Missing in Action: Where is Social Work in Disability Justice?

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Abstract

In this article we examine an ethical dilemma faced by social work in which the claim to uphold disability rights is not only obfuscated but lost in diversity rhetoric. After a brief glance backwards in history, we present the argument that institutional barriers to full accessibility in the form of legal compliance exist in higher education including social work education. The article then concludes with a call to social work educators globally to rethink disability as experience common to all humans and thus to attend to embodied and functional variation by expanding and deepening a textured and precise ethical commitment to diversity rhetoric and praxis articulated in the IFSW, other Codes of Ethics and the IASSW vision "to promote educational strategies and policies for a more just and equitable world".
(International Association of Schools of Social Work,,n.d)

Introduction

Before wading too far into the water of ethical responses to disability, we take on the issue of defining it. Although there are multiple narratives that suggest that disability is not restricted to its embodied container, the explicit and implicit histories of disability, although claiming to be multi-focal, in part or in full default to a diagnosed body as the common denominator. This point will be clarified in the brief history presented below. In the conclusion section, we propose a way forward for social work to take a deontological, intellectual, and actionable lead in rethinking disability as human experience, which supplants the concept of disablement with accessibility to foster pragmatic and equitable participation of all bodies in social work and the greater university community.

Currently, disability rights in higher education, although being celebrated as a justice and inclusion strategy, not so secretly defines disability as a medical condition. Just the nomenclature "individual with" implies that disability resides within the body and can be recognized by the owner or the someone else observer. Too many faculty and students are familiar with so called disability rights legislation and its implementation within the digital or campus based ivory tower. As a matter of policy, both students and faculty who do not fit seamlessly into these standard teaching/learning environments either struggle or jump through the proverbial "proof of medical need" hoops to acquire dispensation from accessibility services, only for small tweaks to be conferred upon them. A typically university accessibility policy in the U.S. often looks like the following statement:

> The University is required to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities

Three constructs are operative, required, reasonable accommodation, and qualified individuals. The mandate to require institutions to comply implies that not all would do so without a legal carrot. Second, note that unlike any other identity group to which social work and universities profess equality of commitment, who is qualified must be affirmed by a legitimate expert and thus must precede the "ask". The accommodation ableist "tell" is always the modifier "reasonable". Thus, other than disability, no other students or faculty in the diversity rhetoric are asked to participate in a game of show and tell or are shuttled off to segregated

locations and services claiming to provide reasonable accommodation while sidestepping equal access to learning/working environments.

In Figure 1 exposes the policy and legal obligation of a university to comply for a legitimate student along with what students may expect from "accessibility" services.

Figure 1

If you are a student with a disability and anticipate that you may need academic, housing or other accommodations, please read the following steps to connect with Student Accessibility Services:

Step 1) Fill out the Student Accommodation Request form at this link. **You can upload documentation in the form and submit it.** A staff member will review your request and send you follow up instructions. (note that under the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, professional documentation is required before any responses are rendered to a student.

Step 2) Login to the link located on the University's Portal/Launch Pad. Students will need to sign in and request an appointment. Appointments can be held in-person or via Zoom. Students will receive a confirmation email and will be asked to log in to view the appointment details.

Step 3) Meet with a staff member to discuss your accommodation request. During the appointment, our staff will talk with you about your symptoms, identify reasonable accommodations and give you detailed information about next steps.

Figure 2 contains an exemplar, a useless form letter minted by an automated digital assistant, sent to all faculty including those teaching fully accessible online courses in which all students have access to lectures presented in multiple formats (verbal, transcription) to alt tags, to untimed assessments, and to video and image descriptions. No attention to the actual student or learning context is apparent, releasing the efficiency genie out of the bottle with limited concern for the student who was implored to spend time and energy to prove "ill fit" with current standards.

Figure 2

Classroom/Alternate format texts

Classroom/**Other** Prefers tests in digital format with Jaws rather than using a reader

Testing/No Scantron answer sheets, If multiple choice exams are given, student should circle answers directly on the test and not use scantron (bubble) sheets.

Testing/Extra time 2.0x, Double time to complete any tests, quizzes, and final exams.

Testing/Scribe for tests, Depending on the format, student will need to have access to a scribe for exams. A scribe only records exactly what is dictated to them verbally by the student. A scribe does not make any additions or alterations of their own. Most students with this accommodation will follow procedures for requesting test proctoring.

Implied in the policy, the vetting process, and the form letter is that anyone claiming to encounter an access barrier may simply be a cheat and thus must have a blessing from a bona fide, legitimate source that the medical condition qualifies for attention.

Unfortunately, social work education, rather than interrogating and challenging such institutional policies, waltzes with them, sometimes in a manner unbeknownst, but not always. This modus operandi is inscribed in our history to which we now turn. Interestingly, while social work faculty often portray us as progressive, history and current action say otherwise, exposing social work education as a functionalist follower (Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica," n.d.). In the conclusion, we propose a theoretical model that upholds the rhetorical duty ethics of social work and positions our profession as leaders in this effort.

History of disability in social work

Early in the history of disability studies, Linton (1998) proposed that educational institutions often perpetuate systems of prejudice and exclusion about which they theorize, claim, as unethical and rail. The field of social work is not exempt from this assertion. Clearly, social work education and practice have undergone significant theoretical and skills-based changes over time. As asserted by Linton and

Shakespeare (2013), most have been in response to contextual phenomena. Defaulting to prevailing intellectual, social-cultural views of disability therefore has been operative in shaping social work education about and response to disability.

As the locus of disability moved from the moral into the medical neighborhood, social work followed. Espoused theory transmitted to newbie students in social work education portrayed disability as a violation of the legitimate human body. This unlucky corpus departed from the enlightenment norm to which the architectural, social, cognitive, emotional, and virtual worlds catered and still do. Within the medical scaffold, the owner of the violating body is at significant disadvantage depending on the type of deficit and thus is the platform for help in the form of fixing to the extent possible.

It is not surprising that in response to this infrahumanization, the social model of disability was proposed in the late 20th century (DePoy and Gilson 2022). A view from this theoretical bridge defined disability as a toxic, oppressive socius (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) ejecting the disability from the corpus to its context. As stated comedically by Young (n.d.) "No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. Never."

This conceptual framework, while consistent with some of the tenets of critical theory, brought enragement from those who decried the cleavage of the body from its environment. Early theorists held the world responsible for disabling any body, but not for long. The medically impaired body tiptoed its way back into the social model, once again taking center stage as the subject of oppression (DePoy & Gilson 2014). The "who"as subject of discrimination is still located in a body in common with other similar bodies, and thus the social model casts its spotlight on the plight of the essentialist group sharing the "not normal" moniker (Titchkosky, 2003). While ostensibly an advantage, the social model places some responsibility for a response on the institutional, built, and social contexts. Still, the violating body remains the victim of inaccessible environments, attitudes and policies. Social work thus follows, still keeping violator status intact and in need of help.

We now hone in on the social work perimeter bringing your attention to some of the critical failures of social work education primarily in the U.S. to meet its rhetorical deontology of equity for all bodies. First, even within changing diversity narratives, social work education still relies on developmental theory to paint a portrait of the flourishing individual over a lifetime. This theoretical de-

terminism fosters normative expectations about bodies in action, emoting, and appearing. A construct always defines its opposite (Mevorah, 2022), and normal development is not exempt (Newcomb, 2021).

The broad range of theories contained in social work texts and HBSE education (Hutchinson, 2025), defines its boundaries and who does fit neatly within them (Dunn & Burcaw 2013), leading to an individualistic praxis outcome. The Person in Environment (PIE) framework, the soul of the HBSE curricula, promotes a helping hierarchy in which the social worker assists the client to adapt.

In contrast to PIE perspectives, rights theories, regardless of their consequences, propose to center the change expectation on context, not individual. Unfortunately, cultural and social essentialism used to define who is vulnerable and in need of specialized rights laws, while politically advantageous, still speaks to alterity and to some extent, maintains it (Spivak, 2008; 1985). Moreover, essentialism sets up a tenor of competition for who is most oppressed, often leaving atypical bodies at the bottom of the hierarchical barrel and in need of the helper. This point leads directly into the second snafu, the helper-helped binary.

While social work often invites participation in defining needs through articulated lived experience of an alter group, the helper is still throwing the party, defining who and what are invited and, in some circumstances, uninvited (Davis 2017). The helping hierarchy remains intact. As reflected by Wernick et al (2024), social work at the pinnacle of the helper/helped binary has not and cannot doff its history of treating disability (including emotional and neurological divergence) as the object of intervention.

Third and perhaps most insidious is the institutional and epistemic violence of the academy. In the U.S. and similarly in Canada, France and the UK, under the guise disability rights legislation, learning and work environments maintain Vitruvian proportions and Enlightenment humanism intact (Brown,2021). The normate (Garland-Thompson, 2017) body navigates, studies, and produces within the standard physical and virtual halls, while others must seek proof to be invited by digitally created form letters after being blessed as in medical need. A significant part of the U.S. Americans With Disabilities Act clergy workforce is comprised of social workers, who are deemed professionally legitimate witnesses who can testify to accommodation eligibility. This oxymoron reveals how professional education systems, and their university homes, do the two-step, maintaining barriers while asserting expansive rights, ethics and values. As DePoy and

Gilson assert (2022), formulaic accommodation to tweak standards for the alter body locates the responsibility for seeking even minimal response to the violating, stigmatized corpus, eviscerating equity of opportunity to educate oneself, and dismissed from the penned social work values and ethics narrative.

Exemplars

We offer exhibits that both criticize the current practices and illuminate opportunity.

Social Work-Good Intentions Stymied

The oncology social worker advocated for transportation for her client, a student at the university, who was not able to navigate the expanses of the campus due to advanced cancer. The university administration offered no solution since it had abandoned its "disability bus" 6 years prior (an exemplar of revoked invitation), mired any current response in committee bureaucracy, and failed to meet the student needs before he entered hospice and expired. The social worker, using advocacy skills learned in her social work education and practice could do nothing as a helper for the client. The client had no voice, and the university took its merry old time to foist the responsibility for transportation assistance to a committee of pawns waiting for the queen to make its move. The opportunity for transportation for all was presented to the president by social work faculty but dismissed, despite research illustrating the recruitment and retention advantages of universities with systems to move all students seamlessly. Implementing a campus wide people mover system rather than a stigmatized short bus is a missed opportunity but one not to be tabled. As we propose in the conclusion, theory and action that humanizes and seamlessly integrates all bodies provides the utopia of futures thinking (Nissen, 2025). During such planning, bifocal helping is warranted. Where is social work in this effort? A single social work student stepped up as a driver, but it was too late in the institutionally violent process.

The Failed Internship

Recently, a graduate student blessed with accommodation legitimacy who was studying in the on-line curriculum in the U.S. due to inability to come to campus, wanted to devote a distance internship to studying the limitations of the ADA in achieving (or not) disability justice. Of particular focus in the proposed work was a systematic study of disability justice content in social work policy courses, and then of social work roles in practice, to address disability discrimination and ab-

rogation of rights. Unfortunately, the internship plan was stymied by epistemic violence and bureaucratic hand wringing. The plan did not meet all nine generalist CSWE competencies. Had this student proposed doing this type of work in an agency that addressed direct practice, no questions would have been raised about the potential to meet all CSWE competencies even if the opportunity for research and policy were not offered. We query the capacity of any placement to meet all competencies.

Virtual and Digital Access

The pandemic Zoom migration illustrated the double-edged sword of digital learning, by both normalizing all bodies as virtual participants, but unfortunately still excluding those who could not access the screened world in a "normal" fashion. But some industrious innovators stepped up to the access plate which has paid off with the explosion of digital and AI models that actually have the potential to craft an expansive participatory intellectual world. As the ethics of AI in learning are negotiated, this deal making challenges social work educators and practitioners to deepen axiological and epistemic analysis before vilifying AI as a cheating tool. Curiously, post-pandemic return to the built environment once again exposed the institutional exclusion of bodies unable to navigate the bricks and mortar.

Faculty Development for Some

A School of Social Work in the U.S. had made a commitment to diversity and implicit bias training, ostensibly inviting all faculty. But day-long workshops from early morning through late afternoon for those who cannot sit for so many hours and even for the few who are willing to try are not the epitome of an invitation for all, overtly demonstrating the emptiness of progressive responses to need and clearly exposing the implicit bias of the trainers themselves.

Where Now

What does making accessibility an ethical mandate in social work education look like? As claimed by Davis, we can make the most profound and enduring change through conceptual reinvention. Although Davis (2017) was not directing his comments to social work educators, we are redirecting Davis' claim in that direction guiding social work educators to follow conceptual and ethical reinvention in our own academic homes. Much thinking and action are indicated, not only to

position social work as ethically legitimate in meeting its deontological and principlist statements, but also in pulling ourselves out of the contradictory corner which we ourselves have painted. Profound change means prioritizing access as an inalienable right, but for whom and through what means? Several works have proposed methods to redress ableism in higher education, and in particular, social work education. Hanebutt & Meuller (2023) for example propose critical crip theory as the basis for action. A recent text (Slater and Johnson, 2024) has brought critical theory and ADEI narrative to propose the role of social work as discrimination slayers. While these approaches build on classical critical theories, they feel too much like we have already "been there, done that and got a t-shirt". As long as "vulnerable groups remain contained in that ghetto, Titchovsky's (2003) warning remains intact. Special programs and considerations retain their centerpieces as visible rather than demanding a seamless, respected, and reciprocal position in a thinking and fair world.

A useful way to rethink disability from deficit to human experience emerges from scholarship and ethical analysis, and from two designers, Morrison and Fukasawa (2007) who proposed supernormal design. This concept denotes the seamless integration of objects (including the body as object) without drawing unnecessary attention to them. Similarly, DePoy and Gilson (2022) proposed that disability be recrafted as the common human experience of inability to accomplish a task, which in social work education would focus on completing the work in courses and internships. Relocating disability as human experience known by all people guides us to an alternative universe in which learning environments are redesigned to meet the purposes and values of social work education in a creative fashion while not dismissing human dignity and worth of the alter. In so doing, we ultimately jettison specialized rules and compliance regulations that only serve to maintain alterity and stigma and violate the professed duty ethics of social work. Of course, this agenda is bifocal in that the needs of today's educational accommodation environment for the atypical learner need to be met while change is occurring in tandem.

Instead of traversing the same rhetorical domains and borrowing from fields that thrive on advancing the power of their own identities, social work now has a potent opportunity to actualize its ethical statements not only for disability rights, but more expansively for promulgating an agenda of progressive accessibility and equity for all bodies. We entreat such ethics, values, scholarship and action.

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