Enriching Social Work Through Interdisciplinary Disability Studies

Irene Carter, Christine Quaglia, & Donald Leslie
University of Windsor

This paper recommends that faculties of Social Work incorporate Disability Studies in their curriculum by embracing its interdisciplinary deconstructionist perspective. Disability Studies encourages Social Work to move beyond person-in–the-environment and anti-oppressive approaches to find more effective ways of removing barriers for persons with disabilities, and new opportunities to include them in the larger culture. Discussing the critical nature of Disability Studies, the authors point out how Social Work is learning to embrace the interdisciplinary nature of Disability Studies.

Introduction

Traditionally, liberal arts have influenced undergraduate education. It is "designed to give students foundational knowledge that equips them to make free, informed choices about themselves and the world in which they live" (Barker, 2003, p. 248). However, professional disciplines such as Social Work, although influenced by the liberal arts, have developed largely distinct, separate professional programs of study. Joy Mighty (2009) makes the point that enormous "social, political, economic, and environmental problems that face the global community demand remedies and solutions that exceed the capacity of any single discipline or specialization." Citing Klein (1998), Mighty explains that interdisciplinary approaches transcend the limits of single disciplines to increase our capacity to understand and address problems that are too complex for one discipline.

There is a high level of compatibility between the values and ethics of Social Work and Disability Studies. Both have a commitment to social advocacy, social change, and client empowerment. Both focus on strengths rather than pathology, and each one is committed to diversity and the elimination of oppression (Gilson & DePoy, 2002). Both Social Work and Disability Studies promote respect for individuality, dignity, acceptance, self-determination, and empowerment.

Social Work uses approaches to intervention with vulnerable populations, such as, the person-

in-environment, strengths, and anti-oppressive perspectives. The person-in-environment perspective "views the client as part of an environmental system" (Barker, 2003, p. 322), taking into account social relationships and other influences. Saleebey (2006) articulated a strengths approach in which "the central dynamic of the strengths perspective is precisely the rousing of hope" (p. 8) that empowers people to address their own problems and to develop their own problem-solving skills to deal with adversity and stress. Anti-oppressive practice "focuses on both confronting and changing those social institutions, policies, laws, and economic and political systems that operate in a way that benefits the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups" (Mullaly, 2002, p. 193).

Disability Studies deconstructs medicalized disability, locating the problem of disability in society's failure to provide for people with disabilities rather than individuals' limitations (Oliver, 1990). Disability Studies offers a social construct model and a diversity model in working with people with disabilities. The social construct model explores the nature of oppression and its meaning for the individual, helps people to see that oppression is socially grounded, and works to lessen the effects of oppression (Rothman, 2003). The disability discrimination model sees impairment associated with disability as the result of discrimination, poverty, and marginalizing services, such as special education and group homes (May & Raske, 2005). The disability discrimination model uses a framework that includes a blend of the strengths perspective, empowerment, resiliency, and the medical model to support individual, relationship, and societal change.

Like Disability Studies, Social Work must find more effective ways of removing obstacles to inclusion for people with disabilities and to address the increasing societal demand to include those with disabilities in the larger culture. Social Work must include disability, along with gender, race, and class, in their professional education about diversity (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). The authors suggest Social Work should strengthen its long-standing tradition of interdisciplinarity by embracing the critical nature of interdisciplinary Disability Studies.

Historical Perspective of Social Work and Disability Studies

The discipline of Social Work and the area of Disability Studies share perspectives and goals. Both have historically integrated knowledge from the arts and social sciences. Disability activists and academics alike have begun to question the fundamentals of both service delivery and professional practices with regard to people with disabilities. Although compatible in approach, the study of disability has not, until recently, been broached by the field of Social Work. In a survey of 17 Bachelor programs and 15 Master's programs from 22 out of 31 accredited Canadian Schools of Social Work, Burge, Druick, Caron, and Ouellette-Kuntz (1998) looked at coursework and field experiences. They found 79.2% of Bachelor and Master's level field placements had no focus on serving people with developmental disabilities. Given that 0.8% of the general Canadian population has a developmental disability, Burge et al. (1998) stressed the need for social workers to gain knowledge about the issues and values that are important to people with developmental disabilities.

In examining how Canadian Schools of Social Work have responded to disability issues, Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, Leslie, and Macdonald (2008) found the need for enhancement, despite some recent improvements. They found obvious barriers to the inclusion of those with disabilities in terms of recruitment, admissions, accommodations, retention, graduation, employment, and curriculum. In addition to the issues faced by students, there were also issues around hiring faculty and staff with disabilities, and university relations and resources. Dunn et al. (2008) recommended that Social Work explore issues of accessibility and accommodation and develop best practices to ensure effective implementation – for example, Schools of Social Work could train faculty in Universal Instructional Design (UID), an approach familiar to instructors in Disability Studies. Instructors who employ the principles of UID in course design and delivery consider the potential needs of all learners (Burgstahler, 2008). Integrating the Disability Studies curriculum with Social Work

allows opportunities for instructors to identify and remove unnecessary barriers to teaching and learning for all students in both programs, while preserving academic rigor (Coomber, 2007).

The School of Social Work at the University of Windsor is an example of an academic program that has moved ahead in creating, developing, and promoting an inclusive environment. For instance, a course on disability, developed by Donald Leslie (2008), reflects an interdisciplinary approach, using the social model and principles of UID. Leslie furthered this endeavor by taking a leadership role in spearheading collaborative efforts between the Department of Psychology and School of Social Work. This project culminated in the development of the Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program.

The University of Windsor Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program

The Interdisciplinary Honours Degree in Disability Studies at the University of Windsor, introduced in September 2008, is based on the social model of disability. The Disability Studies Program is consistent with the commitment to accessibility, diversity, and social justice that is reflected in legislation that recognizes Canadian society is strengthened by including all its citizens (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982; Ontario Persons with Disabilities Act, 2001). In June 2005, the Ontario government passed the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which sets as a goal the removal of all barriers to full participation in the life of the province by the year 2025. There are few areas of study that prepare graduates to play a significant role in the planning for, and implementation of, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The creation of an Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program was therefore thought necessary, and was put in place to serve an important function in transforming past injustice and continuing to remove barriers which keep people with disabilities from full participation in society.

The push to address existing oppression is consistent with the human rights approach, and it was identified that a program was needed to produce graduates with expertise in many areas relevant to this goal. Disability Studies is designed to support, model, and promote inclusion. The program equips graduates to heighten their capacity to work effectively in the broad areas of disability policy, accessibility, and service delivery. These objectives are made possible by participation in required courses that are reflective of various disciplines. These disciplines include Social Justice Studies, Science, English, Political Science, Dramatic Art, History, Music, Philosophy, Nursing, Psychology, and Social Work. Wherever possible, students choose elective courses according to their area of interest in Disability Studies. However, all students take the following five core Disability Studies courses:

- *Theories of Disability and the Social Model*
    - Explores models of disability and critically examines assumptions that have shaped traditional responses.

- *Historical Approaches to People with Disabilities*
    - Highlights people, events, and legislation that have affected disability rights, including the eugenics movement, the civil rights movement, etc.

- *Community Approaches, Advocacy & Empowerment*
    - Reviews the role of Disability Studies and explores interventions that promote full participation, including empowerment and advocacy.

- *Service Delivery Systems and Independent Living*
    - Analyzes power, inequality, and influence, and promotes a team approach with community living and consumer leaders.

- *Community Practice*
    - Encourages students to put the social model into practice, building strategies for actions and promoting a team approach.

These core Disability Studies courses, as well as other required interdisciplinary courses reflecting the social model of disability, make use of the social model of disability and deconstructivism. The social model of disability, created by "a small but influential group of disabled activists" in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Shakespeare, 1998, p.72), described people with disabilities as an oppressed, marginalized, non-ethnic minority. Morris (2001) clarifies that personal experiences of being denied opportunities are not explained by bodily limitations, but by disabling social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers. The social model moved disability policy away from labeling people with disabilities to addressing "environmental and social barriers which exclude people with perceived impairments from mainstream society" (Shakespeare, 1998, p.78).

Barker (2003) defined deconstructivism as "a method of analysis in which the underlying assumptions and perceptions of phenomena are taken apart and reexamined, especially to each component and its relation to all other relevant components" (p.11). Employing a deconstructionist approach in an interdisciplinary environment, Disability Studies espouses **learning outcomes that promote student recognition of systemic barriers to full participation** for persons with disabilities in society's social, economic, and political institutions. It does this by examining theories and approaches used to explain differential or discriminatory treatment of disability groups within the context of a social model of disability. It assists students in identifying and removing barriers to full participation for people with disabilities. It allows students to relate to the needs of persons with disabilities as expressed through the disability movement's credo: "nothing about us without us."

Using deconstructivism, the social model of disability has shown that negative social factors, and not the disability, restrict participation, and that progressive social policy can lessen and address oppression (Goodley, 2000). The social model has been influential in the lives of people with disabilities. It resulted in legislation and laws that outlawed discrimination based on a person's characteristics, requiring public agencies to manage programs in the most integrated fashion possible so as to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Similarities Between Social Work and Disability Studies

Disability Studies, using the social model of disability, fits with the overall goals and objectives of Social Work. The missions of Schools of Social Work (CASWE, 2008; CSWE, 2008) include the promotion of social justice through quality professional education, advocacy, community partnerships, and to develop and spread knowledge through inquiry. Promoting the social model of disability, a major objective of Disability Studies, is consistent with this mission. Like Disability Studies, the goals of Social Work reach beyond the educational needs of the individual student to promote social justice for the disabled population and their community.

The objectives of Social Work and Disability Studies are similar as both provide a learning environment that includes awareness of the social construction of theory and its application. These objectives promote the acquisition and continued development of knowledge, values, and skills for ethical generalist practice with oppressed, marginalized, and vulnerable populations. Also, these objectives aim to inspire students to take responsibility for using their knowledge, values, and skills in pursuit of social justice and human rights with a focus on issues of diversity, equity, accessibility, and other anti-oppressive practices. Both Social Work and Disability Studies encourage students to develop a commitment to, and understanding of, how self-reflection, creativity, critical inquiry, and evidence-based practice impact the practicing professional; and encourage students to understand current practice realities in historical, socio/political, economic, and environmental contexts. Each program fosters students' abilities to recognize structural barriers created by society through social inequities, environmental issues, and regional disparities, and directs them to build a commitment to social advocacy, social change, and client empowerment.

Bachelor of Social Work Program objectives reflect anti-oppressive approaches to interacting with people with disabilities. In addition, the desire to individualize and respect each client clearly mirrors the

need to show respect and acceptance for the differences embodied in all people including those with disabilities. Overall, there is a strong match between Social Work values and ethics, and the respectful approach needed to adopt a social model of disability.

Enriching Social Work Through Disability Studies

Disability programs add value to professional Social Work by reaffirming the shift away from individual deficiency (Gilson & DePoy, 2002). Interdisciplinary Disability Studies increases the emphasis on constructionist approaches, which are essential to Social Work's mission (Martinez-Brawley, 1999). The increased integration of a liberal arts creative, critical, constructivist perspective, such as that found in Disability Studies, transcends practice techniques in therapeutic endeavors and is recognized as essential by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education and the Council of Social Work Education (Mazza, 1986). Implications for Social Work training and practice include the need for knowledge of disabilities and approaches to policy advocacy and empowerment.

Disability scholars view Social Work as needing to adopt a view of disability that is in line with the ways in which they have traditionally looked upon gender, race, and class. Using various approaches, social workers employ ways to challenge issues and counter oppression. Social Work uses a strengths perspective to empower individuals, groups, families, and communities (Saleebey, 2006). The emphasis on human capacity and self-empowerment is consistent with a solution-focused approach and with Social Work's historical values. The focus on socioeconomic reasons for client problems, obvious in the structural approach, allows the opportunity for social workers to look for possibilities where change can take place, and for the ability to move beyond generalist practice and toward social activism (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006). Disability Studies programs offer courses that reflect Social Work practice and add to the training of social workers who can work as advocates for people with disabilities.

Disability Studies offers opportunities for social workers to become empowered through collaboration. In order for awareness to be transformed into inclusion, recognition of past injustices must occur. Furthermore, continuing barriers to full participation need to be translated into empowering experiences and present barriers must also be removed. Professionals in health, education, and social service agencies need interdisciplinary skills to collaborate with individuals with disabilities in promoting new legislation, identifying the need for policy changes, and supporting further research. Multiple perspectives prove more useful than those from any one field when challenging assumptions about disability (Ware, 2001). Developing a collaborative relationship between Social Work and Disability Studies also fortifies the Social Work profession against other helping professions that are incorporating its theories and practice. Further, as there is a global focus on disability and issues of accessibility, collaboration between Social Work and Disability Studies is timely and must be promoted.

Future Direction

Schools of Social Work currently vary widely in their commitments to preparing students to practice with individuals with disabilities. There is a need to develop a *Best Practice Manual* for setting up Disability Studies curricula and combining it with Social Work programs (Liese, Clevenger, & Hanley, 1999). Social Work and Disability Studies need to work creatively to ensure that Social Work incorporates practice strategies to enable graduating students to work effectively with people with disabilities. As the area of Disability Studies develops and evolves, opportunities to explore ways of integrating Social Work and Disability Studies Programs should be seized. Creative choices include a Combined Social Work and Disability Studies degree, a minor in Disability Studies, and a certificate program in Disability Studies. These integrative approaches would enrich the profession of Social Work with graduates who would be prepared to work with people with disabilities, and would also serve to add relevance and value to the Social Work degree.

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Biographies

Irene Carter, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in School of Social Work, and Program Coordinator, Disability Studies, at the University of Windsor. Her main areas of interest are social support for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, disability studies, and self-help groups.

Christine Quaglia, MSW, is a Disability Advisor and Technical Consultant with Student Disability Services, at the University of Windsor.

Donald R. Leslie, Ph.D., is a Professor and Chair of the Undergraduate and Graduate Programs at the School of Social Work, at the University of Windsor. His research interests over the past 30 years have included disability studies, accommodation and accessibility for people with disabilities, program evaluation, and non-profit governance.