



SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

Disability, Geography and Ethics

Introduction

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In recent years geographers have started to re-engage with issues of exclusion, social justice and moral philosophy, first explored by radical geographers in the 1970s. This re-engagement parallels the rapid growth in the 1990s of feminist and critical geographies. Geographers within these traditions have focused their attention on the intersection of issues such as identity, difference and space, and the ways in which socio-spatial processes reproduce material and non-material inequalities. Empirical and theoretical work has focused on a range of specific issues such as gender (patriarchy), race (racism), sexuality (homophobia) and class. To this list has recently been added disability (ableism). However, most critical geography research has concentrated on examining the production and maintenance of geographies of social exclusion. Only a small number of studies have engaged directly with these issues in the context of specific theories of social justice and moral philosophy, which are seemingly taken for granted (see Smith, 1994, 1997). One area where these ideas have been applied is in relation to data generation, where there has been a concern for research ethics and the power relationship between researcher and researched. For example, a number of articles have been published exploring issues such as production and situatedness of knowledge, representativeness, reflexivity, empowerment, emancipation, critical praxis and positionality, and how these might be best addressed (e.g. Katz, 1992; Robinson, 1994; Rose, 1997). In the collection of short position papers gathered here, the theme of ethics and moral philosophy is explicitly examined in relation to geography (as a research practice and institutional endeavour) and the lives of disabled people.

Disability, Geography and Ethics

Geographers are not alone in their lack of consideration of ethical issues in relation to disability. Questions concerning normative ethics, what might be envisioned as a just

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society and how disability fits within different models of social justice, have been little explored, even within disability studies. There the consideration of ethics has largely been confined to research ethics and the social politics of research practice. As such, there have been on-going discussions on how disability research should be conducted (e.g. collections by Rioux and Bach, 1994; Barnes and Mercer, 1997), with debate centring on issues such as exploitation, alienation, misrepresentation, the development of emancipatory and empowering research strategies and the role of non-disabled people in disability research (see Oliver, 1992; Stone and Priestley, 1995). To an extent, these debates have also been rehearsed in the geographical literature, with exchanges concerning the nature and application of geographical practice (Golledge, 1993, 1995, 1996; Butler, 1995; Gleeson, 1996; Imrie, 1996). However, in geography whilst we still largely fail to address issues of normative ethics in relation to disability (although see Gleeson, 1999), we seem to have taken the research ethics debate to a new stage, questioning whether we should directly link research and activism into a single politicised process. The answer to this question from many geographers studying disability (e.g. Chouinard, 1997; Kitchin, 1999), and other critical geographers (see Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999), seems to be 'yes'. The theoretical and empirical practicalities of this 'yes', however, need to be more fully examined, and the papers collected here go some way towards this end, and towards considering research ethics in a more traditional context.

The first two papers, by Brendan Gleeson and Vera Chouinard, both examine the role of geographers in the emancipation and empowerment of disabled people. These authors contend that geographers need to be more proactive, both in their research and in their professional capacity as teachers and members of educational institutions, in seeking to improve the material and non-material conditions of disabled people. Gleeson, in his paper *Enabling geography: exploring a new political-ethical ideal*, calls for an enabling geography that is grounded in a social model of disability and which seeks to contribute something positive to disabled people. In particular, he is interested in promoting 'strategies of engagement' whereby geographers join with disabled people in their struggle against social exclusion and social injustice. He asserts that while there are dangers of paternalism and unconscious domination, geographers can be a valuable resource to disabled people. This resourcefulness, however, is not fully exploited purely through academic endeavour. Geographers, he suggests, need to find their way out of academic journals and into local presses and local politics. Moreover, their research should become political projects aiming to change socio-spatial arrangements through its focus and through its research design, where more inclusive and empowering research strategies need to be adopted: we must think and act politically.

These arguments are echoed by Chouinard, who argues that geographers need to both acknowledge their research positionality and become politically engaged in disability struggles. For her, the creation of an inclusionary academy is riddled with ethical and political challenges. These include implementing emancipatory research strategies that recognise and address issues of academic power and privilege in knowledge production, academic complicity in the exploitation and marginalisation of disabled people, the problems of detached observation and paternalistic approaches to political engagement. Like Gleeson, Chouinard contends that identifying these issues is not enough: they need to be acted upon; an enabling geography has to be consistently implemented. This then is her challenge to geographers working on disability.

In the next four papers, these ideas are explored in relation to empirical research practice. One of the most striking features of the accounts presented and arguments advanced is the contrast between the idealised enabled geographies advocated by

Gleeson and Chouinard, and the reality of trying to translate these ideals into practice (a task that they never envisioned as being easy). For example, Isabel Dyck, in her paper *Putting ethical research into practice: issues of context*, discusses the way in which the multiple contexts occupied by researcher and research participants complicate efforts to conduct inclusionary or action-led research. Whilst emancipatory and empowering research might be a desirable ideal, she argues that we have to recognise the institutional and professional context of our work (she works in a school of rehabilitation, dominated by the medical model of disability) as well as those contexts occupied by people participating in research. Disabled people are socially positioned not only as a result of their impairment but also by other intersecting power relations that need to be addressed for true empowerment/emancipation to occur. Moreover, many disabled people lack a collective identity around which political mobilisation might occur. They may be unable or unwilling to engage in overt political activity. Empowerment then is not easily bestowed. As Dyck notes, however, the difficulties of implementing inclusive research do not mean that geographers cannot make a difference to the lives of disabled people. An ethnography that recognises the positionality of both research subject and researcher, for example, can still contribute to an enabling geography.

Deborah Metzel, in her paper *Research with the mentally incompetent: the dilemma of informed consent*, implicitly acknowledges some of the same issues raised by Dyck. The people on whom her gaze focuses are unable to become politically active in their own future. She critically examines some of the ethical dilemmas of conducting research on a group unable to give informed consent for that research. She argues that whilst there are no simple solutions to these issues, this should not be an excuse for geographers to ignore the geographies of this group. To do so would be to leave its members further marginalised within academic discourses. She therefore advocates a professional approach to research that follows a code of ethics that safeguards the interests of the disabled people studied.

Rob Wilton, in his paper '*Sometimes it's OK to be a spy*': *ethics and politics in the geography of disability*, also discusses the issues of consent, and of conducting covert research. His discussion, however, does not relate to the deception of disabled people but rather to those people who seek to exclude disabled people. He describes the research strategy he used in studying the contested geographies of service provision in Los Angeles, and the ethical and political issues that arose out of his work. The crux of his dilemma concerned how to negotiate a political commitment to try to overcome the exclusion of disabled people and a need to interview people opposed to their inclusion. Revealing the true nature of the research project might have jeopardised his contact with service opponents. Further dilemmas were raised when he was asked to share the knowledge he gained through his interviews to provide a basis on which to fight service provision restrictions. Ultimately, he argues that his deception was justified by a commitment to social justice and by a need to understand how and why non-disabled people marginalise disabled people.

Eric Laurier and Hester Parr, in their paper *Emotions and interviewing in health and disability research*, also examine some of the social politics of research, focusing their attention on ethics and the role of emotion in interviewing. They suggest that more attention needs to be focused on understanding the role of emotions within interviews and the consequences of these emotions on participants, both researched and researcher. As such, researchers need to think not only about the power relations operating within an interview, but also about the emotional dynamic between researcher and researched and the consequences of the discussion. These issues they assert cannot be unproblematically managed. Their observations are informed by their own experiences of

conducting ethnographic and interview-based research where they became increasingly conscious of the role of emotion.

Ways Ahead/Work to Do

The papers presented here are short position pieces designed to flag and initially explore important issues that are in need of discussion and further empirical research. Whilst they examine a number of substantive issues they also inevitably present a selective and partial view that focuses primarily upon research (although see papers by Gleeson and Chouinard). As was discussed in the panel session from which these papers originate, questions about ethics, politics and disability have as much to do with geography as an academic institution as they do with geography as a research process. The geographies we teach, the institutions we belong to, the departments and classrooms we occupy, the resources we use, the conferences and fieldtrips we organise, the *status quo* we maintain, all need to be examined through an ethical eye. As Carolyn Anderson (in press) describes, disabled students are excluded from geographical classrooms, fieldtrips and conferences, due to poor institutional facilities and arrangements. These are practices that need not only critical reflection but action. Indeed, as a discipline we have been slow to turn what we preach, in relation to social exclusion, social justice and moral philosophy, into practice (although the work of the Disability and Geography International Network, particularly in the context of the USA, is actively seeking to change geographical institutional practice). There is also little doubt that the links between the academy and activism (of varying forms) need further exploration (see Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999).

As the papers in this issue illustrate, whilst we might wish to engage in a critical praxis of emancipation and empowerment, reality is often more complicated. As we attempt to translate theory into practice, we need to consider what it means to think and act politically. We need to assess how and in what ways we can join with oppressed groups in their struggles for emancipation, and to consider the consequences of these unions for those involved. And we need to think through what a just landscape might look like. These are not easy questions, but they are important nevertheless. Collectively, the papers offer ideas and inspiration, encouraging us to critically engage with, rather than avoid, questions of ethics and politics as we work toward more inclusive geographies.

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