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Published on H-Disability (November, 2023)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

The prologue to this edited collection exploring metanarratives of disability opens with the statement that “the iniquity of the normative social order is divisive and profound” (p. xvi). The social implications of metanarratives are continuously addressed throughout the essays, with authors highlighting the discriminatory potential of commonly held assumptions about a range of disabling conditions and experiences. This, however, may be a secondary aim of this thought-provoking collection that has the primary purpose of highlighting, assessing, and challenging popular metanarratives of disability.

The metanarratives addressed in these essays are the widespread assumptions about disability—its meanings, its medicalization and, most significantly, the role these stories play in shaping the daily experiences of disabled people. This is a protean concept—“popular” and “widespread” are difficult terms to pin down—but, in all these essays, the contributors do an impressive job of identifying and analyzing these ideas. A recurring source of metanarratives is plays, books, TV shows, and films, sometimes supported by “popular” medical literature, whether in pamphlets or on organizations’ websites. Dana Combs Leigh, for example, does this brilliantly in her discussion of sarcoidosis. All the authors do an excellent job of providing a clear scholarly analysis of common tropes, ideas, and assumptions across a range of media. Discussing the metanarrative of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), for example, Angela Kim uses examples from the TV series *Friends* (1994-2004) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-19), to demonstrate how OCD is played for laughs, while portraying the condition as primarily being germ-related. Kim convincingly argues that this diminishes an appreciation of the serious (and disparate) manifestations of OCD—seen in the off-the-cuff claims of nondisabled people to “be OCD” (as opposed to having OCD). She also demonstrates how misconceptions of OCD were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which cast germaphobia as a positive, trivializing the condition while problematizing the
relationship “that those with contamination OCD have to cleanliness and germs” (p. 74).

Kim’s discussion of OCD is just one of many excellent, nuanced, and thought-provoking analyses of metanarratives of disability. Some authors address the “positive” metanarratives attached to conditions, illnesses, and disabilities—showing how they can be as dismissive and disempowering as more overtly negative stereotypes. Thus Alexis Padilla addresses the characterization of blindness as “giftedness, as a super-brain mythology” in the Global South, providing a “counter storytelling” based, in part, on Padilla’s own experiences (p. 17). In Helen Davies’s analysis of the metanarrative of Down syndrome, shaped by her relationship with her sister who had Down syndrome, Davies remembers a teacher ignoring her unease about the portrayal of a child with Down syndrome next to an orangutan by saying “it must be a great comfort that people with Down syndrome are so happy and affectionate” (p. 108). Davies recalled that this comment surprised her because her sister, Elizabeth, “was just as cynical and reserved as myself and the rest of my immediate family” (p. 108). Davies, like all the authors in this collection, restores the humanity, diversity, and complexity of experiences of disabilities. This is in sharp contrast to metanarratives that often sanitize or smoothe over and that ignore differences in disabling experience, with the result of creating a division between disabled people and, in Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s analysis, “normates.”[1]

The primary mode of challenging metanarratives in this collection is through autoethnography, and it is a powerful and stimulating approach. In her discussion of the metanarratives of dwarfism, Erin Pritchard demonstrates the benefits of drawing on her own “experiences as a woman with dwarfism to demonstrate how the metanarrative of dwarfism shapes social encounters” (p. 124). As she argues, not only can research carried out by nondisabled researchers bring with it “subtle forms of cultural ableism,” but “outsiders can only ever be onlookers,” meaning that only a person with dwarfism can identify and explain “the psycho-emotional impact of the metanarrative” (p. 125). In their analysis of the metanarratives of mental illness, Katharine Martyn and Annette Thompson argue that by focusing on the narrative of an individual, autoethnography is “a medium that allows readers to feel moral dilemmas: to think with the story, rather than about it” (p. 48).

Autoethnography offers powerful alternatives to dominant metanarratives. It also can complicate and challenge widely held ideas, and does so without feeling obliged to offer a neatly packaged alternative narrative. Some of the most challenging and rewarding autoethnographies within this collection do exactly that, encouraging the reader to think with the story. Hemachandran Karah uses autoethnography “as a collective exercise,” drawing on the experiences of a cohort at the St. Louis School for the Deaf and Blind in Madras, of which Karah was part (p. 31). The result is to throw into sharp relief the assumptions of educators and the different responses of the students to both implicit and practical barriers they faced in their schooling. The chapter by Nicola Martin, on the metanarrative of cancer, is subtitled “disrupting the battle myth”—namely the idea that if the affected person “puts up a good enough fight they will be able to defeat the disease” (p. 169). In her opening section she describes how, just before her son, John, age twenty-five, died after a year of grueling treatment, he said, “people will think I didn’t try enough” (p. 170). Martin also addresses her own experience of cancer diagnosis and treatment four years later (which she describes as cancer-lite), and how this has been colored by her experiences of John’s illness and her grief. This chapter does so much more than challenge the “battle” narrative. Martin addresses a wide range of assumptions and narratives surrounding grief, illness, loss, and family. She addresses the concept of “Complicated Grief,” examining her own experiences to challenge—or, rather, complicate—ideas of grief and the habit of “piling everyone into the Complicated
Grief sack together and rolling us towards a mountain of pills” (p. 181). Martin’s chapter is an incredible piece of work, showing how autoethnography is essential both to highlight and challenge deeply held assumptions.

Positionality is something the authors of all these different pieces address, highlighting their own relationship with the metanarrative and explicitly addressing the power relationships inherent in this analysis. Sometimes, positionality is very clear. Sonya Freeman Loftis, for example, combines both an enlightening analysis of the infantilization of autism in popular culture with her own experiences as an expectant mother with autism. David Bolt, with self-deprecating insight, analyzes assumptions around arthritis and how receiving a diagnosis of arthritis in his forties forced him to address those assumptions. Other times it is more complex. Owen Barden and Steven Walden state, “we cannot claim to be learning disabled,” but the authors do have extensive experience of working with learning-disabled people as health practitioners and academic researchers (p. 79). They outline methodological approaches they have developed to ensure that learning-disabled people become co-researchers in academic research projects, combining archival analysis (by the researchers) with workshops that make the material accessible and encourage interpretation by learning-disabled people. In her chapter on the metanarrative of HIV and AIDS, Brenda Tyrell directly addresses the complexity of positionality and academic research, asking, “What qualifies me, as one who does not experience HIV or AIDS, at least directly, to identify and critique this metanarrative?” (p. 185). Drawing on work by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, she argues that criptistemology “does not assume epistemic privilege for the disabled person” (pp. 185-186).[2] Furthermore, having been a nurse during the 1990s, she is able to examine the ableist metanarrative of AIDS and HIV through her own experiences.

Throughout this collection, scholars are self-reflective on their methodology and approach, which makes this book useful for academics in a range of disciplines. Of particular interest was Alexis Padilla’s use of LatDisCrit—an amalgamation of critical disability studies and “LatCrit theory,” which aims to center the multiplicity of Latinx experiences by looking at the interplay of race, ethnicity, diasporic cultures, and sociopolitics. Other authors are also explicit in their use of different methodologies (for example, David Bolt on critical discourse analysis) and analytical frameworks. The book is divided into three sections. Part 1 addresses the experience of blindness in three different places: North America, India, and the Global South. This is thoroughly enlightening, and if space had allowed it would have been wonderful to read more of these narratives that are less familiar to scholars working in the United States and Europe. The second section looks at metanarratives of familiar disabling conditions, from mental illness to dwarfism, and the third section examines unexpected disabling conditions, namely chronic conditions. Here the authors address chronic pain, diabetes, cancer, HIV and AIDS, sarcoidosis, and arthritis. All of the pieces are insightful and offer some suggestions about the relationship between disability and chronic conditions: the chapters on chronic pain (Danielle Kohfeldt and Gregory Mather) and diabetes (Heather Walker and Bianca Frazer) particularly address the intersection between the two in new and challenging ways.

This collection of essays raises as many questions as it answers, but in challenging a range of metanarratives it offers new perspectives to scholars working across a range of fields in disability studies, medical humanities, cultural studies, and health.

Notes
[1]. Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture


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