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Challenging knowledge production in disability issues from the Global North to the Global South.

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Abstract

The evolution of disability studies can be traced back to originate in the Global North. This has created a conundrum in terms of the existing knowledge on disability issues. The Global North has largely dominated in influencing and shaping the global narrative surrounding disability. This has not only resulted in disability issues being universalized, rather it has been more of disability issues being discussed basing on the thinking and experiences of scholars and activists from the Global North ignoring the regional dynamics and differences. This does not mean to say nothing has been taking place in the Global South from past to present or the scholars and activist of disability issues in the Global South have been idle. A blind eye has been turned when it comes to the knowledge produced from the Global South due to the hegemony the Global North exerts on this matter. Issues regarding disability rights and studies have been written by those in the Global North not only for the whole world but even also for those in the Global South. Voices from the Global South have not received enough attention to even influence the policies crafted for these areas. This problem within disability intersects well with the hegemony in neo-colonialism, racism, sexism, LGBTQ issues and other issues related to hegemony and structural violence of one group over the other(s). This paper aims at challenging the production of knowledge within disability studies looking into how the Global North has dominated the discourse and amplify the voices and narratives on disability rights coming from the Global South.

Key words: *Disability, Knowledge production, Global South and Global North.*

Introduction

The idea of having global knowledge produced coming from other parts of the world beyond the traditional Global North is one area which is slowly gaining prominence in both the academic and policy fields. Many scholars involved in this debate of the power asymmetries between the Global South and Global North on knowledge production, have indicated that much of the empirical work in fields such as disability, racism, sexism and gender amongst others have been largely dominated by scholarship from the Global North (Grech: 2011, Meekosha:2008, Howell: 2019, Adebis,2020). The foundational arguments of this discourse are located in the Southern theory, a theoretical perspective on the process of knowledge production in social sciences which embodies intellectual projects from the global South (Connell, 2007).

In as much as this paper is following the Southern Theory, it does not aim to neither to negate nor denigrate the knowledge that has been produced in the Global North rather to encourage and promote the production of knowledge in Global South, with focus on issues around disability. The paper will firstly discuss the Southern Theory in relation to disability issues, look into what is at stake when academic knowledge on disability issues enters public life, map out what needs to be done to breach the gap in the knowledge production between the Global South and Global North and conclusion.

Global South Theory and disability issues

The whole idea of the “Southern theory” was originally coined by feminist and post-colonial scholar Rawyne Connell (2007), this theory offers a perspective on the process of knowledge production, circulation, and distribution within specific cultural, historical, and political conditions of the global South. The theory was not specifically designed for disability studies, but it intersects well with the globally produced knowledge within the field. Connell (2007) provides a rich theoretical understanding of the social process of knowledge production within different disciplines of social sciences, offering a range of sociological critiques of inclusion and exclusion as situated within the intellectual projects in the global North and

South. The Southern theory does not only scrutinize how global knowledge has been produced in various fields of social sciences, it also looks into the development of intellectual projects which produce knowledge grounded in Southern spaces, histories, and discourses

The ideas being postulated by Connell and the existing literature on disability indicate that concepts and ideas being used in this field of study can be traced to originate in countries located in the Global North. Meekosha (2011) has argued that the epistemology foundations of disability studies have been rooted in the European perspectives which privilege the theory from the global North. Different scholars have concurred with the theoretical arguments of the Southern theory as they show consensus in questioning the existing knowledge within the field of disability studies. Grech (2016:50) is more critical of knowledge produced within disability to lack of engagement with Southern knowledges in the face of geo-political differences between the global North and South. He contends: "There is an almost complete disengagement with Southern epistemologies and Southern disability theorists" in the texts produced by prominent Western disability studies scholars. Furthermore, the dominance of Western knowledge, practices, and institutions, the unfettered control over what counts as knowledge, how it is produced, by whom, and how it should be disseminated" (Grech, 2016: 50).

In relation to the argument that has been brought forward by Grech (2016) on disabilities history and concepts being omitted, Chataika et al, (2015:187), has argued that, in the Global South, Africa to be specific disabled people have always been involved in activism and situated at the vanguard of myriad forms of protest. These include those for a country's independence, political liberty, peace, civil and human rights. This history has largely been ignored not only to the marginal position of disability within human rights discourse and activism but also history and the narrative on disability being written by those in the global North. Chataika et al (2015) further argues that there has been a kind of delegitimization and

re-creation of disability in the global South by the global North through association contagion, deficiency, disease, suffering, burden and now poverty in development discourse.

Issues regarding disability rights and studies have been written by those in the Global North not only for the whole world but even also for those in the Global South. Voices from the Global South have not received enough attention to even influence the policies crafted for these areas Chataika et al (2015:189). This challenge within disability intersects well with the hegemony in neo-colonialism, racism, sexism and other issues related to hegemony and structural violence of one group over the other(s).

What is at stake when academic knowledge on disability issues enters public life

The current knowledge that has been produced in the area of disability studies has both positive and negative effects when it reaches public life. The major positive that comes with the current knowledge on disability issues is that it sets the minimal standards which can be globally accepted with regards to treatment and standards of living. Various journals such as the Disability Society, Journal of Disability Policy Studies, Disability studies quarterly amongst others have been some of the key drivers in producing knowledge which provides standards and experiences of Persons with Disabilities. Organizations such as the World Health Organizations have also played an integral role in producing the some of the existing knowledge on disability rights. This knowledge has contributed to society and organizations understanding of disability in terms of rights and treatment of persons with disabilities.

On the contrary, with the marginalization of disability issues in the global South mainly by the global North or the narrative set by the global North has been a cause of concern not only in developing the literature on disability. It has influenced the way issues of disability have been modeled resulting in a one size fits all approach which universalizes disability from the global North to the global South. Grech (2011:88) notes that, academic literature on issues of disability studies consistently privileges minority world accounts (especially, those from

Western Europe and Northern America), the result has been disability (in both medical and social model senses) has been framed within a minority world's view. The narrative that has been set regarding disability issues by this hegemonic domination to the rest of the world has been adopted by development agencies and generalized everywhere they operate failing to take into account the regional and geopolitical differences and dynamics that comes with different areas. In as much as there are modifications here and there, Development agencies, Southern organizations and other intermediaries have not questioned the Western disability studies and its tenants, notably the social model of disability and the language of rights are transferred indiscriminately from the global North to the South (Grech, 2011:88).

Breaching the gap in the knowledge production between the Global South and Global North

Before discussing much on how this epistemological gap on the existing knowledge produced on issues of disabilities it is important to also look in contributions from the dominated global south, particularly Africa. It is worth noting that there are disability histories, concepts or thinking from the African societies that have been developed but have not received much attention. Earlier on in the paper, it was noted that disability studies have been strongly shaped by the global South (where minority of disabled persons are located). However examining the social and cultural history of Africans tells a completely different story and illustrates and how Africans have formulated and shaped theories as well as actions of decolonization and relationships to disability in their own epistemology and transnational terms Berghs (2017:1). It is worth noting that according to Berghs (2017) scholars from Southern Africa have developed their own concept to disability in which they present the concept of ubuntu as disability model. In an ubuntu model of disability, impairment becomes cognitive, sensory, mental, physical (inclusive of biological) and spiritual diversity that can have a multitude of shared meanings that society, as human collective, constantly (re) make together. This is just a typical example that shows that, there are concepts and knowledge

produced that exist, coming from parts of the global South which can be part of the discussion and advocacy on disability issues but have not received enough attention.

Having disability issues being discussed from one direction creates a serious conundrum in terms of dealing and addressing disability issues in the global South. Grech (2011:89) argues that if disability is framed within a minority world view, then it implies that it is theoretically ill-equipped to deal with majority world views and the nuances of world context. This calls for the need to not only contest disability issues, but also rethink disability while including and considering the thinking, writing and lived experiences of Persons with Disabilities in countries within the global South. Connell (2011:1369) has argued that, re-making disability studies from the global South requires a major reconsideration of concepts in the field of study. Disabled lives in the Southern context are often simplified and generalised in a dynamic of homogenising, de-contextualised and de-historicised discourse, instead, concepts and knowledge from the global South, the Southern voice and epistemologies are rarely considered, sustaining an 'academic neo-imperialism' (Grech, 2015:6).

In an effort to not only challenge the production of knowledge on disability issues, but to also amplify the voices from the ground in the global South and share a different narrative on the matter, there is need to have specified research and discussions from the global South. This does not mean to say the scholarship from the global north has to be ignored, rather there is need for collaborative research between the scholarship from both North and South. The main advantage of having collaborative research in the production of knowledge is that it brings the best of both worlds. The scholars from the global north have the experience and the resources to produce knowledge, while in the global South it is mainly a matter of untapped knowledge, experiences and concepts that can be in-cooperated into global knowledge production.

Conclusion

Basing on the Southern theory and its advocates, the field of social sciences has knowledge produced or in existence being largely dominated by the scholarship from the global north over those in the global south. The same can also be said with disability studies which can be traced to have its roots in the global north as indicated by the literature explored. This has created both positive and negative effects when the knowledge reaches public life. To some extent it has managed to provide minimal standards and knowledge on models and treatment of persons with disabilities. On the contrary it has presented a generalized approach to disability, in which disability has been universalized ignoring the geopolitical differences. However, one of the most suitable way to address the challenge in the production of knowledge be it in disability studies or any other discipline that has faced this challenge is collaborative research which brings the best of both worlds.

About the author

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Munashe William Mupoperi is a 1st year PhD student in the Global Studies with special emphasis on peace and security in Africa, offered by University of Leipzig and Addis Ababa University. Munashe William comes from Zimbabwe and his topic is looking into the state of the rights and protection of persons with disabilities in Africa: a case study of Zimbabwe under the 2013 constitution. For his undergraduate studies, Munashe William studied a Bsc in Peace and Governance with Bindura University of Science Education (Zimbabwe) and as for the Masters, he studied a M.A in Global Studies with special emphasis on peace and security in Africa (2017-19). Regarding his experience, he has had internships with the Institute for

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