

Symposium on Disability Geography: Commonalities in a World of Differences

Disability Studies Quarterly
Fall 2001, Volume 21, No. 4
pages 2-5 <www.cds.hawaii.edu>
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Introduction

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We are pleased to have been given the opportunity by DSQ editor David Pfeiffer to present some of the wide-ranging and fascinating work currently being undertaken by geographers and researchers in other related disciplines on disability topics. As a means of introducing disability studies scholars to the geographical perspective, we begin with some comparisons to the discipline of history. Geographers approach the study of human phenomena through a spatial or areal lens, using an enriched spatial analytic vocabulary (proximity, locality, access, etc.) and employing maps, in much the same way that historians tend to organize their studies of human phenomena through a lens of time and the temporal imaginary. While most of the studies included here may be classed within the realm of social, cultural, and medical/health geography, we also are happy to present work by urban environmental planners.

Social geography emerged as a subdiscipline of American and British geography during the late 1960s. It has long had close ties with socialist and radical geography, areas of concern that were the product of human geographers' negative reactions to the heavy emphasis of quantitative analysis and regional studies on describing rather than explaining the causes and socio-spatial relationships of social dislocation and social inequity. The robust body of urban social geographic research on deinstitutionalization and mental illness can be traced back to this period. Health and medical geography have also experienced intense growth in the last 35 years. But only since the mid-1990s have researchers conducting work on disability and chronic illness begun to meet and collaborate (and occasionally confront) each other. Some of these initial encounters were strained, as advocates of a social model approach went head to head with researchers whose work relied more heavily upon the terminology and models of medicine and the behavioral sciences (see the article by Rob Kitchin).

Yet disability geographers, housed within a discipline that habitually spans conceptual boundaries (art vs. science; people vs. landscape; social science vs. physical science), have

learned to accept the diverse character of their colleagues' work. Whether we opt to work in collaboration with, or on behalf of, the persons with disabilities, disability geographers (who may or may not have disabilities themselves) share a similar motivation to draw attention to the presence of people with disabilities within our societies and to improve the lives of persons with disabilities. This has been captured in the mission statement for the Disability Specialty Group (DSG), affiliated since 2000 with the parent Association of American Geographers (AAG).

In this issue, seventeen contributors present research based in Thailand, Indonesia, India, Ireland, England, Scotland, Australia, Singapore, Southern Africa, and the United States. While recognizing the diversity of these papers in terms of locality, approach and subject matter, we have grouped them here around two key themes: Voices and the Paradoxes of Policy.

The first section, Voices, is devoted to papers that flesh out geographically-nuanced portrayals of lives with disabilities. All of these authors utilized qualitative research designs to pursue their research questions. The first two papers grow out of dissertation research considering the conflicting priorities of different Southeast Asian voluntary organizations. Based on her work in an in-depth study of a South Indian charitable organization for children with disabilities, Nirmala Erevelles describes an uneasy paradox that exists between marginal classes (particularly children with disabilities and the impoverished single women employed to care for them) within Indian society. As part of his dissertation research Vincent Del Casino volunteered for a year-and-a-half with an organization devoted to HIV/AIDS outreach in Northern Thailand. In the case presented here, Del Casino focuses on the limited agency that persons with HIV/AIDS exercise within such organizations. While subjected to surveillance and authoritative discourse, some are still able to use the organization's non-governmental status to resist discrimination in other areas of their lives.

Neela Thapar and her collaborators, Surinder and Candy Bhardwaj, use the stories of two US men dealing with the onset of multiple sclerosis to examine the relative contributions of physical and social supports in promoting and preserving quality of life. Ruth Butler and her colleagues share with us some of the findings of their on-going research with d/Deaf teenagers and older adults in the United Kingdom. Susan Levy discusses the contrasting perspectives of those persons with disabilities living outside and within sheltered housing in Dundee, Scotland. Finally, Rob Kitchin reflects on some of the hard lessons he has learned from several years of undertaking and completing participatory action research projects. We feel that this is a timely assessment of an approach that has been long advocated by geographical researchers and persons with disabilities alike.

The second section of essays, Paradoxes of Policy, is comprised of papers that demonstrate how policies articulated in abstract terms and at typically distant loci of authority (well intended though they may be) too often fail or fall short in their implementation. In the wake of Sydney, Australia's hosting of the 2000 Paralympic Games, Simon Darcy reviews the planning process and the potential outcomes of the Games for persons with disabilities.

The next three contributions discuss the potential for increasing disability awareness and promoting realistic plans and goals addressing physical access in developing countries. Marcus Power draws upon his recent work concerning war-related physical disabilities and with definitions of disability in Mozambique and Angola to consider the prospect for empowering development policies in Southern Africa. He finds that in South Africa and Mozambique local disability initiatives show the greatest promise. Inge Komardjaja gives us an in-depth look at how

people with disabilities are perceived in Indonesia and how the streets and related infrastructure limit the mobility and access of people with mobility impairments. More broadly, Kenneth Parker reviews demonstration projects and awareness campaigns undertaken throughout Asia on behalf of persons with physical disabilities, as well as the elderly, as part of the United Nations' "Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons" (1993-2002). Parker also discusses the kind of economic arguments that are more successful in countries like Singapore that lack formal civil rights guarantees for persons with disabilities.

In the final contribution to this section, Deb Metzel and Pamela Walker summarize the historical and contemporary social policies for people with mental handicaps that impact their participation in American society, in many cases tying them to formal service and support systems while providing the illusion of inclusion.

We have been so pleased with these submissions that a second symposium on Disabilities and Geography has been scheduled for Winter 2003. Consider this announcement an early Call for Papers and please contact Deb Metzel at <dsmetzel@yahoo.com> about submitting. A more complete Call for Papers will be posted and distributed next year.

We invite scholars in the allied spatial disciplines (those devoted to planning, landscape interpretation, and spatial analysis) to join the Disability and Geography International Network (DAGIN). Founded six years ago by geographers from Britain, Canada and the United States, DAGIN members have since organized conference sessions and special publications in all three countries. The primary venue for organizing and discussion amongst DAGIN members is the international discussion list GEOGABLE, operated out of the University of Kentucky. Information on joining the GEOGABLE listserv can be found at the following address: <<http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/interests/ds-hum/geogable.html>>. Additional questions should be directed to Mike Dorn at <mdorn@zoo.uvm.edu>.

If you happen to be in Los Angeles this spring between March 19 and 23, 2001, we invite you to meet us at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers. When the final schedule is confirmed, we will post the schedule of presenters and their abstracts via the GEOGABLE listserv.

Mike Dorn and Deb Metzel are also happy to field inquiries regarding the AAG Disability Specialty Group, the Disability and Geography International Network, and disability geography more generally. As co-editors of this issue, we contend that the breadth of perspective within the discipline of geography lends itself to the complex task mapping the changing place of the disability in today's society.

Finally, we would like to thank all the contributors who enthusiastically submitted abstracts that turned into great articles. We were pleased to receive works from old friends and now new friends and we hope that you enjoy reading about disabilities through these various geographical perspectives. Thanks also to David Pfeiffer for being an encouraging and amenable editor-in-chief.