

Disability, Work and Welfare

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Abstract:

There is a wealth of evidence that disabled people experience far higher levels of unemployment and underemployment than non-disabled peers. Yet hitherto sociologists have paid scant attention to the structural causes of this issue. Drawing on a socio/political or social model of disability perspective this paper argues for a reconfiguration of the meaning of disability and work in order to address this problem. It is also suggested that such a strategy will make a significant contribution to the struggle for a fairer and equitable global society.

Key words: Disability, Employment, Social model, Theory, Work

Re-thinking Disability, Work and Welfare

Colin Barnes

Introduction

Over recent decades, the systematic exclusion of people labelled 'disabled' from mainstream society has attracted increasing policy attention within and across nation states. The general response has been policies clustered around notions of 'care' and social welfare with additional schemes to get disabled people into paid work. But whilst there has been some improvement in the employment situation for disabled individuals in parts of the world, in most countries unemployment, poverty and dependence are common experiences for the overwhelming majority of people with impairments (Barron and Ncube, 2010). Around 2-3 percent of impairments are present at birth while the remainder are acquired during the life course (2001a; Priestley, 2003). Indeed, recent estimates suggest that more than a billion people (around 15 per cent of the global population) experience 'disability' (WHO, 2011).

By adopting a socio-political or 'social model' understanding of the complex process of disablement (Oliver, 1981, 1990; Barnes, 1987; Oliver and Barnes, 1998, 2012), this paper argues that to overcome this problem an alternative strategy is needed that shifts attention away from the real or assumed functional limitations of people with impairments and onto the social organisation of mainstream employment and the meaning of work. It is divided into three main sections. The first part explores conventional sociological functionalist and deficit theories of disability and work. This is followed by a discussion of an alternative socio/political approach commonly referred to as the social model of disability. Attention then centres on the organisation of labour, the reconfiguring of work for disabled people, and its implications for work and welfare in the 21st century. .

Sociology, Disability and Work

Despite the politicisation of disability by disabled people and their allies during the last century, social scientists generally and sociologists in particular have shown little interest on the process of disablement and the social forces that shape disabled people's lives. The roots of this omission are evident in the writings of the founding fathers of the discipline. For example, Marx and Engels provide insights into the social creation of impairment with the onset of capitalism. Marx focused on the 'alienating' consequences of the capitalist mode of production for non-disabled workers. Engels provides a vivid account of the 'injurious working' practices that led to the growing number of 'cripples' amongst the working classes based on government reports and personal experience (Engels, 1969). Yet there is no discussion of these workers' exclusion or exploitation beyond references to the 'surplus population' or 'reserve army of labour' (Marx, 1981). For Durkheim (1964) people excluded from the complex division of labour that accompanied industrialisation are relegated to the margins of society and considered deviant, dependent and 'in need'. This resonates with the standard functionalist/deficit interpretation of disablement that in one way or another has underpinned almost all subsequent sociological inspired analyses since the work of Parsons (1951) and

Goffman (1968). Indeed there is now substantial sociological and social policy literature on disablement, but the majority reifies in one way or another orthodox individualistic deficit approaches (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, 1999; Ormansky-Gordon and Rosenblum, 2001; Thomas, 2007; Swain and French, 2008; Barnes and Mercer, 2010; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012). In so doing they undermine or ignore social model insights and analyses (see for example Williams, 1999; Bury, 2001; Scambler, 2004; Scambler and Scambler, 2010). A notable recent exception is provided by Bauman (2007) who argues that in contemporary society older people and people with impairments are disabled by a hegemonic culture of youth and consumerism driven by market forces. .

Moreover the prominence attached to paid work is pre-eminent in recent studies that draw a distinction between citizenship and exclusion. The latter is defined as 'the denial (or non-realization) of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship' (Walker and Walker, 1997: 8). The concern with citizenship has a particular importance for disabled people because it includes inclusion 'in the system of rights and welfare that are mediated or managed by state agencies' (Harrison, 1995: 20-1). Other social analysts suggest that citizenship is linked mainly to economic activity along with the assumption that paid employment is more important than other work activities (Grint, 1998). Levitas highlights this view in her discussion of discourses of social exclusion:

'... a redistributive discourse (RED) developed in British Social Policy, whose prime concern is with poverty; a moral underclass discourse (MUD) which centres on the moral and behavioural delinquency of the excluded themselves; and a social integration discourse (SID) whose central focus is on paid work' (Levitas, 1998: 7).

Whilst each of these approaches contains a prescription for combating social exclusion, none solve the problem of disablement. Redistribution is unlikely in capitalist societies and does not address the stigma associated with impairment and unemployment. A focus on the 'moral and behavioural delinquency' of those excluded simply reaffirms a traditional individual, deficit approach to explaining disability. The social integration emphasis on paid work directs attention away from the environmental and cultural barriers that inhibit disabled people's entry into the paid workforce. Thus in a review of work, disability and European social theory, Abberley (2002) argues that to address the problem of disabled people's exclusion from mainstream society:

'We need to develop theoretical perspectives that express the standpoint of disabled people, whose interests are not necessarily served by the standpoint of other social groups, dominant or themselves oppressed, of which disabled people are also members (p. 136).

The thrust of Abberley's argument is based on three main points. First, that the eradication of environmental and cultural barriers associated with capitalism, will not generate a society in which all people with impairments are able to 'work' due to their impairment related functional limitations. Second, that previous social theories; functionalist, Marxist and feminist, cannot provide an appropriate framework for policies that give disabled people equity in terms of either employment or living

standards. Third, that paid 'work' need no longer be a key organisational feature of western 'developed' nations in the future.

Andre Gorz (1982) for instance argues that the combination of rising unemployment, job insecurity and part time work in wealthy states has already created a class of non workers alongside those in employment. He suggests that this 'non class' of people will inevitably increase due to accelerating technological innovation, growing instability in the labour market, the growth of part time work and job insecurity. The outcome he suggests will be a rejection of the pursuit of productivity, economic growth and materialism generally associated with western style capitalist societies in favour of a diversity of lifestyles beyond the constraints of permanent paid employment by an increasing majority of the population (see also Harvey, 2010).

The next section focuses on the re-definition of disability from the standpoint of disabled people and their organisations.

Re-conceptualising disability: a social model account

The exclusion of disabled people from paid work has been an issue for disabled people's organisations in the UK throughout the last century, and became a major concern with the escalation of disability activism in the 1960s and 70s (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). For example, formed in 1974 the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS) in their manifesto 'Fundamental Principles of Disability' (1976) state:

'In the final analysis the particular form of poverty principally associated with physical impairment is caused by our **exclusion from the ability to earn a living on a par with our able bodied peers due to the way employment is organised**. This exclusion is linked with our exclusion from participation in the social activities and provisions that make general employment possible' (UPIAS, 1976; 14, emphasis added).

Drawing on personal experience and sociological insights, although none were trained sociologists, UPIAS members redefined disability as 'social oppression'. In contrast to previous definitions such as the World Health Organisation's (WHO) *International Classification of Impairments Disabilities and Handicaps* (ICIDH) (WHO, 1980) which cites impairments as the main cause of disabled people's 'disability' and 'handicap', they produced a socio-political analysis that distinguished between the biological: impairment, and the social: disability. Thus 'impairment' denotes 'lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb or mechanism of the body', whilst 'disability' is:

'the disadvantage of restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities' (UPIAS, 1976: 14).

Thereafter the restriction to physical impairments was extended to incorporate *all* impairments – physical, sensory and cognitive. This is because many conditions

both congenital and acquired may affect all bodily and cognitive functioning. Cerebral Palsy and Multiple Sclerosis are two examples, and in a disablist society all impairments whatever their cause, have, to a greater or lesser degree, negative physical and psychological implications (Goffman, 1968; Reeve, 2006). Also impairment specific labels may have relevance when accessing appropriate medical, re/habilitative and support needs, but they are usually imposed rather than chosen and therefore socially and politically divisive (Oliver and Barnes, 1998).

The UPIAS reformulation led directly to the adoption of the phrase the 'social model of disability' by Oliver, an English disability activist and sociology lecturer, to refer to:

'nothing more or less fundamental than a switch away from focusing on the physical limitations of particular individuals to the way the physical and social environment impose limitations upon certain categories of people' (Oliver, 1981: 28).

Thus the social model breaks the causal link between impairment and disability. The 'reality' of impairment is not denied but is not the cause of disabled people's economic and social disadvantage. Instead, the emphasis shifts to how far, and in what ways, society restricts their opportunities to participate in mainstream economic and social activities rendering them more or less dependent. Disability is redefined as 'the outcome of an oppressive relationship between people with impairments and the rest of society' (Finkelstein, 1980: 47).

In contrast to conventional individualistic medical approaches, it is a pragmatic attempt to switch the focus away from the functional limitations of individuals with impairments onto the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures. It is not a denial of the importance or value of appropriate individually based interventions, whether they be medically, re/habilitative, educational or employment based, but instead draws attention to their limitations in terms of furthering disabled people's empowerment and inclusion in a society constructed by 'non-disabled' people for an assumed 'non-disabled' majority. It is therefore an holistic approach that explains specific problems experienced by disabled people in terms of the totality of disabling environments and cultures. It is a tool with which to gain an insight into the disabling tendencies of contemporary society in order to generate policies and practices to facilitate their eradication (Oliver, 2004).

For advocates impairment is a common human experience but 'disability' is not and should not be. Although the social model has been linked to several sociological theories of disability (Priestley, 1998), it is generally associated with materialist perspectives (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991, 1997; Gleeson, 1999; Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Hence, in contrast to conventional explanations for disabled people's disadvantage in the workplace that centre almost exclusively on their real or assumed functional limitations and/or limited marketable skills (OECD, 2003, 2006, 2010; Marin et. al., 2004), a social model analysis raises several important points. One, disabled people's individual and collective disadvantage regarding paid employment is linked directly to the social organisation of work. For example in the UK the phrase 'Disabled Person' first appeared in the 'Disabled Persons' (Employment) Act 1944' (HMSO undated). Previously people with

impairments were labelled according to their condition such as ‘the blind’, ‘the deaf’, ‘the insane’, ‘cripples’, ‘epileptics’ and ‘defectives’ (see for example Stone, 1984). Two, unemployment and underemployment amongst disabled workers cannot be explained in isolation from other factors such as history, education, transport, the built environment, access, ideology and culture. Three, within the present context, policy developments regarding disability and the labour market can have only a limited impact on the employment prospects of the majority of disabled workers (Barnes, 1991; Roulstone, 1998; Roulstone and Barnes, 2005; Berthoud, 2008; 2011). Finally, as a consequence of the above, meaningful change is only likely through a radical reformulation of the meaning and the organisation of work (Oliver and Barnes, 1998, 2012; Barnes 2000, 2003; Prideaux et al., 2009).

Nonetheless since its inception the social model has been subject to various criticisms largely because of the conceptual distinction between impairment and disability. Some disabled feminists called for the inclusion of impairment related experiences when theorising disability (Thomas, 2007). Also, that the social model emphasis on barrier removal implies that all activity restrictions encountered by disabled people can be eliminated by social change is unrealistic as ‘impairment effects’ will continue to exclude some individuals from particular areas of social life (Wendell, 1996). Others argue that both impairment and disability are social constructs and consequently the division upon which the social model rests is false and no longer valid (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Tremain, 2005; Shakespeare, 2006).

To suggest that the distinction between impairment and disability is anything other than a practical guide to action is both linguistically contentious and politically misleading. Whilst such assertions may be of interest to philosophers and some social theorists, they have little, if any, practical value in terms of research, policy and practice. Besides fuelling criticism of social model inspired writings by some academics (see for example Scambler and Scambler, 2010), they serve only to re-enforce within political and policy circles the traditional bias for ‘changing the person rather than changing the world’ (Bickenbach, 2009: 110).

Even so social model insights are now clearly evident in legislative and policy statements produced by most national governments (Doyle, 2008), national and international non-government organisations (NGOs) and transnational agencies such as the United Nations (UN), the WHO and World Bank (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). Furthermore, the WHO’s recent *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF), or ‘biopsychosocial’ model of Disability (WHO, 2001b), developed to replace the ICDH (WHO, 1980) includes a social model perspective.

The ICF aims to provide a universally acceptable language for disablement by combining the individualistic medical and social models of disability into one unitary construct: the ‘biopsychosocial’ model of disability. Like the ICDH it comprises three main elements – ‘impairment’, ‘activity’ and ‘participation’, the terms activity and participation replacing ‘disability’ and ‘handicap’ as in the ICDH. But unlike the ICDH the ICF acknowledges that the entire disablement process is subject to environmental influences. Based on western notions of ‘science’ and ‘normality’ it has been welcomed by academics and policy makers alike (Shakespeare, 2006: WHO, 2011).

Yet whilst the ICF recognises the role of the environment in the disablement process it is presented as apolitical. It retains the inference that impairment is the main cause of disabled people's disadvantage in its methodology, language and title. Methodologically, far greater emphasis is given to measuring impairment than activity and participation. In the ICF the word 'disability' is described as a negative term encompassing both a person's limited functioning and disabling barriers (WHO, 2002). But it is linked to individuals with the phrase 'people with disabilities' thus reaffirming the traditional assumption that disability is an individual rather than a societal problem (Barnes, 1992; Oliver, 1996, Linton, 1998; Titchkoski, 2008). Also, if the environment influences all three elements of the ICF construct then surely the logical title should be the 'sociopsychobiological' model of disability rather than the 'biopsychosocial' model'? (Barnes, 2011; Oliver and Barnes, 2012).

Moreover, despite its continued promotion by researchers, the WHO, UN and World Bank and national governments, there are growing doubts about its usefulness for policy development. The incidence of disablement within and across nation states is historically, culturally and situationally variable (Ingstad, 2001) and therefore a socio-political issue. Consequently the expressly 'apolitical', 'scientific' approach of the ICF '**does not solve the problem the policy analyst needs to solve**' (Bickenbach 2009: p. 120, emphasis added). Therefore we still need to develop and disseminate a social model analysis of the complex relationship between disability, work and welfare. Such an account is elaborated in the next section.

Disability, work and welfare

i. Disabled people, employment and rights

There is now universal agreement that disabled people are disproportionately disadvantaged in the labour market both nationally and internationally. Various studies from both official and unofficial sources consistently show that disabled people are far more likely to be unemployed and/or underemployed than non-disabled peers (Thornton and Lunt, 1997; OECD, 2003; 2006; 2010; WHO, 2011).

In most western societies since at least the eighteenth century the meaning and organisation of work has been organised around a particular set of values and principles: the pursuit and maximisation of profit and competition between individual workers. Both effectively disadvantage and disable people with any form of impairment. But when work is organised around a different set of principles such as social necessity and interdependence people with impairments are included in, rather than excluded from, the workplace. For example, during the 1939/45 conflict hitherto excluded groups such as women and disabled people were drafted into the workforce at various levels by warring nations to aid the war effort. Immediately after the war ended much government effort was put into maintaining this situation due to the 'social obligation' (Thornton and Lunt 1995) felt towards these workers. But subsequently government priorities changed and labour market policies reverted to pre-war practices (Barnes, 1991; Roulstone, 1998; Russell, 2002).

Over recent years the meaning and organisation of work has undergone significant change. The intensifying globalisation of the world economy along with technological advances over the last half century has meant that many western societies have shifted from what Wolfensberger (1989) termed a 'primary production' to a 'post primary production' economy. Therein agricultural and manufacturing industries have given way to human services as the principal source of economic activity and employment. Castells (1996) refers to this transformation as 'informationalisation' to reflect the new forms of production and power that has emerged.

It is often argued that this 'mode of production' offers new employment possibilities for disabled people (Barnes, H. *et al.*, 1998). Yet historically access to technology has never been evenly spread throughout the population, disabled or otherwise. Although information has taken on a value equalling that of the material products of industrialisation, questions of ownership and control are as relevant today as they ever were (Castells, 1996). This underlines the fact that whilst new technology, deregulation and more flexible production techniques enable some, for others they bring new and enhanced forms of exclusion and social isolation (Roulstone, 1998; Sapey, 2000; Sheldon, 2004).

Indeed, whereas in the 19th and most of the 20th century an 'able body' was an essential prerequisite for paid labour and a 'non-disabled status', in the 21st century an 'able mind may be more important' (Barnes *et al.*, 1999: 225). Therefore if people with impairments, and particularly those with 'learning difficulties' and 'mental health' problems are to participate in this 'post-industrial' workplace it is crucial that governments take a more interventionist role in how it operates.

Certainly recently politicians and policy makers have adopted the language of inclusion, and posited what at first glance appear to be social model solutions to disability in the workplace. The rhetoric surrounding the introduction of the various anti-discriminatory legislative and policy measures at both the national and international levels provides a wealth of examples. But rhetoric rarely accords with reality and policy remains centred largely on the supply rather than the demand side of labour. Consequentially policies which target and highlight the functional limitations of individuals are prioritised and supported rather than those that address the social organisation of work. .

For instance the British Government formally adopted a social model definition of disability in its report 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' (Cabinet Office, 2005: 5). Yet Chapter 7 titled 'Employment' focuses exclusively on strategies to support disabled individuals into work, there is no discussion of how to tackle the various environmental barriers that pervade Britain's labour market. Britain has had legislation prohibiting discrimination against workers with impairments since 1995. Analysis of case law (Ministry of Justice, 2010) shows a significant level of non-compliance with the employer's duty, now under the 'Equality Act' 2010, following the abolition of the 'Disability Discrimination Act' in 2009', to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled employees (Harwood, 2011).

Since the 1970s there have been several international initiatives designed to address disabled people's social exclusion. Two notable examples are the UN's

'Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities' (1993) and the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' (2006). Both adopt a 'human rights', holistic approach to the problem of exclusion and both have items dealing specifically with employment. The former although comprehensive with 22 items covering medical and support services, education, employment, leisure and cultural activities was not legally binding and ignored by national governments. The Convention on the other hand is designed within an international law context and sets out the duty of nation states to protect disabled people's human rights. It is said to be legally binding on any country that ratifies it. At the time of writing it has been signed by 149 countries, 101 of which have ratified it (UN enable, undated). Of the 50 articles covering all aspects of the human experience Article 27 states:

'States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities' (UN Enable, undated).

Whilst the Convention may be seen as a major step forward in the struggle for equality as it provides a comprehensive list of what needs to be done to eliminate disability, there is little on how this is to be achieved by way of enforcement. As yet there is little sign that it has had any significant impact on securing disabled people's individual or social rights within and across nation states (Jolly, 2010).

This is not surprising since the rights based approach has yet to bring equality to other disadvantaged sections of the community in both rich and poor nations. This is because however they are defined: individual, social or human, rights are open to interpretation and context bound. Furthermore the notion of individual and social rights is the outcome of neo-liberal thinking and has little relevance to those living in non-western cultures (Miles, 2006). Even where appropriate laws exist challenging the denial of rights through the law courts is costly in terms of resources and time. The overwhelming majority of disabled people in all countries rarely have either. Moreover the legal route to equality does not challenge the established political and economic structures of capitalist societies. Therefore such an approach is unlikely to bring about the radical environmental and cultural changes needed to eradicate structural inequalities (Oliver and Barnes, 1998, 2012; Jones and Marks, 1999; Hahn, 2002; Russell, 2002).

Major structural change is even less likely in the foreseeable future as a result of the succession of deepening economic crises that have dogged the world economy since the 1970s. This has resulted in a significant shift to the right by governments across Europe and North America and claims that excessive government regulation in the workings of the market and escalating welfare budgets are at the root of these problems. Hence solutions to these crises prioritise policies supporting finance capital and reductions in welfare spending in order to sustain and consolidate capitalist class interests and power. They are legitimated by a plethora of discourses about the importance of 'individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the free market' and assertions that future prosperity depends on the creation of a good business climate in which financial institutions can generate

and maximise profit (Harvey, 2010). All of which does not bode well for the employment prospects of disabled individuals reliant on welfare and expected to compete for jobs in labour markets characterised by high unemployment generally and structured almost exclusively for a non-disabled workforce.

ii. *Rethinking policy, work and welfare*

The growing problem of high unemployment generally in both rich and poor states has led some social analysts to call for a further reformulation of the meaning and organisation of work. For instance, building on the work of Gorz Beck (2000) argues that a combination of factors including globalisation and technological innovation, have generated a far less stable labour market in which traditional skills are devalued, jobs lost, and welfare reduced or eliminated. He argues that to offset the inevitable social and political instability everyone must have the right to be included in a new work system. This will include movement in and out of paid employment and forms of self organised artistic, cultural and political 'civil labour' involving equal access to comprehensive social protection within the context of democratically organised local, national and trans-national networks of active citizens.

But whilst much is made of the role of active citizens in this and similar analyses, little is said about the role of government, disabled people and/or their organisations. This is important since the experience of work instability and social exclusion has characterised disabled people's work experiences for much of the last century, and that if this situation is to be resolved government intervention is fundamental. Indeed, government involvement in the way the labour market operates is not new nor is it confined to policies for disabled people. Throughout recent history all governments have played a major role in structuring and restructuring the labour market through grants and tax concessions for industrialists and employers in order to sustain economic growth and maintain political stability (Grint, 1998; Giddens, 2006). With regard to the employment of disabled people, as noted earlier, 'demand side' initiatives were implemented in many states during and immediately following the 1939/45 war to facilitate their inclusion into the workforce.

Whilst the current global economic climate may prohibit national governments from addressing labour market infrastructures in the short term, there are several policies that could be introduced to address disablism in the workplace. They could, for example, set targets for all government departments and state organisations to achieve in respect of employing disadvantaged workers. In their dealings with the private sector they could use similar targets to enforce contract compliance. International and government sponsored funding agencies could provide grants to charities and NGOs controlled by disabled people whose track record in employing disabled workers puts the traditional voluntary sectors to shame. Additionally, removing large numbers of people from state welfare systems and into work would reduce public spending and help combat disablism in the workplace (Oliver and Barnes, 1998; 2012).

This is not to suggest that all disabled people can or should be expected to work at the same pace as 'non disabled' contemporaries or that all disabled people can or should work in the conventional sense. To expect people with high support needs to

be as productive as non-disabled peers, is one of the most oppressive aspects of modern society. And to radically reconceptualise the meaning of work beyond the rigid confines of waged labour is not unprecedented in the modern context. For example, in their efforts to assert the role of women in a predominantly patriarchal society, feminists have redefined the meaning of work to include housework and childcare (Lister, 1997). But this re-conceptualisation must go much further for disabled people because although many disabled individuals, both female and male, do housework, and have childcare, and/or 'caring' responsibilities others do not.

Consequently this re-configuring of work must include the everyday tasks that non-disabled people take for granted. Notably this idea is not unprecedented within sociology. Corbin and Strauss (1988), for instance, identified three types of work associated with 'illness' management: a/ 'illness work' including activities like organising and administering medication, doing physiotherapy etc.; b/ 'everyday work' such as household tasks and interactions with family and professionals; and c/ 'biographical work'. The latter involves strategies that disabled people adopt in order to incorporate impairment into their daily lives. This might involve developing ways of making sense of their condition and explaining it to others.

The growing involvement of disabled people in the development and delivery of disability services should also be construed as work. This is especially evident with reference to the various self operated support systems now being introduced by many governments. As an alternative to professionally led services these schemes provide funding to disabled individuals to recruit and employ support workers or personal assistants (PAs) to do the things they are unable to do themselves. Although technically unemployed users of such schemes are in fact employers who may employ four or five people per week. The knowledge and skills required to manage these schemes is comparable to running a 'small business' (Prideaux et al., 2009). They also make a significant contribution to local and national economies. For instance, Sweden introduced funding for PA users in 1994. There are now some 14,000 people using these schemes employing 70,000 PAs (Ratzka, 2007).

The recent expansion of user led involvement in the development and delivery of services has meant that more and more people with various impairments now spend their 'free' time actively involved in service consultations and development of one form or another. Notwithstanding that successive British governments since the 1980s have actively encouraged this involvement, but none have acknowledged such activity as work (Barnes, 2003).

Such policies warrant a re-evaluation of debates about the costs of state sponsored welfare systems. Escalating welfare costs are due to a variety of factors: demographic, economic, political and cultural; not least of which is consistent governmental failure in all countries to address the various barriers to inclusion. But whilst barrier removal will undoubtedly reduce the cost of state sponsored welfare, it can never eliminate it altogether. This is simply because impairment however it is defined is a common human experience. As indicated above the overwhelming majority of impairments are acquired during the life course due to various factors: poverty, pollution, accident, violence, war, lifestyle and ageing (WHO, 2001a;

Priestley, 2003). Hence rather than being viewed as a drain on national economies, welfare systems in whatever form they take should be viewed as an indicator of collective social responsibility and social justice..

Moreover, there is growing realization amongst academics and policy makers that the continued development and future stability of a global economy is inextricably linked to the complex and ever changing relations between production and consumption (Bauman, 1998). This should be coupled with the recognition that, regardless of their role within the orthodox work environment, disabled people are both producers and consumers of a vast array of services upon which many non-disabled people depend; they are, therefore, a fundamental component within this equation. Consequently instead of stigmatising those in receipt of welfare services and support, politicians and policy makers should be striving to develop a more even handed and less stigmatising system of provision and support. In an increasingly unstable world such a policy is an essential element in the struggle for poverty reduction and development of a more equitable and just global society.

Final Word

By adopting a socio political or social model of disability perspective this paper has argued for a re-conceptualisation of the meaning of disability, work and welfare. This argument should not be construed as an alternative to the on-going struggle for disabled people's participation in the paid labour market, but complimentary to it. Whilst the policies and strategies advocated above will not transform overnight the gross inequality that characterises current labour markets, they would certainly go some way in eradicating the stigma widely associated with disability and unemployment. In so doing they would benefit everyone as impairment is an increasingly common experience and no respecter of age, gender, class, ethnicity or nationality. Consequently the problem of disablement is a growing problem in all countries (WHO, 2011). Cuts in welfare spending at national and international levels to shore up a profoundly flawed global economy that nurtures and sustains unprecedented levels of economic and social inequality throughout the world can only perpetuate the problem still further (Oliver and Barnes, 1998; 2012; Harvey, 2010).

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