Chapter 9
Reappraising the Social Model of Disability:
A Foucauldian Reprise

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ABSTRACT

The social model of disability is widely accepted as a contemporary and progressive way to understand the experience of disabled people and is also seen as a means by which there can be a response to the discrimination that arises out of impairment. However, this chapter argues that there has been/is a process of assimilation, which has claimed the social model of disability within a dominant medico-legal discourse. Using Foucault’s work on biopower and docility this chapter exposes the human body as the means by which institutions and disciplines continue to define the experience of disabled people. The process of assimilation requires the propagation by medico-legal disciplines of a certain privileged knowledge of the body, which is presented in ways that suggest objective neutrality. Taking a focus on psychiatry we can see that disciplinary constructions of the body, impairment and disability are problematic.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will problematise current disability theory with reference to a number of Foucault’s texts but in particular ‘Docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1975; 1991). The purpose of terming this chapter a reprise is in recognition of the previous critiques that have been raised through applying Foucauldian theory in disability discourse and in understanding the lived experience of disabled people (see Tremain (2009) for a particularly relevant coverage). This is most significantly applied in relation to constructions of impairment, the body and the mind, the primacy given to such construc-
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tions, ontological conflicts and indeed the social model of disability as a practice that follows. There remains some merit in further developing the synthesis of Foucault’s work and disability theory, and at points I speculate on the use of postcolonial perspectives in disability as an allied area of post-structuralism, given that Foucault is often associated with the post-structuralist school.

Before expanding on this argument it is necessary to explain why this might be of interest in a discussion of education for adult learners, given that adult learning in higher education is of most concern for this book. I would suggest that the relevance of this chapter could be seen in four ways. Firstly, that education is organised within disciplines and institutions and so an exploration and critique of such an organising system is crucial to understanding educational operations. Secondly, that generally the social model of disability is viewed as a progressive, contemporary approach to understanding disability and responding to the needs of disabled learners. Given the status of the social model of disability, it is important that it is discussed in terms of its limitations and benefits. Thirdly, that the activities of taxonomy, that is the activities of ‘empowered description’, are applied to adult learners and that this application has a power effect in designating learners as ‘bright’, ‘dyslexic’, ‘introverted’, ‘failing’, for instance. These ways of separating different kinds of learner have an impact on the learner and the operations of education. I coin the term ‘empowered description’ as a way of denoting systems of arbitrary taxonomy that have an organising effect and are privileged with, and through, authority. I would consider the term ‘empowered description’ to be one that most accurately reflects practices that can otherwise be camouflaged in the use of the word ‘taxonomy’ behind an implied legitimacy, obscuring the partiality of the word. Finally, I suggest that Higher Education is a key location for the disability discourse to develop as a critical perspective, in the interests of disabled people. However, both inside the higher learning institu-
tion, and outside, disability activism and discourse is offered a limited regard, and as such, disability discourse is a ‘subjugated knowledge’, that is, as a certain category of knowledge claim that is/are seen as less viable than other knowledge claims such as medicine. Higher education is crucial as a place from which resistance can be mobilised in response to disciplinary power. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a Foucauldian analysis of Higher Education as a whole, indeed this may be contraindicated given it would be an attempt at a unifying, generalised perspective, but rather the critique I do proffer is problematising the social model of disability, and that is through a lens that I apply to the practices of psychiatry.

My choice of psychiatry is because of how mental illness has come to be understood as a disability, and some of the questions this raises. The reader may therefore see a similarity in how disciplinary power operates across a number of institutions and disciplines, and should see that there are currently limitations in the application of the social model of disability. The reader may also question the psychiatric model, and also the arrangement of people that are in distress and are inducted into the field of mental health. By ‘arrangement’ I refer to the deployment of people within systems of knowledge and power, which will be expanded in later parts of this chapter when I discuss subjugation and docility. It is important to note that in my discussion of the disciplinary power of psychiatry and psychology, that we recognise that there is dissent and resistance in these disciplines also, such as the critical psychiatry movement and radical psychologists. Such movements do not necessarily coalesce in one place, or time, but refer to activities of resistance and disavowal, that mobilise, disperse, and regroup in response to the exercise of disciplinary power. However, while such acts of resistance are noted, it should also be considered that these groups, and their areas of discourse, do remain interested in the research and knowing of the person. Even though I am being mindful of the ethical practice