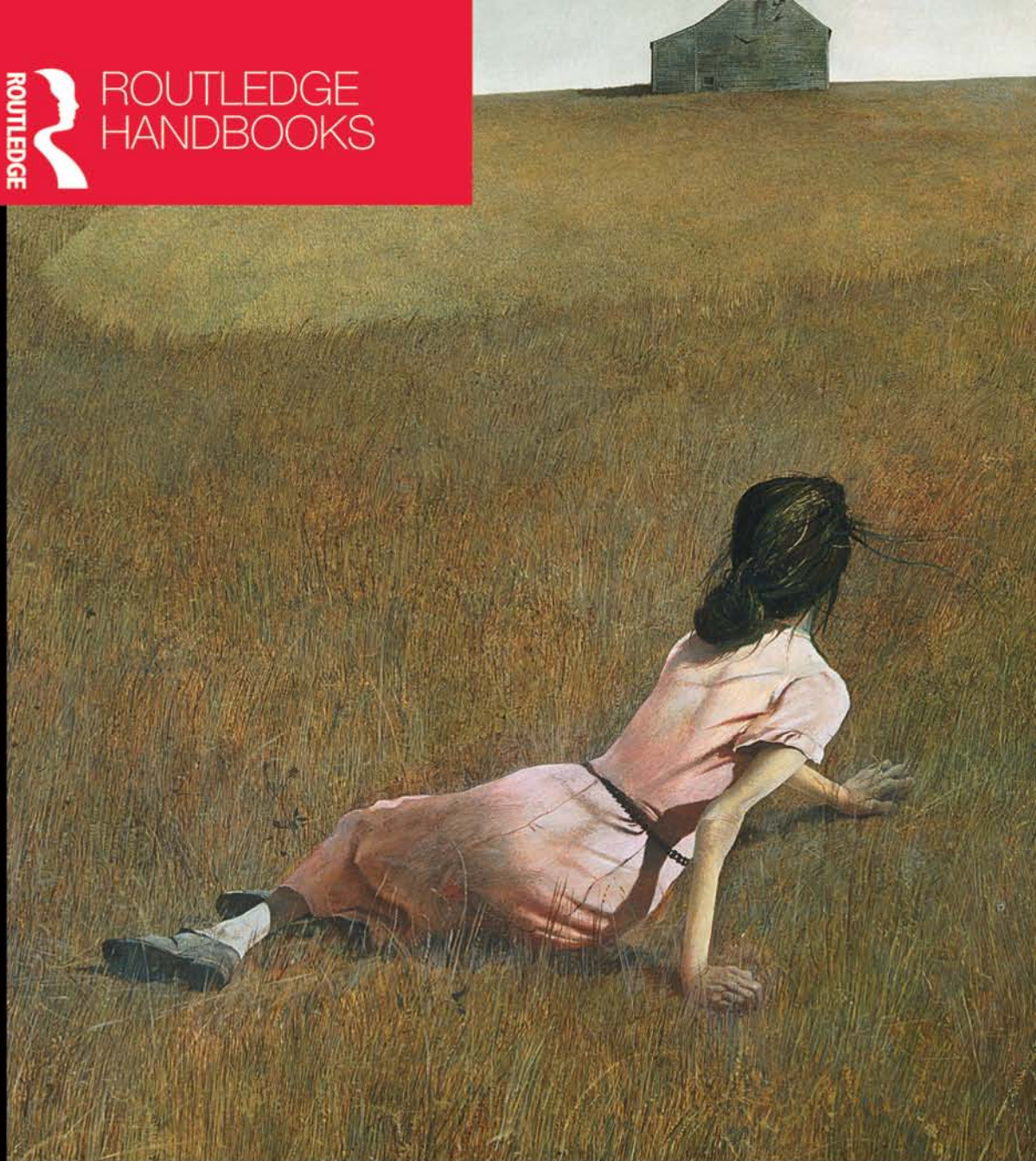




ROUTLEDGE  
HANDBOOKS



# Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies

Edited by  
Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF DISABILITY STUDIES

The *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* takes a multidisciplinary approach to disability and provides an authoritative and up-to-date overview of the main issues in the field around the world today. Adopting an international perspective and consisting entirely of newly commissioned chapters arranged thematically, it surveys the state of the discipline, examining emerging and cutting-edge areas as well as core areas of contention.

Divided in five parts, this comprehensive handbook covers:

- Different models and approaches to disability
- How key impairment groups have engaged with disability studies and the writings within the discipline
- Policy and legislation responses to disability studies and to disability activism
- Disability studies and its interaction with other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and science and technology studies
- Disability studies and different life experiences, examining how disability and disability studies intersects with ethnicity, sexuality, gender, childhood and ageing.

Containing chapters from an international selection of leading scholars, this authoritative handbook is an invaluable reference for all academics, researchers and more advanced students in disability studies and associated disciplines such as sociology, health studies and social work.

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*Edited by Nick Watson,  
Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas*

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## **PART 1**

# Theorizing disability



# 1

## THE CHANGING TERRAIN OF DISABILITY STUDIES

*Alan Roulstone, Carol Thomas and Nick Watson*

Disability studies is at a crossroads. From its political foundations and early theoretical formulations in the late 1960s and early 1970s it has now become recognized as an academic discipline in its own right. It is available as a core subject of study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and has firmly established national and international organizations that hold their own academic conferences, including the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) in the United States (US), the Disability Studies Association (DSA) in the United Kingdom (UK), the Nordic Network of Disability Research (NNDR) and the Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED). There also exist a range of international, peer reviewed academic journals rooted in disability studies, including *Disability & Society*, the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *ALTER – the European Journal of Disability Research* and the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*.

Disability studies can trace its origins to the organizations of disabled people whose voices emerged in the late 1960s and who shared ideas drawn from those of other previously excluded groups such as African Americans in the US, black and other minority ethnic groupings elsewhere, women, and lesbians and gay men. Disability activists in the US, the UK, Scandinavia and other Western European countries campaigned for a change in the way that disability was understood, demanding the redefinition of disability from a personal, medical problem to a political one (Driedger 1991). No longer, they argued, should disability be seen as a problem of the individual's 'body' and thus something to be treated by health and social care professionals, but instead it should be seen as a political and socially constructed problem with a focus on the disabling barriers faced by people with an impairment (De Jong 1981; Finkelstein 1980).

It can be argued that there have been three key elements to the development of the disability studies agenda (Shakespeare and Watson 2001). First was the idea that disabled people are a marginalized and disadvantaged constituency; second was the idea that disabled people constitute a minority group; and third, and perhaps key, was the idea that disability be reconstructed as a social rather than a medical problem – what Mike Oliver in 1983, drawing on the ideas of the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS 1976), termed the social model of disability. The former two points have combined and been used to reinforce the latter, and the three elements together are broadly constitutive of what has become known as disability studies. Disability is thus described in terms of social discrimination and prejudice rather than individual medical conditions. Discrimination, according to disability studies writers, can be rooted in

institutional, personal and interpersonal processes of exclusion and oppression and are viewed as endemic to most societies irrespective of levels of economic and cultural development.

The acknowledgement and conceptualization of disabled people as a disadvantaged group was the main focus of early disability scholars, supporting the claim for the politicization of disability by disabled people and their allies throughout the world. Writers such as Kleinfield (1979), Hahn (1985) and Barnes (1991) all presented evidence for this claim, in different cultural contexts. Economic considerations and materialist analyses were central to first-wave disability studies perspectives. Very soon afterwards, feminist disability activists and scholars were keen to name this disadvantage as social oppression: the concept 'disablism' sat comfortably alongside sexism and racism (Morris 1991).

Through its close ties with disabled people and their political movements and organizations, and by stretching beyond and across disciplinary boundaries, disability studies has become fully international, multidisciplinary and has transformed the intellectual scene. Disability studies has produced not just an intellectual challenge to the way that disability is understood and theorized but has resulted in the establishment of a new paradigm around disability. Large-scale international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO), national governments and voluntary and third sector organizations everywhere have engaged with – and been influenced by – the ideas that have emerged as a direct result of the way that disability studies scholars and activists have engaged with disability.

As disability studies has grown, its central ideas and concepts have increasingly attracted critical academic scrutiny and with this has come increasing demands for academic validity (Shakespeare 2006). New ideas and concepts have emerged that have sought to challenge the key tenets of the discipline. These challenges have emerged both from within the discipline and from outside it. Disabled feminists such as Jenny Morris, Carol Thomas, Simi Linton and Rosemary Garland-Thomson have argued that disability studies has failed to adequately theorize the experience of disability from a gendered perspective and needs to engage more with feminist perspectives. Similar points have been made in relation to ethnicity (Stuart 1993), sexuality (Shakespeare *et al.* 1996) and social class (Gallagher and Skidmore 2006).

Since the 1990s, disability scholars have also begun a critique from outside of first-wave disability studies by pointing to the need to go beyond largely economic arguments and their correctives by critically unpacking structures of 'ableism', normalcy and the construction of disabled people as categorically 'other' (Chouinard 2009; Davis 1995; Kasnitz 2001; Goodley 2010). Instead of simply navigating around the results of disablism, these writers attempt to get to the core of ableist thinking as structures of categorical exclusion. Such writers argue for root and branch and educational reappraisals of how we view difference in contemporary society.

Of significance, both first-wave and subsequent disability writings share a concern for the results of exclusionary societies and the impact this has on disabled people. Not surprisingly, the theoretical and thus policy responses to disablism/ableism differ in their emphasis, whilst ideas can be increasingly characterized as pluralized in pursuit of understanding disabled people's lives. Some see such plurality as a risk to disability studies; others view these developments as evidence of the growing maturity and openness of debate within disability studies. We see these developments as contributing to the enrichment of the discipline as it grows and diversifies. This book seeks to capture a sense of the discipline in transition.

## Structure of the book

In putting this book together we have sought to cover the key debates in disability studies and it is our hope that this collection will act as a major reference text for the future development of