



New-Materialist Reading of Disability, Senescence, and the Life-Course

Plain English Summary

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Introduction

Theory provides a way to make sense of complex issues and happenings in the lives of disabled people and beyond. The key argument is that new-materialism, along with another theoretical approach called critical disability studies, can improve understanding about the relationship between disability, senescence and the life-course. Senescence is related to the course of one's life, particularly the end phase of life, which is focussed upon most in this article. This is because senescence refers to biological aging or how the body undergoes a process of deterioration with age. The paper considers also related issues like impairment and social justice.

Approach

New-materialism and critical disability studies, when taken together, provide a frame of theory for the paper. To support the theory, a critical literature review method is used in the paper to source, screen and understand literature and research. This method involves using a set research question to create concepts and search terms that form part of a more complex search strategy for literature. Online databases were used to undertake the search as well as a search for unpublished work to address publication bias. Coding and then creating themes from bringing together codes, was part of making sense of literature.

Main argument

The main argument of the paper is that new things can be learned about the relationship between disability, senescence and the life-course, through the approach of new-materialism and critical disability studies. New-materialism is an approach to theory that developed around the late 1990s. It is often interested in questions about the relationship between matter and life. Ethics can also be important in answering these questions, as well as questions about what it means to be (ontology), and what or whom can have agency. When new-materialism is used to view disability, it can raise questions about bodies, impairments, quality of life, technology, matter, culture, perception and many other things. Critical disability studies is different to new-materialism but also helps to think about disability in more complex ways. Critical disability studies is an area of theory and scholarship that includes lots of different disciplines and that thinks critically about disability.



After introducing theory in more depth, findings are presented. The findings of the paper are divided into three sections. These are: Disability and senescence (1), understanding quality of life through theory (2), and understanding how people, in a social world, rely on one another in the context of having their own sense of self (3). Within section 1, on disability and senescence, theory is used to break down the divide between human and non-human. The divide between that which is considered to have life-force and that which is considered lifeless is challenged. Going beyond humans to look at matter and animal life, this section also considers social equality and social justice issues about having the opportunity to decline with age because of having the opportunity to age. This is an issue related to social justice and disability on a global scale.

The second section of findings begins by establishing that focus ought not just to be on living a long life with disability but having quality of life. Key aspects of quality of life addressed include social justice regarding discrimination and disadvantage against disabled people, issues about memory, as well as illnesses, conditions and treatments such as related to dementia and organ transplantation. Finally, the last section relates to self, and how self can go beyond oneself, to be created and sustained along with others. The section shows how disability can add complex dimensions to how self comes to be understood socially, such as in the case of life support machines. Assumptions are questioned such as whether a better life really is one that is longer, of more quality or indeed a life that is remembered. Overall, the three areas of findings show how there is not set agreement around even the simplest things such as what a good life, in the context of disability, looks like or how we establish where life exists and where it doesn't.

Main implications

One of the implications of the findings for disabled people is that there are social inequalities related to how life and matter interact and are understood. This includes who gets access to life support technologies and how some bodies can be viewed inappropriately through a solely medical lens. There has been increased recognition of a need to view the situations of disabled people in a way that upholds equality and that does not treat disability as a medical problem that is only individual to a person. This recognition can, however, lead to not enough contact between human sciences and disability theorists. This is unhelpful as social justice for disabled people, related to the life course and senescence, includes matters like medical technology to assist with impairments. The paper concludes that the distance between human sciences and disability theory is not always helpful. The paper also concludes that it is not helpful to simply divide ideas up as though they are completely opposite. This would include not seeing medical and social views of disability as entirely distinct or viewing other concepts as opposite or entirely different such as alive and dead, matter and life, animals and humans, or disability and impairment.



Finding out more

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