

Introduction to critical disability studies

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<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/disability-matters>

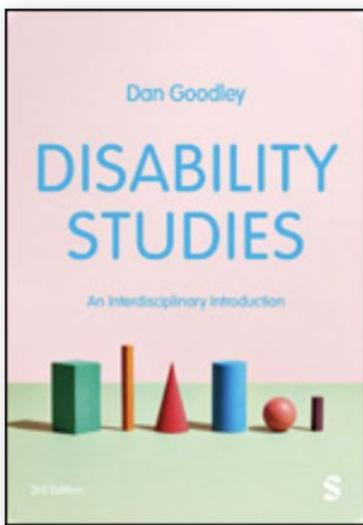


In this presentation we will argue that for those of us engaged with disability studies theory and research in the UK, India and in many other places in the world - we ***are all critical disability studies researchers now.***

Our provocation is based on three arguments - arguments that we will justify and expand upon:

1. Critical disability studies is a reflection of the contemporary nature of the field of inquiry
2. The move towards critical disability studies is also a direct response to the proliferation of diverse forms, kinds and types of disability activism
3. Being critical also involves honouring the legacy of disability studies founders

For reasons of access, we will be reading directly from these slides.



Our argument will draw, in part, on four pieces of writing

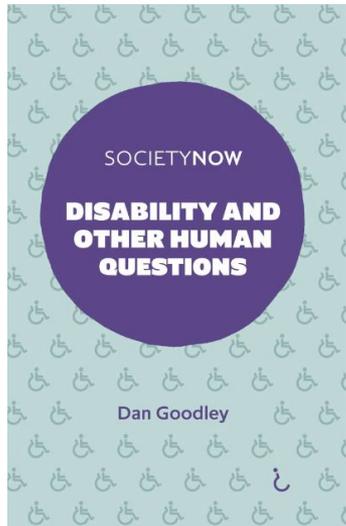
Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Liddiard, K., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2021). Key Concerns for Critical Disability Studies. *The International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, 1(1), 27–49.

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Ghai, Anita, editor. (2018). Introduction. *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and Experience*. Delhi: SAGE Publications.



We will also be speaking of and through three research projects:

Disability Matters

Wellcome Discretionary Award

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/disability-matters>

Humanising Healthcare

Economic and Social Research Council

[Humanising the Healthcare of People with Learning Disabilities and/or Autism funded by the Economic and Social Research Council \(ES/W003406/1\)](#)

Wellcome Anti-ableist Research Culture

A Wellcome Trust Institutional Funding for Research Culture Award

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/wellcome-anti-ableist-research-culture-waarc>

So, we believe that we are all *critical* disability studies researchers now because of these three arguments...

1. Critical disability studies is a reflection of the contemporary nature of the field of inquiry
2. The move towards critical disability studies is also a direct response to the proliferation of diverse forms, kinds and types of disability activism
3. Being critical also involves honouring the legacy of disability studies founders

And we want to consider each of these arguments in relation to a specific live disability studies research project ...



1. **Critical disability studies is a reflection of the contemporary nature of the field of inquiry**

*Disability
Matters*

So let us consider - Disability Matters

Wellcome Discretionary Award

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/disability-matters>

Thinking of a research programme

- *Disability Matters* is a £2.9 million Wellcome Trust discretionary grant that was written in collaboration with disabled academics and disabled people's organisations in Australia, India, Canada, Singapore and the UK.

The original research team

Includes the PI and disabled Cols: Dan Goodley (University of Sheffield); Anita Ghai and Sandeep Singh (Ambedkar University Delhi); Jackie Scully (University of New South Wales); Meng Ee Wong (National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University); Col Tanya Titchkosky (University of Toronto)

We lost the great Professor Anita Ghai in 2024

We were fortunate to partner with India through Anita. She brought Disability Matters to India and India to Disability Matters, for which we are eternally grateful. As we all know, Anita was a foundational figure in Indian Critical Disability Studies, and her work has deeply shaped conversations about gender, identity, inclusion, power, culture, and activism. In Anita's memory and to honour her legacy, we organised an online symposium in December 2025 dedicated to centre Indian Disability Studies, its epistemology, theory, activism, and social engagement as it marked a year to Anita's departure on 11 December 2024. We hope to create a living archive that celebrates and extends the work of Indian Disability Studies, inspired by Anita Ghai's scholarship, activism, and imagination.

Anita's work continues to inspire us as we will mention

Our team now includes

PIs and Cols: Dan Goodley (University of Sheffield); Jackie Scully (University of New South Wales); Meng Ee Wong (National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University); Col Tanya Titchkosky (University of Toronto)

Programme Manager - Rhea Halsey (fully-funded) at University of Sheffield (September 2023)

Research Associates: Christina Lee and Ankita Mishra (University of Sheffield), Elaine Cagulada (University of Toronto), Jodi Lamanna (University of South Wales), Kerri Heng (National Institute of Education/Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

Appointment of a Visiting Researcher - Sandeep Singh (Ambedkar University, India) - at the University of Sheffield who is contributing to different elements of Disability Matters including this course.

**The National Association of
Disabled Staff Networks, UK
(NADSN) facilitate the work of
the International Research
Advisory Board**

We are assisted by **disabled people's organisations** - who constitute the **International Research Advisory Board** - national DPOs from Singapore, UK, Australia, Canada and India

Disability Matters aims to transform health research and research environments through ***a paradigm shift to disability as the driving subject of inquiry***. We want to develop anti-ableist and anti-disablist approaches that promote inclusive research cultures, broaden health research priorities, innovate research methodologies, generate positive disability representations and cultivate a new generation of equitable health researchers across five countries.

We know that disability exists as an 'absent presence' - a present problem to be solved by research but absent as a research colleague or scholarly authority - and disabled health researchers are conspicuously absent. And health research often ignores the specificities of disabled people's lives and the health inequalities that they endure as a consequence of disabling systemic factors.

Poor, working class, female, LGBTQ+ and black disabled people are particularly at risk of being forgotten. Our programme of work wants to address these omissions and generate transformative equity, diversity and inclusion knowledge; thus supporting Wellcome's strategy to lead the Science and Health sector in challenging ableism and disablism in the practices and cultures of health research.



**So what evidence is there that
Critical Disability Studies
(CDS) is a reflection of the
contemporary nature of the
field of inquiry?**

*Disability
Matters*

Disability Matters is a product of contemporary critical disability studies theory and research. To understand disability as *driving subject* rather than object of inquiry is testimony to crip theory, disability phenomenology, feminist disability studies, affirmative and posthuman disability studies. *Disability Matters* is an example of the parasitical nature of CDS on disciplines and institutions; in this case the health, science and research sectors. A coming of age of CDS is found in its application, its reach, its willingness to engage with disciplines that were originally pitched as antithetical to disability studies.

Over the last two decades we have witnessed the emergence of bodies of knowledge associated with intersectional politics including feminist, Black, queer, neurodivergent and trans disability studies. It is important not to confuse alliance with some kind of an unproblematic union or a smooth coming-together of ideas. Raced, sexualised, sexed, classed, disabled and gendered identities each carry them complex histories of oppression. Indeed, even within the specific category of disability, it is possible to identify a further layer of sub-categories of impairment. Each of these more precise definitions - or impairment-specific categories - boast their own aetiologies, origin stories and predilections. Alliances are never easy; they provoke tensions. Rather than seeking to smooth over differences, critical disability studies should embrace these frictions. CDS is necessarily frictional; inviting the bumping up of different identities, politics and arts.



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Let us consider our second argument 2. The move towards critical disability studies is also a direct response to the proliferation of diverse forms, kinds and types of disability activism



Thinking of ... *Humanising Healthcare*
Economic and Social Research Council
[Humanising the Healthcare of People with Learning Disabilities and/or Autism funded by the Economic and Social Research Council \(ES/W003406/1\)](#)



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Humanising Healthcare is project co-produced with organisations of disabled people - self-advocacy groups - which are run for and by people with learning disabilities. These research partners are experts: they know the lives of people with learning disabilities and have clear ideas about how healthcare can be improved for people so-labelled.





Economic
and Social
Research Council

So what evidence is there for the assertion that the move towards *critical* disability studies is also a direct response to the proliferation of diverse forms, kinds and types of disability activism?



Humanising Healthcare includes researchers from self-advocacy groups and worker cooperatives who are led by people with learning disabilities. Whereas the early iterations of disability studies excluded people so-labelled; their activism has demanded change on the part of theorists, researchers and universities. Self-advocacy as one example of disability activism fundamentally disrupts some of the leitmotifs, assumptions and big ideas of disability studies - pushing the field into critical disability studies where different kinds of questions are now being asked:

- What does it mean to be human?
- Are people with learning disabilities included as comrades in the wider disability movement?
- How does disability pride resonate with other disability activist slogans such as 'People First'?
- As people with learning disabilities align themselves more and more with neurodivergent comrades, what new kinds of conceptions of disability, humanity and activism are being created?

The activism, input and research leadership of researchers with learning disabilities pushes us from orthodox models of disability into new kinds of critical disability studies scholarship.

Emancipatory disability studies is being crafted in some new and exciting ways by researchers with learning disabilities.

Let us consider our third argument 3. Being critical also involves honouring the legacy of disability studies founders



Thinking of Wellcome Anti-ableist Research Culture

A Wellcome Trust Institutional Funding for Research Culture Award

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/wellcome-anti-ableist-research-culture-waarc>

WAARC is one of 24 institutions funded by the Wellcome Trust to research, develop and enhance research culture within their universities (see Lewis-Wilson et al, 2023).

This £1 million project brings together disabled and non-disabled academics at the University of Sheffield - working in consultation with disabled people's organisations - to find and promote anti-ableist practices in TUOS.

- **Environment** will experiment with new ideas for inclusive recruitment and employment.
- **Development** will produce new guidelines on accessible research events and deliver a new course on inclusive research methods to raise capacities of PGRs and ECRs.
- **Collaboration** will put disabled people front and centre and in collaboration will offer funding, via an open call, to other researchers and professional services colleagues to produce their own inclusive research projects and we will revisit the Concordat on Researcher Development to ensure inclusivity.

WAARC is pushing us to rethink the university. One way in which we are doing this is with recourse to a new concept: **depathologising the university**. We find ourselves engaging with metaphor. Titchkosky ([2015](#), 1) argues for the creative potential of disability metaphor to open up ‘the imagination to the possibility of new worlds since it is more than a diagnostic signifier of already dead ones’. We propose working with the novel metaphor and practice of *depathologisation* in order to adhere ‘to the idea that the meaning of disability is to be found in *something other* than assimilation’ (Titchkosky, [2020](#), 208; my italics). Just as members of the Queer Disability Studies network have worked with the idea of ‘(de)pathologisation’ in their consideration of theory and practice at the border of trans and disability studies, we seek to develop depathologisation in conversation with decolonisation.

Goodley, D. (2024). Depathologising the university. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2024.2316007>

The contemporary push for EDI opens up spaces of critical debate and reflection about the wider aims, responsibilities and accountability of the university. In contrast, white and ability privilege (for example) close down debate and maintain the exclusionary character of the university. One wonders if the university can ever be *for* disabled and BAME people when the institution consistently perpetuates systemic white and ability privilege. The university is colonialist and ableist. EDI risks becoming a policy distraction if we fail to challenge the ableist and colonial architectures of the university. In sitting with – and hopefully challenging – white/ability privilege within universities, we connect those who have brought together postcolonial and critical disability studies scholarship.

So what does it mean to say that being critical involves honouring the legacy of disability studies founders?

waarc
WELLCOME ANTI-ABLEIST
RESEARCH CULTURES

The Medical Model of Disability



This is a diagram of the traditional Medical Model of Disability, which the Social Model was developed to challenge.

An entry point into understanding ableism and colonialism is the medical model. But sitting only with the medical model is not enough. We need to engage with the dominance of ableist ideology, for example, in the university.

Our universities too often assume our students and staff to be able-bodied-and-mindedness. Universities continue to feed on and promote forms of neoliberal-ableism that emphasise independency, autonomy and self-sufficiency. We are all culpable in the rise of Trump and the Alt-right: movements which are neoliberal-ableist and racist to their core.

The Social Model of Disability



Depathologising the university builds on the social model's system focus: on systemic change. We need to be asking what the university is for (Lalu, 2019)? If universities are civic universities – and most university websites indicate that they are – then the university should welcome *all* members of the communities that it purports to serve. Ensuring that universities are inclusive, equitable and diverse requires an interrogation of the assumptions, philosophies and spaces that constitute the modern-day university. Depathologising the university is but one methodology for totally rethinking the university.

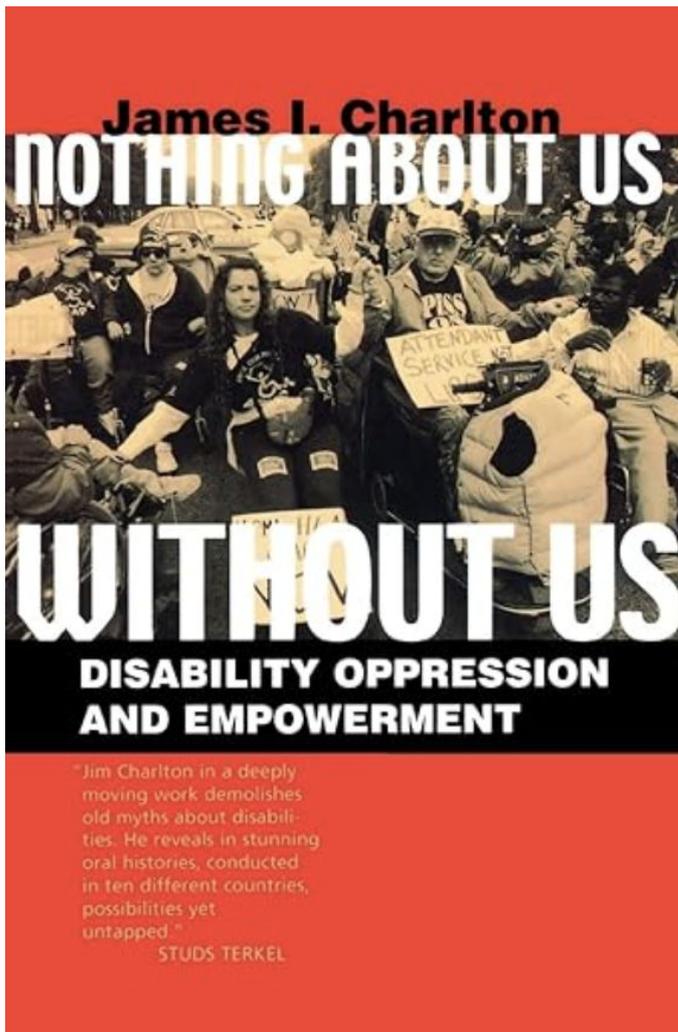
The Social Model of Disability states that the oppression and exclusion people with impairments face is caused by the way society is run and organised.

A critical disability studies perspective encourages us to go beyond simply the social model and disability studies. It means finding resonances with other transformative spaces - such as decolonisation. An examples is la paperson. (2017). *A third university is possible*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. We need to embrace Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea of retrievals - finding connection in ideas that were not necessarily written for disability studies.

Critical disability studies builds on the legacy of our founders to connect with others

It could mean embracing new politics and collectivities such as la paperson. They write 'assembling a decolonising university is also a multiscalar endeavour. We might ask what the necessary collaborations are for making

- A single project with a decolonising aspect
- A body of decolonising works
- A decolonising studies [and] industry
- A network of decolonising organisms, or a decolonising university movement' (la paperson, 2017: 48-49).



And any attempt to depathologise the university must be in collaboration with **disabled people's organisations** who constitute our leadership team and remunerated at daily consultancy rates for their work on WAARC. Nothing about us, without us: which is a direct reference to Jim Charlton's classic 1998 work

And we should remind ourselves of the contemporary power of the words of our heroes.

For the disabled person with a fair intelligence or other gifts, perhaps the greatest temptation is to try to use them just to escape from his disabledness, to buy himself a place in the 'sun', a share in the illusory normal world where all is light and pleasure and happiness. Naturally we want to get away from and forget the sickness, depression, pain, loneliness and poverty of which we see probably more than our share. But if we deny our special relation to the dark in this way, we shall have ceased to recognize our most important asset as disabled people in society-the uncomfortable, subversive position from which we act as a living reproach to any scale of values that puts attributes or possessions before the person.

Hunt, P. (1966). A Critical condition. In P. Hunt (Ed). *Stigma: The experience of disability*. (pp145-149). London: Geoffrey Chapman. Reprinted as pdf

<https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Hunt-a-critical-condition.pdf>

And finally we would ask you to consider the impact of Anita Ghai's work

Please visit

<https://sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/our-work/marginalised-humans/disability-dialogues/disability-dialogues-contributions#anita>

Thank you

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what it means to be human.



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