

Disability and Society

Audio Interview with Len Barton, Editor

Interview Transcript

1. When you founded *Disability & Society* in 1986, what was the rationale behind the creation of the journal, and briefly, what is the journal about?

The journal was created at a period when both nationally and internationally disabled people and their organisations were involved in serious struggles over the establishment of empowering conceptions of disability, rights, citizenship and independent living. Through the development of what is called the social model of disability, which is a creation of disabled people, the question of disability began to be understood as a form of social oppression, and it was connected to issues of equity, social justice and human rights, and as well, at this period, disability studies was beginning to emerge as a distinct study in higher education.

Now, several factors influence the creation of the journal. The importance of encouragement and ideas from disabled scholars was particularly significant and at this point, Professor Mike Oliver in particular was of crucial significance with his guidance and with his ideas. My experience of developing research and teaching, as well as my connection to other researchers, also provided me with incentives in relation to the recognition for the need of such a journal as *Disability, Handicap and Society*. My examination of existing journals in the field, internationally and nationally also persuaded me of the need for a distinctly different outlet for publishing. And finally, and this is important, I also had the advantage of having established an international journal in the field of *Sociology of Education*, as well as organising a highly successful annual international conference. The experience and knowledge I derived from all these factors, I was able to draw on in this new venture. For example, I used the same organisational structure as *The British Journal of Sociology of Education* in relation to this journal, i.e. there was a group of executive editors, there's a membership of the editorial board, and overseas board members for the journal. It's also crucial that disabled scholars and activists were members of all sections of the board. The process of appointment was the same as the previous journal in that one point of agreement to a membership of the board was that if [a member of the editorial board] failed to respond to papers for review more than three times they would be instantly removed from the board. Two referees were given for each review of a paper. Where there was a split decision, a third referee was involved, and the anonymity of the referees was absolutely crucial throughout that whole process. Feedback was to be provided to all papers, whether they were accepted or rejected.

Now, the journal was created to provide a forum for the development of critical debate and analysis that would contribute to the enrichment of thinking, teaching and research. It had its connections to the position and experience of disabled people and would be explicitly concerned with critiquing models, conceptions, policies and practices relating to disability that are based on individualised deficit views and assumptions. The intention of the journal was to foster discussion, dialogue that would encourage the development of new questions, insights, interpretations, explore and reconfigure the notion of disability in which the relevance and relationship of theory, politics and practice could be critically explored. This

would include open disagreements and creative tensions between different perspectives which had their roots in the social model of disability.

In a recent book entitled *Overcoming Disabling Barriers: Eighteen years of Disability and Society*, the Executive Editors identified some of the most significant articles published during this period. They organised their evaluation of the papers in to three themes; those of disability studies, policy and research. The papers represented the range of major ideas, issues and questions that constituted the history and development of the major areas of concern. The interest of the journal thus covered conceptual, theoretical, empirical and applied issues and questions.

2. What for you and your editorial board and your writers are the most contentious issues in contemporary debate in research and disability studies, that your journal seeks to address?

The notion of being contentious is important because it assumes that there will be a necessity of struggling and engaging over ideas, arguments and interpretations, and that critical interchange and exchange of ideas and arguments is crucial to the tenor and to the ethos of the journal. So the following are not exhaustive, nor are they in any order of priority, but the contentious issues would be the following: engaging with the voices, interests and concerns of disabled people and their organisations; explorations of the definition of disability and of the social model of disability; explorations of the political, social and economic factors in relation to understanding the nature of disablement; the nature and impact of a right based approach to policy; the question of effective legislation and its implementation; explorations of the complex and varied nature of discrimination and exclusion; the relationship and difference between disability, class, race, gender, sexuality and age; the issue of change and the development and maintenance of an inclusive, non-discriminatory and non-oppressive social world; the purpose, process and outcomes of research and particularly its implications to the social model of disability; questions relating to disability and disability studies emanating from the majority world; challenges and issues relating to genetic engineering and euthanasia; independent living and equity issues; issues relating to the position, relationship and struggles between users and providers of services; the challenges of cross-cultural issues in relation to disablist assumptions and language and process of empowerment; the position and role of governments in relation to disability and disability issues; disabled people and the world of work; finally, the nature and content of disability studies and its relationship to practice. Those would be an example of contentious ideas that the journal has been engaged with, not on one occasion but constantly re-examining and re-thinking through these issues.

3. How has the outcome differed from what you expected and originally intended?

Creating a journal is a learning process and you cannot anticipate all the different challenges and issues that emerge over time in the life of a journal. In relation to this journal, the following issues have emerged. At one particular point in time it became necessary to change the name of the journal from *Disability, Handicap and Society* to *Disability and Society*, which reflected our developing understanding of the issue of disablist language. 2. It became necessary for us after a period of time to create a language policy which authors needed to be aware of, particularly when it came to cross-cultural analysis. The continual monitoring of this has also involved further changes to that policy. Thirdly, the introduction of special issues was not something that we anticipated at the beginning of the journal. And the careful selection of specific themes as a means of steering policy, (and this is why this has become

really important) and guiding the intentions of the journal has increasingly become a significant innovation. And finally, we could never have anticipated the sheer range and depth of ideas, understandings, issues, questions that the journal would encourage and facilitate. This includes the international aspects of those developments. So those are some examples of things we could never have anticipated but have emerged over the process of time.

4. What do you see as the main triumphs of the journal?

Now again, these are really important questions and they are really complex and I am making a selection of factors here and I'm not saying they are exhaustive and I'm not saying that they are authoritative, I'm just saying from my perspective this is what I believe. The triumph of the journal has been the extent and degree of the international recognition in that it is now the leading journal internationally in disability studies, I think that has been a triumph. Secondly, the continued commitment, reliability and quality of the editorial board. Anybody who has any involvement in a journal will know how that aspect is crucial. That has been a triumph of this journal. Thirdly, the critical and innovatory nature of many of the ideas and insights of the publications that we have made, that has been a further triumph of the journal. And finally, the best way I can sum this up is in our editorial to the book which we put out recently with Routledge on *Eighteen Years of Publications in the Journal*. The Executive Editors had to read all the publications over eighteen years, and we made certain statements in that editorial, and I'm just going to give you them because I think it sums up what the triumph has been, and the triumph is to be seen, in that those articles are seen as a source of critical, innovatory and thought provoking insights and understandings, and we say a major outcome of our examination of the published articles has been our absolute unanimous agreement about the sheer wealth of ideas, insights, questions and topics that make the journal such a wonderful resource, especially for students, involved in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding with regard to the issue of disability and disability studies.

5. What are your aspirations for the future?

The interest in and readership of the journal is increasing [and this is one of our constant aspiration]. We want to maintain the high quality of the refereeing and publications and this includes the international dimensions of those publications. Secondly, the Executive are continually thinking of ways of enhancing the journals profile, for example, we recently decided to publish a synopsis of doctoral studies relating to disability and disability studies. That has been very important as a development and an anticipation for the development in the future. We now have an open letter section for disabled people and their allies to write brief letters to the journal on any issue of concern and we have just made a decision to actually now, in the future, require all submissions to write one A4 side of accessible language of the main points of any article which is submitted to the journal, because we are trying to get ways in which the journal can be more accessible for different audiences including some disabled people. The special issue of the journal continues to provide exciting, innovatory ideas, insights and questions, and one anticipates that this will continue into the future. The next issue to be published in 2009 is on the theme *Brave New World: Disability and Twenty-first Century Challenges and Solutions* and that is just about ready to go to the press. So those would be some of the anticipated aspirations we have for the future of the journal.

6. Who or what do you feel is Disability Society's core audience and how do you maintain contact with your grass roots?

It's a broad audience that would include students and students doing a variety of things: students in disability studies; students in cultural studies; students doing interdisciplinary studies; students who are in education, a variety of students would be the ones we are trying to target here; lecturers again in different fields but again the lecturing body we would be trying to see as audience for the journal; researchers, full time researchers of one form or another, policy makers; professionals, particularly on [specific] professional courses as they are going about retraining or new forms of training, we will hopefully want to try and get them involved in reading the journal; and also disabled people. And again, that is a particularly important dimension that we are constantly having to think about how we can make that a reality. This is an academic journal but at the same time we don't want to lose our contacts with grass roots positions and therefore that is a very important audience and we want to think increasingly of ways in which we can make our work more accessible for them.

7. What are the most important cross-cultural issues that are discussed at the Disability Society?

Cross-cultural insights, issues and understandings are vitally important in that they on the one hand contribute to challenging and removing ignorance and narrow, restrictive, regulatory conceptions and understandings. They're also a means of raising questions about our own cultural and social assumptions and perspectives, and there have been many important issues engaged with in the journal that cover cross-cultural issues. I'll name a few: the development, maintenance and position of disabled people's organisations in different cultural context in the struggle for change; the social model of disability and its implications for policy, practice and research as a topic for serious, critical engagement; the history, social economic, cultural and social factors that have their impact on disability; conceptual and theoretical debates about the relationship and difference between impairment and disability; the relationship between users of services and providers of services; innovative insights and knowledge derived from particular research and the publications of that research on disability issues; the question of human rights approach to disability; developing conceptions and insights relating to the question of disability studies, and the relationship between disability, class, gender, sexuality, age and disability issues. These are issues along with others that from a cross-cultural perspective are raised and need to be continually examined and re-examined and provide a whole series of fascinating, innovative, challenging insights, understandings, questions and points for dialogue and debate. The important point here also is the relationship between the majority world and their situation and perspectives and views and the minority world i.e. Western advanced societies, and the danger of one being dominant in relation to the other.

8. How do you write the perfect article and what do you look for yourself when you are considering articles for submission to your journals?

Actually, when I think about this, there are a number of common problems that are reflected in submissions still today, and in this journal after twenty odd years we still have these issues. A most common problem of a submission is the lack of time and thought that authors have given to examining some of the back issues in the journal. Without this effort they are not able to connect to the history and ideas that have developed over the life of the journal. They are not sensitive to the history of those ideas, not that we are asking them to accept them but to be at least aware of them. We are still having articles today where there isn't a single reference to any published paper in twenty odd years in this journal.

Secondly, it's important that authors try to connect their ideas and their issue and their topic to something that is existing in the insights or interpretations available in the journal. It may be to challenge that or it may be to confirm it. It may be to re-examine it or to indicate why, after careful examination of some of the issues in the journal, the topic they're interested in is under-developed, even neglected, certainly not considered in the way they want to argue. Whichever way they want to engage with it it's crucial that people take that time and thought to do that. And I would recommend that to any student, anybody attempting to write an article in any journal actually, but certainly in *Disability and Society* that you bare that in mind.

A third issue is, too often authors try to cover too many questions and issues in a single paper and they sacrifice depth of analysis for a more generalised, often unsupported set of statements, propositions or arguments. And it is important, people do need to give time and thought to careful consideration of the coherence and the integration of their arguments and particularly, I would also say, in thinking about a careful conclusion to a paper. We've had a number of papers recently where the conclusions have been, to say the least, brief and abrupt, and again, people need to think about that in terms of production of an acceptable paper. Too many authors do not pay attention to the guidance for submission, believe it or believe it not, including in this journal, the policy statement on language and referencing, and do not keep to the specified wordage required. It is not a way of encouraging endearment of the editor of this journal to find a person who is presenting a paper that is one and a half thousand words longer than the recommended word length. It's a basic factor but it's still constantly one that we are having to face.

And finally, and I do think this is important for a number of reasons, but I want to say it, it's important that authors remember that where referees comments have been helpful, and hopefully they will be helpful because in many ways they are quite detailed and specific, it is appropriate in the revised submission that their contribution is acknowledged in the paper. Very, very few people acknowledge the helpfulness of referees.

9. Can you tell us a little bit about being an editor of a journal?

Thinking back over my experience of being involved in this journal there are a number of factors that are important. 1. The quality and extent of the support from the publisher is vitally important, and that should not be underestimated. That enables the journal to function in a way that would be difficult without it. Secondly, administrative support of the quality that I've had the privilege to actually have during the life of this journal has been phenomenal. I cannot say enough superlatives to talk about the current administrator, Helen Oliver, and the way in which she has supported, encouraged and kept in contact quite effectively with all the members of the editorial board, and that has been absolutely crucial.

Running a journal is hard work. It's very demanding, it's demanding on your time, it's demanding on your thinking, and you also need to have, I would argue, an exec' editorship. I would argue for this, and all the journals I've ever created I've always had an executive group and that group has been wonderful in terms of supporting you, helping to steer and develop policy and innovations, and having that group of collegial and supportive colleagues has been absolutely crucial to the quality and development of all the journals I've been involved with, and without that I think it would be a poorer journal and a poorer quality of my experience and reflection on the life of the journal. Also, it's a wonderful experience

when you see how ideas and arguments develop in a field and the influence of the journal in that process. It's very rewarding, very uplifting, and it's a great encouragement to pursue things even further because of that involvement. So I would say those are some of the factors when you look at that process of creating the journal and maintaining it that would be important.

And finally I would say the ethical issues both in your relationship with members of the board for discussions in meetings where issues are being discussed and the ethical issues and confidentiality issues, anonymity issues are absolutely crucial and I would protect them as far as is possible and that is really, really crucial. And that means also being careful about the way in which you speak to people about the journal who you've never met before, so that on the one hand you want to be helpful, but you don't want to be in a position where they may be feeling they've had an added advantage from talking with you about this journal and what to do in the journal. So in one sense this engagement now, that we are having here, will equalise that, because everyone can have access to these thoughts.