

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY FRAMEWORKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Kirsten Brown, Edlyn Peña, Ellen Broido,
Lissa Stapleton and Nancy Evans

ABSTRACT

We seek to expand the disability theoretical toolkits of higher education scholars to include frameworks that view disability as multivalent. We start by describing limitations scholars can encounter when employing traditional medical, social, and minority frameworks. Then, we draw upon: (1) the temporal and fluid understandings of disability in critical disability theory, (2) the value critical realism gives to the body, impairment, and the environment, and (3) the work of Deaf epistemologies to call attention to the varied communication methods disabled college students use to encourage the use of frameworks that promote intersectional understandings that are authentic to lived experiences. We extend scholars' toolkits by encouraging the use of frameworks that value diverse human neurology and draw attention to the hegemonic dominance of Western thought. We conclude by discussing four implications and two limitations for higher education scholars.

Keywords: Ableism; critical disability theory; critical realism; Deaf epistemology; disability; research methods

“Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (Smith, 2012, p. 5). How scholars conduct disability research is a critical issue, particularly because it has direct implications for how college students with disabilities are understood and therefore supported. One major factor determining

how disabled students¹ are studied, conceptualized, and included centers on the disability framework from which researchers operate (Shakespeare, 2014). These frameworks serve as epistemological lenses that influence the conceptualization and design of research questions, data collection tools, and data analysis strategies in higher education research. We argue that understanding the different frameworks that shape disability research is important because some frameworks have unfavorable implications for college students with disabilities, at worst, and can empower disabled college students, at best.

Higher education scholars typically operate from incomplete theoretical toolkits because higher education graduate programs offer limited or no disability specific coursework (Berger & Lorenz, 2015) and top-ranked higher education journals rarely publish disability research (Peña, 2014), creating an absence of theoretical knowledge within the field. Incomplete theoretical toolkits are problematic; some disability frameworks are rooted in ableism – they reflect meanings of disability that were used to justify slavery and institutionalization, prevent immigration, force sterilization, and promote eugenics (Nielsen, 2012). Further, the multivalent and shifting nature of disability means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to employ a single framework to understand the experiences of disabled college students (Friedensen & Kimball, 2017). It is imperative that higher education scholars produce research that aligns “with disabled people’s own explanations of the problems of disability” (Oliver, 1992, p. 108). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to consider the role of theoretical frameworks and methodologies in higher education research by documenting the range and evolution of the major epistemological and ontological frameworks that have shaped and continue to shape knowledge about disability in postsecondary settings.

As disabled and abled researchers, we advance methodological discussions about disability by first describing and critiquing theoretical frameworks that have historically framed studies of disability issues in higher education research. Second, we review three frameworks that hold promise for inclusive research of, and with, disabled college students, and weave in examples of studies that operate from these varying paradigms. We conclude by describing strategies that higher education researchers can use to challenge ableist norms embedded in academic research.

TRADITIONAL DISABILITY FRAMEWORKS

Traditional frameworks served as the foundations for disability research during the twentieth century and in many cases continue to do so. We discuss these frameworks within our engagement of critical approaches because we recognize that they are based on tacit norms of research. Traditional frameworks contribute to *othering*, ontologically representing college students with disabilities as outside of “normal” and thereby perpetuating “the alienation, objectification and exclusion

¹In this chapter, except when citing others’ works, we use the language people with disabilities and disabled people interchangeably to honor both identity and person foci.

of individuals with disabilities” (Petersen, 2011, p. 294). Further, Western understandings (e.g., economic independence) are often “taken-for-granted” (Titchkosky, 2009, p. 79) and remain unquestioned. Because of these limitations, scholars who employ traditional frameworks, risk reproducing hierarchies of meaning and ableism while ignoring voice, privilege, and power.

Medical Model

The medical model has a long-standing tradition in the study of disability (Smart & Smart, 2006). Those who adhere to a medical worldview define disability as a product of biology, in which a congenital or chronic illness, injury, or some other departure from “normal biomedical structure or functioning has consequences for an individual’s activities of daily living and ultimately, for the individual’s ability to participate in society” (Scotch, 2009, p. 602). Disability is essentially seen as “trouble” and “a sign of something ‘gone wrong’” (Michalko, 2009, p. 66). Impairment, defined as “any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function” (World Health Organization, 1980, p. 27), is viewed as the basis of disability. Functional limitation, defined as inability to carry out specific life functions expected of students in specific age groups, is based on the extent of impairment (Longmore & Umansky, 2001).

Grounded in the scientific method, a positivist framework underscores the medical model (Engel, 1977). From this perspective, the focus of disability – including impairments and functional limitations – lies solely within the individual (Imrie, 1997). Accordingly, disabled individuals are viewed as passive victims, patients, invalids, or sufferers who must rely on others for assistance and follow the treatment plans laid out by their medical providers (Fine & Ashe, 2000). The medical model is often rooted in ableist notions to fix, treat, or make students with disabilities fit into a more able-normative world. Interested readers should consult Scotch (2009) and Drum (2009) for further information on the medical model.

Social Model

The social model of disability emerged in response to the limitations of the medical model. Within the context of the social model, disability is viewed as a social construct – the manner in which the individual makes meaning of the environment (Olkin, 2011). Barnes (1991) defined disability as “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers” (p. 2). Impairment is defined as “the limitation in a person’s physical, mental, or sensory functioning [which only becomes] salient or disabling in specific settings” (Marks, 1999, p. 80). No causal relationship exists between disability and impairment in the social model (Hughes, 2002).

The goal of social model proponents is to overcome environmental barriers so that disabled students achieve increased access and inclusion (Marks, 1999; Olkin, 2011). The environment, as used in the social model, includes social, political, and economic factors as well as physical components (Drum, 2009).

Oppression and exclusion resulting from environmental conditions (e.g., inaccessible classroom curricula and inadequate accommodations), rather than individual limitations, create the problems that college students with disabilities must overcome (Shakespeare, 2006).

The social model depathologizes disability and, since it has the support of some disability activists, it is easier for researchers to get buy-in for their studies. However, the social model, particularly in its materialist form, is based on Western values of hard work and independence (Marks, 1999), discounting contrasting values of the disability community such as interdependence and human dignity. For example, Western assumptions about the value of personal independence (e.g., being able to feed oneself instead of using a personal care assistant to eat) are pervasive, causing researchers to ignore the ways that all humans are interdependent (e.g., most people eat food that is grown, picked, packaged, transported and sold by other people). The social model also favors people who view disability as a positive part of their identity, particularly heterosexual White men with physical disabilities, and individuals who do not hold such an identity (e.g., do not view disability as an asset) may be devalued or excluded (Marks, 1999; Shakespeare, 2006).

In addition, the assumption that college students with disabilities are oppressed needs to be proved, but since disability is defined as an oppression, “a circularity enters into disability research: it is logically impossible for a qualitative researcher to find disabled people who are not oppressed” (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 201). For additional information about this model, see Barnes (1991) and Shakespeare (2006).

Minority Group Model

Adherents of the minority group model view disability in higher education as “a civil rights issue” (Hahn, 1985, p. 314). Following this model, disabled students are considered a minoritized group, similar to women and people of color, who face discrimination in political, social, and economic settings (Longmore, 2003). “A socio-political definition that views disability as the product of the interaction between individuals and the environment” (Hahn, 1991, p. 17) underlies the model. “Environment” includes the built environment but the focus is on the discrimination and prejudice created by attitudes of people in society (Hahn, 1985). Hahn (1991) added that “all aspects of the environment are shaped or molded by public policy,” and “that public policy is a reflection of widespread social attitudes” (p. 17). The goals of the minority group model are: (a) to help college students with disabilities establish a positive disability identity; and (b) to work for the establishment of laws and policies to eliminate disability discrimination (Hahn, 1985).

The minority group model is more complex than either the medical or social models since its focus is on the *interaction* of the person and the environment rather than only one of these variables. It also establishes a bond among college students with disabilities as part of an identity group leading to self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hahn, 1985). Advocates of the minority group model have achieved many policy changes leading to a more positive environment for

students with disabilities in the US (Longmore, 2003). Critics of the minority group model have pointed out the lack of attention given to the individual's body in this approach (Drum, 2009; Imrie, 1997) and a narrow focus on public policy approaches to reduce negative attitudes toward disability (Imrie, 1997). More information about the minority group model is located in Hahn (1985, 1991) and Longmore (2003).

Promising Disability Models

We discuss critical disability theory, critical realism, and Deaf epistemologies as three approaches that question the idea of disability as deficit-based, trouble definitions, challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge within disability theory, encourage intersectional awareness, and advocate for complex understandings of the relationship between impairment and disability. We chose these theoretical models because they are largely absent from the higher education literature. Exploring these theoretical frameworks advances the conversation on ways in which to research, understand, and support college students with disabilities.

Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory (CDT, also known as Critical Disability Studies or Cultural Disability Studies) primarily arose as a challenge to the lack of theoretical frameworks that either included local knowledge or allowed for a “causal relationship between impairment and disability” (Corker, 1999, p. 632). The development of CDT brought the struggle for social justice to areas beyond the social and political by including spaces and experiences that were meaningful to disabled students (e.g., culture, sex, and body), but not valued within the social model (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Themes that inform and characterize CDT include: (a) the critique of dichotomous thought processes, such as disability/impairment or society/body; (b) the relational dialogue that exists between embodiment and disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009); (c) the awareness that boundaries around disability are temporal and uncertain; and (d) the conceptualization of disability as “slippery, fluid, heterogeneous” (Shildrick, 2009, p. 3), and intersectional (Peña, Stapleton, & Schaffer, 2016). Within CDT, researchers give ontological prominence to “uncertainty, instability, hybridity, contingency, embodiment, and reflexivity” (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 4). Proponents of CDT view knowledge as situated and local.

Language and Definitions

Scholars operating in CDT prefer and frequently use disability-first terminology (e.g., disabled student) although some alternate between person-first and disability-first language depending on context (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). CDT scholars oppose the regulation of language and claim that journal guidelines or editorial standards that predetermine correct phrases are hegemonic (Shildrick, 2009).

One hallmark of researchers who use CDT is scrutiny of the definition of disability. Historical, social, geographic, and political contexts influence what counts as disability (Shildrick, 2012). This, among other reasons, leads many scholars employing CDT to “contend that there is no single, universal, fixed, stable disabled identity and that experiences differ in terms of both individual and contextual factors” (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014, p. 424).

As much of CDT builds upon deconstructing language, researchers using CDT resist explicit definitions of disability. Davis (2002) articulated, “Disability is an amorphous identity with porous boundaries” (p. 36). Thus, defining disability in higher education research from a CDT perspective becomes complex. Shildrick (2009) explained:

To set out any mutually agreed series of parameters would be to close down, and thus normalize, what must otherwise remain a shifting nexus of both physical and mental states that resists full and final definition. (p. 3)

Both examples demonstrate the assumption of CDT scholars that definitions are inherently inadequate.

Considerations for Higher Education Researchers

Disability researchers must consider their own positionality, political underpinnings, use of language, and participant accessibility when working within a CDT framework. CDT centers disabled voices and posits that since ableism is a widely spread form of oppression, the “responsibility for enquiry and analysis falls, then, not on disabled people alone but on all those who participate in the relevant structures” (Shildrick, 2009, p. 15). Non-disabled researchers must “interrogate precisely their own cultural and psychosocial locations” (Shildrick, 2012, p. 37), and use research as a tool to dismantle ableist educational structures. In short, within CDT, disability research agendas should be directed by disabled people; abled people engaging in disability research have a duty to ensure their research confronts ableism.

Researchers using CDT recognize that “the politics of knowledge creation is a critical dimension in the success of any social movement” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 47) and focus on the liberation that occurs through both the creation of new knowledge and by breaking down hierarchies of meaning that are used to control or exclude (Brown, 2009; Corker, 1999). In their exploration of CDT in the field of higher education, Peña et al. (2016) underscored the important role, researchers can play in studying disabled college students. That is, higher education researchers should aim to:

identify regulatory undertones that serve to control people with disabilities; critique disabling structures that permeate the educational landscape [...] and incorporate the voices and interests of people with disabilities in decision-making processes. (p. 89)

CDT addresses a major critique of the minority group, social model, and early disability studies frameworks by problematizing the intersection with other social identities (Peña et al., 2016), and presents an opportunity to engage intersectional research topics from a framework of social change

(Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Additionally, since scholars employing CDT view disability as fluid and temporal – by acknowledging that disability can change suddenly or over the life course – Davis (2002) proposed that researchers can capitalize on the idea that “instability allows disability to transcend the problems of identity politics” (p. 23). Disability identity is often a focus in the minority model, but problematic in that not all disabled college students self-identify as a person with a disability or hold a collective disabled identity.

CDT positions itself well as a theory for researchers interested in exploring a wide range of educational and social topics, such as sex, representations, and culture. Similarly, CDT is versatile enough to inform a variety of research methodologies including narrative study (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014), participatory action research (Gillies & Dupuis, 2013), and ethnographic research (Davis, 2000). CDT is congruent with other post-conventional theoretical frameworks (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Shildrick, 2009, 2012); researchers can draw on or engage with critical race theory (Campbell, 2008), feminism (Corker, 1999), and queer theory (McRuer, 2006) to explore intersectional topics. For instance, researchers might examine the consequences of ableism in particular student communities (e.g., autistic community college students of color or queer college athletes).

By the same token, researchers wishing to employ CDT may have trouble with operational definitions and inaccessible language. The highly academic language, references to Western philosophers, and verbose, dense writing style that often accompanies CDT creates obstacles to non-academic participants and college students with or without disabilities.

Among postsecondary research studies grounded in CDT, Gillies and Dupuis’s (2013) article serves as a noteworthy template. In their research on creating inclusive campus cultures for individuals with disabilities, Gillies and Dupuis employed CDT to frame a participatory action research study. They positioned CDT as extending beyond the biomedical model towards an approach that acknowledges the thorny interplay between individual embodiment and social oppression while moving towards a human rights approach. Readers interested in exploring CDT further are directed to Corker and Shakespeare (2002) and Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009).

Critical Realism

Critical realism is a philosophy that “claims to be able to combine and reconcile *ontological realism*, *epistemological relativism*, and *judgmental rationality*” (italics in original; Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 1998, p. ix), addressing limitations of positivism, social constructionism, and interpretivism. Critical realism has three foundational principles. The first is that reality, and in particular, causal relationships, exist whether we are aware of it or not (*intransitivity*). The second is that causal relationships operate in “relatively enduring” (Williams, 1999, p. 808) ways, allowing for fairly accurate predictions of natural systems, and somewhat accurate predictions of social systems (*transfactuality*).

Finally, reality is made up of multiple levels (*stratification*), the deepest of which are causal mechanisms. Applied to disability, this means there are molecular and biological realities to disability that exist independent of our experience or interpretation of them and those realities are somewhat, but not totally, predictable. Further, disabilities exist on molecular, biological, physiological, emotional, interactional, institutional, and cultural levels simultaneously, and all of these are equally real.

Critical realism is noted for its focus on ontology, and in particular, causal mechanisms, in contrast to most contemporary philosophy, which focuses on the epistemic question of what can be known. Critical realists presume “reality has an *objective existence* but that our knowledge of it is conceptually mediated” (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 15). Thus, critical realists assert that credible claims can be made about truths regarding reality (Danermark, 2002), while recognizing that our understanding of that reality is mediated by our social locations, experiences, and values, and thus is fallible. In the particular case of social phenomena, our understanding of that objective existence is challenged by the ways in which people and interactions change, especially when interacting with theory and research. Thus, researchers using critical realism recognize that social worlds are constructed, but that “these constructions are theorized as being constrained by the possibilities and limitations inherent in the material world” (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007, p. 102).

Language and Definitions

As Archer et al. (1998) noted, “the term ‘critical realism’ arose by elision of the phrases ‘transcendental realism’ and ‘critical naturalism’” (p. ix). Little (2013) indicated that Bhaskar never specified what he meant by the “critical” aspect of critical realism, but by looking at the material Bhaskar cited, one can infer a commitment to using our understanding of the world to engage in emancipatory activity.

When applied to research on disability in higher education, critical realists presume that there are multiple levels of reality, including important interactions at the molecular, physiological, psychological, socioeconomic, and cultural levels (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006). Thus, disability “is an *emergent* property, located, temporally speaking, in terms of the *interplay* between the biological reality of *physiological impairment, structural conditioning* (i.e., *enablements/constraints*) and *socio-cultural interaction/lelaboration*” (italics in original; Williams, 1999, p. 810).

These multiple levels of reality influence but are not caused by one another, as the following example demonstrates. Danermark (2002) explained that while two people might have the same biological causes of a particular form of hearing impairment, their psychological experience of that impairment will differ depending on their own coping mechanisms, or “differences in working [...] [or] lexical memory” (p. 57). The causal mechanisms at the psychological level are independent of those at the biological level, and both are true causal

mechanisms. Similarly, causal mechanisms at the social level differ; one person may attend a university that effectively creates conditions that support the person's ability to communicate while another university may be less effective. Understanding hearing impairment requires recognition of independent mechanisms operating at multiple levels.

Not being a disability-specific framework, there is no prioritized disability language. Generally, scholars working from a critical realist perspective use disability as an umbrella term, inclusive of both impairment and functional limitations, as well as the restrictions created by social norms, policies, and attitudes. Critical realist scholars define disability, for example, as “a relationship between intrinsic factors (impairment, personality, motivation, etc.) and extrinsic factors” (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 76), which can include the college environment, supports and accommodations, and oppressive policies and practices.

Considerations for Higher Education Researchers

Critical realism offers multiple benefits to researchers, although it presents complications as well. First, critical realism reminds researchers that disability always occurs in the context of a real, non-discursive body (Williams, 1999): “The body, in short, diseased or otherwise, is a real entity, no matter what we call it or how we observe it” (p. 806). This is both a benefit and a challenge to researchers, reminding us that we must attend to both bodies and experiences of college students. As Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) noted:

The relative importance and specific role of [bodily psychic, and social] components varies [*sic*] from disability to disability, and often from case to case, and is always an empirical question. (p. 292)

Additionally, critical realism suggests a need for “new ways [...] of conceptualising the relationship between the biological and the social, themselves real ontological strata, without reducing one to the other” (Williams, 1999, p. 814). Similarly, critical realism is especially suited for interdisciplinary research (Danermark, 2002; Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004; Pilgrim, 2014) because it allows for the use of and recognizes the value of multiple theoretical and methodological approaches. Because complex phenomena operate on multiple levels of reality, they are best understood when those levels are recognized and the ways in which they operate independently as well as interactively are considered. In the case of disability research in higher education, this is particularly evident in the broad heterogeneity of forms of impairment and experiences of disability; this heterogeneity makes context-independent claims about disability of limited value.

Because critical realism presumes that our understanding of reality is shaped by context, both that of the researcher and that which is researched (Pilgrim, 2014), findings from critical realist studies have restrictions on generalization. However, critical realist studies still allow researchers to make causal claims and to “reach conclusions that are highly relevant for the investigated phenomenon and avoid the mistake of ‘context stripping’ that is the sign mark of an empiricist/positivistic approach” (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004, p. 351). With its

focus on “how things come into being and change, not merely how they are ‘represented’ or are ‘constructed’ in knowledge claims” (Pilgrim, 2014, p. 2), critical realism allows for tentative predictions and suggestions of how to create change. That ability, however, is limited by recognition that most phenomena have several causes and consequences.

Similar to CDT, critical realism is grounded in Western thought (Gorski, 2013; Pilgrim, 2014) in that it is an explicit extension of the ideas of Western philosophers. Critical realism allows for recognition that “while different cultures have different views or beliefs or attitudes to disability, impairment has always existed and has its own experiential reality” (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 73). Higher education researchers seeking to employ critical realism may find the obfuscating language confusing and inaccessible to those without advanced graduate training. Inaccessible language presents similar challenges to those using CDT when designing research that engages non-academic disabled people as co-creators and partners in the research process.

While critical realism is not inherently political, most scholars using this framework to write about disability clearly hold a political perspective supportive of justice for disabled people. For example, Danermark and Gellerstedt (2004) described the ways in which ableism exists for disabled people at multiple levels of reality: “injustices to disabled people can be understood neither as generated by solely cultural mechanisms (cultural reductionism) nor by socio-economical mechanisms (economic reductionism) or by biological mechanisms (biological reductionism)” (p. 350). However, because critical realists presume reality operates on multiple levels, they recognize that political concerns are only one aspect of the experience of disabled people, and retain simultaneous focus on the body and individual responses as well as the political and socio-cultural aspects (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004). Thus, any definition of disability that focuses solely on oppression, or difference, is rejected (Shakespeare, 2014).

Authors write extensively about critical realism, but it is difficult to find empirical studies in higher education literature using a critical realist framework, though it is unclear why this is the case. Even most articles in the *Journal of Critical Realism* use a critical realist framework to analyze phenomena and refine theory, rather than being original research studies. The lack of an example or template to review for guidance might pose challenges to newer or less experienced higher education researchers. However, critical realism offers great potential for researchers by allowing the simultaneous consideration of physical, interpersonal, and societal aspects of disability issues situated in a higher education context. Shakespeare (2014) provided a primer for readers interested in understanding the application of critical realism to disability.

Deaf Epistemologies

The Deaf (Deaf is an inclusive way of acknowledging multiple identities within the Deaf world, including culturally Deaf, DeafBlind, Disabled Deaf, hard of hearing, and Late Deafened) community contributes to our comprehension of

the world and research with disabled college students. Researchers using Deaf epistemologies seek to understand the world from the perspective of individuals who live the experiences: Deaf people (Paul & Moores, 2012). Holcomb (2010) stated, “The epistemology of the minority consists of theories of knowledge created by members, about members’ modes of knowing, for the purpose of liberating members” (p. 471). Bauman and Murray (2009) explained, Deaf people “view their lives through a frame that is diametrically opposed to the frame of hearing loss” (p. 3). From this perspective, Deaf people contribute to the world at large through Deaf Gain. Deaf Gain is an avenue to interrogate the negative ways in which society interprets hearing loss and more deeply explores the possibility that Deaf people positively contribute sensory and cognitive diversity to the world. Reframing hearing loss “de-centers – and minimizes – the frame of normalcy” (Bauman & Murray, 2009, p. 2), thereby disrupting normative rhetoric for all disabled people.

Although Deaf epistemologies encourage non-deficit thinking, higher education researchers using this framework also understand disability through a meta-paradigm lens, which is to understand disability from medical and cultural perspectives. The medical view focuses on what is lost and ways to fix deafness or disability, while cultural perspectives focus on identity, language, artifacts, values, and community (Paul & Moores, 2012). Wang (2010) stated that researchers “need to move beyond the either-or-dichotomies that sparked the destructive interparadigmatic debates [because] standing alone, each paradigm is inadequate” (p. 431). Deaf epistemologies recognize Deaf people exist in a socially constructed dichotomy; the world understands Deaf as disabled, but many in the community see themselves as a linguistic minority (Holcomb, 2010) and reject this binary.

Language and Definitions

Deaf people live an insider-outside perspective every day, as other historically marginalized groups do in different ways, and their ways of knowing complicate how researchers understand and approach educational inquiry with all communities with disabilities. Deaf epistemologies allow higher education researchers to evolve by disrupting binary and single ways of constructing disability. Deaf epistemologies are anti-essentialist, thus encouraging researchers to more broadly understand college students with disabilities as a heterogeneous community. Paransis (2012) stated:

There is little reason to believe, and certainly little or no objective research, to support, the idea that multiple dimensions of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social diversity are not potent and interactive factors that may shape unique forms of complex Deaf identities and lead to diverse personal epistemologies within the Deaf community. (p. 65)

This same consideration must be given to all disabled people. Hence, Deaf epistemologies push researchers and participants to see themselves as complex people who are not solely defined by the environment or their ability to engage in environments. Researchers who employ Deaf epistemologies allow disability and other social identities to co-exist in the center of educational research.

Because the Deaf college student community is diverse, there is no one way to see or experience being Deaf. There is also no way to take the Deaf community out of most higher education contexts that are majority-hearing worlds. The world Deaf people understand is consciously and subconsciously co-constructed with hearing people. Sometimes that co-construction comes from a place of oppression and discrimination and other times it is co-constructed from a place of support and advocacy. By acknowledging this contradiction, issues of oppression can be addressed. In particular, the term audiocentrism is used to describe assumptions and attitudes of “privilege exhibited by most of the dominant hearing majority” (Eckert & Rowley, 2013, p. 104).

Considerations for Higher Education Researchers

Similar to CDT and critical realism, higher education researchers must consider that Deaf epistemologies stem from Western thought (Young & Temple, 2014), and are “influenced by the basic tenets or variation of critical or cultural theories” (Paul & Moores, 2010, p. 419). Further, Deaf epistemology is about and for Deaf people, and is not necessarily applicable to all disability research. However, there is much to be learned from Deaf epistemology that applies to disability research more broadly. The Deaf college student community is complicated and within the scope of broader research projects Deaf students may be grouped or may identify themselves as having a disability. In these cases, researchers should consider using Deaf epistemology to more appropriately or accurately understand participants. Deaf epistemology reinforces that the way individuals make meaning of their lives is influenced by historical happenings, constructed by issues of power and privilege, and informed by their interactions with others and researchers must understand these complexities. Researchers can employ Deaf epistemologies to show that there is not one way to be Deaf (Young & Temple, 2014), which serves as a reminder of diversity within disabled spaces (Shakespeare, 2014).

Proponents of Deaf epistemologies state that knowledge is socially constructed, thus, centering Deaf voices and Deaf ways of operating in the world and using personal accounts to document knowledge is paramount (Holcomb, 2010; Paul & Moores, 2012). This is an important component of Deaf epistemologies when it comes to the research process and the ways in which higher education researchers should engage in responsible and ethical research. Encouraging the use of Deaf epistemologies, Singleton, Jones, and Hanumantha (2014) have defined ethical research with Deaf communities as: (a) incorporating cultural and linguistic awareness in scientific endeavors; (b) creating accessible research and dissemination practices; (c) making the results available to any participant who expresses interest; and (d) re-framing Deaf and hearing collaboration models. The practices of considering the importance of language, making implications accessible, building appropriate relationships with participants, and being open to multiple understandings of what it means to be Deaf extends to all disabled college students and the researchers who work with and within their communities.

Higher education researchers using Deaf epistemological perspectives should ask themselves questions such as: is the consent information delivered (i.e., written, signed or spoken), and constructed (i.e., jargon free and accessible language) in a way that participants will be able to understand? What language would the participants prefer? Is the space well lit, conducive to easy visual communication, and fully accessible and appropriate for all participants? Scholars who use Deaf epistemologies also question participant and researcher relationships as they relate to collaborative projects, power dynamics, and who really benefits.

Within the scope of research in higher education, Stapleton's (2015) work with collegiate Deaf women of color is an example of a study based on Deaf epistemologies. Stapleton's research considered linguistic awareness, environment, and power dynamics in the recruitment, interview, and analysis process. Readers interested in exploring Deaf epistemologies further should consider Young and Ackerman (2001), Young and Temple (2014), and Stapleton (2017).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this chapter, we argue that researchers should expand their theoretical toolkits to include frameworks that are explicitly anti-ableist, view disability as multivalent, and use approaches that support the emancipation of disabled college students. We provide three examples of promising frameworks that do so. In proposing directions for future research, we draw upon: (1) the temporal and fluid understandings of disability in CDT; (2) the value critical realism gives to the body, impairment and the environment; (3) the work of Deaf epistemologies to call attention to the varied communication methods disabled college students use; and (4) the challenge all three frameworks bring to how disabled students are positioned in research, including the promotion of an intersectional understanding that is authentic to lived experiences. Further, we seek to fuse the emancipatory tools provided by promising perspectives with the understanding of human neurology as diverse (Friedner & Block, 2017), and an awareness of the hegemonic dominance of Western thought (Smith, 2012). We outline four implications and two limitations for higher education researchers to consider.

Researchers can employ understandings of disability as fluid and temporal to reject the logic of diagnostic prevalence as the primary rationale for the significance of disability scholarship. In doing this, researchers posit disability as worthy of study beyond justification schemes that are inherently tethered to the medical model or deficit understandings. For example, in writing this chapter we made an intentional decision not to ground the significance of our work in the often-cited data about diagnosis rates over the lifespan, the prevalence of disability among college students, or legal requirements (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act). Disability is "central to the human condition" (Davis, 2006, p. xv) and therefore disabled culture, experiences, impairments, and educational endeavors are valuable.

Critical realism's recognition of independent mechanisms (body, impairment, and the environment) operating at multiple levels offers researchers a tool to understand how different college students with the same impairment may have very different educational experiences. Further, researchers can use critical realism to challenge existing higher education literature that frequently presents disability as a monolithic category (Vaccaro, Kimball, Wells, & Ostiguy, 2015).

Deaf epistemologies call attention to the importance of using varied communication methods. Multiple means of access, inclusion, and dissemination are principles that extend beyond the Deaf community (Friedner & Block, 2017). The language and communication methods researchers used must be accessible to a broad range of college students with multiple ways of understanding the world. Researchers should include funding for accommodations and interpreters within their grant and research budgets and employ principles of universal design (e.g., collecting interview data using the participants' method of communication or making surveys screen reader accessible; Peña et al., 2018).

CDT, critical realism, and Deaf epistemologies all challenge how disabled students are positioned in research. Higher education researchers can address issues of ableism and hierarchies of power by encouraging the inclusion of participants as co-researchers. This process of integration seeks to connect research directly with the disabled student community and give authentic communication to people with disabilities in all parts of the research process (Brown, 2009; Vincent et al., 2016). Additionally, presenting counter-narratives that disrupt master narratives about disabilities in higher education is another emancipatory and inclusionary approach that privileges the voices of the disabled. Future research must pay greater attention to intersectionality – to disability and other intersecting identities coexisting in the center of higher education research (Peña et al., 2016) – and we point readers to Kerschbaum, Eisenman, and Jones (2017) for an in-depth discussion.

The three critical theoretical frameworks described have limitations. Oliver (1992) and others (e.g., Chappell, 1998; Lubet, 2009) criticized disability research for being inaccessible to disabled individuals by shoring hierarchies of meaning; limiting individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities from conveying their experience in academic venues. Shildrick (2009) explained that researchers must “balance the activist's cry for accessible conceptualization with the scholar's understanding of the complex, interwoven but continually changing fabric of human societies” (p. 64). We agree that the tension between accessible and academic language is one of the difficulties higher education researchers using critical frameworks face. Drawing on Foucault's (1980) idea that knowledge is a form of power, we posit that, similar to the social model, critical frameworks also create restrictions for individuals with impairments. By employing highly academic language (e.g., transfactuality), scholars using critical perspectives may alienate disabled people and non-scholars who are interested in disability (e.g., parents, allies), and may further uphold hierarchies of knowledge, producing research that is inaccessible to disabled college students with learning, intellectual, developmental, or processing differences and other diverse ways of knowing.

Neurodiversity is one concept that researchers can employ to question academic norms (Nachman & Brown, 2019). Neurodiversity shifts away from deficit-driven understanding and describes “the neurological diversity of autistic people, dyslexic people, and people with other major differences in cognitive processing” (Robertson & Ne’eman, 2008, para. 8). Neurodiversity inherently honors variation; there is no one way of being, communicating, or knowing. Further, we suggest that scholars should upend academic hierarchies by learning from frameworks that originate in non-academic spaces (e.g., spoon theory; Miserandino, 2003 and disability justice; Sins Invalid, 2015).

Finally, researchers should acknowledge that Western underpinnings anchor critical frameworks and the continued “hierarchal social structure which accords experts an elite role” (Oliver, 1992, p. 102), as evidenced by the lack of space that critical perspectives afford to learning and communication differences. Specifically, Western norms within published critical disability scholarship are inherent and often unquestioned. As Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) noted:

Disabled people in the majority world have been marginalised often as a result of colonisation, colonial rule and post-colonialism; these cases constitute 80 per cent of the 650 million disabled people in the world. (p. 64)

Although scholars using critical frameworks acknowledge Western roots and some have issued calls for research based on non-Western perspectives (e.g., Lubet, 2009; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), we argue that the veiled omission of non-Western ways of knowing in published scholarship is significant to the future of disability research within higher education that seeks to challenge hegemonic power structures. Disability researchers need to engage with decolonizing methodologies (e.g., Smith, 2012) in higher education contexts.

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