan 2001; Goodley 2001).

The appearance of theoretical analyses in disability research raises the question about what characterizes these analyses. It should first be said that the identified theoretical perspectives showed a great variety. However, three basic theoretical perspectives showed interesting, similar characteristics. These similarities first of all seemed to concern the *focus* of the theoretical analyses. One type of perspective seemed to be based on ideas of *what disability really is*, how it is produced and how it can be understood. A second and third perspective analyse disability with a more open analytical focus.

### **Individual and contextual essentialism**

In a review of the Norwegian program for Special Education research 1994-1999, Söder (1999) proposes a terminology that describes the first type of theoretical

perspectives as *essentialist*. He identified two kinds of theoretical essentialism: individual essentialism and contextual essentialism, the first linked to what he called the ‘clinical model’ and the second to the ‘social model’.

In the same way as individual characteristics in the clinical model are made “essential”, the segregating context here (in the social model) is “the essential”, i.e. what explains the emergence of the problems (Söder 1999:26-27, my translation).

Typical recent Swedish examples of individual essentialism are Ulla Wide Boman’s (2000) dissertation, *Turner syndrome: psychological and social aspects of sex-chromosome disorder* and Stefan Gustafson’s (2000) dissertation, *Varieties of reading disability - phonological and orthographic word deficits and implications for interventions*. Here, genetic, neurological and cognitive levels of explanation are essentialized. It should be pointed out that neither Wide Boman nor Gustafson seem to ignore that there are other levels of explanation. In fact, they both stress the importance of multi-level perspective in disability research. Nevertheless, they both limit their own studies to specific individual aspects, thus in practice illustrating typical examples of individual essentialism.

The most typical example of contextual essentialism was found in studies made

by the social modellers. Davis (2000) gives us a short history of this model.

The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS, 1976) argued after Paul Hunt (1996) and Vic Finkelstein (1975), that disability should be seen as ‘caused by contemporary social organisation’. In Britain, this has led to the call for change in the way society is structured primarily in the area of rights and citizenship. It has been powerfully employed as a banner under which disabled people and others can unite to fight off their oppressors. Specifically, in the research arena, Barnes (1996a) has employed this perspective as a basis from which to call on academics to choose which side of the barricade they are on (Davis 2000:195).

This stress on the need for changes in the societal structures is an important characteristic of the first generation of the social modellers. The second generation replaces the materialistic perspective with more constructionist points of departure, emphasizing the oppressive forces of language and culture. Söder (1999) describes the essentialism of the first version of the social model in the following way:

In the social model, a sharp distinction is made between “impairment” on the one hand and “disability” on the other. The former has to do with the body. But the consequences of impairment

are, according to the social model, defined by the social context. Impairment becomes disability as a result of the barriers and oppression in the social context. But these mechanisms cannot be reduced to “culture” or “social meanings”. *They are embedded in the materialistic structure of society.* Oliver makes a point of not being a social constructionist, but a “creationist”. Everyday life conditions of people with disabilities are not the results of the representations and the attitudes of other people, but *a creation of the capitalist order of production* that, in various ways, marginalizes and oppresses different groups, among others, people with disabilities (Söder 1999:25-26, my translation and my italics)

### **The constructionist perspectives**

The second type of theoretical perspectives found in the recent reviews has, to some extent, been developed as a critique of the essentialist perspectives. What has been criticized is that an analysis based on assumptions of what disability really is often ends up in circular reasoning, where the researcher only confirms his or her own points of departure. Thus, the essentialist, theoretical perspectives risk to become a strait-jacket for the analysis. The alternative perspectives are often referred to as constructionist, post-modernist or post-structuralist. Here, disability is not

understood as something *created* by individual dysfunctioning or by oppressive social structures of a society, but rather as the result of a social, linguistic or cultural *construction*. In Britain, this approach is illustrated by the new generation of social modelist disability researchers (cf. Shakespeare 1997, Corker 1998, Corker & French 1999) who challenge the prioritization of the economic roots of disability in favour of more constructionist theoretical paradigms. Key-concepts in these paradigms are language and culture.

### ***Linguistic constructionism***

The linguistic approach draws on the importance of language and communication for the construction of disabilities. Using deafness as an example, Corker (1998) and Ohna (2001) have shown that disability is much about language and communication. Another linguistic approach draws on Foucault's work (1979, 1981) on discourse and more generally on the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences. One of the basic theoretical assumptions is that language practices not merely reflect but also *are* social orders, and thus strongly influence living conditions of people with disabilities. Different groups in a society, with different experiences and perspectives on life, try to construct their own social orders and use of language. However, power structures always tend to favour the orders and discourses of the groups in dominance and majority, giving them hegemony. An important goal for post-modern researchers is to give voice

to counter hegemonic discourses. Davis (2000) argues for this from an anthropological perspective:

In opposition to generalised views of culture, a new (or not so new, Campbell 1996) way of writing has been proposed in anthropology that represents the contrasting and conflicting relations between individuals who inhabit a social location (Marcuse 1986). It has been referred to as ‘polyphonic co-operative story telling’ (Tyler 1986), ‘multi-dimensional textualisation’ (Fischer 1986), ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin 1986; Rabinow 1986) and ‘multi-verisimilitude’ (Denzin 1997). [---] It is believed that anthropologist can listen to the different voices they encounter in the field, that the people they encounter may hold conflicting versions of what constitutes ‘the real truth’ (Davis 2000:196).

Key persons supporting this position in the British debate are Tom Shakespeare and Mairian Corker. In the current debate, the discursive approach has been criticized by Oliver and Barnes (1998), among others, for what could be called ‘*discursive essentialism*’, referring to the idea that ‘the world is somehow constructed through discourse alone’ (Oliver & Barnes 1998, in Corker 2000:446). One of Corker’s responses is that:

Language *in use* can and does change lives, in both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’

directions. As an example of ‘negative’ change, studies of racism (Matsuda et al., 1993; van Dijk, 1993, 1996; Whillock & Slayden, 1995; Riggins, 1997; Butler, 1998) show that racist discourses which are as regularised and ritualised have much capacity to injure, to oppress, and to exclude racial and ethnic groups at both personal and institutional levels, as the material barriers to inclusion that disabled people face in their everyday lives (Corker 2000:447).

#### ***Cultural constructionism***

Culture is the other key-concept in the constructionist perspective. Researchers such as Shakespeare (1997), Price & Shildrick (1998) and Gustavsson (2000b) have argued against materialist, medical and psychological theoretical perspectives on disability, placing instead an emphasis on the disability-engendering role of cultural ideas. These ideas, they argue, position those with culturally ascribed bodily and behavioral differences in locations of powerlessness and dependency. References are often made to Foucault’s work on the self-disciplining of the body, and there are in general many theoretical similarities between linguistic and cultural constructionist perspectives.

French Gilson & DePoy (2000) describe the cultural approach in this way:

Defining disability as culture transcends internal determinants of disability, subsumes social and political

definitions, and creates a cultural discourse that characterizes the collective of disabled people. Cultural views of disability suggest that all individuals who define themselves as disabled belong to a unique group which shares experiences, tacit rules, language and discourse. In this view, the notion of disability is one of group belongingness and distinction from other groups who do not share the disability identity [Mackelspang & Salsgiver 1999] (French Gilson & Depoy 2000: 209).

The cultural perspective has also been criticized for a kind of essentialism, for instance by supporters of the social model, pointing to the fact that inclusion into a subculture, can of course in some ways contribute to a more positive identity and to a sense of social community, but that these aspects are overestimated in the cultural perspective. Barnes (1996b), for example, objects to what he suggests is the reduction of explanations for social phenomena to 'thought processes'. Thus, even if the constructionist perspectives to some extent have been formulated as a critique against the limitations of the essentialist perspectives, constructionist perspectives as well, according to its own critics, run the risk of becoming strait-jackets for analysis.

### **The relative interactionist perspective**

The third type of theoretical perspectives identified in the reviews of current

disability research was, first of all, illustrated in Scandinavian publications. This approach is characterised by a *relative, interactionist* understanding of disability, often drawing on the so-called Scandinavian, relative definition of handicap/disability. Originally, this definition was introduced in the 1960s and 1970s in connection with the Scandinavian 'environmental turn' (Tøssebro & Kittelsaa 2003) as an alternative to the traditional, more individual essentialist definitions of disability. However, today the interactionist perspective is also understood as an alternative to essentialism, emphasizing a multi-level approach, that is, a theoretical perspective that rejects assumptions about any primordial analytical level and rather takes a programmatic position in favor of studying disability on several different analytical levels. A basic although not always explicitly stated credo underlying the multi-level approaches seems to be one of empirical sensitivity, in other words that disability theory must be empirically generated, and that empirical discoveries should guide the researcher in the decisions about where the most productive analytical focus of a specific study can be found. In the report on Norwegian special educational research, Söder (1999) called these theoretical perspectives *the relative perspective*.

One way of phrasing this is to say that these projects [adopting the relative perspective] take the relative definition of handicap seriously. It is impossible to



understand the processes producing disability, and consequently exclusion and discrimination, without studying the interaction between the individuals and the context. In order to understand this interaction, it is necessary not to lock oneself into the idea that certain individuals have certain shortcomings or problems and that these problems are to be set in focus, or that one beforehand has decided that the context has certain characteristics. Such projects demand certain openness towards what is going on; a sort of respectful approach to a reality where competent and reflective persons act and shape the order we want to study (Söder 1999:33, my translation).

***Four different versions of relative interactionist perspectives***

The relative definition of disability/handicap has often been identified as a productive perspective by Scandinavian disability researchers, but very few attempts to articulate this perspective have been reported. However, my recent reviews show that four more explicit versions of this perspective seem to be emerging. The first two seem to share a basic realist assumption about the phenomenon of disability, whereas the last two are more constructionist.

In the first version of the interactionist approach, the Scandinavian idea of the relative definition of handicap is linked to the WHO's international classification of disability ICIDH (1993). Here, the analytical levels are based on the three key-concepts of the classification,

impairment, disability and handicap and the analysis focuses on conditions that turn an impairment or a disability into a disadvantage (handicap) for a specific person. After the introduction of the new classification (ICF 2001), analysis is carried out in terms of the new key-concepts: body structure, activity, participation and environmental factors. One recently published example can be found in Anette Kjellberg's (2002) thesis on the citizenship of people with intellectual disabilities and in Granlund, Eriksson & Almqvist (2004).

A second version of the relative interactionist approach has been outlined by Danermark (2001) in terms of critical realism. Danermark's project is to articulate a program for handicap/disability research as an interdisciplinary science based on the Scandinavian relative perspective of handicap/disability. Interdisciplinarity, here is a way to integrate knowledge about disability from different analytical levels and disciplines and Danermark's approach is strongly influenced by critical realism as it has been presented by Bhaskar (1978), Collier (1994), and Archer (1995).

To some extent, Danermark's theoretical approach can be understood as a critique of radical constructionist positions, arguing, that disability is *just* a social construction. Drawing on Lupton (1998), Danermark argues for what Lupton calls a weak social constructionism, i.e. 'there is a reality independent of ourselves,

influencing the phenomena we seek to analyse in an interdisciplinary way' (Danermark 2001:294, my translation).

In the critical realist approach, interaction between for example individual and social phenomena is understood in terms of an interaction between different strata of reality. Danermark describes a hierarchy of strata on four different levels: the societal (social), the psychological, the biological, and the molecular level. Each level has its own mechanisms and works on its own premises. As a consequence, each level must develop its own methodologies and theories. However, critical realism also provides a kind of meta-theory that is supposed to facilitate integration of knowledge from different levels and disciplines. Empirical findings on each level are explained in relation to an underlying reality, first of all described in terms of mechanisms. Lower levels influence higher levels but critical realism distinguishes between the production and the influence of a specific mechanism. Bodily dysfunctions, for example, produce impairments but influence disabilities. A certain brain dysfunction, Danermark argues (2002), constitutes the necessary conditions for the disability we today call dyslexia. However, in order to be able to speak of dyslexia, we need to live in a society based on reading and writing. In this sense, Gutenberg can be said, not only to have invented the art of printing, but also conditions for dyslexia. However, this does not mean that dyslexia is merely a social construction.

Both the brain dysfunctions and the characteristics of our society constitute necessary conditions for the phenomenon we call dyslexia.

A third way of understanding the interaction between, for example medical and economic aspects of disability, has been presented by Mikailakis (2002). Drawing on Luhmann's (1995) phenomenological systems theory, and more specifically, the theory of observation, he argues that disability is observed differently from the perspectives of different systems. Observation theory distinguishes between biological systems, psychic systems and social systems. Thus, both observation theorists and critical realists, emphasise that a phenomenon like disability is differently understood from different perspectives, but an important difference between them is that the former understands the reality of disability as inaccessible for research. Reality in itself is not denied but socially constructed in the sense that a phenomenon can only be observed from a specific systems perspective.

Observation theory assumes that we cannot observe 'das [D]ing an sich', i.e. reality as it is. From this follows that we can reject all statements that man is something as such, i.e. all forms of essentialism (Ibid, p.224).

Thus, the difference between a medical and an economic perspective is not understood against the background of a

stratification of reality itself, but of the fact that they are based on observations from different social systems. In order to understand specific distinctions and meanings one must identify the system where these meanings and distinctions are used. From a medical (systems-) perspective, disability is observed as disease, defects, malfunctions, impairments or the object of treatment. From an economic perspective, disability is rather seen as lack of economic resources, inability to pay or poverty, and from an arts perspective disability is seen as ugliness or a defective body.

An important assumption in observation theory is that there can be no meta-perspective from which reality as a whole can be observed or understood.

There are biotic, psychic and social systems, or, in other words, organisms, consciousness and communication. But there is no system unity, a super-system, that embraces all these. There is a dividing line between organisms on the one side, and social and psychic systems on the other. Organisms are integrated on the basis of life (in the biological sense), social and psychic systems in contrast on the basis of meaning (Mikailakis 2002:219).

A bio-psycho-social language such as presented in the ICF is, systems theorists would argue, an impossible project and an expression of naïve realism. In this sense, observation theory as presented by

Mikailakis, is to some extent critical to the very idea of the interactionist approach. But as far as I understand, this does not mean that it is impossible to analyse several aspects of disability at the same time. The point is only that the analysis must be undertaken from one specific perspective. In fact, this specific way of understanding the relative, interactionist approach also characterizes the fourth version, one that can be called *critical interpretation*. Here, the prioritized analytical perspective is the life-world perspective of human meaning-making.

This approach has similarities both with systems theory and critical realism. Similar to critical realism, critical interpretation seeks an integration of knowledge from different analytical levels. Here, the key to this integration is the interpretation of what phenomena and processes on different levels mean from an insider's and/or outsider's position (Gustavsson 2001). In line with systems theory, critical interpretation does not accept the idea of an integrative meta-theory of disability. Interpretation of meaning is always done from a life-world perspective and can never do full justice, for instance, to molecular or biological findings. However, this does not mean that such findings have to be neglected. Their meanings can be included in an analysis together with the meanings of other aspects of disability.

In most critical interpretative studies, the interpretative strategy is more or less

implicit. However, the typical methodological procedure used is to combine analyses of both individual and social aspects of disability and to present the results of these analyses in terms of summarising interpretations. In this way interaction between, for example, individual and social findings can be investigated and the relative importance of such findings in a specific case can be determined. The underlying methodological logic of this approach is often expressed in terms of theory of interpretation and meaning. Findings are, for example, very often articulated as metaphors, indicating that empirical patterns can be seen or interpreted 'as something' (cf. Ricoeur 1986). The interpretative approach is critical in the sense that it critically validates all conflicting interpretations of the studied aspects of disability according to canons developed within hermeneutics (Hirsch 1967, Ödman 1979, Gustavsson 2000b).

A recent Scandinavian study illustrating this approach is Bibbi Ringsby Jansson's (2001) thesis titled *Everyday life arenas. People with intellectual disabilities, their everyday and social lives*. Here, the social lives of people with intellectual disabilities are studied from several social and individual perspectives. One perspective is constituted by the crossroad between current Swedish policy of integration of people with intellectual disabilities and the modern development of western urban societies, especially how these societal

developments shape the social life in local communities. Ringsby Jansson's interest, first of all, concerns what Oldenburg (1999) has called 'third places', that is small shops, local busses, squares and other kinds of public places we often find in the centres of modern western cities, where people maintain, so-called 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) with for instance shop-keepers or bus-drivers. In line with the interactionist approach, Ringsby Jansson links societal development to individual experiences of what these 'third places' and 'weak ties' mean to people with intellectual disabilities living in integrated, local group-homes. And her interesting analysis is also typically articulated in terms of meanings of, for example, third places:

In the metaphor, 'a home away from home', the representation of the meaning of the places for the users is expressed. Its openness and accessibility, its character of being at the same time well known and homelike as well as unpredictable and foreign creates a potential for an experience of safety, belonging and excitement. 'The regulars' give these places their special character but the excitement lies in the fact that one can count on meeting both with people one knows and with strangers. Both the neighbourhood and the close public places in the centre of the city offer this kind of meeting places. To several of the persons who took part in the study

such public places constituted important everyday arenas (Ringsby Jansson 2003:8).

### Discussion

How can the recent theoretical development in disability research be understood? First, it seems quite obvious that all the springboard effects that Söder and I hoped for when we argued for increased theoretical sensitivity in 1990 have not been realized in the way we expected. It is certainly true that the more frequent use of theoretical perspectives and analysis have made it possible for disability researchers to avoid being caught in current ideologies and problem definitions. An important aspect of this concerns increased opportunities for the development of critical perspectives on current ideologies and power structures. Another important achievement is that disability research now more clearly speaks the same language as researchers in other fields. As a consequence, disability research becomes more cumulative, and exchange with other knowledge fields becomes easier.

At the same time, this review of recent disability research show that theoretical perspectives also risk introducing a new kind of strait-jacket. Essentialist theoretical perspectives, stating what disability really is and in what theoretical framework it must be

understood, are the best illustrations of this. In a comment on the projects carried out within the Norwegian special education program, described above, Söder (1999) points to the risk of circular reasoning:

As we have seen, the different projects realize both the clinical and the contextual perspectives. In both cases—one could say—for better and for worse. Sometimes individual essentialism becomes a strait-jacket that makes it difficult to discover the social mechanisms that produce the problems of pupils, on other occasions.

[---] The perspective of contextual essentialism can sometimes end up in an almost circular reasoning, where the researcher only confirms his or her points of departure, when working from his or her own perspective (Söder 1999:32, my translation).

Thus, striving for increased theoretical sensitivity recent disability research, runs the risk of reducing the researchers' empirical sensitivity. Instead of becoming a springboard for in-depth investigation and critical analysis, theory here blindfolds the researcher in a new way. As pointed out by a number of disability researchers above, these dangers are also true for constructionist perspectives which tend to locate the construction, or at least our understanding of the construction, of disability in specific linguistic or cultural processes.

The challenge for disability research in the years to come seems to be to find a way of combining the development of both theoretical and empirical sensitivity. Here, the relative interactionist perspectives seem to offer interesting opportunities. These analytical perspectives are guided by an explicit multi-level approach and a special interest in exploring the interaction between different aspects of disability. However, examples of such approaches are still few and need to be more elaborated. Scandinavian researchers have a special responsibility in this regard, building on the long tradition of the relative definition of disability/handicap. A productive elaboration of these perspectives also demands a broader discussion and contribution from other disability research traditions, in line with the dialogue initiated, for example, in this special issue of SJDR.

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