

Reclaiming the social model of disability for emancipatory research: a critical realist critique of disablism

Introduction

My research focus on the intersection of social policies which are directly concerned with both inclusion and exclusion in the education system necessitates an attempt to reconcile divergent meta-theoretical landscapes. Historically the issue of ‘inclusion’ and its related topics of Special Educational Needs and disability in education have been seen as one topic (for example Croll & Moses, 2003) whilst exclusion from school has been seen as an entirely separate and distinct field of interest (for example Pavey & Visser, 2003). Recently it has been argued that ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ should not be researched in isolation (Vulliamy, 2001) and an attempt has been made to bring the two concepts under one theoretical umbrella of ‘inclusion/exclusion’ (Booth, 2000; Dunn, 2004). For me, the key connection is a concern with social justice and human rights. Thus I see emancipatory research as the most appropriate approach to the study of inclusion/exclusion. This paper is thus concerned with making progress towards constructing a coherent meta-theoretical framework within which to conduct such research.

A brief note about exclusion

One significant difficulty with achieving theoretical fusion between ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ is that the two fields have traditionally been dominated by approaches which are at first sight quite incompatible. Thus, for the concept of ‘inclusion/exclusion’ to be developed some attempt at rapprochement is required.

Research into exclusion has historically been based within a technicist policy analysis which has focused on causal relationships in the sense of which factors¹ increase or decrease a child's risk of exclusion from school and their subsequent experiences (See for example Berridge *et al*, 2001; Daniels *et al*, 2003; DfES, 2003; SHA, 1992; SEU, 1998). This nomothetic goal is indicative of the strongly positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions of much of this work: viewing the world as real, concrete and knowable through measurement and the role of the researcher as passive and objective. The methods adopted in most of this body of work (mainly government commissioned) are predominantly quantitative and based heavily on flawed official statistics (Vulliamy & Webb, 2001). The use of some qualitative data from interviews has become more common in recent years (for example Solomon & Rogers, 2001), however this has often been an 'add-on' and does not, in itself, indicate a shift away from positivist epistemology. I have discussed elsewhere (Dunn, 2004) the limitations of this work and argued that there is a need for an integrated multi-level analysis with the potential to encompass the full spectrum of educational inequality.

In this paper, therefore, I want to focus on inclusion: to explore more fully the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of research in this area, the reasons these are currently being re-evaluated, the new directions they might take and how these might be integrated into the concept of inclusion/exclusion.

The importance of the Social Model to inclusion research

¹ despite some attempts to include institutional factors this predominately consists of circumstances pertaining to the child

The origins of the movement towards ‘inclusion’ in the education system lie within the Disability Rights Movement. Scholars associated with that movement and working in the discipline of disability studies predominately espouse some form of standpoint epistemology of disablism. This body of work is dominated by a strong version of the British Social Model of Disability. Shakespeare and Watson (2002) have highlighted the work of Finkelstein (1980, 1981), Barnes (1991) and particularly Oliver (1990, 1996) as key to this tradition. With a more specific educational focus, Fulcher (1989) has also been a notable exponent of this view. Research grounded in the British Social Model has commonly focused on interpretive understanding (*verstehen*) of the lived experiences of disabled people. Consequently many recent studies of ‘inclusion’ have used methods which draw heavily on strong versions of social constructionism, such as ethnography (as in Benjamin, 2002) and Foucauldian approaches focussing on discursive networks (as in Allan, 1999). The focus of this work has thus been more towards faithfully recounting the perspectives of disabled children in a particular educational environment rather than seeking, in any way, to explain their experiences. As I will argue later, I believe that such research, while intrinsically interesting, does little to advance the cause of emancipation. The rest of this paper, therefore, focuses on unpicking some of the key assumptions which underpin disablist research and considering whether the social model needs to be abandoned or relocated within an alternative meta-theoretical framework.

The Social Model of Disability

Before attempting to deconstruct the assumptions of disablism, I believe it is essential to disconnect disablism itself from the social model of disability. In a form often referred to as the “strong” version, the Social Model states that

“Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.”
(excerpt from the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation document: Fundamental Principles of Disability. Reprinted in edited form in Oliver, 1996, p.22).

It is important to note that, even in this strong form, the social model does not deny the existence or relevance of impairment, a point which I will revisit later.

Since its original conception in the 1970s, however, a misapprehension has arisen that the social model can only be located within the epistemological framework of disablism. Stone & Priestley’s (1996) 6 principles for emancipatory disability research have been a key influence in this association, since they assumed the necessity of locating the social model within disablism in order to distinguish it from the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Barnes (2003) has argued, over the past 30 years “in some respects the social model has become the new orthodoxy.” (p.9) replacing the medical model as the dominant paradigm in research into disability. Since arguing against this shift would be a difficult position to sustain, the association between the social model and disablism has proved difficult to disentangle.

Recently, however, some discomfort with the social model has become apparent (see for example Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Dewsbury *et al*, 2004; Gabel & Peters, 2004). I would argue that the root of that discomfort is not the social model itself, but rather the strong disablist epistemology with which it has been associated.

The key assumptions of disablism

Strong Social Constructionism

Ontologically and epistemologically similar to other standpoint epistemologies such as feminism, disablism is associated with a strong form of social constructionism. Thus, on an ontological level, disablist perspectives commonly assume that reality is constructed by social actors through their discourse and that there is no independent reality beyond this. A key criticism of this view is that it conflates ontology and epistemology by assuming that nothing exists independently of knowledge, a problem referred to by critical realists (such as Sayer, 2000) as the epistemic fallacy. In the physical world this conflation can be easily disputed through examples such as stars which, I would strenuously argue, existed long before humans came into existence, let alone built telescopes. Thus they exist independently of our knowledge of them.

In the social world, however, the argument is more complex. Strong social constructionists argue that, since ideas cannot be expressed without language (or at least some form of semiosis) it is not possible to have knowledge of any independent social reality and therefore that no such reality can exist. All that is social must be

socially constructed. Sayer (2000) has argued, however, that this position confuses construction with construal. Many social practices occur in the world without the presence of external observers (such as researchers) and changes in theories about social practices do not (automatically) cause changes in those social practices. Thus, many social practices exist independently of our construal of them (Sayer, 2000). For example, the shift within disability research away from medical models of disability and towards the social model (a shift in construal of the social problem) did not automatically cause the barriers disabled people experience in society (the social problem itself) to disappear.

Beyond this general problem with strong social constructionism there is an additional and highly significant difficulty specific to standpoint epistemologies. Disablism's version of the social model is that disability is created **solely** by the discourses and practices of the non-disabled world: that is that disability is entirely socially constructed. If this is accepted then it must also be the case that disability has no relation to impairment: that the two concepts are entirely independent. Thus, where the social model is used in this way it is implicit that there is no inherent difference between disabled and non-disabled people, and thus it is a denial of impairment. The difficulty this causes is to ignore significant practical and real problems experienced by disabled people which are a result of impairment and not social constructions (most notably some experiences of pain and emotional distress).

It is this significant departure from reality which, I would argue, has led many researchers to want to distance themselves from the social model. As Shakespeare and Watson have argued "the denial of difference is as big a problem for disability

studies, as it was for feminism.” (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002, p.11). However, it does not follow that the denial of difference is a problem which must, necessarily, lie within the social model itself. The social model distinguishes between ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ but does not suggest either that they are not related nor that impairment is entirely irrelevant. It is, I would argue, the standpoint epistemology of disablism which is the fundamental difficulty.

The privileged standpoint of the oppressed

In a key review of the first ten years of the emerging ‘disability studies’, Barnes (2003) reinforces a frequent demand of disablism’s proponents: that research must be accountable to disabled people and their organisations, thus “reversing the social relations of research production” (Stone & Priestley, 1996, p.703). This implies both that the perspective of disabled people themselves should be privileged above all others and that disabled people and their organisations should control the research agenda. As Dewsbury *et al* (2004, p.156-7) have argued

“Constructionist versions of experience can slip easily into essentialist positions, whereby members of one social grouping are held to be incapable of experiencing the experiences of another social grouping”.

Such a position, fundamental to disablism (but not, I will argue, to the social model), is flawed as an epistemology of emancipatory research in a number of respects. In this section I will discuss what I see as the two key criticisms of this position then, in the section which follows, I will move on to some more minor and technical criticisms.

Sayer (2000, p.53) has described two key difficulties with situatedness which can be applied to the analysis of the disablist perspective. Firstly, he argues that to acknowledge that certain knowledge originates from a particular culture or subject position does not imply that it only applies to that culture/subject position. Thus, the social model of disability (whilst originating within the disability movement) might equally well be applied to explaining racism or other forms of discrimination and therefore should not be constrained within the agendas of the disability rights movement. I would argue, therefore, that the positions that (a) the perspective of disabled people themselves is the only valid view of disability and (b) that research into disability should be controlled exclusively by disabled people themselves are fundamentally as prejudiced and discriminatory as the practices they seek to supplant.

Sayer's second key criticism of situatedness undermines disablism's critique of research rooted in medical models of disability. He suggests that the fact that knowledge "bears the marks of its social origins" (2000, p.53) is not in itself a problem: in fact, he argues, it is inevitable that this should be so. So, under this conceptualisation, the fact that the medical model guided most research into disability prior to the 1970s is not in itself a problem. According to Sayer, a problem arises only when this agenda causes it to fail the critical realist test of explanatory adequacy. By this test, research which fails to consider the contribution of social practices to the experience of disability would be judged as failing to provide adequate sociological explanation. However, research which privileges the disabled viewpoint to the extent of denying the existence of any difference (i.e. impairment) between a disabled person and a person who does not currently have an impairment would also be judged to be

explanatorily inadequate. This is because such explanations fail to adequately account for experiences such as pain which does not result from a social practice.

Thus, whilst I would agree that the voices of oppressed minorities should not be excluded, neither should they be included uncritically and without examination. Sayer (2000, p.55) makes the point very well quoting Haraway's (1991, p.191) argument that "the standpoints of the subjugated are not innocent or exempt from critical re-examination.". He goes on to argue that "there is no warrant for giving them [oppressed groups] an epistemic privilege which we would deny to socially privileged groups" (Sayer, 2000, p.55). Thus, I am not arguing that the disabled 'voice' has no value but rather that it should not be held to be inherently more valuable than alternative viewpoints in and of itself. Rather it must be viewed critically and examined in terms of its explanatory usefulness. Thus I would argue that the social model of disability **as it is construed by disablism** is inadequate to the task of explaining the experiences of disabled people. I fully acknowledge the importance of the lived experiences of disabled people but argue that **in isolation** they constitute inadequate sociological explanation.

Other difficulties with epistemic privilege

In addition to the key criticisms set out above there are three less central, but nevertheless valid, criticisms of the disablism positions that the perspective of disabled people themselves is the only valid one and that, therefore, disabled people should have exclusive control of the research agenda.

Firstly, these positions preclude the possibility of non-disabled people having anything to offer the emancipatory process: a view exemplified by some extremist views of non-disabled researchers as ‘parasites’ (Hunt, 1981 cited in Stone & Priestley, 1996). Unfortunately this position has a fundamental flaw when taken together with a social model view of disability as oppression. If the argument were taken to its logical conclusion it would go like this: disabled people are oppressed and unable to attain power in society, because they have no power they are unable to overcome their oppression. If at this point we insert the idea that the viewpoint of the disabled person themselves is the only valid one then only disabled people can emancipate themselves but since none of them have any power this becomes impossible! Thus, the original premise of the argument must be questioned.

A further difficulty with the privileging of the viewpoint of disabled people is that its justification is based on a critique of the previously dominant medicalised research paradigm (see for example Fulcher, 1989). As I set out above such critique is in any case fully justified when pursued from a critical realist perspective as failing to provide an adequate sociological explanation of the experience of disability. However, when criticised from a disablist perspective as prejudiced, I would argue, the critique cannot succeed because it is founded on an ontology which denies the existence of an independent reality. Since such assumptions lead to an epistemology which denies the possibility of truth and error in knowing (Sayer, 2000), the disablist position implies judgmental relativism (that is the position that it is not possible to judge between conflicting beliefs). If this is accepted then the previously dominant paradigm cannot be held to be in error or untrue. Thus the key disablist critique of medicalised, able-bodied research is undermined.

Finally, as in feminist research, disablist research has advanced the justification of redress (i.e. that reversal of the privilege is necessary in order to redress the balance and ‘right the wrong’). This assumes (erroneously) that time is not a relevant factor and that privileging the disabled viewpoint in the future will somehow make up for or balance out the oppression of it in the past – unfortunately the decisions and issues are different and constantly changing so rather than re-balancing it is simply likely to cause further imbalance.

The homogenous, cohesive and distinct disabled group

In a paradoxical stance, given the ‘denial of difference’ problem discussed earlier, the position that disabled people themselves should control the research agenda is centred on a further key assumption of disablism: that ‘disabled people’ comprise a homogenous, cohesive and readily identifiable group. In a flaw common to all strong standpoint positions (Sayer, 2000, p.54), disablism thus implies that members of particular social groups must automatically share the same point of view and that people cannot be members of multiple groups. Additionally, much disablist writing assumes that disabled people can be readily identified and distinguished from non-disabled people.

Thus disablism assumes, and imposes on the social model of disability, the idea that ‘disabled’ is a fixed and singular identity applying only to particular individuals. In practice, it seems clear, individual disabled people have widely divergent experiences and views. There are obviously organic differences in

impairment between individuals which can lead to vastly different experiences. Some individuals choose to reject the 'disabled' label altogether, including many deaf people. There are also many individuals with multiple 'disabled' identities and joint membership of other social groups including other disadvantaged or discriminated against groups.

'Disabled' is also not a stable identity. Individuals may both enter and exit the 'disabled' group, sometimes several times, and these identities can be fused with and overlap with membership of subgroups identified by impairment or other factors. Impairments both vary and fluctuate in the extent to which they both cause direct distress to the individual and interact adversely with the social environment. Change also occurs in the social environment – for example the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act. Consequently, and as the implementation of that Act has demonstrated, on a practical level it is extremely difficult to specify where the dividing line actually is – who is 'disabled' and who is not?

Similarly, political persuasions and positions on particular issues vary as widely amongst disabled people as they do in the general population. Organisations of disabled people are no less prone to disagreement and debate than other democratic organisations. These issues are not merely theoretically problematic. They pose practical difficulties which in turn create methodological problems for researchers wishing to consult and involve disabled people (see for example Stone and Priestley, 1996).

These assumptions are fundamental to disablism. However they also severely undermine it as a basis for emancipatory research. The problem is well expressed by Gabel and Peters (2004). Whilst I would dispute their identification of the social model itself as the source of the problem, they demonstrate the fundamental difficulty of these assumptions, arguing that “In its emphasis on collective solidarity, the social model runs the risk of developing a form of oppression from within to justify liberation from without.” (p.596). Thus by artificially homogenising and partitioning a ‘disabled’ group, disablism denies individuals a voice and so severely limits the potential for their emancipation.

However, it is disablism itself I would argue, rather than the social model, which makes these assumptions. According to the social model as set out earlier, disability is an experience beyond impairment. This conceptualisation allows for the experience of disability to vary between individuals. It is only when this is further constrained by the disablist insistence that ‘disabled people’ must control the research agenda that the assumption of a homogenous, cohesive and distinct ‘disabled’ group is made.

The assumption of a homogenous, cohesive ‘disabled’ group can actually prevent consideration of the needs of disabled people within a broader context of disadvantage and discrimination. For example in the education field, Booth (2000) has criticised tunnel vision views of inclusion as concerned only with pupils with Special Educational Needs, arguing that it camouflages broader divisions and discrimination created by selective processes related to “attainment, presumed ability, age, gender, religion, class, ethnicity and wealth.” (p.82)

In Stone & Priestley's (1996) fifth principle of emancipatory research, that of "Personalizing the Political and Politicizing the Personal" they argue that, while differences in personal experiences of impairment must be acknowledged, some degree of collectivisation is required in order to highlight disablement as a form of social oppression. Thus they view the assumption of a homogeneous, identifiable, 'disabled' group as essential to emancipation since a group is collectively more powerful than individuals. This argument stands up only so long as homogeneity is seen as essential to collective action. I would argue that it is perfectly possible for groups to form around a common cause but whose members represent a wide variety of experiences and standpoints. In addition, even if this argument were accepted, it is difficult to see why it should not be extended to cover all people experiencing disadvantage or discrimination thus forming an even larger group rather than perpetuating an artificial disabled/non-disabled divide.

If it is accepted, therefore, that it is disablism rather than the social model itself which makes the limiting assumption of a homogenous and cohesive group, then it becomes possible for an emancipatory research paradigm to be developed which extends the experience of disabling social practices beyond the criteria of the presence of an impairment. While this would require a slight modification of the social model, it also has the potential, as I will discuss later, to inform broader, more inclusive research.

A final criticism - the uncomplicated oppressor

The concept of who is actually doing the oppressing is persistently vague in much disablist writing. Sayer (2000, p.56) has argued that generally extreme standpoint epistemology precludes recognition of when the dominant oppressors are actually trying to improve social justice (because it assumes they are always oppressing) and thus makes an explanatorily adequate account impossible. In education, for example, this runs the risk of producing accounts which simply assume the use of personal tragedy and medicalised models of disability on the part of the oppressors (i.e. policy makers) and fail to adequately consider the complex and sometimes conflicting forces influencing social policy. Much current policy on disability now explicitly endorses some version of the social model of disability. Similarly no current document on Special Educational Needs would consider failing to assume that 'inclusion' should be the norm. From a disablist perspective these might appear to be victories, indeed from such a perspective it is extremely difficult to challenge these developments since they purport to accede to the long stated demands of the disability movement.

Effective criticism of these developments, I would argue, needs to account for the complex meaning making (semiosis) of political discourses, such as 'inclusion' and their multi-faceted roles, including the neutralisation of opposition and dissent. This requires a perspective that specifically acknowledges the difference between construction and construal. Only then does it become possible to account for events such as the simultaneous re-construction of disability through oppressive social

practices (e.g. segregated schooling) and the construal of such oppression as emancipation (i.e. 'inclusion').

What alternative paradigms exist for emancipatory research

Postmodernism

Gabel and Peters (2004) have suggested that resistance theory located within an eclectic post modernist philosophy might constitute an alternative to the social model of disability as a new paradigm for disability studies. They quote Shakespeare and Watson's (2001) argument that

“... disability is the quintessential post-modern concept, because it is so complex, so variable, so contingent, so situated. It sits at the intersection of biology and society and of agency and structure. Disability cannot be reduced to a singular identity: it is a multiplicity, a plurality.” (p.19)

A post-modernist paradigm might indeed resolve the problem of assuming a homogenous, cohesive disabled group. However I contend that, for two reasons, rejecting the social model of disability and relocating emancipatory research within a post-modern meta-theoretical approach would compound rather than resolve most of the current difficulties by preventing emancipatory research from developing an adequate critique of current social policy.

Firstly, post-modernism shares with disablism the difficulty of a strong social constructionist position. Ironically, some of the strongest criticism of 'post'

theorising² has come from the disablist perspective. Oliver and Barnes (1998) have criticised the strong social constructionist position of 'post' theories on the grounds that they marginalise the study of structure, history and collective action.

I would carry forward this criticism to the present. A strong social constructionist position makes it difficult, if not impossible, to effectively critique current policy and without critique, it is difficult to imagine how emancipation can be advanced. An example is provided by the issue of semiosis. A post-modernist perspective would deny the existence of any reality beyond that which is constructed through discourse. This leads to a view of semiosis as consisting of signifier and signified with no external and independently existing referent. The difficulty of this position is that it permits the negation of opposition through discursive rather than actual change. For example, if no external referent exists, the construction of a purely linguistic notion of 'inclusion' cannot be challenged by reference to the failure to actually close special schools and move children into the mainstream.

Secondly, a post-modernist paradigm limits the potential for explanation to the micro-social sphere and, in doing so, severely limits the potential for change and thus emancipation. Nash (2002) has recently argued that limiting the research perspective to the micro-social risks missing important explanatory factors, such as school composition effects, which exist only on the macro-social plane. Similarly, Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2002) have argued that practical non-linguistic factors (such as the availability of material resources) are essentially relevant to issues of social policy and must not be excluded from analysis.

² A term Oliver & Barnes (1998) use to refer collectively to post-modernism, post-structuralism and

Without consideration of such factors research can only explore the feelings and subjective experiences of particular groups of social actors but without the ability to offer any explanation as to how that experience might be effectively changed beyond that micro-level environment. In the area of inclusion this has meant that much recent research has concentrated on exploring how ‘included’ particular children feel whilst failing to offer any insight into how their experiences might be changed. Barnes (2003, p.10) quotes Finkelstein (2002) in pointing out that, as a result “experiential research alone has hitherto to yield any meaningful political or social policy outcomes.”

Critical Realism

I would propose that a philosophical position of critical realism forms the most promising starting point for developing a coherent meta-theoretical framework for emancipatory research into inclusion/exclusion. Such a position would have two substantial advantages.

Firstly, a critical realist position is uniquely suited to the goal of emancipation since it offers the possibility of going beyond mere understanding (*verstehen*) to develop explanations (*erklären*). This in turn opens up the possibility of change. Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2002, p.5) have argued from a critical realist perspective that “to illuminate semiotic causal powers and how they might be

similar philosophical positions.

actualised (their mechanisms)” should be one of the central goals of research. This is highly compatible with research into inclusion/exclusion because it allows for the possibility that not only may political discourse surrounding ‘inclusion’ significantly influence children’s experiences in school but that it may be possible to draw conclusions as to how this occurs and so to challenge it.

Secondly, a framework underpinned by critical realism offers the possibility of broadening the account beyond impairment and disability (as it is currently understood) to incorporate other forms of disadvantage and discrimination. This would overcome the difficulties of assuming a homogenous, cohesive disabled group by explicitly allowing for multiple, conflicting and shifting identities while at the same time not abandoning explanatory and emancipatory goals.

The aim of such a widening out of the research agenda would not be some naïve search for grand narrative but rather an acknowledgement that the explanatory power of accounts is likely to be strengthened by being explicit about our standpoints and attempting to combine several differently situated views. Both similarities and differences in experience can then be examined for the potential insights they may offer.

Critical realism is not without its flaws and it has been argued, from a Marxist perspective (Roberts, 2002), that critical realism’s conceptualisation of ‘emancipation’ is too vague and general with an insufficiently robust conceptualisation of its relationship with ideology. Whilst tentatively agreeing with this criticism, I do not believe it fundamentally undermines the critical realist project,

rather it reminds us of the need to specify more precisely, as I have attempted to do here, the philosophical underpinnings of emancipatory research.

A Critical Realist social model?

At this point I can only put forward some initial thoughts as to what a critical realist social model of disability might look like. Firstly, a key component must be to adopt the critical realist distinction between construction and construal (Sayer, 2000). Thus the relevance and reality of impairment may be acknowledged, whilst still pervasive construals of impairment as disability are fundamentally challenged. This then allows similarities to other forms of discrimination (sexism, racism etc.) to be explored. It also ensures that opposition to oppression cannot be undermined by merely adopting the vocabulary of emancipation into the mainstream whilst failing to enact actual change.

Secondly, in place of the disabled/non-disabled binarism I believe some form of spectrum view of disability/disadvantage/discrimination might prove more fruitful. I have previously advocated the development of an inclusion/exclusion continuum as a means of providing an integrated multi-level analysis of exclusion (Dunn, 2004). I would now extend this argument to suggest that the concept of an inclusion/exclusion continuum also has the potential to fulfil this need for a spectrum view of disability in the context of disadvantage and discrimination more generally in the education system.

Conclusion

The adoption of extreme positions has often been a necessary tool in attempting to overturn dominant paradigms but, at least within disability studies, the job has been done. As Stone & Priestley (1996) acknowledged, by the 1990s if researchers still failed to use a social model framework in disability research their research would automatically be considered oppressive. I have argued, in line with other recent commentaries, that the social model of disability as it is currently used has outlived its usefulness.

However, unlike other commentators, I have proposed that it is not the social model of disability itself which needs to be abandoned but rather the disablist epistemology which underpins current versions of it. If the goal is emancipation, then placing the experiences of the powerless on a pedestal no longer serves a useful function. I believe that research might more effectively concentrate on seeking to explain and make explicit the mechanisms through which domination and oppression are perpetuated and reinforced.

I have argued that, in pursuing such a research agenda, the social model of disability still has a useful role to play. However its focus on the role of oppressive social practices needs to be reinforced rather than undermined. This can, I believe, best be achieved by reclaiming the social model of disability from the standpoint epistemology of disablism and relocating it within a critical realist framework. Then it reacquires the potential to be a vehicle for challenging current social policy and achieving actual progress towards emancipation.

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