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Special Issue: Disability as a feminist issue
EDITORIAL

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Abstract

This editorial introduces our special issue on disability as a feminist issue. The special issue began from the central point that disability is profoundly gendered, and that important feminist issues are intricately interwoven with disability. We aim to locate the special issue in larger frameworks of scholarship on disability, gender and feminist psychologies and disability studies. Our editorial outlines the contributions to the special issue, exploring voice, embodiment, power, sexuality, care, labour, hetero/sexism, disablism and ableism.

This Special Issue began from the central point that disability is profoundly gendered, and that important feminist issues are intricately interwoven with disability. These include issues such as the construction of the ideal subject, embodied difference, reproductive politics, citizenship rights, and the ethics of care, to name just a few. Yet, feminist scholars often approach these topics without referring to disability and/or impairment, and often crucially failing to recognise the tensions between disability and other axes of difference (*inter alia* gender, sexuality, race). While we may agree that disability is an important component of intersectional identity, there is often less focus on it than on other identity categories. As such, disability is often an absent-presence in mainstream feminist scholarship. Likewise, studies of disability from a feminist or gendered perspective are relatively uncommon (Morris, 1996; Liddiard, 2018).

For instance, few of the articles published in *Feminism & Psychology* in the last three decades consider disability alongside other social characteristics, and certainly not as the central focus. A good example of an article published in *Feminism & Psychology* that draws on disability (Slater et al., 2015) was in response to an earlier *Feminism & Psychology* special issue on young women and feminism (edited by Liebert & Thompson). Slater's (2015, p. 58) contribution to the special issue was written "in the hope of reaching out/asking for advice/joining with others about how or indeed whether we can 'do feminisms' within the academy" when academia is inherently as "a patriarchal and ableist arena". However, few issues of *Feminism & Psychology* even mention disability at all.

It may seem peculiar for fields founded upon the interrogation of identity and difference, both with strong connections to activism, not to have established strong scholarship addressing the intersection of power relations centred on disability and gender (along with other categories of differentiation). Feminist scholarship - as featured in a journal foregrounding feminist theories, methodologies and herstories - would benefit from the consideration of and deeper engagement with disability, as many contributors to this Special Issue argue. Our impetus for this special issue, then, is to make space to showcase politics, theory, and research that situates disability as a feminist issue.

We are immensely proud of this Special Issue. Over 18 months we have taken time to read, review and engage with some very important contributions in this collection. Part of this process has been about taking our time, purposefully engaging in slow/er forms of scholarship. Slow scholarship "questions the ever-increasing demands of academic life, placing them broadly within wider tendencies toward neoliberal university governance" (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1238). It involves resistance, engaging slowly with the object of study, engaging with others and improving the quality of academic practices such as writing (Mountz et al., 2015). We have done this purposefully to acknowledge and resist the ableist academy as we experience it as disabled and feminist scholars.

Critical to the way in which disabled women (and others) theorise disability in the world inherently relates to the conditions of an ableist academy (Goodley, 2024). Scholars and researchers are now more cognisant of the ableist environments in which we work and the ways in which certain types of bodies and minds are both unexpected and unwelcome in the academy (Brown & Leigh, 2018). For example, many types of bodies disrupt the "masculine disembodied ideal academic worker norm" (Ollilainen, 2018, p. 961). Disabled bodies (Brown & Leigh, 2018, 2020), pregnant bodies (Ollilainen, 2018), bodies that miscarry (Liddiard, 2018), queer bodies (Prock et al., 2019), sick bodies (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2023), and neurodivergent bodies and minds (Phillips, 2024) all contrevene the expected embodied norms upon which the ableist academy rests. Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2023, p. 4) draw attention to the ways in which sick, disabled and ill bodies and people have to labour to "perform (un)spoiled academic identities". Hiding, keeping up, disclosing, pushing yourself, coping, passing and masking are all practices that require emotional and other forms of labour for disabled and chronically ill people, both inside and outside of the academy (Liddiard et al., 2022). Thus, to try and mitigate some of these ableist realities, we have actively centred feminist ways of being and doing, and an ethic of care, while building this scholarly collection together, for authors, contributors and ourselves.

In the first part of this editorial, then, we trace the intersections of disability theory and feminist voices, and the ways in which disabled women's own research, scholarship, experience and voice fundamentally reshape dominant ways of thinking about disability. Our sketching of this brief history and landscape, we hope, lays a helpful and accessible foundation for those new to feminist explorations of disability, while also setting a context for the important contributions from authors that make up this special issue. Next, we provide an overview of the contributions to the special issue through a thematic lens, exploring voice, embodiment, power, sexuality, care, labour, hetero/sexism, disablism and ableism. We conclude by calling for greater intersectionality and inclusivity within feminist scholarship and research; a welcoming in, of and *desire* for disability, not merely as an object of study, but as the driving subject of a more inclusive and intersectional feminism.

Disability as a feminist issue

Disability theory and politics in the Global North have long been dominated by the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Born out of an early founding organisation of the British disability movement in the 1970s—the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, social model politics have radically shifted the meaning of "disability" from the bodies of individuals to a product of the social world. The social model offers a predominantly Marxist and materialist-orientated approach to disability, laying "the blame for disabled people's oppression clearly at the feet of economic relations in capitalistic society" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 55). For context, in the social model of disability "impairment" as the bodily bio-physiological condition of disability is marginalised in favour of a focus on "disability" as a complex set of social relations that structure the experience of impairment. In this sense, the social model mirrors early (mainstream) feminist movements that distinguished between sex (as a "natural" entity) and gender (the cultural construction of one's sex) (Rubin, 1975). The social model was, and is, a deeply powerful rethinking of disability and disablement; it serves as a cultural and political re-imagining of disability for disabled people, their communities and movements. As disabled feminist Liz Crow (1996, p. 207) states, the social model enabled a "vision of ourselves free from the constraints of disability (oppression) and provided a commitment for our social change – I don't think it's an exaggeration to say the social model has saved lives."

Yet, despite the social model's emergence as the revolutionary reconceptualisation of disability in the 1990s, important omissions began to be highlighted by disabled feminists of the era. Where were our own bodies, emotions, and experiences of impairment, disability and social oppression (see Crow, 1996; Lonsdale, 1990; Thomas, 1999; Wendell, 1996)? Such important interjections echoed the "deconstruction of the public/private divides" (Sherry, 2004, p. 776) advocated by mainstream feminist theorists of the time. Disabled feminists' emotional lives and embodied stories were often derided as "sentimental biography" (Barnes 1998, as cited in Goodley, 2011, p. 28) by male disability theorists of the era. Yet such stories were integral to centering material experiences of impairment such as pain, illness, and fatigue, and the emotionality of these bodily experiences. These lived experiences of disability were actively silenced in early social model understandings. Thus, this attention to embodiment echoed movements in other areas of social sciences to "bring the body back" (see Shilling 2003; Leder 1990), and a recognition that for many disabled women and people the impaired body "experiences real pain, nausea, fatigue and weakness" (Thomas, 2002a, p. 69; see also Morris, 1991).

Carol Thomas' (2002a) later theorisation of impairment effects was key too. Not only was impairment the focus, but impairment effects, what she defined as, "the direct effects of impairment which differentiate bodily functioning from that which is socially construed to be normal or usual" were important (p. 20). Her rationale for thinking about impairment effects was clear: "in our society, these impairment effects generally, but not always, become the medium for the social relational enactment of disability: social exclusionary and discriminatory practices" (Thomas, 2002a, p. 20).

As well as instigating recognition of impairment and the body, disabled feminists have made significant strides in locating gender within analyses of disability, a distinctly under-theorised dimension of disabled people's lives (Ghai, 2002; Liddiard, 2018). Understanding the ways in which gender shapes disabled women's lives has been important not only to affirming disabled women as gendered subjects—rather than those denied a gender identity—it also enables examination of the impacts of hetero/sexism and patriarchy upon disabled women. As Goodley (2011a, p. 35) reminds us, disabled women are "more likely to be poor than disabled men; are less likely to have access to rehabilitation and employment; are more likely to experience public space as threatening; and are more likely to live in the parental home and experience sexual abuse". Understanding the gendered realities of disabled women's lives is key to how feminist disability studies has "addressed questions of representation and difference and engaged with issues of identity, subjectivity, the body, sexuality and language" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 59). Thus, early iterations of feminist disability studies established that the powers and processes that construct both gender and disability are intimately bound (Thomas, 2006).

Furthermore, in advocating for gendered subjectivities, and theorising through their own lived and embodied experiences, disabled feminists have also reified the ways in which structural, patriarchal and ableist oppression feels. Related to our (disabled feminists) lived experiences of the body, and of ableism, are the ways in which we feel about, relate to and care for our bodies. As Goodley (2011, p. 716) states, oppression is "felt psychically, subjectively and emotionally but is always socially, cultural, politically and economically produced." Many contributions in this special issue take up themes of emotion and oppression: the emotionality of abuse, care, loss, exclusion and objectification in contexts of disability. As Thomas (2006, p. 182) proposes, psycho-emotional disablism is a mode of "disablism that works with and upon gendered realities; it operates along psychological and emotional pathways and frequently results in disabled people being made to feel worthless, useless, of lesser value, unattractive, a burden". Central to this, then, are disabled people's psychic responses to living in disabling cultures: the psycho-emotional consequences of oppression and the ways in which this may be internalised, managed, negotiated and resisted. As Marks (1999, p. 615) puts it: "it is important to examine not just the relationship that people have with others, but also the relationship they have with themselves".

Feminist disability studies has been integral to the development of critical disability studies (CDS), which draws on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), to "connect the aspirations and ambitions of disabled people with the transformative agendas of class, feminist, queer and postcolonial studies" (Goodley, 2011, p. 174). As Goodley (2011a, p. 33) states, "a body or mind that is disabled is also one that is raced, gendered, trans/nationally sited, aged, sexualized and classed." CDS enables focus, then, on the intersections of disability life, connecting disability with the politics of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, while staying mindful of local, national and global economic contexts and the impact of these upon disabled people (Goodley, 2014). As Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009, p. 50) argue:

> use of [CDS] signifies an implicit understanding that the terms of engagement in disability studies have changed; that the struggle for social justice and diversity continues but on another plane of development – one that is not simply social, economic and political, but also psychological, cultural, discursive and carnal. Importantly, critical disability studies seek to build upon, not discard, materialist approaches that are central to feminist disability theory.

While disabled women's voices were integral to critical thinking around disability, and their deconstruction of public and private experiences of disability was influenced by second wave feminism, as Liddiard (2018, p. 19) states, "it was disabled feminists' own engagement with these ideas that instigated important changes for disabled women, rather than via support from their non-disabled sisters" whose "narrow notions of womanhood" (Wilkerson, 2002, p. 39) have largely excluded and overlooked the experiences of disabled women. Disabled feminists have long noted that mainstream feminist explorations of reproductive rights, motherhood, and forms of violence, abuse and caring have predominantly excluded the experiences of disabled women from their analyses (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Morris, 1996).

At the same time, it's important to document the exclusionary cultures and practices feminist disability studies itself has enabled and how these continue today (Ghai, 2002). For example, women with learning disabilities were markedly excluded from early disabled women's movements, communities and spaces (Rogers, 2009). This continues, despite the fact that the "lives, bodies and selves of learning-disabled women remain overtly targeted for many of the interventions disabled feminists protest (e.g., forced sterilisation; the removal of children), being routinely denied their reproductive and parenting rights" (Liddiard, 2018, p. 21). Much of this exclusion is embedded in an ableism that posits that women with learning disabilities are still regarded as fundamentally different from other women (McCarthy, 2009). Similarly, feminist disability theory has somewhat overlooked the experiences of psychiatric survivors, Mad women and those who experience mental distress and illness and live with psychiatric diagnoses (Beresford et al., 2010; LeFrançois et al., 2013).

Garland-Thompson (2005, p. 1557) states that, "like feminism itself, feminist disability studies is academic cultural work with a sharp political edge and a vigorous critical punch." Crucially, our positionality to feminism and disability are worthy of attention here as editors of this Special Issue. Kirsty Liddiard is a feminist disability scholar and disabled researcher whose work explores ableism and disablism in the lives of disabled people and their families. Ableism is defined as "a system of beliefs that privileges normate notions of the body/mind and ability that are culturally constructed and views disabled people as inferior and lacking" (Bê, 2020, p. 421); while disablism is the resultant oppressive treatment of disabled people. Liddiard's work typically centres on lived experience, emotion and embodiment as core axes through which to understand disabled people's everyday lives. Moreover, her creative approaches to co-production (see Liddiard et al., 2019; Liddiard et al., 2022) rest upon a key leitmotif of the disabled people's movement is "'nothing about us without us"' (Charlton, 2000). This means "'demanding that research should not be solely accountable to disabled people but rather they must be involved in the philosophy and redesign of research as co-producers of knowledge"' (White et al., 2025; np). Rebecca Lawthom is a Professor of Community Psychology who has extensive experiences of galvanising research across a range of education, health, social care and social science disciplines and she combines this with interests in community-led approaches to co-production and participatory research. Her groundbreaking theorising on disability has explored affect (Goodley et al., 2022), disability politics and theory (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019; Goodley et al., 2019), learning disability (Hunter et al., 2020), the pandemic (Fisher et al., 2020), and ageing (Lawthom et al., 2018), to name a few. We are both White women located in the Global North based in a British university in the north of England.

Importantly, this Special Issue prioritises the feminist scholarship of disabled women and gender nonconforming people and their allies, and feminist interrogations, analyses and experiences of blindness, neurodivergence, trauma, congenital and acquired impairment, contested forms of illness, and energy-limiting conditions. We have also purposefully sought to include scholarship from the Global South (namely, Latin America, Chile, and South Africa), in recognition of how disability studies "retains an indiscriminate focus on the global North, echoing the voices of Northern academics and activists, particularly those in the UK and the US" (Grech, 2015, p. 6; see also Ghai, 2002). In working across these intersections, we are mindful of our privilege as editors and sensemakers.

Articles in the issue: A roadmap for our readers

We now offer a roadmap of what's to come in this Special Issue.

In *Complaining while disabled: Disabled people's experiences expressing complaints within the context of sexuality*, Ásta Jóhannsdóttir and Embla Guðrúnardóttir Ágústsdóttir (2025, this issue) powerfully take up disability, sexuality and microaggressions as spaces to make sense of *complaint* for disabled people. Working within theories of emotional work and labour, Jóhannsdóttir and Ágústsdóttir demarcate the everyday kinds of emotional labours demanded or expected of disabled people in contexts of intimacy. Importantly, they draw on "emotional disability work": forms of work that are often "invisible, conditional and an inseparable part of being a disabled person' that are usually 'carried out as a result of the fear and shame of causing discomfort to others" (p. XX). Such labour and performance (both for the self and for others) has implications for disabled people. In sum, the authors argue that the forms of disability work explored in the article, especially in relation to complaining or objecting, can hinder disabled people's access to their own erotic self. Working from an Icelandic context, one in which feminism is often positively heralded, readers are presented with intersectional complexity.

In *"Hey, where's my low-key sexist objectification?": A blind woman's reflections on being banished and liberated from normative femininity and the gaze*, Michelle Botha (2025, this issue) presents an autoethnography of what "negotiating tricky identity-related terrain as socio-cultural beliefs about disability, femininity, impairment, and sexuality interact with [her] embodiment as a blind woman" (p. XX). Challenging social theory that advocates the transformative power of blindness and disability for the ways in which it can lead to emancipatory exclusions from visual cultures and patriarchal constructions of women's value, Botha asks what it means to be excluded from the gaze. Ultimately, being excluded is painful and harmful, as well as liberatory. Botha also proffers the power of autoethnography as a means to make space for a surfacing and shoring up of the everyday realities of living at the intersections of ableism and sexism: [autoethnography] brings "light the often unseen personal, relational, and practical predicaments which disabled people face" (p. XX). To explore exclusion from the gaze and social and sexual legitimacy, Botha reflects on an interaction in a coffee shop, where she wasn't objectified in the same ways as other women customers. She concludes by highlighting the generative possibilities of such explorations: "to viewing blind women, not as existing beyond the demands of the gender regime and visual culture, but as navigating within these systems (along with everyone else)" (p. XX).

In *Women with disabilities and the loss of custody of their children: "Carers, but not mothers"*, Pía Rodríguez-Garrido and colleagues (2025, this issue) explore motherhood, care and constructions of "fitness" to mother in a Chilean context. Centring situated feminist epistemologies across three distinct studies, each of which explored disability and motherhood in differing ways, the authors centre a series of tensions experienced by disabled Chilean mothers. Such tensions shore up conflicts within identities of care and caring across familial contexts; poor responses, accommodations and support for motherhood from within institutions such as support services, healthcare, and most critically, within the judicial process; and the influences of ableism with and upon child custody processes. They conclude that such tensions "reveal a web of practices of violence against women with disabilities, particularly in their role as mothers and carers" (p. XX).

In, *Feminist ethics of care in academic knowledge production: Reflections from disability researchers*, Constanza López Radrigán, Andrés Aparicio, and Marcela Tenorio (2025, this issue) reflect upon care as an ethical foundation in the processes of academic knowledge production. Writing from Latin America, the authors explore key themes of interdependence, vulnerability, and care practices from interviews with researchers aligned to feminist disability studies to proffer a care ethic "based on the experience with disability, the emotions emerging from this encounter and a space of reflexivity that leads to certain actions and alliances" (p. XX). They situate this within the neoliberal-able (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019) demands of academic research and scholarly knowledge economies advocating that a "caring approach to disability must involve an orientation toward shared knowledge production" (p. XX).

In *Toward the emancipation of "medically unexplained" and energy-limiting conditions: Contesting and re-imagining psy through the lens of feminist disability studies*, Joanne Hunt (2025, this issue), writing from a Swedish context, applies a feminist disability studies lens to contested forms of illness to explore how psy may be transformed, even emancipated, 'through reimagining disability in a socio-culturally and biopolitically cognisant, embodied and maximally inclusive manner" (p. XX). Reiterating that ways that (mainstream) feminist literature overlooks the gendered and intersectional nature of disability, Hunt argues for how including and integrating disability "can add value to critical feminist contestations of psy", underscoring the importance "of including an intersectional understanding of disability in feminist praxis" (p. XX).

In *Fitting comfortably together: Doing and imagining gender and sexuality in personal assistance*, Harvey, Humphrey, and colleagues (2025, this issue) explore the experiences of disabled young people negotiating gender and sexuality as part of personal assistance in a British context. The empirical study at the heart of the article uses queer, trans and disabled feminist research and theory along with composite vignettes to explore how:

> diverse gender and sexual identities were made part of personal assistance, from the imaginative ways these were suggested in support plans or written into recruitment adverts, to the interactions that took place around the body and in the home in which genders and sexualities are enacted or displayed as valued identities, but which also occasion risks and vulnerabilities. (p. XX)

Their findings reiterate how disabled people undertake multiple forms of identity and emotional work and labour in their sexual and intimate lives and make claims for intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003), particularly within contexts of care, support and assistance. The authors conclude that there is:

> a lot to learn about the potential for more harmonised and ethical relationships [in personal assistance] through looking at the work disabled young people do, and have to do, around identifying and recruiting PAs [personal assistants], as well as the structures that impinge and shape those decisions, and the potential good and bad bargains on offer. (p. XX)

In *Constructions of "female autism" in professional practices: A Foucauldian discourse analysis*, Isobel Moore, Gareth Morgan, and Chris Howard (2025, this issue) apply a Foucauldian lens to examine how "female autism" is constructed in professional practices. Offering a feminist analysis of (female) autism in relation to power, professionals, institutions and governmentality, their contribution to this special issue asks a series of questions: How is female autism constructed in professional practices? What possibilities do these constructions allow or disallow? And, what implications do these constructions have for women and girls? Following an analysis of texts provided by UK-based clinicians, the answers to these questions draw upon notions of identification and what counts as "progress" and "medical advancement"; expansions of autism and the reach of the expert gaze; and female autism as reinforcing binaristic and essentialist constructions of gender. Importantly, the authors demarcate real care in their problematising of "female autism", not aiming to undermine the lived experiences of women who seek diagnosis, but help practitioners "to reflect on how best to serve the wellbeing of women by taking the claim seriously that female autism is embedded in wider gender politics, and thus its potential to reproduce gendered power, inequality and distress" (p. XX).

In, *Disability, trauma, and the place of affect in identity: Examining performativity in visual impairment rehabilitation*, Brian Watermeyer and Michelle Botha (2025, this issue) critically explore rehabilitation, materiality and performativity, drawing on two distinct qualitative data sources: (1) interviews with service users and providers of in rehabilitation organisations in South Africa, and (2) a vignette of about a graduation ceremony from a South African rehabilitation organisation. The authors apply a critical disability studies lens to examine rehabilitation services for visually impaired people as, in part, “an amplified instantiation of disciplinary social forces maintaining heteronormative, ableist, and neoliberal norms” (p. XX). Taking up affect and emotion as theoretical lenses, the authors explore the inherent overlooking and sidelining of trauma that may accompany vision loss and forms of progressive blindness in rehabilitation services, and critically question the kinds of docile subjectivities that rehabilitation services and imperatives produce. They advocate for “explicit theorising on how this ‘corrective tendency’ impacts on the ability of disabled people to work through trauma” (p. XX).

Conclusion

We conclude by calling for greater intersectionality and inclusivity in feminist scholarship and research; a welcoming in, of and desire for disability; not merely as an object of study, but as the driving subject of a more inclusive and intersectional feminism. As Garland-Thompson (2002, p. 28) asserts, “integrating disability as a category of analysis, an historical community, a set of material practices, a social identity, a political position, and a representational system into the content of feminist - indeed into all - inquiry can strengthen the critique that is feminism”. This special issue has responded to this call - emphasising the importance of bringing together, specifically, gender, disability, emotion, and oppression. Author contributions have brought disability in from the margins, making clear that disability *is* a feminist issue. As much as disability and psychology need feminism, feminism and psychology *need* disability: we hope that this special issue is evidence that integrating disability theory into feminist explorations of the construction of the ideal subject, gender, sexuality, care, labour, motherhood, and trauma will always deepen feminist explorations of gendered life. While we may agree that disability is an important component of intersectional identity, there is often less focus on it than on other axes of difference. As such, disability is an often absent-present in feminist scholarship. We hope that the articles that follow begin to address this absent-presence in diverse ways.

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Dedication

We dedicate this Special Issue to Professor Anita Ghai. Professor Ghai’s work transformed feminist disability studies through its centring of intersectionality, race, culture and power. Her theory, politics and advocacy was rooted in justice for disabled people and their communities. Rest in power, Anita.

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