

International Disability Studies Research Unit

Conception

In Germany, “disability” is usually discussed only in terms of the avoidance, elimination or alleviation of illnesses and impairments, in short, their prevention, cure and rehabilitation. In addition, the theme of disability has, if considered, so far only played a secondary role in the humanities and social sciences. It follows that the investigation of embodied difference as a dimension of the *conditio humana* is rarely on the agenda – at least in Germany. The new, interdisciplinary discipline of Disability Studies, which originated in the 1980s in the USA and Great Britain, offers a perspective outside of the predominant approach found in the rehabilitative sciences. Disability Studies has been established in Anglo-American colleges and universities as well as in countries such as Finland, Japan, India, and South Africa.

Disability Studies was mostly initiated by scholars and scientists who themselves had disabilities, for example, two of its founding fathers - the British social scientist, Michael Oliver, and the American medical sociologist, Irving K. Zola, who died in 1994. In addition to their scientific occupation, both Zola and Oliver were activists within the Disability Rights Movement. Disability Studies, therefore, owes its pulse to the social movements of disabled people throughout the world. Simultaneously, Disability Studies documents an international paradigm shift regarding the phenomenon of disability and the lives of people with disabilities, as reflected by the World Health Organization’s “International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health” (2001).

In regard to theorization, Great Britain has mostly contributed to the placement of Disability Studies within critical social science. Further, Disability Studies is part of the “cultural turn,” i.e. the establishment of the cultural studies paradigm as an integrated concept of the humanities and social sciences. And last but not least, the poststructuralist discourse, which is inspired by French philosophy, plays a major role in Disability Studies, as it views the body, the subject and knowledge as cultural constructs – especially in the discourse within the United States.

Disability Studies has also recently gained interest within the German-speaking world. After the highly successful conferences “Der (im-)perfekte Mensch” [“The (im-) Perfect Human Being”; 2001] and “PhantomSchmerz” [“PhantomPain”; 2002] as well as the exhibition “Der (im-)perfekte Mensch” in Dresden and Berlin – all of which were cosponsored by the German Hygiene Museum, Aktion Mensch, and Humboldt University – a two-week summer institute entitled, “Disability Studies in Deutschland – Behinderung neu denken!,” took place in July, 2003 in Bremen as part of the European Year of People with Disabilities. This summer institute proved to be the third start-signal for the research field. In addition, the nationwide working group entitled, “Disability Studies in Deutschland” has been in existence since April 2002. In several German-speaking universities one can find various research and teaching activities – not only in Cologne within the Chair of the Sociology of Disability, Social Policy and Social Management, but also in Berlin, Bochum, Bremen, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Marburg, Innsbruck (Austria) and Zurich (Switzerland).

The international and interdisciplinary program of Disability Studies can be outlined as follows:

- Research on “disability” as a social category as defined by the “social model of disability”

- Research on “disability” as a historical and cultural construction based on theories and methodologies from the cultural sciences
- Research on the living conditions of people with disabilities based on a participant-oriented methodology
- Research on participation, emancipation and equalization in cooperation with the social movement of disabled people.

With this background and upon an initiative lead by Prof. Dr. Anne Waldschmidt, in December of 2004 the Special Education Faculty [Heilpädagogische Fakultät] at the University of Cologne agreed upon the establishment of the International Disability Studies Research Unit. The program of the Research Unit, which is affiliated with the Chair of the Sociology of Disability, Social Policy and Social Management, comprises four spheres:

- Literature Review of German and international research in Disability Studies
- Development and execution of research projects, especially third-party funded projects
- Scientific advising and mentoring of junior scholars
- Organization of conferences and workshops

Research Activities

An important field of activity of the International Disability Studies Research Unit is the development and execution of individual research projects. The projects are situated in the following research fields:

- Participant-oriented research in the area of rehabilitation, social, and health-care services
- History and development of the international social movement of disabled people as well as self-help groups and interest groups
- Analyses of current events and problem areas within social and disability policies from a Disability Studies perspective
- Diversity studies, inter- and intra-cultural aspects of disability
- Gender studies with respect to disability
- The history of Disability
- Analyses of symbolic representations of disability, especially in art, culture, and the public sphere

Research Colloquium on Disability Studies

The Research Colloquium on Disability Studies serves the purpose of mentoring junior scholars and provides a forum to discuss exam papers and research in progress that can be placed in the context of Disability Studies. It provides a forum for theoretical debate, as well as the discussion of methodological problems and approaches. Participation is fundamentally open to all interested parties within and outside of the University of Cologne. We request that you personally register before participation with Frau Prof. Dr. Waldschmidt, following which we will send you the upcoming semester meeting times.

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