The Physics Teacher

JUST PHYSICS? | DECEMBER 01 2024

Disability as politics and pride: Imagining a future for physics unhooked from ableism

Amy D. Robertson

Phys. Teach. 62, 792–793 (2024)
https://doi.org/10.1119/5.0245883

just physics?

Just Physics? *is a column focused on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. To submit, please fill out the idea submission form at https://forms.gle/JJik2qaw2GLGeViL7.*

Column Editor:
Deepak Iyer, **Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA**

Disability as politics and pride: Imagining a future for physics unhooked from ableism

Amy D. Robertson, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA; robertsona2@spu.edu

I will never forget the second day of my qualifying exams in graduate school. I woke up around 6 a.m. to a distinctive and recognizable cramping in my abdomen and spent the next several hours in the bathroom, navigating an episode of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Those hours were punctuated by frantic phone calls to the graduate program assistant's office, hoping to catch her the moment she arrived so that we could make a plan for how I would navigate my exam under the circumstances. When I finally got in touch, our best idea was that I would take my remaining exam in a separate room, proctored by her, and we would pause the clock when I needed to go throw up or manage other digestive distress.

Reflecting on this experience 15 years later through the lens of disability studies, I feel grateful that I was offered last-minute accommodations. Many disabled people aren't offered accommodations at all; cannot risk disclosing their disability status for a variety of reasons (including racism, heterosexism, fatphobia, and other intersecting oppressions); or would have needed to have gone through an extensive (and intrusive) process, months in advance, to receive the accommodations I (a white, disabled, cisgender woman) did.[1–3] At the same time that I am grateful, I also profoundly feel the lack of creativity reflected in our (including my) believing that the only way forward was for me to take my qualifying exam, at school, in the midst of a debilitating IBS episode.

In the rest of this essay, I'd like to explore what a disability studies lens offers, analytically, for understanding what happened and then imagining more humane possibilities.

The first question I want to explore is *what* limited our creativity as we considered possible responses to my incapacitation that morning. Disability studies would first look to *ableism*, or

> a system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.[4]

Importantly, Lewis points out that ableism works alongside multiple forms of oppression to maintain an *image*—a "constructed idea"—of what is normal and desirable that works to bestow value upon particular people and to (by extension) punish others.[4] This punishment may draw (intersectionally) on more than one system of oppression. For example, racism relies in part on harmful stereotypical images of Black people as unintelligent or "brutish," images that both support and are supported by a notion of an "ideal" body and mind, and in this way (and others), racism and ableism work together.[5–7] Likewise, settler colonizers drew (and continue to draw) on the ableist logic of intellectual (and in some cases moral) inferiority to lend support to their dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their land, forcing Indigenous peoples' resettlement on reservations, and attempting to extinguish Indigenous ways of knowing (e.g., via boarding schools).[8–10]

The decision that the graduate program assistant and I collaboratively made on that second day of my qualifying exams was a decision that was invested in maintaining ableism—in this case, in maintaining an image of a physicist *as able and willing to persist through great difficulty for the sake of the discipline*.[11,12] Fundamentally altering the conditions of the test to better align with and support a body that is in pain, a body that needs to be in bed, or a body that *just can't do this right now* would have called into question the grounds on which I would be awarded a master's degree in physics.

I contend that this imagery of a physicist is rooted in ableism, and, by extension, capitalism, anti-Blackness, misogyny, and so on. Disability studies names some of the ways in which ableism relies on capitalism to define the "able body": "being able-bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labor."[13] Under ableism (reinforced by capitalism), value is assigned vis-à-vis profit; the more closely a body approximates the imagery of the ideal laborer—individualistic, competitive, efficient, and productive, all narrowly defined—the more *value* that body is thought to have. In physics, bodies and minds that fluctuate in capacity, that can only work in bursts, or that do not meet the criteria for "objectivity" are thought to be incompatible with the labor of the discipline.[14,15]

Disability studies also offers an analysis of the ways in which people typically *respond* to what happened on the day of my qualifying exam. When I share this story—or even when I simply share that I am a disabled and chronically ill physicist—I often receive one of two responses: pity and/or awe (which usually feels like veiled pity to me). Without an analysis of the *system* that cultivates a world in which it makes sense for me to take a qualifying exam in debilitating pain, offering pity reinforces a model in which the *problem* is my (thought-to-be-troublesome) disabled body. Within ableism, disabled bodies are often painted as grim, bleak, and in some cases tragic, our lives imagined to be a monolith of "relentless pain, isolation, and bitterness," with disability "prevent[ing] one from leading a good life."[16] This stereotype—and the (often warm) feelings of compassion it evokes—serves to uphold ableism and ensure ableist futures, by, for example, framing the devaluation of disabled lives as a *natural* consequence of being disabled. That is, rather than treating the devaluation of disabled lives as a consequence of *ableism*, pity narratives, rooted in a particular image of disability, treat *being disabled* as a less valuable state of being human.

Ableism also cultivates the "supercrip" narrative, sometimes called inspiration porn. The supercrip narrative frames disabled people as inspirational, sometimes for achieving extraordinary feats thought to be exceptional or rare (e.g., hiking a mountain), and other times for acts ordinary to that disabled person (e.g., being present in public).[17,18] In the case of my qualifying exam, the supercrip narrative would call my persisting through the difficult exam under difficult circumstances *inspiring*, reifying both the images of physicists as hardy and persistent and disabled physicists as exceptional. Supercrip narratives serve ableism in assigning value to disabled lives *in relation* to how our bodies motivate nondisabled people, not as valuable by default: we become "tool[s] for keeping [non-disabled people] grateful and motivated to seize their days," as "here to teach them the loftier nuggets of wisdom, like how to live life to the fullest."[19]

What I am arguing so far is that *so much* of how we think about what it means to be a physicist—including the basis on which we assign people the title of physicist—is rooted in ableism, as are the (I believe) well-meaning responses to my presence as a disabled person in physics. This makes complete sense to me, if I take seriously ideas about the *permanence* and *pervasiveness* of systems of oppression like racism, cisheterosexism, classism, ableism, colonialism, and anti-fatness in the United States.[20,21] And yet, as I and others argue, we can dream about and work for futures that unhook the discipline from these oppressive systems.

In particular, disability studies and activism offers an alternative to ableism: disability pride and politics. Disability politics challenges narratives of pity and objectification, instead offering that disability is part of the natural variation in human life, and pointing out that the experience of being disabled offers distinct and imperative cultural insights about what it means to be alive. Emerging from those insights is a vision of a way of life that centers interdependence, community care, and self-determination, and works for a future in which these values shape policy and collective practice. Disability politics would work to build a world where someone could be a central participant in the discipline from bed, with a service dog, in fits and spurts, at a "crip" pace.[16,22] Disability politics makes room for disability *pride*: pride in these ordinary, earthy bodies; pride that comes from belonging to a community rooted in principles of care, that seeks to design spaces with the "intention to contribute to others' well-being, vitality, and lives."[23]

Disability politics offers opportunities for community and belonging to those who identify as disabled and opportunities to be in solidarity for those who do not. Importantly, for me, disability politics—and disability theory—crystallizes a felt experience in a way that makes clear that I am not alone, and that ableism is not the final word. The impacts of ableism are felt by all of us, and all of us can work together for a future that centers care and justice.

Acknowledgments

This work was funded in part by National Science Foundation grant 2201929; all opinions are my own. I am grateful to colleagues Lauren Bauman, Tali Hairston, Trà Huỳnh, and Verónica Vélez for thoughtful feedback. Seattle Pacific University is named for a city that takes its name from Chief Si'ahl, the chief of the Duwamish people, whose territory and traditional land stretched across our campus. I am especially grateful to my service dog, Eilish, and my caregiver husband, Justin, for their enduring partnership that makes work a continued possibility.

References

1. S. Schalk, "Coming to claim crip: Disidentification with/in disability studies," *Disabil. Stud. Q.* **33**, no. 2 (2013).
2. J. T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2017).
3. M. Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2011).
4. T. A. Lewis, "Working definition of ableism – January 2022 update" (2022), https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/.working-definition-of-ableism-january-2022-update.
5. S. Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2018).
6. D. J. Connor, B. A. Ferri, and S. A. Annamma, *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education* (Teachers College Press, New York, 2016).
7. J. R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (Routledge, New York, 2013).
8. R. Grosfoguel, "The structure of knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic racism/sexism and the four genocides/epistemicides of the long 16th century," *Hum. Archit. J. Sociol. Self-Knowledge* **11**, 73–90 (2013).
9. M. Bang, "Towards an ethic of decolonial trans-ontologies in sociocultural theories of learning and development," in *Power and Privilege in the Learning Science*s, edited by I. Esmonde and A. N. Booker (Routledge, New York, 2017), pp. 115–138.
10. V. Deloria Jr. and D. R. Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, CO, 2001).
11. J. C. Hermanowicz, *Lives in Science: How Institutions Affect Academic Careers* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009).
12. R. M. Herzig, *Suffering for Science: Reason and Sacrifice in Modern America* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2006).
13. R. McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York University Press, New York, 2006).
14. C. Prescod-Weinstein, "Making black women scientists under white empiricism: The racialization of epistemology in physics," *Signs* **45**, 421–447 (2020).
15. S. Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (Routledge, New York, 1996).
16. A. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2013).
17. S. Young, "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much," TEDx, Sydney, Australia, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K9Gg164Bsw.
18. S. Schalk, "Reevaluating the Supercrip," *J. Lit. Cult. Disabil. Stud.* **10**, 71–86 (2013).
19. R. Taussig, *Sitting Pretty: The View From My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* (Harper One, New York, 2020).
20. R. Delgado, J. Stefancic, and A. Harris, *Critical Race Theory,* 3rd ed. (NYU Press, New York, 2017).
21. C. I. Harris, "Whiteness as property," *Harv. Law Rev.* **106**, 1707–1791 (1993).
22. M. Price, "The bodymind problem and the possibilities of pain," *Hypatia* **30**, 268–284 (2015).
23. A. Nishida, *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2022).

Amy D. Robertson *is a disabled and chronically ill Research Professor of Physics at Seattle Pacific University. Her work draws from critical race theory and critical disability studies to identify some of the ways in which racism and ableism are shaping physics education, and to dream possible futures that are unhooked from both. She spends part of her days adventuring with her service dog, Eilish.*

Photo by Roddy Chung
https://www.roddychung.com/

DOI: 10.1119/5.0245883