Nordic Disability Research/Studies: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

The aim of this symposium is to discuss the current state of disability research and disability studies in the Nordic countries. The five presenters are leading disability scholars and activists from all five Nordic countries. Their presentations will reflect on the history, development, and future of disability research/studies in the Nordic countries. Some of the questions addressed are: What characterizes Nordic disability research/studies today? To what extent has disability research/studies become established within the academia? What is the relationship between disability research and social change? What is the future of disability research/studies and the relations between scholarship, policy, activism and the disability movement? The presenters will leave ample time for discussions.

Interdisciplinarity: its challenges and demands on disability research

Simo Vehmas, University of Helsinki

Disability research/studies is a politically motivated academic field as it should be: we are in the business of understanding disability better and making things better for disabled people. The problem, however, is that we are not utilizing all the possible tools provided by academic research to carry out this mission. I have in mind in particular the challenge that interdisciplinary research provides us with. We are comfortable with interdisciplinarity as long as the theories and methods used are in line with the conventions of disability studies. These conventions tolerate virtually any research that is rooted in social sciences and humanities. Nordic disability research has, however, a long tradition in drawing from other fields as well, such as education, psychology and medical sciences. Because of this, Nordic disability research is sometimes divided in two camps; the traditional and old-fashioned research on and for disabled people and the new social scientific research with disabled people. And indeed, this binary representation is in many ways accurate (especially regarding the lack of political engagement of the former). There is a danger in this approach in that we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater and in our haste to develop our own discourse have lost some of the potential other disciplines have for empowering disabled people. In my view we have downplayed some of the strengths of Nordic heritage in disability research including a broad-minded alignment with disciplines considered to be part of the ‘enemy camp’. I would like to argue that we need to engage more closely with ‘enemies’ such as medical sciences. This is simply because medicine is a necessary foundation of appropriate knowledge and care in the lives of many disabled people. Thus, a broad interdisciplinarity is required for better understanding as well as political improvement.

Disability research/studies in Norway: between established dialogues and new discourses

Patrick Kermit, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

It is by no mean an easy task to write about Norwegian disability research and/or disability studies as this is a very heterogeneous filed of research. At the national conference for the Norwegian network of disability research in May 2016, more than a hundred delegates participated. Most of the delegates were academics and researchers, but there were also activists, practitioners and representatives from governmental departments dealing with health, social service and education. The attending academics represented different fields, spanning from rehabilitation to gender research.
This might illustrate that disability research within the context of the Norwegian welfare society, currently and historically is characterized by dialogues both among researchers, and between research and different types of practices. Even when the former is critical, there are numerous examples of how disability research is invited and reflected on, for example in Norwegian White Papers on disability politics. Norwegian disability research has promoted views on, and principles for, approaches to disability like the ones in the UNCRPD, long before this convention was ratified in Norway. Disability research may thus very well be – at least partly – credited for achieving that terms like “inclusion” and “universal design” have been widely adapted in Norwegian public administration and everyday language. The Norwegian welfare state not only listens to research, but also very much presupposes that critical research is a prerequisite for the further development of the welfare state.

That Norwegian disability research is engaged in ongoing dialogues with practitioners and decision makers can be seen as beneficial both for the former and the latter. Nevertheless, it is a question whether such dialogue based interaction, though clearly suitable for promoting adjustments to politics and practices, is prone to overlook aspects of disability in a societal context that falls outside the welfare state framing. In this paper, the aim is to invite discussions both on research traditions and politics.

**Danish disability research: a scattered academic environment?**

Inge Storgaard Bonfils, Metropolitan University College

In 2011 the Danish National Centre for Social Research published a report on “Current Scandinavian and British disability research”. The aim was to provide an update on Danish disability research in comparison to the Scandinavian countries and the British research environment. The report shows that Danish disability research is spread across many disciplines, with limited contact with each other. In this paper I will discuss the current situation in Danish disability research. The paper is based on the report from the Danish National Centre for Social Research, an article titled “Danish disability research across half a century” (Bengtsson & Bonfils, 2013, SJDR, 15. Supplement: 13-37), and my experience, as a member of the Danish NNDR board since 2001. The presentation will focus on three of the dominant traditions; 1) research in institutionalization and de-institutionalization, inclusion and exclusion, 2) welfare research in disability services and 3) rehabilitation science. The focus is on the academic institutions that dominate the three traditions, their theoretical and methodologic approaches and how research is applied towards current political and/or professional situations in the disability area. The three traditions share a common interest in understanding disability, however from different epistemological positions. The first tradition is primarily based on a historical and critical approach that origins from a Foucauldian inspired analysis of the dominant discourses and practices. The welfare research tradition has, however, been closely linked to the political development of disability services and the practical application of research. The third tradition is an upcoming field of sociological inspired research developed with the aim to advance rehabilitation practices.
The Scandinavian research on disability grew with support of the expanding welfare states during the 1970s. The government’s motives for supporting the research was to evaluate the various reforms carried out when the institutions closed down. Integration and normalization became the political objectives of disability while the definition of disability were environmentally related. This development was driven largely thanks to the active political work and mobilisation of organizations of persons with disabilities. However disability organizations never became a base for the recruitment of researchers in the manner that occurred in the UK or the USA. These diverse origins have characterized the tension that existed between both the Scandinavian research and the Anglo-Saxon Disability Studies tradition and sometimes also the relationship between research and policy in Scandinavia. This paper presents the results of an overview of Swedish disability studies (Lindberg 2016). Svensk forskning om funktionshinder: Forskningen som haltar. Hörselsskadades Riksförbund. It describes the trends of the field and concludes with 10 concrete propositions. The trend has been towards research on disability becoming a more integrated part of the regular academic environment. At the same time the disability movement has been caught in consensus model. The interaction between research, disability movement and policy has become less and less. Nordic and international policy on disability is currently based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, today there is very little research linked to human rights, participation or discrimination. Instead medical and health sciences dominate. I propose a series of measures to strengthen Swedish research and cooperation in the Nordic countries with research related to the CRPD. I argue that the relationship and interaction between research, politics and the disability movement needs to be modernized and developed in a new direction.

Disability studies in Iceland: local, interdisciplinary and international

Rannveig Traustadóttir, University of Iceland

Icelandic disability studies and disability research have developed in Nordic and international contexts and shares their theoretical origins and location in the academic landscape. Early beginnings of disability studies in Iceland can be traced back to the mid-1990s but the first academic program in was launched at the University of Iceland in 2004, providing this young field with an institutional base and academic recognition. Main characteristics of disability studies in Iceland are its growing interdisciplinary nature and close cooperation with disabled people and the disability movement, and to a lesser extent with policy-makers. Today, Disability Studies is a well-established field within Icelandic academia and operates in the context of extensive international ties and connections. This presentation will discuss some of the challenges and dilemmas in disability studies/research in Iceland such as conflicts between academic demands on the one hand and a commitment to social change, social justice and disabled people on the other. Related to this is the dilemma of the importance of contributing the local Icelandic community by writing and publishing in Icelandic, and the academic demand to publish in international peer-reviewed journals. One challenge is also how to recruit more disabled scholars and address the tense relations that sometimes arise between non-disabled disability researchers and disabled activists. This presentation will conclude by raising the question of how to develop Icelandic, and indeed Nordic, disability studies and Nordic disability thought. Is there a Nordic disability thought shaped by the cultures and contexts of the Nordic welfare societies? Or should we simply “import” Anglo-Saxon theories and approaches?