LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

Transability through the Lens of Biopower, Disablism and Neoliberalism: exposing societal contradictions around bodily autonomy and inter/dependence

Dr Cassie Ogden

BID/Transability: an alternative approach

- To consider some of the ways we can understand experiences of and reactions to transableism **away from medicalised foci**
- To explore the ways the **public treat/perceive transable individuals** and the **stigma** experienced
- To **critique neoliberal ideas regarding bodily autonomy** to develop broader ideas of embodiment and identity and in turn reduce stigma towards transable people.

What's in a name?

- Given the purpose of thinking different/critically around this subject, the terminology I usually use are non medicalised terms: transableism as opposed to BID.
- Terminology has been adopted following Davis's work with online community of transable individuals (2012a, b)
- **Transableism** is a term from the community themselves

Why is this preferred?

- de-medicalised

- Encompasses the full range of impairment desires
- It further disrupts ideas embedded in the 'static and essentialising' use of medical labels

Has Sociology looked at Transableism?

- American sociologist (**Davis**, 2014, 2012) looks at transability from the perspective of moral stigma (2014) and the 'prosumption' (the blurring of production and consumption) of identity (2012)
- **Ogden** (2016) from the perspective of labelling and cultural expectations and
- American Professor of feminist and gender studies (**Baril**, 2015) looks from the perspective of intersections between transgender and transablism

Disablism and Hate Crime

- “Safety remains a concern. Hate crimes against disabled people have still increased by 9% since 2020, convictions rates are still only around 2%. Fear in a divided society continues to be an issue. We cannot just expect these feelings to go away without acting.”

Quote from Dr David Wilkins (disability hate crime researcher)

United Response, 2025.

Disablism in a neoliberal world

- Reduces disabled people to the position of ‘other’ and ‘lesser’
- **Neoliberal capitalism**

Key characteristics include:

- Trickle down economics
- Free market economics
- Individualism/independence
- Dismantling of welfare state

- **Zola’s** work (1977) traces how **biomedicine** historically became the modern day purveyor of social control due to **fitting ideologically** into demands of society: reliant on the unitary, static, rational human.

- Where do disabled people fit in this?

The stigmatisation of transability and disability

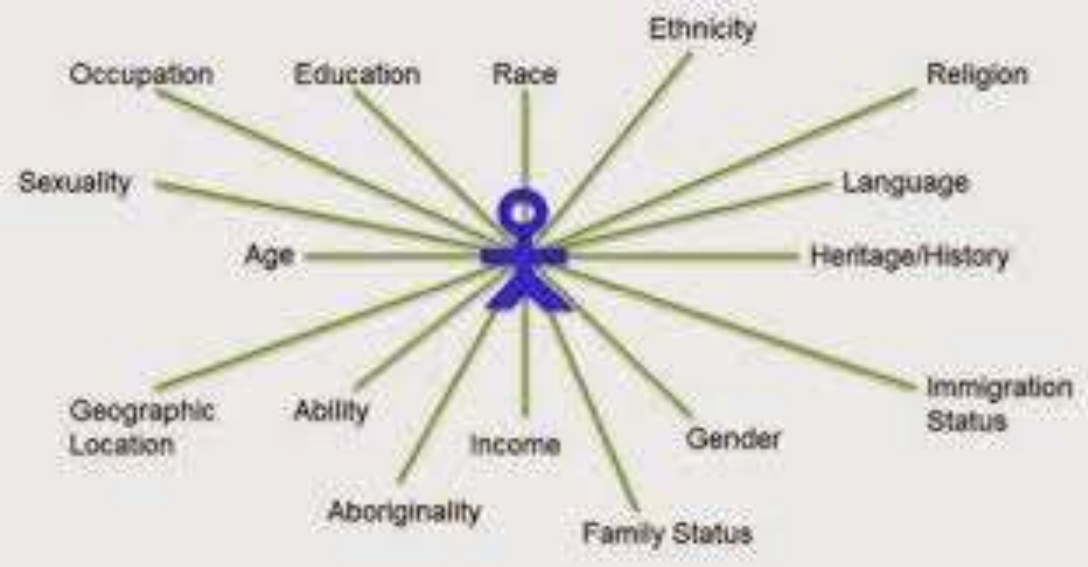
- Davis's (2012) work explored the now shutdown community of transabled.org and found transabled individuals were **morally stigmatised**
- Davis (2014) found the following problematic views

a) Sexually perverted
b) Emotionally weak
c) Dishonest
d) Greedy

Crip Theory McRuer (2006)

- To critically analyse the **dis/abled** dichotomy
- To use this to explore contemporary culture
- It can be used to explore how transableism troubles the operation of biomedicine
- Health: ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (WHO, 1948).
- The person (and the body) is expected to be stable, unified and rational which is seen to be challenged by transableism

Neoliberalism, Agency, Choice and Power



- When desire is non-normative permission is not granted
- Neoliberalism renders the person seeking cosmetic surgery for example as self-sufficient, rational and on the quest for self-improvement
- Transable individuals **rendered irrational, incompetent and lazy**
- Biopower governs bodily possibilities
- Lead transable individuals to try to gain rights to surgery on the merits of **individual agency**
- Phipps (2014) discusses the '**war on voice'** which overlooks wider structural critiques of society.
- **Intersectionality** should be considered as a person's class, ethnicity etc. would have an impact on how transablility will be received (Baril, 2015).

Baril's (2015a,b) work:cis*identity

- Baril draws attention to the **ability and cis* trans*** axis to question the boundaries between trans and transable experiences
- What is **cis gender** and what is **cisabled**?
- Baril's work tracks the lack of acceptance of transgender individuals
- By using the label 'cis*gender we **challenge the assumptions that being transgender is non-normative**
- Baril notes the usefulness of considering ideas of the cis disabled when thinking about transability

How to further understand transability?

- Baril (2015a) therefore wishes to

1. **Enrich intersectional analysis** in trans and disability studies' and movements
2. Encourage the **decentring of a cis*abled** subject to increase the possibility of understanding disability as 'voluntary'
3. Encourage trans-studies **to not assume ability**

Looking Forwards: a site for deconstructing bodily expectations

- The transabled body falls **outside of the conception of 'normal'** and therefore is rendered '**subhuman**', bodies rendered as such may evade classification as they occupy a liminal space.
- Davis (2014) and Baril (2015) both think transableism offers a space to 'queer'/ 'crip' boundaries of (dis)ability and desirability
- We should try to resist the temptation to dichotomise the issue and remember that **humanity cannot manifest itself in one working type**
- Philosopher Margrit Shildrick calls for **postconventionalism** (Shildrick, 2012) in her work on experiences of embodiment and the pressure to behave in certain ways. In using dis/ability to challenge norms makes new spaces away from normal and challenging the **cultural imaginary**

Composite by Jack Stollery

Any questions?

Thanks for listening!

Email: c.a.ogden@ljmu.ac.uk

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