Ableism in Academia

Brown, Nicole, Leigh, Jennifer

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The significance of crashing past gatekeepers of knowledge: Towards full participation of disabled scholars in ableist academic structures

Claudia Gillberg

Academic knowledge, historically speaking, is intrinsically elitist and exclusive and has served to uphold a hierarchical power system in which the professions enjoy supreme status and privileges such as remuneration exceeding that of other members of society (Abbott 2001; Witz 2004). Initially, the professions were informed by the opinions and ideas of a handful of people who were passionate about their work and were often driven by intellectual curiosity, but there was a dark side to this: a sharp divide between the public and private sphere leading to a gendered divide in knowledge, with sometimes disastrous consequences for women's possibilities to influence policy let alone the politically confined spaces to which they were restricted. While Ann Oakley's research provides a new picture of some women’s astounding agency and high-ranking roles in public life (Oakley 2018), the role that class, race and disability (the lack of) played concerning women who had opportunities was conspicuously lacking.

Mainstream, unlike academic, knowledge in this article is defined as recognised knowledge that a critical mass of academics and the wider population can agree on. It is also knowledge people think they know to be true, where there is no or limited controversy in public. Examples of such known and broadly recognised truths are that fresh air is good for you, and the work environment benefits from physically present employees.
Academia, in this chapter and context, is the seat of learning at which a formally recognised and institutionalised body of knowledge lying at the heart of a profession is debated, determined, taught, examined and perpetuated and/or sometimes re-evaluated. For instance, medical knowledge is taught at medical school, social work is taught to future social workers, engineering is taught to future engineers and the law is taught to law students. Subject matter constitutes an agreed-upon set of basic, non-negotiable skills that each member of a profession must possess. These are the bare minimum. Then there are more specialised skills, usually still part of what is required in order to be deemed fit to become a member of a certain profession, and highly specialised skills that are outside the mandatory coursework but will lead to expert roles and positions for some.

It can be argued that access to and participation in higher education is a social justice issue, with the case for broadening and widening access to higher education having been made and driven by differing ideologies and agendas for several decades (Morley and Walsh 1995; Delanty 2001; Percy, Zimpher and Brukardt 2006; Shah, Bennett and Southgate 2015; Alphin, Lavine and Chan 2017; Gillberg 2018a). The Open University, for example, has played a special role in the UK with its vision of lifelong learning as a tenet of a democratic, participatory society, expressed through courses and modules open to all people, but recent years have seen changes for the worse for disabled and chronically ill students, especially following the UK government’s higher education reforms of 2012 (see http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/mission, https://theretiringacademic.wordpress.com/2018/04/13/closure-at-the-open-university). The introduction of tuition fees increased costs considerably for Open University students and, combined with the introduction of time limits for the funding of degree courses, made the completion of a degree for those suffering from a chronic illness, whose health may fluctuate, more difficult.

In debates on higher education an oft-forgotten aspect is that members of faculty or temporary academic staff might also be disabled and have difficulty conforming to norms dictating physical presence in the workplace (Lloyd 2015; Brown and Leigh 2018; Brown, Thompson and Leigh 2018; Johnston, MacNeill and Smyth 2018). Disabled academics have extensive lived experience of disability and, even if their field of expertise is far removed from disability studies, will at some point feel prompted, encouraged or even forced to contribute with knowledge engendered by that experience, relating to disability and academia (Wendell 1997; Honeyman 2016). This may make an impression
but their contribution as disabled academics, while also representing disabled people, might slowly change some people’s perception of their disabled colleagues, if the latter choose to come out as disabled – a difficult choice to make, given the negative impact it may have on their future career opportunities, presenting a potential conflict between personal ambition and the societal good. This touches on Kafer’s (2013) ideas about the political/relational model of disability rather than fully subscribing to either the medical or social models of disability, both of which, she argues, are problematic relating to the disability/impairment divide. Kafer’s proposition makes sense in relation to Fraser’s concept of recognition and representation and discussions about political spaces of justice (Fraser 2008; Fraser et al. 2004; Fraser and Honneth 2003).

‘Coming out’ and the complex issue of representation for disabled academics is a double-edged sword involving an intricate web of negotiations, rarely with the promise of a positive career outcome. If they focus solely on their core work, they may face trouble involving other issues, e.g. having to explain lengthy absences from work, or continued sick leave, with no possibility of demanding that reasonable adjustments be made if they previously decided not to disclose. This needs to be understood as a personal and political decision in a highly politicised context, not only in academia but also in disability activism and the academic professions. Whatever disabled academics decide about embodying disability in academia, the issue will arise of the extra workload required for anyone with a disability to participate on the same terms as able-bodied colleagues. This unremunerated additional labour is an unfair burden for disabled academics, made more difficult by the fact that all academics are often expected to shoulder excessive workloads, especially early career researchers lacking permanent employment (Lloyd 2015).

Why would change in academia be required at all? As previously suggested, a social justice issue arises when there is a power imbalance impeding people’s possibilities to participate on their own terms in contexts that affect them. For clarity, in this article the term ‘professions’ relates to those closely linked to academic disciplines, e.g. medicine. Professional bodies are traditional upholders of societal order and norms, the medical and legal professions being the archetypes of traditional professions that used to be deeply respected. While this respect may have diminished, there is no denying that medical doctors and lawyers still have a firm grip on sometimes rather intimate aspects of people’s lives. For example, women with conditions such as endometriosis can wait many years for a correct diagnosis on the strength of which they may then gain access to quality healthcare. During the years in which they
are ill without a diagnosis, they risk being misunderstood, stigmatised and maligned, and losing their jobs and family support. The absence of a legitimate diagnosis can mean loss of status, loss of identity and loss of life, be that through suicide or premature death (Gillberg 2018a, 2018b; Gillberg and Jones 2019).

In a chapter called ‘Feminism’ (Gillberg 2014), I addressed ‘gate-crashing past established knowledge’. Key to this debate is the role that activism has played and can play regarding transformative change of the status quo. What are the possibilities and obstacles towards participatory knowledge production that rejects hierarchical ideas of knowledge having an intrinsic or inherent value depending on who and in what context it evolved? Drawing on Fraser’s (2008) concept of recognition, it is worth considering her experience of activism. She harboured hopes of grassroots activism benefitting from her critical thoughts on how to advance feminist issues and assumed that writing for two audiences was possible, maybe even mutually beneficial, but soon discovered that her efforts were in vain.

Feminist scholars are not known for their propensity to help disabled scholars, something Shelley Tremain and Susan Wendell have described in what are recognised as mainstream feminist theories that tend to reassert the status quo – that is, disability as a failing body and frailty that is deficient and undesirable. Feminist and disability activism have not enjoyed a frictionless relationship in the past few decades, or perhaps ever (Morris 1993; Wendell 1989; 1997; Ryan 2014; Syfret 2015; Goyal 2016; Liebowitz 2019; Gillberg 2018a; 2018b; Tremain 2017). As Goodley and Moore have discussed, disability activism and academia are characterised by uneasiness (Goodley and Moore 2000). The question is whether this uneasiness presents an opportunity to channel new knowledge into academia and if such knowledge might be conducive to an academic discipline’s development while offering new insights into what academia is and can be.

Knowledge and the formation of the professions

One of the most ancient and respected professions is medicine, which is also notable for having potentially the greatest impact on a person’s wellbeing, especially if the person is female. Regardless of how empathetic a medical doctor may have been towards a female patient presenting with symptoms of severe pain, the recognised knowledge in the past was that women were frail and given to hysteria, an attitude
that continues to this day (Gillberg and Jones 2019). Medical education as an academic discipline was complicit in legitimising this attitude by producing the knowledge that subjugated women: this was political, ensuring that women were kept out of the public sphere. The current Medically Unexplained Symptoms diagnosis is a flawed twenty-first century construct that has evolved from the same misogynistic prejudice that has permeated medical education and research for centuries (Gillberg and Jones 2019; Redinger et al. 2018).

Women from the period c. 1880 to 1920 deserve a special mention here, since figureheads such as Jane Addams (1860–1935) brought activism into academia and arguably contributed to the formation of the academic disciplines of sociology, social work, feminist philosophy, education and several others (Oakley 2018). Oakley discusses predominantly sociology and social work in the context of her research into that historical epoch (Fischer, Nackenoff and Chmielewski 2009; Gillberg 2012; Oakley 2018). There were also men who genuinely wished to be of service to society and were driven by compassionate insights into human suffering and visions of a fairer societal system (Dewey 1927, 1938), but delineation in the name of professionalisation has always been at the heart of knowledge production in academia. Academic disciplines are competing in the marketised higher education system, where the fight for limited funding is fierce.

Theoretical texts on knowledge and knowledge production in academia are plentiful (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Morley and Walsh 1995; Schuller and Watson 2009; Honeyman 2016), yet historically speaking a scarcity of theories on disabled academics’ possibilities for contributing to the mainstream body of established knowledge is notable (Tremain 2019). Social media has opened alternative channels of communication for disabled academics to convey information, research questions and grassroots activism, and some have taken the opportunity that Twitter, for example, offers to initiate debate on controversial questions or issues that are not on any agenda in the academic sphere (e.g. Chronically Academic 2020).

Multiple meanings of participation

Some academic disciplines have concerned themselves with the concept of social citizenship, arguing that citizenship is more than being a recognised part of a sovereign state with clearly defined borders. Full social citizenship concerns the type of participation with which this chapter is concerned (Addams 1905; Dewey 1927; Duffy and Perez
Political scientists may not like citizenship being used in contexts outside their political expertise but as Ruth Lister (2003) has also pointed out, citizenship comprises more than passports and the right to vote. This is the argument that some on the fringes of the suffragette movement offered when they started looking at issues other than the vote, so attempts to broaden the understanding of the materiality of citizenship are not new (Oakley 2018).

To be able to voice concerns within a social citizenship context is to engage actively in a country and in local communities. Utilising contacts and networks in which citizens’ concerns are heard and potentially acted on is an expression of participation as a citizen. What is the opposite, the antonym of participation? It is the inaction of others. It is the refusal to react. This shifts the focus onto structures and systemic failings of individuals who do not participate to the best of their ability and knowledge, but it does not blame them for not managing to be included or for failing to adhere to preconceived notions of what should work for them. Meaningful analyses of such failings could involve the prerequisites for social citizenship by deconstructing it into its multifaceted activities.

By using participation as a theoretical concept and practical means with which to assess an individual’s or group’s involvement in certain contexts concerning the individual and group, participation allows a focus on what works and what does not. Participation as a concept is different from others, such as inclusion, in that it does not necessarily require an invitation or permission to participate, while barriers to participation lie elsewhere and can be addressed (Reid and Gillberg 2014), at least in part, by the social model of disability. Participation, while far from perfect, corresponds to Addams’s vision of a pluralistic society that demands accountability and knowledge. It also corresponds with Fraser’s social justice theory of the concept of recognition, because genuine participation must entail recognition of one’s agency and knowledge.

**Activism and reciprocal learning**

Activism is defined here to mean concerted efforts to change the status quo based on jointly identified barriers that render parity of participation and full social citizenship difficult or impossible. Activism can mean many different things in practice, but it should not be conflated with actionism, the latter being ill defined, often a spuriously decided-upon measure to reach a short-term goal with little or no long-term effect,
potentially causing more harm rather than creating wider understanding and acceptance (McRuer 2006; Gillies 2014; Disabled People Against Cuts 2018; Mann 2018).

Social activism is of prime importance in enabling the understanding of theories or methodologies involving participation and knowledge processes in a world where women’s concerns, especially disabled women’s concerns, are not the norm. Feminist pragmatism arose from a determination to comprehend the conditions of life experienced by women and, if necessary, to alter them for the better based on principles of participation, reciprocal learning and ethics, expressed by the inclusion of multiple perspectives of lived experience and collaborative decision-taking (Gillberg 2012).

Research-based activism was one of Addams’s philosophical tenets (Gillberg 2009, 2012). Addams was a philosopher whose work united feminist perspectives with a determination to engender social change via co-operative action (Hamington 2018). Activism without a thoroughly researched knowledge base would not do for several reasons, including the ontological and epistemological. Addams realised that without established truths and conscious efforts to put realities on the map, there could be no social justice, irrespective of the enthusiastic activist efforts of her peers. Fraser’s concept of recognition here translates as ‘x is both recognised and affirmed, attributing a positive evaluation to x’ (Fraser 2008). Kafer’s (2013) political/relational model aligns with Fraser’s critical concept of recognition, where the mutuality aspect is essential. In terms of change – that is, gatecrashing past keepers of mainstream knowledge – collective agency is at the heart of Addams’s philosophy and it is the methodological prerequisite of reciprocal learning (Addams 1905, 2017). This is a critical validity criterion for knowledge production.

Ann Oakley (2018) provides a thorough and meticulous account of feminist activism and academic knowledge building in the period 1880–1920 that still holds currency in today’s complex and confusing climate. Feminist pragmatism in its contemporary form addresses a multitude of social justice issues already making the case for broadening mainstream knowledge (Gillberg 2012; Hamington and Bardwell-Jones 2012). However, it is questionable how inclined academic feminists, irrespective of discipline, are to engage in activism. Does today’s activism for social change require academic knowledge and collaboration with academic disciplines at all? Or are Addams’s theories of social change obsolete? Also, do activists listen to academics, can there be any collaboration in Addams’s spirit?
Reciprocal learning is a validity criterion for some methodologies; for instance, Reid and Gillberg (2014) argue that for there to be reciprocity, the transactional or reciprocal learning must be genuine, validated by each participant’s involvement in collective action and decision-making processes. This requires the researcher(s) to be open to scrutiny and critique and to learn from their participants’ concerns rather than to reject them. In other words, feminist participatory action researchers commit to creating parity of participation for the co-production of knowledge. Reciprocity, according to Addams, or transactional learning, according to Dewey, is an expression of democratic participation in a society that takes its citizens seriously. It becomes unacceptable in such a knowledge paradigm to produce knowledge for certain groups of people based on spurious assumptions about them. There is a discussion among researchers pertaining to the extent to which they need to be disabled themselves to understand their field of research in the area of disability studies, but this is a discussion that exceeds the parameters of this chapter and deserves to be thoroughly considered elsewhere.

**Challenging ableism in academia**

Academia houses many disciplines that are at odds with each other (Becher and Trowler 2001), mainly because they operate in different paradigms while also competing for funding. Universities’ civic duty has often been replaced by corporate power philosophies or managerialism, erecting walls of pseudo-efficiency between those studying subject matter and their teachers (Percy, Zimpher and Brukardt 2006). This said, the normative framework of the ever-available able-bodied academic driven by ambition, and in a climate of university rankings, leaves little room for those who do not conform with this ableist framework (Morley and Walsh 1995; McRuer 2006; Brown and Leigh 2018). Insofar as a university is a centre for knowledge culture and making contributions upholding the social order, it is not just a knowledge producer but a transmitter of culture, and as such a central actor in society (Kadoda 2018). As Delanty says, ‘the main social change that we need to note is that because of different rates of change the university has been most affected by the changes in the mode of knowledge and changes in the social order’ (Delanty 2001, 57).

The difficulties with ableist knowledge and practices occur at all levels and are only perceived as such by those affected by the ableist
knowledge paradigm in which academic disciplines exist and keep producing, perpetuating and endorsing ableism, mostly unwittingly. Oakley’s most recent work (2018), brilliant as it is, is full of a history steeped in ableism: formidable, admirable activists producing knowledge that would not have been produced without them, because men would never have noticed the issues that blighted women’s lives; strong, healthy bodies travelling around the world, putting their lives on the line, intellectually and physically, for social and political change. There was no room for the frail bodies, deformities or ‘weakness’ present in those suffering from disability and/or severe chronic illness. To enforce this point, Oakley (2018) mentions several feminist thinkers and activists who openly argued for eugenics, which represented the spirit of the time; I would argue such thinking prevails to this day.

As Gillberg and Pettersson argue (2019), ableism is deeply rooted in a historical understanding of the necessity to disregard unfit bodies. Based on such a historical understanding of ableism, Gillberg and Pettersson raise questions regarding legal, cultural and political recognition of disability rights in practice, while Brown and Leigh (2018) problematise scarce disclosure among disabled academics. Fraser’s theory of social justice (2008) posits that recognition is about cultural and social status, i.e. groups that are denied recognition will systematically be oppressed and stigmatised by their own culture. In other words, recognition is about how certain groups are portrayed by others and what room for manoeuvre the groups themselves are given to vocalise their concerns. Fraser (2008) is adamant that social justice requires recognition and redistribution. The latter is not discussed in further detail in this chapter but pertains to reallocation of resources to historically and politically under-privileged groups.

Ableism inside academia is nothing less than a lack or absence of recognition. This is a structural problem that cannot be reasonably resolved at the individual level, though it is at the individual level that the implications and consequences of ableism are felt most keenly, and already precarious work conditions easily become untenable (Campbell 2009; Goodley 2014). Another consequence is that knowledge production inevitably suffers due to the multiple injustices imposed on disabled academics by ableist structures, such as numerous additional hours of unpaid labour to access facilities through making special arrangements, i.e. accessibility issues that require renegotiating ad infinitum.

Physical strength has traditionally been described as a moral and indeed intellectual virtue. Feeble-mindedness, by contrast, inhabits ailing bodies. So it is not a leap of the imagination to assume the reverse:
disabled bodies do not house sharp intellects. Whatever emanates from a disabled body must therefore comprise at best fringe or ‘special’ knowledge, an addition or footnote (Gillberg and Pettersson 2019). Ableism in academia may well express itself through fragmentation and over-specialisation, i.e. special education (Delanty 2001). This can be useful in some respects but there is a risk that such specialisation may lead to further marginalisation. Anyone who has mentioned ‘crip theory’ (or anything relating to disability) in a research seminar that was not explicitly about a ‘special’ topic (McRuer 2006) will remember the vacant non-stares, the polite murmurs or dismissal (‘that is not what is being discussed’).

Recognition through participatory frameworks

The question is, how can disabled academics negotiate the ableism in knowledge production and the institutional injustices they experience? The impeding of their professional development and their unique knowledge production often has nothing to do with disability. How can their lived experience of being disabled, but by no means inferior, academics lead to full recognition and respect for their work? I propose that one way of dealing with a lack of recognition is through engagement in knowledge production contexts (not limited to research projects but encompassing all activities within the organisational setting of academia). Good examples abound, and these will be presented here.

There are fundamental questions pertaining to knowledge and power because knowledge has been created, controlled and made available by hierarchical educational and political systems (Reid and Gillberg 2014). When engaging in participatory research, which some argue should be viewed as a new knowledge paradigm, an epistemological issue is what lies at the centre and margins of knowledge production, and for whom is knowledge generated, by whom and to what end? Examples of participatory frameworks will be described. These frameworks comprise both qualitative and quantitative methods; in other words, participatory frameworks do not subscribe to the qualitative/quantitative divide. Participatory frameworks are not limited to a handful of social sciences but may also apply in the natural sciences. The following are examples of such frameworks, all of which have a strong ambition to recognition and sustainable knowledge building that is meaningful.
In feminist participatory action research (FPAR; whereas the PAR framework is of a more generic nature, FPAR is about particularities stemming from lived experiences of women’s, all women’s, lives), the research is done with those involved as research participants, in stark contrast to some medical research that takes place without any meaningful participation of the patient population (Reid and Gillberg 2014; Gillberg and Jones 2019). In FPAR, as well as in other feminist and decolonising approaches to knowledge production, the web of power dynamics is referred to as oppression, marginalisation, discrimination, otherness, disempowerment and subordination. Irrespective of terminology, it is FPAR’s ongoing effort to question, challenge and understand the complexities of power and to recognise the multitude of ways in which it can be expressed. FPAR’s ontological and epistemological stance includes challenging the authority of the researcher and shifting traditional power relations, which can be seen as controversial and is accordingly met with resistance from mainstream researchers, who define scientific rigour solely as the ability to verify or falsify research results through enforcing distance between and ascribing differential statuses to the researcher and researched. Due to its critique of power, FPAR challenges dominant attitudes to research, disciplinary silos and taken-for-granted assumptions that render invisible the diverse experiences of marginalised groups (Reid and Gillberg 2014).

Another example of moving towards recognised academic knowledge is provided by the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP), in the school of management at the University of Bath, UK – particularly pertinent in this chapter as academia and the professions were mentioned as mutually enforcing power structures, but also jointly producing valuable knowledge. CARPP was created to develop the theory and practice of action research and it explicitly sought to reform academia by enabling postgraduate research that would meet the established quality criteria and then exceed these, leading to radical development of ideas and practice. A core purpose was to bring an attitude of inquiry and learning to key issues of our time – justice and sustainability. CARPP was part of an international network of people and institutions developing and legitimising action research in its many forms. Members saw this as ‘political work about which knowledge(s) count especially countering the privileging of intellectual knowledge’ (Marshall 2014, 91).

In yet another methodological example of how to challenge privileged knowledge, there is citizen participation in relation to action research, and, as Jaitli puts it,
in all these approaches and methodologies, there is emphasis on the knowledge of the citizens and the recognition of individual and collective action to address issues of unequal powers which influence access and control over development processes. The most effective use of these participatory methodologies and approaches is evident when they are used as important means for change and not as ends in themselves. (Jaitli 2014, 96)

The validity criteria for participatory action research, here to be understood as a methodology, are outlined as follows:

- **Catalytic validity** – any rigorous action research project is expected to produce meaningful ways in which to implement and further develop jointly produced knowledge. There is always a risk that restricted funding and limited project timescales will produce flimsy results that are quickly forgotten. Participatory research, however, must be sustainable, continuing free from the original project. Therefore, new steps must be worded in an action plan; networks will need establishing and allies must be found (Gillberg 2012).

- **Democratic validity** – is the research problem of valid concern in terms of pertinence to the community or groups it claims to represent? Here a parallel can be drawn to an early feminist pragmatist, Mary Parker Follett (1868–1933), whose proposal for a radical form of democracy was based in local neighbourhoods. Follett’s philosophy and practice were that ‘the process of democracy is one that can only be engaged through concrete experience’ (Whipps 2012).

- **Ethical validity** – are stakeholders harmed by the research? Yoak and Brydon-Miller (2014, 306) maintain that ‘ethical systems are intended to clarify and advance our understanding of moral relationships and the value-based decisions we make’. In an action research context, this translates into the ability on the researcher’s part to reflect self-critically on their bias, prejudice and preconceived notions. There is no such thing as unbiased research as that would entail knowledge being produced in a cultural, historical and political vacuum. Through such self-critical examination, the framing of the research problem emerges in collaboration with those directly affected by the proposed research, allowing for multi-perspective input as an intrinsic part of the project. This
largely removes the power hierarchy between researcher and researched while empowering the researched to be active in their own lives. Not all participatory research can grant such a degree of involvement but in FPAR and community-based research, the ethical aspect is non-negotiable (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith 2007).

• Outcome validity means the same here as in other research paradigms, but an outcome must also be validated by all research participants and the researcher’s ability to agree on meaningful actions towards change for the common good. Such an action will be the outcome of other actions taken during the research process, undergoing the typical cycle of naming the problem, jointly deciding what action to take, critical evaluation, reflection and the next action towards problem solving. An outcome validity should always include clearly formulated statements by all participants concerning their learning process, a form of meta-learning for each participant that may not have anything directly to do with the project. An ideal outcome validity entails researchers who genuinely learnt from their research participants. This is what Addams referred to as reciprocity, an intrinsic part of being a fully participating citizen (Gillberg 2012).

• Process validity is a form of ongoing critical and self-critical evaluation of the knowledge production process. The aim is not to reach compromise but the relational/political engagement that Kafer (2013) posits in her feminist crip theory. In other words, process validity must be as strictly observed as outcome validity.

These validity criteria translate into material consequences for all parties involved in the research. The knowledge produced in such a paradigm (critical social theory, feminist pragmatism, action research, etc.) will differ from the knowledge produced in a positivist or interpretative paradigm, where the distance between the researcher and the researched remains wide and hierarchical power structures are upheld, thereby withholding recognition for the concerns and struggles of marginalised groups and further cementing the systemic ableism with which not only academic disciplines but also professions, and to some extent activist movements, are infused.
Feminist, queer crip meets feminist pragmatism, meets future

Feminist pragmatists posit that there is no need to choose between polarised positions when it comes to the creation of new knowledge. Minnich, for instance, holds that knowledge is at once subjective and objective: subjective because it is ‘marked by the processes of its construction by specifically located subjects; objective in that the constructive process is constrained by a reality that is recalcitrant to inattentive or whimsical structurings’ (Minnich 2005, 257). Those operating in a positivist paradigm need not fear that this means a relativist, ‘anything goes’ approach to knowledge. On the contrary (as mentioned earlier), Addams and her contemporaries were adamant that their activism towards social change be fact-based. They needed to provide rigorous statistics to convey the reality of multiple injustices such as uninhabitable housing, starving children and women’s health, where they noted that immigrant women’s quality of life was worse than that of the resident population. Oakley describes some of these women’s work, including the foundation of the Children’s Bureau in 1912 (the first US federal agency led by a woman), established by Florence Kelley, Lillian Wald, Julia Lathrop and Grace Meigs, the latter a doctor who conducted a major study on maternal mortality rates for the bureau (Oakley 2018, 229). There is a valid reason for remembering such women and their work, as many of them were both social activists and academics, providing a link to Kafer’s (2013) queer crip future, or imagined future, when she argues that disability is devoid of feminist crip theory analysis. Kafer identifies this as a methodological problem that can be addressed by inserting such analysis in existing contexts, but in the gaps and spaces where disability is omitted.

Earlier in this text, the absence of disability, of physical frailty, was mentioned in relation to Oakley’s sociological account of the period 1880–1920, but it can be assumed that it was embodied by some of the people for whom the early feminist pragmatists did so much knowledge building and activist political work. This work can only be described as political and relational, again a parallel to Kafer’s envisaged future scenarios. The root problem, as identified by contemporary feminist pragmatists (Minnich 2005; Anderson 2007), is that beings are divided into ontologically, ethically, politically and epistemologically significant ‘kinds’, but then one ‘kind’ is defined to be the norm and the inclusive term and ideal for all. That is a dominance-serving definitional move,
which leads directly to faulty generalisations that are perpetuated ad nauseam.

**Finally, recognition?**

When members from historically powerful academic disciplines denigrate knowledge production from other fields, for example rejecting knowledge due to its being anecdotal and of no significance or validity, it is often done based on hegemonic thinking uncritical of how various types of knowledge production have upheld professional boundaries specific to academic disciplines and recognition by regulatory bodies. The scientific method has been maintained as the gold standard for valid knowledge; all else is dismissed as anecdotal and unworthy of consideration or examination, let alone inclusion into the legitimate body of knowledge of one’s own profession. Ableism is deeply rooted in historical and political ignorance of the material realities of disabled people’s lives and there is no incentive to examine such ignorance as there are no repercussions. In addition, it serves to uphold historically and politically dominant knowledge systems, perpetuating systems of domination, something that Minnich (2005) identifies as the root problem regarding creating a fairer society in which recognition as envisaged by Fraser (2008) genuinely becomes conceivable.

The organisational framework of academia is not conducive to knowledge production in the spirit of solidarity and collaboration. The excellence framework is devoid of incentives for knowledge based in social realities for the simple reason that it is not produced fast enough to be published in the highest-ranking journals and for a university to maintain its position on prestigious ranking lists, which is exactly what the upholding of knowledge systems means. What I suggest and what the earlier examples describe is that through collaborative projects adhering to a certain standard – i.e. by observing the validity criteria – disabled academics can inhabit spaces in which transformative knowledge production becomes not only possible but a new norm. In order for these new spaces to increase and reach wider circles, knowledge collaboration with grassroot activists can be in many fields, which would be ideal, but the problem remains that the bases for transformation are narrowly defined, as Fraser discovered in the 1980s when she tried to work and write for two different audiences, a circle she found difficult to square.

As far as valid knowledge is concerned – at least, knowledge that the establishment will consider – activism must be fact-based. Again,
this mirrors the insight of nineteenth-century feminist pragmatists who rejected unfounded actionism. It would be conducive to change if grassroots knowledge could reach mandatory reading lists and course modules in their respective disciplines. What is required is movement of people into areas of social transformation as envisaged by proponents of action research for the past few decades, or even going back to the early feminist pragmatists of the 1800s, who made a strong case for transcending the private/public sphere divide through thoughtful action-taking paired with academic knowledge.

Intersectional analyses are vital in coming to grips with multiple injustices while working towards creating a fairer society inclusive of disabled people. Such analyses must be effective in that they are clearly defined. It cannot be ‘a bit of this, a bit of that’ just to pay lip service to ‘inclusivity’ but must be a methodologically sound undertaking to enable radical objectivity.

**Discussion**

Gatecrashing connotes a methodological revolution in the sense that not only do we need knowledge built on disability as the norm, but we must also be able as a society to say why this is so. Unless we succeed in confidently discussing our knowledge-producing tools (i.e. the methods by which we arrive at our results), and critically examine the criteria based on which we consider knowledge to be reliable and valid, change at the systemic level will remain elusive.

Even in academia, methodology is often conflated with method and, even worse, data collection, which is not only reductive but incorrect. It results in tedious non-dialogue where a medical researcher can claim epistemic superiority over a disabled philosopher when the latter raises issues about the ontology and epistemology of lived experience, while the former insists on being in the right in denying the materiality of the latter’s lived experience as a disabled academic. In other words, the different knowledge paradigms are not always conducive to a basic intellectual commonality that would facilitate such a methodological revolution, rendering gatecrashing a necessity. Gatecrashing represents a vision of the right to demand parity of participation in social life, transcending its narrower meaning in a strictly defined political science context and instead encompassing activism (Fraser 2008). This must happen to disrupt the misframing – whether unwitting or not – of disabled academics’ realities, a meta-injustice that can have serious
repercussions for the possibility to produce and co-produce knowledge in those potentially transformative spaces.

References


