

SOCIAL DIVISIONS/ SOCIAL IDENTITIES STREAM

The power of using the method of co-production with disabled people: translating ‘private troubles’ into social and political actions to build equality and justice.

Abstract

Questioning how knowledge is produced, the value attributed to it, by whom and for what purposes, are all legitimate sociological questions. They encourage researchers to look beyond what appear to be difficulties of everyday life, or ‘private troubles’ (Mills, 1959), to view these as indicators of wider social and political concern. Disability Studies does this by prioritising the ‘lived experiences’ of disabled people. The close relationship between disabled academics and the Disability Rights Movement, nonetheless, suggests an explicit association between knowledge creation and politics, which some find uncomfortable. This paper will argue that challenging this ‘discomfort’ has become increasingly important since the pandemic. Academics were called on to provide ‘expert’ medical knowledge when politicians needed to offer public reassurance. They engaged in critical analysis when the significant contribution social and economic inequalities made to death rates in certain populations, became apparent. However, many also played an important role in what was a crowded political and media landscape, in ensuring the concerns and voices of marginalised groups were heard. Working with campaign groups representing marginalised communities who popularised the alternative discourse: “we are not all in this together”, academics were active agents in challenging dominant political narratives. By reference to a research project that was coproduced with disabled people and their organisations during the pandemic, this paper will explore the implications of alliances between academics and activists. In doing so it will examine the changing relationship of academics in the creation of knowledge, research power relationships and social policy outcomes.

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