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Social justice: redistribution and recognition—a non-reductionist perspective on disability

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The purpose of this article is to present some recent contributions to discussions on social justice and recognition in the context of disability research. Nancy Fraser’s theory of redistribution and recognition, and her endeavour to include both a materialist and a cultural perspective in a theory of justice is examined. We also discuss Honneth’s Hegelian-informed model of recognition. Critical realism, emphasizing a non-reductionist perspective, is briefly presented and, finally, we put forward some ideas on how to analyse and understand disability within such a framework.

Introduction

Two themes emerge as the main controversial ones in disability discourse as this is mirrored in Anglo-Saxon literature. One theme evolves around the concept of disability and we can identify two major perspectives, the ‘social model of disability’ and a post-modern perspective. The other theme addresses the complex issue of social justice and the debate is also in this case characterized by two major perspectives: a formal and a distributive perspective on justice.

The purpose of this article is to present some recent contributions to discussions on social justice and recognition that has so far not been much used in disability discourse, and in doing so we want to investigate the possibility to overcome polarizations and by introducing a meta-theoretical perspective, critical realism, we furthermore aim at discussing how to analyse and understand disability in contemporary society without yielding to reductionism.

What is disability? The ‘social model of disability’ is supposedly well known to the readers of this journal and we will not recall the emergence of the model—and its profiling against the ‘medical model of disability’—or its main features, but just

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briefly bring up some aspects of importance for the coming discussion of formal versus distributive justice and our suggestion of a non-reductionist approach to disability research.

Many scholars associated with the ‘social model of disability’ have focused on the socio-economic structure of society (the capitalist mode of production) when developing a theoretical understanding of disability as a social phenomenon (for an account, see Thomas, 1999, pp. 125–135). Oliver, for instance, notes that economic marginalization, such as disadvantaged positions or exclusion from the labour market facing many disabled persons, is closely related to the capitalist mode of production and rooted in the economy and the social structures of capitalism (Oliver, 1996, p. 33). Gleeson has also focused on the close connection between economic structure and disability (Gleeson, 1997, p. 195).

Contrasting the structurally focused approach in ‘the social model of disability’, a post-modernistic approach has emerged in the academic world. Suffice here to say that according to post-modern epistemology and, in particular, to a post-modern view on causality, it is not adequate to discuss the relation between disability and capitalism. According to Corker & Shakespeare (2002, p. 3) post-modernism sees the subject as constituted in and through specific socio-political arrangements. Although this could be interpreted as a version of a social model there are differences. When ‘mapping the terrain’ of a post-modern perspective on disability Corker & Shakespeare point at problems with meta-historical narratives and modernist assumptions of, e.g. ‘reality’ and ‘truth’, and they endorse deconstruction and situated knowledge, and decentring the subject. In doing this, they give culture a privileged role. Corker & Shakespeare see a great potential in a post-modern approach mainly because it enables us to incorporate the complexity of disabled people’s lives (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 15). In short, while the social model emphasizes economic structures a post-modern approach is focusing on cultural processes. One of our endeavours here is to point at a perspective that embraces both these levels of reality.

The question of disability and social justice has engaged many philosophers, social scientists and other scholars. Hahn (1985), Young (1990), Bickenbach (1993), Silvers (1998), and Wasserman (1998) are well known contributors to recent debates on these issues. We will not review the discussion on social justice here but merely give a brief account of two competing perspectives, formal justice and distributive justice.¹

A formal justice perspective is advocated by, among others, Silvers (1998). A key concept is ‘access to opportunities’. The main question is how these opportunities can be equalized. The fact that disabled people do not have access to opportunities is supported by an overwhelming body of research and biographic notes from disabled people themselves. There are many advocating that a formal justice perspective is the most efficient approach to reach the goal of equal opportunities. Silver argues that ‘to differ from the majority—that is, to be in the minority—is not itself sufficient to justify the imposition of social disadvantage, nor does their benefiting the majority excuse public policies that cause minorities to be worse off’ (Silver,
Such marginalization of minorities is the outcome of oppressive social choices, often thoughtlessly and unconsciously made. When oppression is acknowledged, the circumstances generating it can be addressed in a liberal society aiming at abolishing oppressive choices and structures. The formal social justice approach is strongly rooted in the civil rights movement in USA and the US jurisdiction with the Americans with Disability Act as a core stone (see also Albrecht, 2002; Hahn, 2002 on disability studies in USA). Establishing and enforcing a formal justice policy should remove the barriers that exclude disabled from access to equal opportunities, a conviction that has been criticized by some scholars, among them Wasserman (1998), arguing that this is not enough, but quite an over-simplification of the issue. Since disability is the result of interaction between a person, and his/her social and physical environment the latter has to be altered and such modifications of social and/or physical environment need resources, i.e. a redistribution of the flow of the resources in society is required and Wasserman thus advocates a theory of distributive justice (Wasserman, 1998, p. 268). Proponents of the formal justice approach criticize a ‘redistribution approach’ of necessarily implying that disabled people are labelled as a group with ‘special needs’. However, such labelling can be avoided if we address the reshaping of social and physical environment in general redistributive terms without conceptualizing it as measures for disabled people, but as measures to meet a variety of needs in the society. For instance, accessibility to various buildings for people with wheelchairs, people with children’s carriers, people with less than ‘normal’ strength in arms, etc., require similar architectural and technical solutions. Such ‘Design-for-all’ approach is at present formally the dominant perspective informing the Disability Policy of the Swedish government.

After having briefly outlined various perspectives in contemporary disability discourse, we will now in a few words introduce the approaches and tools that we wish to use in investigating disability. In order to come to terms with how to approach basic harms that disabled people encounter in society, we will discuss and examine Nancy Fraser’s theory and elaboration on the dimensions redistribution and recognition—central to her approach to social justice—in the case of disabled people. Much theoretical and empirical research on disability focus on questions related to personal identity. There are numerous accounts of disabled people experiencing devaluation, lack of respect, stigmatization, fear, etc. in encounters on an institutional, as well as a personal, face-to-face, level and of the impact of these experiences on self-image, as well as accounts of struggles of creating, recreating and maintaining a positive sense of self when living with an impairment. We will therefore subsequently discuss Fraser’s approach in the light of this. As will be illustrated, Fraser does not deal with interaction on a personal level and we will in this context introduce and briefly discuss Axel Honneth’s contribution *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts* (1992).

As will be clear from our account, however, we cannot but understand disability as a multifaceted phenomenon involving many crucial factors and we believe that an approach allowing us to work on various levels will serve our purpose best. Concluding our discussion we thus briefly put the question of redistribution and recognition...
in a wider analytical context. To this end, we present and discuss critical realism as point of departure in such an endeavour, and finally we put forward some ideas on how to analyse and understand disability within such a framework.

Nancy Fraser’s theory of justice

The challenge to integrate redistribution and recognition in an encompassing theoretical framework is dealt with by Nancy Fraser in a number of contributions in *New Left Review* and elsewhere. Fraser does not specifically address the situation of disabled people, but aims at capturing ways of analysing and coming to terms with social harms in our days more generally. As will be evident from our initial account of Fraser’s approach, a guiding principle and yardstick of intervention measures is the concept of participation parity. Participation is frequently part of claims made by disabled people and their organizations, and it is a major component in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, ICF.2 As Fraser is elaborating on a theory of justice with parity of participation as a normative, democratic guideline, her approach seems well suited as point of departure to analyse and understand disability in modern society.

Redistribution and/or recognition

One of Fraser’s intentions is to challenge what might be called the cultural turn in debates and in social science. To her, it is a paradox that claims for egalitarian redistribution rooted in a materialistic analysis are in decline and that the recognition approach rooted in a culturalist perspective seems to become more central in a period when material inequalities—nationally as well as globally—are increasing. This downplaying of the importance of socio-economic structures as causes of injustice is problematic since it ‘may actually promote economic inequality’ (Fraser, 2000, p. 108). Fraser thus has elaborated an analytical scheme that aims at including socio-economical as well as cultural injustices (Fraser, 1995, 1997a, b, 1998a, b, 2000, 2001). Fraser distinguishes between a philosophical, a social-theoretical and a political level of analysis, respectively (Fraser, 1997a, 1998a). On the *philosophical level* there is, on the one hand, the paradigm of distributive justice and, on the other, a paradigm centred on a normative concept of recognition. Both generate powerful and morally just claims of egalitarian redistribution of material resources, and recognition of cultural practices, traits and identities, respectively, but they do not communicate. There is, in other words, a need for elaboration in order to over-arch the tension between these two paradigms, so that claims for justice become more inclusive (Cf. Fraser, 2001, p. 23). Guiding principle for Fraser in such an elaboration is a moral norm expressed as parity of participation. Participation parity requires both the *objective* precondition of a just distribution of resources so as to ensure participant’s independence and voice and the *intersubjective* precondition of just cultural patterns of interpretation and valuation, institutionalized to express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social
esteeam. Fraser maintains that respect should always be equal to all human beings while social esteem is dependent upon personal accomplishments or contributions etc. Participation parity is furthermore dual in that it must be fulfilled between, as well as within groups (Fraser, 2001, p. 34).

On the social theoretical level Fraser advocates a dualist perspective (not to be confused with a dichotomy), where redistribution and recognition are two distinct analytical standpoints, both needed to address the justice of social arrangements. This enables us to combine redistribution and recognition in an integrative, not an additive, way, without reducing either one to the other (Fraser, 1998a). The third level is the level of politics, where the approach suggested by Fraser is part of the difficult project of integrating the best of socialist and the best of multicultural politics (Fraser, 1997a, p. 129; 2001, p. 38).

Applying the dualistic analytical perspective mentioned above on specific groups in society Fraser concludes that injustice experienced by working class people and homosexuals are both socio-economical and cultural, but the roots of injustices for these two groups are to be found in unjust socio-economical arrangements regarding the working class and in lack of recognition regarding homosexuals. Every person is situated at the intersection of a variety of identities, but Fraser’s account is for analytical clarity in a sense based on ideal types, as indicated above. Continuing her analysis, Fraser concludes that women and people of colour are examples of ‘bivalent’ groups in society, i.e. the roots of injustice are socio-economic, as well as cultural. A tension now arises on the political level concerning such ‘bivalent’ social groups: remedies to socio-economic injustice would be redistribution of resources while remedies to cultural injustice would be recognition. The first type of political measure aims at making groups similar and blurring differences while the second type of measure does the exact opposite in accentuating group identities (Fraser, 1995, 1998a). Suggestions have been made to include ‘disabled’ as an example of a social collective that could be analysed in a way similar to Fraser’s analysis of injustices to working class people, homosexuals, women and people of colour. Hahn, referred to previously, argues this view (see also Hugemark & Roman, 2001, 2002). Could disabled people, for instance, be looked upon as a bivalent collective? We will argue that disability is a very complex phenomenon and disabled people too heterogeneous a category to be analytically defined as a collective on a social theoretical level (cf. Üstün et al., 2001, pp. 5, 9). This will be further illustrated in subsequent sections of this article.

Redistribution and disability

One of Fraser’s paradigms of justice is the paradigm of redistributive justice. Exploitation, economic marginalisation and deprivation are examples of injustices rooted in the socio-economic structures in operation. Are there general mechanisms, rooted in a socio-economic dimension, which affect disabled people regardless of what type of impairments they have? Contemporary global capitalist economy depends on capital accumulation and commodification of capital and labour. Work-
ers that are less productive than others will gradually be excluded from the labour market as they are an impediment in the capitalist mode of production and this course of action will be increasingly accentuated with an increasingly globalized capitalist economy (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991). As Oliver (1996), Michailakis (2002) and many others have noted, this affects disabled people. These circumstances are at the root of the lower paid jobs and the longer periods of unemployment that disabled people encounter on the labour market.

There are, however, also impairments that do not affect productivity. Some limitations in functions can be fully (from a productive point of view) compensated—if at all required—by individual and/or environmental measures and do not differentiate a person with impairment from working peers without impairments. In this respect, there are huge differences not only between diverse groups of disabled people, for example, between people with mental and physical impairments, but also within a group of people with similar limitation in function, for instance a person with hearing impairment caused by conductive hearing loss as compared to a person with sensorineural hearing loss. In the first case, a hearing aid usually compensates the hearing loss and the person concerned therefore has no or limited problems in communicating, while in the second case the specific type of hearing loss cannot be compensated by using a hearing device and a person runs the risk of being devalued as a member of the labour force as a result of more time-consuming communication processes which may reduce productivity (Danermark & Coniavitis Gellerstedt, 2003).

In conclusion, we find that, at the same time as it is obvious that dissimilarities between various impairments require incorporation of the body in any analysis of disabled people, it is—as, indeed, emphasized by many scholars—highly relevant to make such an analysis from a perspective focusing on socio-economic arrangements in society.

Recognition and disability

Fraser’s second paradigm of justice is recognition. Recognition is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication, and includes for instance cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect.

Are there general mechanisms, rooted in a cultural dimension, which affect disabled people regardless of what type of impairments they have? As was the case when examining the same question from a redistribution perspective, we find a great variation when analysing groups with dissimilar impairments from a recognition perspective. Various impairments are furthermore valued and devalued in various ways in various societies (Üstün et al., 2001). Moderate sight impairment compared to moderate hearing loss is an illustrative example. Having a moderate vision problem, and wearing glasses or contact lenses is not culturally devalued in contemporary Western society, but having a moderate hearing loss and wearing a hearing aid is culturally devalued in quite a few contexts in Western society.
In conclusion, we find that, at the same time as it is obvious that dissimilarities between impairments require incorporation of the body in any analysis of disabled people, it is—as, indeed, emphasized by many scholars—highly relevant to make such an analysis from a perspective focusing on cultural values in society.

Fraser, recognition and disability

Maybe we can analyse injustice and harm to disabled persons from a ‘status-model’ perspective proposed by Fraser? Fraser suggests that we should avoid an identity model of recognition, claiming recognition of the values of various group-specific practices, traits and identities, which are not and cannot be universally shared or established as authoritative in modern conditions of value pluralism (Fraser, 2001, p. 27). Such an identity model is both theoretically deficient and politically problematic, equating the politics of recognition with identity politics and—as Fraser convincingly argues—‘in doing so, encourages reification of group identities and displacement of the politics of redistribution’ (Fraser, 2000, p. 113). Fraser thus proposes another approach to recognition, seeing it from a social status perspective tied to the norm of participation parity mentioned earlier. ‘What requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction’ and misrecognition is social subordination ‘in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life’ (Fraser, 2000, p. 113; 2001, p. 24, emphasis added). Parity-impeding may take on a great many different forms (legal, institutional, policy-bound, everyday social practices to name but a few), but the root of injustice remains institutionalized patterns of cultural values that constitute some social actors as less than full members of society and prevent them from participating as peers. Accordingly, on a political level, remedies to this kind of injustice means replacing such patterns that hinder parity of participation with ones that make participation as a peer possible so that we can speak of reciprocal recognition and status equality. The nature of such remedies varies according to circumstances (Fraser, 2000, pp. 114–116).

Fraser points at advantages with this status model approach as compared to an identity model in, for instance, that we avoid reifying culture and essentializing identities and we enhance cross-group interaction. Furthermore, we resist ‘re-engineering consciousness’ as social change (Fraser, 2001, p. 25).

Indeed, we cannot find arguments for perceiving disabled people as having a unifying group identity. Consider the case of people with hearing impairment. People with hearing loss are hardly members of a group with a specific commonly felt cultural identity and, as pointed out earlier, this goes for people with many other types of impairments as well, with the possible exception of deaf persons. It is rather other people who impose a stereotyped identity assigning characteristics such as slow, tiresome, less intelligent to people with hearing impairment. This does not, of course, mean that persons with hearing loss do not share experiences and claims that are rooted in their hearing impairment. Persons with hearing loss frequently experience institutionalized patterns that constitute them as less than full members of
society and prevent them from participating as peers in social life. Examples of such institutionalized patterns are lack of FM-lopes in lecture halls and theatres, high levels of noise in work sites, i.e. circumstances that generate claims for redistribution of material resources. People with hearing impairment thus hardly require recognition of a group-specific identity (but rather—on a political level—recognition of common group-specific and even subgroup-specific interests in, for instance, text-TV, FM-lopes and noise reduction at work sites)—instead, it is precisely the status as a full partner in social interaction at all levels that is at the centre of any claims for recognition.

As previously indicated, Fraser’s status model locates ‘the wrong’ in institutionalized social relations, not in individual or interpersonal psychology (Fraser, 2001, p. 27). This point is crucial. Neither the self-consciousness of the oppressed nor the prejudice of the oppressor should be at centre of interest, but ‘externally manifest and publicly verifiable impediments to some people’s standing as full members of society’ independently of their effects on the subjectivity of the oppressed. We must avoid a slippery road towards ‘blaming the victim’ for her/his internal structure of self-consciousness, resist ‘re-engineering consciousness’ and, instead, locate ‘the wrong’ and thereby also the basic focus of remedy and intervention in institutional social relations (Fraser, 2001, p. 27). This is a position akin to the conception of a ‘social model of disability’ in disability studies in Britain, but far from one where a person’s identity and sense of self—as she/he and her/his social surrounding grasps it—is at the centre of interest, which is the case in some approaches to disability (for instance, those focusing stigma and stigmatization in Goffman’s sense) and in Honneth’s model of social recognition, which we will return to below. Self and identity as developed in face-to-face encounters, on the one hand, and self and identity as developed through civil, legal, political and other institutional social relations, on the other, as well as the mediation and interplay between them is, however, not elaborated by Fraser (nor in any detail by Goffman or even Honneth in a sense, cf. Alexander & Lara, 1998).

Fraser’s model thus implies that recognition is not tied to a group-specific identity, but to the status of individual group members. By applying the status-model perspective we then hope to avoid the error of mechanically treating people with disability as a group with a specific identity and a homogenous collectivity.

For our purposes, however, there is a disturbing lack of concern with face-to-face encounters in Fraser’s approach. Our concern here is similar to concerns expressed by Thomas and others when urging us to bring not only ‘the political’ but also ‘the personal’ and not only ‘doing’ but also ‘being’ into disability studies (Thomas, 1999). Let us again consider the case of people with hearing impairment. Hearing impairment does prevent people from participating on a par with others in social life. Hearing is—like, for instance, language skills—a phenomenon that is at the core of verbal communication and social interaction itself. Certainly much—and maybe increasing—social interaction does not take the form of verbal communication, but in the case of people with hearing loss it is precisely verbal communicative situations that hinder participation as a peer (beside other characteristics, such as being a
woman, not having white skin and/or being a wheelchair-user). Frequently, the process of reaching some kind of shared meaning to an exchange of utterances is influenced in one way or another when one of the participants in a social interaction face-to-face or by telephone does not hear, and/or misunderstands, and/or guesses and/or withdraws altogether—all very common situations and strategies in specific communicative situations for persons with hearing loss. A person with hearing impairment is not a peer in such social interaction, and not only tiresome and often hidden work and planning by the person with hearing impairment, but also time and cooperation from the other participant(s) and/or various environmental measures are required in order to approximate a peer situation. One point here is, in other words, that social interaction itself, as such, and the possibility of participating in it as a peer is in some face-to-face/telephone cases distorted by mechanisms that may be rooted not only in socio-economic and/or in cultural, but in specific physiological circumstances as well and we are again reminded of the importance of bringing in the body in any analysis (Cf ‘impairment effects’ in Thomas, 1999). The distortion moreover has a material, as well as a cultural dimension. There is a dimension of time involved, as reaching a shared meaning may take more time when a participant has a hearing loss. Time is a resource that may be scarce in specific situations, irrespective of any measures taken, for example, some emergency situations. The distortion further has a dimension of personal identity involved, as the responses of a person with hearing impairment to an interaction partner may—due to not hearing properly and misunderstanding—reflect characteristics and traits that simply are not true, creating uncertainty in the specific situation as well as a challenge to local cultural rituals. This may also fuel previous prejudices about people with hearing impairment.

In conclusion, it seems important to pay attention to social recognition and lack of social recognition on an individual, as well as a structural level. In the long run, institutional change certainly do change personal attitudes, values and so on, and in changing institutions, procedures, physical environment, etc., to make disabled people take part as peers in all aspects of social life we no doubt would make good—and maybe the best—use of any potential for change on a political level (cf, Finkelstein, 1980, 1996). But in view of the harm made to people with disability (disability understood as being about both ‘doing’ and ‘being’, as Thomas (1999, pp. 60, 157) puts it) in everyday personal encounters it seems urgently relevant to search also for mechanisms on a social theoretical level that generate such harm. We could also argue that it is possible to claim authoritatively that respect should always be equal to all human beings in institutional, as well as individual encounters. We will therefore briefly present another approach to recognition in the following.

**Honneth’s theory of social recognition**

Honneth’s theory of recognition offers an interpretation of current social development that tries to go beyond ideas of identity and difference in post-modernist theories. Honneth develops a Hegelian-informed model of recognition characterized
by a categorical imperative of recognition involved in all human interaction: if I want to be recognized I have to recognize the other. Mis-recognition or lack of recognition by others distorts the development of a sense of self (Honneth, 1995, chapters 5 and 6. Like Fraser, Honneth does not address the situation of disabled people, but an account of Honneth’s approach in the context of disability studies is found in Abberley 2002, pp. 128–130).

The important observation that positive relations-to-self can be achieved only by being recognized by others highlights the question of social relations and Honneth is—drawing upon Mead—operationalizing relations of recognition and the process of recognition in three different categories. The first is centred on the individual and his/her concrete needs and emotions. Recognition evolves in primary relationships between child and child carer, lovers, family members, friends, etc. and is crucial to the individual’s basic ‘self-confidence’ in himself/herself as an autonomous individual. Lack of recognition affects an individual’s physical integrity, in its extreme forms as abuse and rape. The second process of recognition is centred on a person’s position as a legal subject in the law. Recognition evolves in legal relations and is expressed as rights—in our time of history often described in terms of civil, political and social rights—crucial to obtaining a sense of possessing a universal dignity as a human being and thereby to acquire ‘self-respect’. Lack of recognition is accordingly expressed as denial of rights, exclusion, etc. The third process of recognition is centred on the subject, and her/his individual particularity, traits and abilities. Recognition evolves in communities of shared values that in our historic period of individualization has to be characterized by solidarity—a mutually felt concern for what is individual and particular about another person and his/her way of life—and is crucial to a sense of ‘self-esteem’. Lack of recognition is expressed as denigration, insult, etc. As human beings we need to be recognized through each of the three processes and modes of relations of recognition and establish positive relations to ourselves in terms of ‘self-confidence’, ‘self-respect’ and ‘self-esteem’. When lack of recognition is experienced harm is done, and important to Honneth is the impact of such negative experiences in triggering off collective actions and struggles for recognition. For our purposes, the brief sketch given will serve as a reminder of the importance on a personal level of experiences of harm, disrespect, lack of recognition, etc., and we will very briefly illustrate Honneth’s three relations of recognition in the case of disabled people.

To numerous disabled people, the first category of recognition is more or less permanently present in relations to assistants/caregivers involving physical integrity and fragile balances between autonomy and dependency. For ‘self-confidence’ to evolve and be maintained in such relations is very demanding as many accounts bear witness to. The second category is also highly relevant in the case of people with impairment (cf. the ‘formal approach to justice’ above). The history of this kind of recognition process through law illuminates the quite varying conditions under which people with different impairments are to develop ‘self-respect’ (Blomqvist, 2001, see also Rioux, 2002). The third category of recognition is familiar in studies focusing on stigmatization in Goffman’s sense. To Goffman, stigmatization is
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precisely a process where negative valuation of a characteristic within a 'local moral order' causes people with this characteristic to, for instance, develop strategies in order to protect their sense of self, their 'self-esteem'. To obtain the solidarity required to make away with lack of recognition such as, for example, stigmatization of disabled people is certainly no easy task and Honneth is not convincing in his account of how solidarity may come about (see, for example, Honneth, 1995, p. 163, Alexander & Lara, 1998, p. 135, Fraser, 2001, p. 25). There is, furthermore, a question of scope for such solidarity, i.e. what is a community of shared values? A workplace? A local community? A nation? The world? (Cf Anderson, 1995, p. xviii).

However, Honneth’s theoretical approach to recognition has much to offer in reminding us of the impact of personal experiences of various forms of mis-recognition and in helping us to understand some basic injustices that disabled people encounter in society. However, Honneth’s approach is not enough for our purposes. As mentioned earlier, Fraser (2000) highlights two important shortcomings in what she calls the ‘identity model’, which are important here (even if Honneth’s approach reaches beyond identity): ‘displacement of redistribution’ and ‘reification of group identities’. We will not further elaborate on the first of these shortcomings (also associated with the ‘medical model of disability’, where impairment and disability frequently are conceptualized as personal misfortunes that are to be dealt with on an individual level), but make a few comments on the second.

Reification of identity means that differences between groups are at centre of interest. For a group to be recognized as a group it has to spell out its specificity and uniqueness. In the struggle for recognition there is a risk of simplifying the complexity and differences within the group and of discouraging the expression of the social multiplicity of the group, promoting conformism, intolerance and patriarchy (Thomas’ Female Forms could be interpreted as a contribution to oppose such tendencies within the discipline of disability studies in the UK). As argued earlier in this article, we do not understand disabled people to constitute a social collective with a specific identity, but we noted that deaf people are a possible exception, due to the sign language as a common cultural trait. An example to Fraser’s point is precisely the reaction in the deaf community triggered off by the introduction of cochlea implants for deaf children (placing spoken communication within reach). Parents who decided to have a cochlea implants for their deaf children met a very hostile reaction within the deaf community as such a measure was considered a threat to deaf-culture and the identity as a Deaf (Jacobsson, 2000). Moreover, when a group of people are forced to define their group as ‘special’ they will compete with other groups in the same position and ‘the result is inevitably invidious’ (Bickenbach et al., 1999, p. 1183).

Critical realism as an approach to disability research

Where does this take us? We have suggested that the elaboration of an analytical scheme based on critical realism (Danermark, 2002; Danermark et al., 2002; see also Williams, 1999) including a socio-economic, as well as a cultural level—that
Table 1. Analytical levels in disability research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Examples of mechanisms</th>
<th>Examples of contexts</th>
<th>Examples from a particular context: a specific work site</th>
<th>Examples of negative outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Culture</td>
<td>Negative evaluation of a characteristic</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Employment procedures</td>
<td>Denigration, exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic</td>
<td>Profit, exploitation</td>
<td>Labour market</td>
<td>Organization of work tasks</td>
<td>Unemployment, slimmed organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial</td>
<td>Relation-to-self</td>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>Relations in work team</td>
<td>Lack of self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Feelings of pride and shame</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Conversation during breaks</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>Genetic factors</td>
<td>Noisy surroundings</td>
<td>Shop floor</td>
<td>Sensoriononeural hearing loss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

means addressing both a distributive and a civil rights legislation and recognition perspective—has much to offer in the analysis of disability. We have also indicated that the ‘status-model’ could be a fruitful approach to lack of social recognition, since ‘disabled people’ are too complex and heterogeneous to be treated as one social group, and especially as one with a group-specific identity. As indicated by the examples given we think that we have to bring the body into the analysis. As Honneth’s contribution to the discussion on recognition implies, however, we also need to take a person’s sense of self into account.

Central to critical realism is the world conceptualized as stratified with mechanisms working at various levels, generating a range of outcomes in different contexts. Mechanisms are working on different levels and on each level such mechanisms that cannot be reduced to another level are at work, i.e. critical realism emphasizes a non-reductionist perspective (see Danermark et al., 2002). This implies that injustices to disabled people can be understood neither as generated by solely cultural mechanisms (cultural reductionism) nor by socio-economical mechanisms (economic reductionism) or by biological mechanisms (biological reductionism). In sum, only by taking different levels, mechanisms and contexts into account, can disability as phenomenon be analytically approached. This is illustrated in Table 1.

By using a critical realist model we can incorporate different levels of reality in the analysis. However, it is important to stress that the above is an analytical conceptual framework. We have to bear in mind that in reality levels are entwined and that mechanisms could be supporting each other or counteracting each other, and the outcome in a specific context is the result of a very complex interplay between levels and mechanisms. The scheme also enables us to better understand and analyse external barriers and impairments, and the interplay between them. However, it
does not include tools for moral and political issues, such as ranking competing claims of resources.

In concrete research, it is not possible to grasp all levels in the scheme above, but the model lays the ground for a genuine multidisciplinary approach were no level \textit{a priori} is more important than another. The choice of level to focus in research is related to the purpose of the specific study. However, focusing on one level still means permanent awareness of the existence and importance of other levels, as there are mechanisms active at other levels influencing the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, the framework is also sensitive to the context. By emphasizing the importance of the context we could reach conclusions that are highly relevant for the investigated phenomenon and avoid the mistake of ‘context stripping’ that is the sign mark of an empiricist/positivistic approach frequently leading to very superficial conclusions. Furthermore, the analytical scheme prevents us from ending up in relativism.

In paying attention to a cultural, as well as a socio-economical level and mechanisms operating on these levels we seek to find ways of analysing the situation of disabled people and also to search for relevant political remedies through the norm of participation parity in the manner suggested by Fraser. However, by including also a psychosocial and a psychological level we bring in levels that Fraser wants to avoid and it certainly is difficult to relate such levels to relevant specific political remedies. Nevertheless, we think that knowledge of mechanisms operating on these levels have to be important inputs into any political remedies and actions on cultural and socio-economical levels. As we have argued repeatedly, the body also has to be part of any analysis. Again, whatever level we choose to focus in a specific analysis it seems to us to be of the utmost importance not to let other levels disappear from neither methodological considerations nor theoretical and empirical analysis.

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Notes

1. We draw on Silvers et al. (1998).
2. In working out \textit{The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health} (ICF) the variety of conceptual models proposed to understand and explain disability and functioning is recognized and ICF is apprehended as based on an integration of two opposing models, a ‘medical’ one and a ‘social’ one. (WHO 2001, chapter 5.2; see also Üstün et al., 2001, p. 7).
3. ‘Impairments are problems in body function or structure such as significant deviation or loss’ according to the ICF and we do not argue this conceptualization, but would qualify it by pointing at the fluent and not permanent, context-bound and socially constructed aspects of impairments.
References


