

**CHAPTER 15 (In 'Disability Studies: Past Present and Future' edited by Len Barton and Mike Oliver (1997); Leeds: The Disability Press, pp. 244 - 248).**

**Disability and the Myth of the Independent Researcher: a reply**

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At the seminar Colin Barnes mentions in his article, a considerable amount of time was spent arguing about the relationship between politics and social research. One of the issues, which remained unresolved, was whether those struggling for political rights or for resources needed to bother with research in the first place. Surely people who are 'oppressed', the argument seemed to go, already know it and battle against it. Some people at the seminar were so hostile to academic research in any form, viewing it as no better than 'rape' or 'voyeurism', to use one contributor's rather unfortunate language, that the answer for some was fairly clear; such research had nothing to offer. Others felt that academic research was necessary. In his article, Colin speaks in less intolerant terms of disabled people being wary of researchers, but he is still in favour of social research under specific circumstances, which is understandable given his position as a university academic.

Perhaps the first point to note is that most people are probably already wary of researchers, and for all kinds of reasons, both good and bad. Some people fear intrusion and surveillance, others (notably politicians and the wealthy) fear exposure of their activities, or the social costs of their actions or policies. Colin is playing to the gallery in this respect.

The central issue raised in the article is, however, what degree of independence and accountability should researchers have, in responding to this ambivalence about research in society. On this point, Colin seems to offer a confusing answer.

On the one hand, Colin seems to be objecting to academic research operating within an ivory tower of 'researchers speaking to themselves' yet, on the other hand, he spends considerable space in his article castigating the threat to research posed by government sponsored edicts and procedures.

Though Colin states that contributors at the seminar voiced the concern that researchers 'must be free of all external considerations and controls', I, personally cannot remember anyone putting the point in such an overdrawn

manner. I know of no social researcher who would argue along these lines. Research is always conducted in a social context, and researchers must always operate within a professional code of ethical conduct, and cannot expect to be 'free of all controls'. Moreover, social researchers must provide opportunities for people to refuse to take part in research, as 'refusal rates' in research reports routinely testify they do.

Social researchers are also mindful of the nature of the 'contract' that may be set up in the research relationship and the need to be aware of the impact of the research process on the participants. Numerous books on research methods discuss these issues and it seems strange that Colin should write as if these matters are not thought about, or dealt with, by researchers. In recent years, as he must know the trend is towards a greater level of participation and accountability in research, partly as a result of outside pressure, but also as a function of greater 'consumerism' in official policy. Funding bodies, including the Department of Health R&D initiatives, now expect researchers to involve the relevant client group in the research process. While this may not go as far as some would wish it is misleading to convey the impression that researchers can or wish to be entirely free of 'external considerations', or of responsibilities towards those with whom they are researching.

Having said this, I have considerable sympathy with many of the points made in the article about the attitude towards research proffered by government and funding agencies. The desire among some funding bodies that all social research should demonstrate how it helps (in a post-Thatcherite manner) to promote 'wealth creation', for example, seems invidious if not ridiculous. Certainly Margaret Thatcher thought that research should serve specific interests. However, criticising such views, surely, speaks to the need for more independent research, not less.

The idea of independence in this context does not mean, as Colin seems to want to portray it, a complete absence of commitment or accountability. Indeed, it can mean quite the reverse. Social researchers may often be committed (especially in the health and welfare fields) to revealing social inequalities, the effects of the lack of power, or the inappropriateness, as well as appropriateness of official responses. However, there must always be room for argument and counter-argument, and crucially for researchers, to reveal matters that may be uncomfortable, for specific interest groups and even for those funding the research.

Research on disability is, in this sense, no different than any other area of social life. Social research in the past has revealed a great deal of the inequalities that comprise the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by

disabled people, and the complexities of the social and cultural attitudes that underpin such disadvantage. However, some work has been explorative and descriptive. Indeed, writers such Colin Barnes and Mike Oliver use this social research themselves. They have, for example, recently spoken of 'the struggle for equal rights and opportunities for Britain's 6.5 million disabled people' (*Disability & Society*, 10, 1, 1995, p. 111), thereby using the estimates of the extent of disability from the 1988 national OPCS study, which elsewhere they, and others, have been at such pains to criticise.

What needs to be recognised is that social research has often involved challenging a number of entrenched interests, especially within medicine and government circles. The idea that social research relies on a notion of disability as a 'profoundly medical problem' is to completely misrepresent the history of research on disability and to attempt to elevate the 'social oppression' model as the only one that can govern research.

It is for this reason that voices were raised at the seminar in defence of independence. The idea that a particular section of the disability movement should control the research agenda on a 'you are either for us or against us' basis, as the final comment in Colin's article implies, sounds like a thinly veiled threat.

Surely Colin, and others who are interested in research, want it carried out well and in the most convincing manner. Poorly conducted research helps neither the researchers or those wishing to use it. Good research needs people (whether 'disabled' or 'able bodied') who are trained properly to do so. It also requires that the researcher can be confident that findings that do not please specific interest groups or funders will not be dismissed or suppressed.

For example, research on representative samples of disabled people might reveal that relatively few subscribe to the 'oppression' theory of disability, or find it relevant to their everyday experiences. Or research might reveal that activists identify with it more than others. Or, indeed, it might find that it is widely adhered to by disabled people. Would Colin object to see negative as well as positive findings emerge from such research? It would certainly be of interest to know how many of the 6.5 million disabled people in Britain (most of whom suffer from chronic illness) either understand or subscribe to the 'oppression theory', and if so, which version of it. To argue that research could not test out such assumptions, and that it must pursue a certain line of 'confronting and overcoming oppression', suggests that one approach should be privileged over others. Even if one accepted such an approach to research there would be a need to operationalise 'oppression theory' in a researchable

manner, if only to secure the necessary funds. In this sense all social researchers are in the same boat.

In my own career, I have rarely come across anyone who views social research as merely a technical or neutral process. As I have suggested, it must of necessity occur within a social context and be influenced by it. Universities, notwithstanding Colin's characterisation of them, provide one of the few spaces within capitalist societies where issues can still be addressed with a degree of independence. This means that a range of issues need to be tackled in disability research including mapping disadvantage, the need for health and welfare services, and variations in experience. I would also argue for the right for research that does not always have an immediate practical outcome. Without at least some fundamental research, basic questions may not be asked and conceptual frameworks not developed. Colin is right to regard threats to research in universities as worrying. I would suggest that this means that disabled people and social researchers should work collaboratively together, where possible, to influence the research agenda in a positive and pluralistic direction, to tackle the range of issues involved in disability. From this viewpoint I would argue that the language of 'oppressors' and 'oppressed' does not do justice to the problems, and possibilities, involved.