

CURRENT ISSUES

# All We Are Saying is Give Disabled Researchers a Chance

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Disability research is increasingly becoming a contested area and this journal, through the publication of numerous articles including a special issue in 1992 and a three-way debate (Barnes 1996a, b; Bury, 1996; Shakespeare, 1996), has played a key role in trying to raise and debate key areas and issues. In this paper, we want to consider the important issue of disabled people undertaking disability research.

Over the last decade or so market forces have played an increasingly important role in research generally, and disability research is no exception. The insidious and apparently unstoppable commercialisation of research has meant that competition for research contracts has intensified considerably. In such a climate the economics of the research process play an ever increasing role in determining who is able to do disability research and who is not, as well as what kinds of disability research is funded.

There have been countervailing forces pulling disability research in other directions however. The most important has been from disabled people themselves, insisting not only that they have a voice in such research, but also that it contributes to their liberation. While the undermining of traditional notions of academic independence and objectivity in research (Barnes, 1996a) is to be welcomed in some respects, it has also had some important and worrying implications for those of us trying to develop a more emancipatory research agenda. This is particularly the case with reference to the employment of disabled researchers.

The vast majority of disability research is funded by four main players; the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department of Health, the Department of Social Security and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Most of the research they fund takes place within the research establishment; academia, large commercial research organisations and the like, and as such it is largely outside the influence, let alone the control of disabled people and their organisations. While we hope to see more funds directed explicitly towards disabled peoples' organisations, that is another issue for another day.

Here, we want to suggest that disabled peoples' opportunities to participate in disability research, despite the emergence of an emancipatory agenda, remain very limited. We are not suggesting that only disabled people can or should do disability

research and we do not believe that an accredited impairment is a necessary prerequisite for doing disability research (Barnes, 1992, 1996b). However, the track record of non-disabled people doing disability research has not been noticeably successful. Hence, we would like to see more disabled researchers not only in the field of disability research, but in research generally.

The problem here is that because of society's failure to accommodate the needs of disabled people, employing disabled researchers can have serious resource implications which have yet to be addressed properly by the main players funding disability research and, indeed, the research establishment which receives the grants to carry it out.

Consider, for example, the difficulties encountered by someone with a visual impairment trying to compile an appropriate literature review. The overwhelming bulk of published data is as yet unavailable in accessible formats. Consequently, the blind researcher will need the help of a reader to scan the relevant journals for appropriate material. This will then need to be transcribed either in Braille or on to tape. This is a process which can prove expensive both in terms of cost and time.

Environmental barriers present a host of problems for disabled researchers doing field work. Inaccessible transport systems, for example, mean that transport costs for a disabled researcher may be disproportionately higher than those of non-disabled peers. Furthermore, because of access problems disabled researchers may have to hire accessible buildings in which to hold focus group discussions or conduct interviews. Moreover, as few of us are able to use sign language, deaf researchers will need the support of an interpreter and people with personal assistance needs will need the support of a personal assistant.

Some disabled researchers may also require the use of additional technical aids and equipment. Examples might include scanners for enlarging printed data or voice operated word processing systems. Recent cuts in government employment schemes mean that funding for such equipment may no longer be forthcoming from statutory sources. Disabled researchers cannot and should not be expected to meet these costs themselves. So, they must be built into the research budget.

It is important to remember too that for some disabled workers everyday tasks take longer. Some people with intermittent and unpredictable impairments such as multiple sclerosis, for example, may need a more flexible and less demanding work schedule. One of the key features of a disabling society is that disabled workers are expected to perform like super cripples in order to hold down a job. All of which needs to be taken into account when drawing up research timetables.

Finally, while research continues to be funded on the basis of short term contacts, hence requiring researchers to be geographically mobile, disabled people are going to be severely disadvantaged. Finding suitable accommodation and setting up appropriate personal support in a new area are things that, if possible at all, are likely to take a long time to establish. And in the meantime few disabled people can make do in student accommodation or on a friend's floor.

Clearly, if we are serious about encouraging disabled people to enter the research field, and I believe that most of us involved in disability research are, then these concerns must be accounted for in all future research proposals and research

agendas. Moreover, funding agencies must also recognise that these are legitimate considerations and they must be encouraged not to discriminate against research organisations and researchers who adopt such a policy when awarding research contracts.

After all, as disabled peoples' demands to be included in all aspects of life become more vociferous, specific areas like disability research will have to address these issues more systematically than they have up to now. And as more and more disabled people emerge, particularly from the masters programmes now being developed in a few universities, the suggestion that there are no suitably qualified disabled researchers becomes a less and less sustainable excuse for researching emancipation while continuing to practice discrimination.

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