Disability as an Intersectional Identity

Jennifer Ashton and Milo Obourn
Departments of Education and English
The College at Brockport
5 October 2017
Disability Intersectionality

Think of a time you were forced to recognize yourself differently or became aware of your body or mind differently because of physical pain, mental distress, disability, or diagnosed illness.

Now imagine that experience if you were a different gender. Did it change?

Now imagine if you were a different race. Did it change?
Social Construction of Identity

- Categories that we consider natural and unalterable can be viewed as the products of social processes embedded in human actions and choices
  - We expect people to fit into binaries of race, sexual identity, gender, dis/ability, class, religion
  - How people identify varies depending on immediate social circumstances
- Differences are not the cause of inequity
  - The meaning and values applied to these differences make them harmful
  - The cultural standard of normalcy is white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian.
  - Classification results in a differentiation of power, resources, and privilege based on deviation from the norm
Disability vs. Impairment from the Social Model of Disability

- Impairment: An injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function
- Disability: The restrictions caused by the organization of society, which does not take into account individuals with physiological or psychological impairments
- Disability then becomes a SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY
Ableism

- Discrimination in favor of able-bodied people; prejudice against or disregard of the needs of disabled people; the systemic oppression of a group of people because of what they can or can not do with their bodies or minds (Oxford English Dictionary)

- The implicit belief that disability makes one less deserving of respect, a good education, membership in the community, equal treatment, equality before the law, opportunities to live independently and have self-fulfilling lives (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014)
Race and Schools

- Students of color are systemically treated differently and given disparate opportunities than their white peers, resulting in:
  - Over-representation in special education
  - Under-representation in gifted, honors, and AP settings
  - Disproportionate placement in most restrictive learning environments (self-contained, low-performing classes)
  - Higher number taught by uncertified teachers
  - Higher rate of experiences harsh discipline and punishment, frequent out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, early and frequent referrals to the judicial and criminal systems
Race, Schools, and Dis/ability

- Deficit-based thinking about difference puts students with marginalized identities at risk of failure
- Schools are not able to support students of color in ways that allow them to succeed
  - Resulting in inadequate services, low teacher expectations, low-quality curriculum, and instruction, and reception of more long-term suspensions and expulsions
- Black youth ages 6-21 account for ~15% of the general school population and ~20% of the special education population.
- African American students are overrepresented in special education
  - Intellectual Disability (ID) is more than twice population estimates
  - Emotional/Behavioral Disability
  - Learning Disability
Intersections between dominant discourses of disability and dominant discourses of gender

- There is both an interdependence and an intersectionality between social constructions of and cultural discourses about gender, and social constructions of and cultural discourses about illness, health, disability, and able-bodiedness.
- Bodies can also be physically, intellectually, or emotionally impaired or socially disabled by the process of gendering.
Labels and Spaces

What do these as the usual options for bathroom signs tell us about the options for our identities?
Gender Dynamics in “Care of” and “Care for” the body

Care of the body involves the purchase of a vast number of products for personal care and grooming.

Care for the body involves medical care products and facilities dominated by people without disabilities.
Vs. “Caring about” the body

- Caring about the body involves attention to the rights, treatment, and oppression of disabled, non-normative, and chronically ill bodies.

- Critical understanding of and the ability to live freely as and with your gender identity and bodymind as it is a part of caring about the body and its experiences and legibility.
Disabling people in our society is enabled by stigmas of being worth less

- Disabled
- Female
- Black and Brown
- Trans*
- Queer
- Poor
Dis*

✧ Think of one of your oppressed social positions. (If you think you have none, think of yourself as a child—adultism silences and marginalizes young people.)

✧ In that position have you been impaired? How?

✧ In that position have you been disabled? How?
Questions/thoughts on intersectional disability activism:

◊ How does intersectional work such as this fit into or problematize the recognition and respect for persons with disabilities?

◊ Is it a cooptation of the lived reality of disability to use it to critically read other social identity categories such as gender, race or class? Are the disabilities caused by gender, race, or class oppression the same as disabilities unrelated to another oppressed identity?

◊ Are there practical, activist-oriented ways of utilizing a better understanding of the intersectionality of disability with other social identities such as gender, race, and class? What might those look like?