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At the intersection of development, disability and postcolonial theory. Are people with a disability marginalised among the marginalised?

Na styku rozwoju, niepełnosprawności i teorii postkolonialnej.
Czy osoby niepełnosprawne są marginalizowane wśród osób marginalizowanych?

Streszczenie. Nierówności i niesprawiedliwości wynikające z klasyfikowania/różnicowania ludzi ze względu na rasę, płeć, orientację seksualną, pochodzenie etniczne, wyznanie lub narodowość stanowią przedmiot zainteresowania zarówno dyskursu rozwojowego, jak i dyskursu postkolonialnego, podczas gdy kwestia niepełnosprawności pozostaje w cieniu. Tymczasem zgodnie z założeniami Światowej Organizacji Zdrowia (WHO), w tym realizowanego przez nią projektu Poprawa Zdrowia Psychicznego na rzecz Rozwoju Narodów (MIND), niepełnosprawność to bariera rozwoju, czynnik globalnie przyczyniający się do ubóstwa, nierówności i niesprawiedliwości, a nie odwrotnie. Dlatego też kategoria niepełnosprawności powinna być brana pod uwagę w istotnych z perspektywy wyzwań XXI w. badaniach poświęconych wykorzystywaniu i osłabianiu relacji władzy w celu wyeliminowania różnic społecznych. Postulat ten koresponduje z założeniami formułowanych obecnie koncepcji teoretycznych, które podkreślają konieczność czerpania zarówno z rozważań dotyczących niepełnosprawności, jaki i z postkolonialnych debat na temat sprawiedliwości społecznej i roli, jaką edukacja może odgrywać w budowaniu sprawiedliwych społeczeństw i urzeczywistnianiu idei równości osób na całym świecie.

Artykuł wprowadza w koncepcje rozwoju, niepełnosprawności i teorii postkolonialnej, a także akcentuje potrzebę krytycznych i wieloaspektowych badań nad niepełnosprawnością w celu dekolonizacji aktualnych praktyk oraz sprawienia, by marginalizowana i dyskredytowana wiedza o złożonym i heterogenicznym doświadczeniu niepełnosprawności stała się obecna w przestrzeni publicznej. Wreszcie tekst ten ma na celu podkreślenie, że zdekolonizowane rozumienie niepełnosprawności powinno być nieodłącznym elementem obecnych programów edukacyjnych – integralnym z procesami rozwojowymi – ponieważ różnice mię-

dzy ludźmi nie powinny być czynnikami zubożającymi, ale wzmacniającymi relacje między-ludzkie.

Słowa kluczowe: rozwój oparty na sprawiedliwości społecznej; krytyczne wieloaspektowe badania niepełnosprawności; teoria postkolonialna; projekt WHO MIND; marginalizacja; wieloaspektowa edukacja w zakresie sprawiedliwości

Summary. While inequalities and injustices originating from the social categorisations of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or nationality seem to be a general focus of both development and postcolonial discourses, the issue of disability seems to be rather overshadowed. Therefore, since even the World Health Organisation (WHO) itself and its Mental Health Improvements for Nations Development (MIND) project represents disability as a barrier to development – so as a factor globally contributing to poverty, inequality, and injustice and not the other way around – there is a need to extend our attention when investigating exploiting and disempowering power relations inherent in the 21st century that aim at eliminating human differences. The present theoretical inquiry concentrates thus on emphasising a call for bringing together the disability and postcolonial debates in the investigation of social-justice-based development and the role education might in general play in the realisation of just societies and the equality of all individuals around the world. The paper starts by shortly introducing the concepts of development, disability, and postcolonial theory, and then aims at accentuating the need of a critical global disability studies for the sake of decolonising current practices and making present, marginalised, and discredited knowledges of a complex and heterogeneous disability experience. Finally, the paper highlights that a decolonised understanding of disability should be inherent in present educational agendas – integral to development processes – because human differences should not be factors that impoverish but that empower human relationships.

Key words: social-justice-based development; critical global disability studies; postcolonial theory; WHO's MIND project; marginalisation; global justice education

Introduction

Development is a concept that in general pervades a country's operational spirit as the intention of societies to strive for a level of life that is "better", "higher", "more", or "richer" is more than commonplace. Yet, since there are different ways to define development itself, the perspective chosen by a nation, for instance, in order to "develop" will inevitably influence the concerned measures to be taken; development therefore is not only a common but also a very complex concept.

The focus of this present article lies thus on the investigation of social-justice-based development and on emphasising a call for bringing together

the disability and postcolonial debates within social justice-based development discourses, and on the role education might in general play in the realisation of just societies and the equality of all individuals around the world. Arguing for the recognition of a complex and heterogeneous disability experience and the abandonment of what Grech (2012) refers to as the hegemony of normality, the article can be best realised as a theoretical examination of the power dynamics that link together the concepts of disability and postcolonialism (Sherry, 2007, p. 16) and influence contemporary experiences and understandings of identity. After shortly introducing the concepts of development, disability, and postcolonial theory, the paper concentrates on arguing for how a critical global disability studies could fit both into development and educational agendas, while the concluding words aim to reflect and synthesize a fresh insight into a wider understanding of development studies.

Introducing the concepts of Development, Disability, and Postcolonial Theory

Development

Development studies is a cross-disciplinary field that aims at capturing the complexity of defining the notion of development (Desai & Potter, 2014). It is argued that different definitions of development result in different development theories that constitute the mostly normative theoretical base for development strategies. However, while what lies at the heart of both development theories and strategies is to bring about change in society, “all such efforts to effect change reflect some form of ideological base [...] [that] reflect social, economic, cultural, ethical, moral, and even religious influences” (Potter, 2014, p. 139–140). That is, different development ideologies influence the way one looks at development itself, they influence the way one defines development, how one theorizes change, and the idea behind how this change is put into action is also forced ideologically. Consequently, the spirit in which policy reforms are created as part of a development strategy is never neutral or objective, this underlying spirit decisively motivates how and what sense of development is measured, and it inevitably defines the role education plays in the specific concept of development.

That being said, Goulet (1971) argues that there are three core conceptions – life sustenance, self-esteem, and freedom – that cannot be absent from any manifestations of development ideas. Life sustenance for him

means that “[n]o country can be regarded as fully developed if it cannot provide all its people with such basic needs as housing, clothing, food and minimal education”, “[s]elf-esteem is concerned with the feeling of self-respect and independence”, and “[f]reedom refers to the ability [...] to determine [one’s] own destiny” i.e. “[n]o person is free if they are imprisoned on the margins of subsistence with no education and no skills” (Goulet, 1971 cited in Thirlwall, 2014, p. 62–63). Also, the organisation of Comhlámh (2008 cited in Chataika, 2012, p. 253), for instance, formulates a similar perspective of development where the aim is to “[free] people from obstacles that affect their ability to develop their own lives and communities”. These two definitions were thus chosen to be included because, as far as I am concerned, these are the ones that represent the widest concept of development that we as researchers of human and social sciences cannot afford to lose sight of. Exceeding the scope of development measured in terms of economic growth or human development, these definitions speak for the members of the society as **individuals** who are free and themselves are in power of their own destiny. That is, these definitions illustrate the importance of education as a guiding force in developing self-sufficiency and emphasize an urge to concentrate on **all** members of a country in development discussions, I believe.

Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that the very discourse of development and so the contemporary controversies about poverty, inequality, and injustice stem undeniably from the global historical context of colonialism. Recognising connections between aspects of development, colonialism, and race (Desai & Potter, 2014) and unlearning the “Western”, “white”, and “male” privileging of identity that characterizes power relations even in the 21st century is thus crucial for the eradication of all types of Othering and so for the realisation of just societies (Spivak, 1994). I cannot help but recognise, however, that while issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity and religion are in general profoundly talked about in the field, discussions about marginalisation even within development studies lack a great amount of account on the Othering of people with a disability.

Disability

Moving now on to consider what a disability is, we soon realise that it is a similarly complex concept as development itself. Not only does the definition of the word disability take different forms around the world both via legislative systems and cultural understandings, but what we understand on a disability i.e. human, biological and individual differences is also pre-

determined by the theoretical philosophical perspective one chooses to take on. Notwithstanding, the positivist tendency of “modelling” has been undeniably the dominant concept of theorizing within disability studies that is in core a mostly Western i.e. European and North American academic field (Grech, 2012). The two major models are the medical and the social model of disability where the difference is explained by Silvers as the following:

Whilst the medical model treats disability to be a problem requiring medical intervention as both the prerogative and responsibility of medical professionals to fix, the social model understands disability as a political problem calling for corrective action by citizen activists who alter people’s attitudes and reform the practices of the state (Silvers, 2010, p. 19).

As it offers a prospect of change within society, most social researchers of disability studies tend to identify disability with the social model (Chataika, 2012). What is exactly meant on the social model, however, also requires further clarification. By differentiating between disability and impairment, Sherry (2007), for example, recognises two definitions of the social model of disability that, in fact, might seem controversial, yet, consenting both is inevitable for the comprehension of the discourse around disability. Explaining the social model, Sherry (2007, p. 10) thus calls for the differentiation of disability from impairment, as while impairment is defined “as a form of biological, cognitive, sensory or psychiatric difference that is defined within a medical context”, disability is the “negative social reaction to those differences”, he argues. The definition of disability described by Sherry is thus closely related to questions of identity, which means that according to this understanding disability “is not necessarily regarded as a bad thing – it is an identity, with both social and personal dimensions, which may be associated with feelings of community, solidarity, and pride, or conversely, with feelings of difference, exclusion, and shame” (Sherry, 2007, p. 10). An obvious intensification of identity politics within the disability movement can therefore be realised (Sherry, 2007), which involvement with identity politics, however, raises some crucial questions. Who are people with a disability actually? How do they end up as “disabled”, so how do they come to spend the whole of their adulthood with such a label as disability? Who decides on what an “able” and a “dis-able” body is and looks like in the first place? And finally, how is it possible that Simi Linton (2005, p. 520), a disability scholar herself with a disability, is “stuck using” such a word as impairment in her research because “[she does] not have another word to describe the forms

[their] bodies and sensory systems take and the way those forms function”? In fact, Barker and Murray (2010, p. 228) argue that despite its seemingly humanitarian character and its call for fundamental social change, it is important to see and acknowledge that even the social model of disability is “laden with priorities, value judgements, and historical perspectives that are by no means neutral or transparent”.

Postcolonial theory

Having introduced the topics of development and disability from a rather critical point of view, the following section is going to focus on opening up the political struggle underlying these concepts recognised via the postcolonial theoretical lenses. The basic idea of postcolonial theory is that economic and cultural legacies of colonialism are still present in our contemporary society, and besides being present they still play a crucial role in the construction of the social and political power relations of our world. Both Ghai (2012, p. 273) and Chataika (2012, p. 254) emphasize that postcolonial theory looks at society, culture, and literature in two perspectives: on the one hand, it reflects on a colonial past and looks at how an author and their context reflect on a colonial past, and, on the other hand, it is asserted that postcolonial writings have the power of discovering a “new way of creating and understanding the world”. Ghai further argues (2012, p. 273) that postcolonial theory has the capability to serve as the instrument used to recognise oppressed identities and to grasp the historical and symbolical understandings of the Other.

The wording “them” and “us” is, however, rather usual in Western academia, which tendency becomes quite intriguing from a colonial discourse analysis perspective. “Colonial discourse analyses challenge the neutrality and objectivity of academia, and its role in constructing stereotypes, images, and knowledge”, and so via looking at language and discourse from a post-structuralist perspective it aims at ending institutional suffering (Andreotti, 2011, p. 86). Consequently, language itself and the examination of a text is ideological, which implies the “worldly” nature of texts (Said, 1983) and that “interpretations of the world create the world or reality itself” (Andreotti, 2011, p. 87). Discourse using the social construction of the category of the Other creates therefore a distinction which can easily be understood as discrimination, and so it is argued that discrimination people with a disability experience “on grounds of disability is similar to apartheid” (Chataika, 2012, p. 260). An extreme but appropriate and maybe even too expositive

justification for this claim could be the eugenicist disposition and genocide done by the Nazi Germany, which example plainly manifests the connections between racism and disablism. Accordingly, the struggle I mentioned in the beginning of the section is about questions of “oppression, voicelessness, stereotyping, undermining, neo-colonisation, postcolonisation, ‘them and us’ and bridging the gap between the Global North and Global South spaces in the disability and development agenda” (Chataika, 2012, p. 252). Realising thus the need for interdisciplinary analyses of development and postcolonialism within disability studies is I believe vital when keeping a global context and the picture of a different future in mind. The next part of the paper will therefore argue for a critical upgrade of disability studies.

Critical Disability Studies

Disability studies is a discipline that is essentially concerned with the ways disability has been created as a social category. It studies disability as a complex social phenomenon and investigates “how the category has been institutionalized in social practices and intellectual conventions” (Linton, 2005, p. 518). Linton (2005, p. 518) describes that the focus within the field lies on bringing people with a disability “closer” to society i.e. to naturalise and “remake [them] as full citizens”. Provided the previous section and Linton’s use of vocabulary that indicates a context where people with a disability are not only struggling to fit into “normal” society but had even been made inferior members of it, I find it hard not to agree with Barker and Murray (2010) who call for the decolonisation of disability studies.

Looking at the context of disability from a postcolonial perspective, we are presented the problem of inequality and injustice that inherently originate from exploiting and disempowering power relations that aim at eliminating human differences (Andreotti, 2011, p. 93). Past practices do have an influence on the present and on the future, so we cannot allow turning a blind eye to the hundreds-of-years old tradition of disability-based exclusion starting in the Age of Enlightenment when prominent thinkers such as Hume, Locke, Mill, and Rawls simply excluded people with a disability from their perceptions of social justice (Altermark, 2017). However, Grech (2012), for instance, emphasizes that people with a disability do not stand outside of history but they themselves carry stories that show how they were artificially put to be part of the subaltern. What is important to see is

how these colonial constructions make up the contemporary nature, meaning and ideas about disability. Vocabulary referring to disability such as deficiency, sub-normality, and impairment implies that these people are in the need of cure, which shows that the dominant discourse of disability studies is “not in the language of emancipation or justice, but in the vocabulary of charity, technical enterprise, and a deep paternalism” (Chataika, 2012, p. 255). Also, as expressed by both Sherry (2007) and Ghai (2012), a postcolonial read into the binary construction of either being “able” or “dis-able” might not only have negative moral and political consequences but could even be serving such political purposes as “the disabled [...] does [hardly] have a place [...] in [contemporary] social and public space[s]” (Malec, 2005, p. 286). Therefore, there is an urgent need to alter the terms of our formal analyses, to deconstruct the present tradition of oppressive representation (Barker & Murray, 2010), and for disability studies to learn from postcolonialism in order to work **toward** and not **for** the Other (Andreotti, 2011, p. 93). The objective of critical disability studies is thus to address existent power relations and to entice alternative emancipatory practices and social change (Chataika, 2012) triggered by attention to cultural difference, reflexivity, dialogue, and situated experience (Barker & Murray, 2010, Andreotti, 2011, Malec, 2005).

Critical Global Disability Studies

As indicated by the previous section, the need for a different perspective within disability studies is therefore indeed necessary, especially as it is a multidimensional and multifaceted problem we are facing. The way I see it, a postcolonial read into the nature of disability studies serves not only one but two understandings of subordinating power relations: it reveals, on the one hand, a metaphorical colonialist understanding of the disposition and labelling of people with a disability as inferior by the state all around the world but mostly in Western societies, and, on the other hand, the controversial presence of Global North “expertise” in Global South contexts which can literally be understood as neo-colonialist endeavours. As people with a disability are generally and still described as dependent on the “good will” of others and professionals to come and “fix” them (Chataika, 2012, p. 255), their capability of independence and self-determination globally needs to be argued for (Altermark, 2017). However, “the ‘crucial role’ of the Global North ‘developing’ the Global South” (Chataika, 2012, p. 259) also needs to

be addressed. Grech (2012) for example explains how the West exports epistemologies to the “less developed” parts of the world very often without the pivotal awareness of local ideologies. This misleadingly suggests not only the transferability of Western knowledges but also the unbalance of power and the omnipotent and omniscient pursuit of Global North proficiency.

The epistemic violence described by Spivak (1998) is most recognisable within disability studies in the exportation of the social model to the South. This affair suggests that Western superiority is neutralised (Kapoor, 2004, p. 629) and that the Global North “‘bring[s] light’ to the South through re-dressing its ‘social ills’” (Chataika, 2012, p. 259), while it simply omits the fact that this in many cases deteriorates the local, traditional way of care in communities (Grech, 2012). Western disability studies literature often accounts for “backward” and “uncivilised” cultures to be abandoning, hiding, neglecting, and killing people with a disability, while it has a tendency of overlooking the exploiting nature of Western colonialism and the present violent conflicts often coordinated by the West being a major cause of contemporary poverty and impairment in the Global South in the first place (Grech, 2012, p. 54, 60). To top it all, Chataika (2012, p. 255) points out that the Global North’s “consultant” status in global “relationships” is not only contributed and driven by “expertise” but with the budget and therefore prospects of profit as well. The section that follows will therefore try to uphold this statement.

The WHO’s MIND Project

To corroborate the arguments given by the section before, I would like to introduce the WHO’s MIND project with the help of Titchkosky and Aubrecht’s (2015) critical article. The abbreviation WHO’s MIND stands for the World Health Organisation’s Mental Health Improvements for Nations Development project that encourages national development via a controversial way of conceptualising and treating mental illnesses. First of all, the WHO perceives and so advocates disability as a strictly biologically conditioned peculiarity of bodies, minds, and senses that have “gone wrong”, and so approaches the topic from a purely positivist and rather narrow-minded perspective (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015, p. 77). Also, it defines disability as an “asocial problem that is [...] understood to cause all sorts of social problems such as lack of work, poverty, and restrictive social and emotional environments” (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015, p. 79). Furthermore, the

WHO (2011, p. 5) defines mental illnesses as a major form of disability by reason of the “facts” that show that 450 million people suffer from mental or behavioural disorder globally, that depression is going to be the “number one burden of disease by 2030” (The NGO Committee on Mental Health, 2012), and that “the pervasive nature of mental illnesses [...] results higher cost and lower productivity” (WHO, 2011, p. 6). Thus, the picture is becoming quite cumbersome as the WHO represents disability as something that is measurable and people with a disability as a cost, a burden, and as a lack of productivity (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015, p. 72). That is, the WHO represents disability as a barrier to development, and so as a factor influencing the global question of poverty, inequality and injustice, and not the other way around.

In light of this, it seems like the WHO perceives it as self-evident that most people with a disability are located in the so called “developing countries”, as it is them that have “failed” to implement “adequate” treatment plans (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015, p. 76), that is, plans whose putting into practice “requires access to rarefied languages, disciplinary knowledge and technologies designed, managed and, in the case of pharmaceuticals, patented by Western powers” (Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015, p. 71). Putting on the postcolonial theoretical lenses helps us thus see the WHO as a neo-colonising organ in contemporary times, the underlying power relations and “knowing better” attitude, and that colonisation has always been key in the achievements of modernist medicine (Sherry, 2007). The WHO expects countries to realise disability as a medical phenomenon because medical problems are solvable by “the modernist approaches” of science, and so solving “the problem of disability” is universally **the** way towards national development. Investing in Western medical expertise, according to the WHO (2011, p. 5–6), is therefore “the right thing to do” and not doing so is “very expensive”. Consequently, I am naively hoping that the ironic abbreviation of WHO’s MIND is only a pure coincidence and not a consciously conceived, almost arrogant acronym that openly projects Western superiority.

In conclusion, provided that the section above discusses documents officially presented by the WHO, it needs to be acknowledged that both colonial discourse analysis, postcolonial theory, and critical disability studies are inevitable in developmental discussions of such nature. Disability is a global phenomenon, and in order for us to start perceiving it in a different way we need to both start understanding the various cultural experiences of it and stop conceptualising it as a problem. As a result, “[i]f contexts and circumstances vary and are not static, so is the meaning of disability fluid, dynam-

ic and shifting, [and] constantly (re)negotiated” (Grech, 2012, p. 58). This is the reason why Grech (2012, p. 66) argues for a critical global disability studies which, quoting Santos (2007), he understands as being “about decolonising debates, and about making present and credible, suppressed, marginalised and discredited knowledges”.

Discussion of Educational Implications

So far, this paper has concentrated on arguing for a critical and global dimension of disability studies, let us now turn to what educational implications this change of perspective might incorporate. To highlight it once again, understandings of disability are without question “rooted in history and culture as well as [in] social contexts” and, on top of that, Zaorska (2014, p. 228) argues that these understandings often affect negatively even the future employability of people with a disability. A postcolonial perspective, however, realises “the goal of education [as] enabl[ing] individuals to reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their cultures and contexts, to imagine and negotiate ‘otherwise’, and to take ethical responsibility for their decisions and actions” (Andreotti, 2011, p. 93). That being said, while issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or nationality are naturally considered to be part of educational discourses of emancipatory nature, just like the field of development studies, global justice education seems also to rather fail to include people with a disability into its discussions.

Global justice, defined by Mandel (2006, p. 102), is a duty that “requires that everyone helps to create and to sustain institutions that can protect and provide access to basic human rights”, while Marquis et al. (2018, p. 854) argue that global justice education “proceeds from the recognition that [educational institutions] have an ethical obligation to develop students’ capacity to understand and enact this duty”. The way I see it, global justice education is thus a concept that exceeds, or better said links the notions of human rights-, international-, multicultural-, intercultural-, and peace education and education for global citizenship and sustainable development. Consequently, since the role of education in developmental procedures is dependent on how we define development itself and since this paper conceptualised development as a state to be reached where nobody is left out and everybody has a right to independence and an own destiny, I be-

lieve that disability should be by nature part of discourses of global justice education as well.

As a matter of fact, I would like to indicate the very importance of this article in highlighting that a decolonised understanding of disability ought to, in fact, be naturally part of global justice education i.e. all educational discourses that to any extent are of an emancipatory nature. Education plays a crucial role in decolonising contemporary understandings of disability, which implies that education plays a crucial role in transforming minds and hearts that take Global-North diagnoses and medicines for granted too. In order for education to play its role in social-justice-based developmental processes, however, a comprehensive, multifaceted, and flexible conceptualisation of disability needs to be reached and agreed upon. This article thus calls for the international and comparative investigation of the nature and meaning of disability in different socio-cultural contexts so that present, marginalised, and discredited knowledges of a complex and heterogeneous disability experience can be incorporated into global justice education agendas inevitable for the realisation of social-justice-based development processes.

Conclusion

To sum it up, the aim of this present article was to portray a connection between understandings of development, disability studies, and postcolonial theory, and to highlight the role education might in general play in the empirical realisation of just societies. Having pointed out that “both the discourses of postcolonialism and disability studies rewrite the relationship between the margins and the centre by deconstructing the colonialist and imperialist ideologies as well as albeit hegemony” (Ghai, 2012, p. 284), the paper argued for a critical global disability studies and for the conceptualisation of a social-justice-based development. Furthermore, by recognising the role of education in social-justice-based development, the paper then also promoted the concept of a global justice education that is inclusive of a decolonised understanding of disability. It is therefore argued that critical global disability studies needs to be understood not simply as an interdisciplinary – as previously indicated so by this article – but as a transdisciplinary endeavour (Grech, 2012) where the greatest challenge is to acknowledge that either consciously or unconsciously we have been oppressing each other for a long time (Ghai, 2012). Consequently, I argue that this paper

should serve as a call for further research into the racist, or better said disabling perception and creation of disability (Sherry, 2007, p. 19) because our socially constructed differences such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion or disability should not be factors that impoverish but that empower human relationships (Chataika, 2012). Aiming at outlining a proud and equal disability identity that does not lack any life sustenance and is free to develop its own destiny, critical global disability studies seems to have the potential of fulfilling this aspiration.

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