

Race and Disability: From Analogy to Intersectionality

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity

2019, Vol. 5(2) 200–214

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DOI: 10.1177/2332649218783480

sre.sagepub.com

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Abstract

Sociologists are using intersectional lenses to examine an increasingly wider range of processes and identities, yet the intersection of race and disability remains a particularly neglected area in sociology. Marking an important step toward filling this gap, the authors interrogate how race and disability have been deployed as analogy in both disability rights activism and in critical race discourse. The authors argue that the “minority model” framework of disability rights has been racialized in ways that center the experiences of white, middle-class disabled Americans, even as this framework leans heavily upon analogic work likening ableism to racial oppression. Conversely, the authors examine the use of disability as metaphor in racial justice discourse, interrogating the historic linking of race and disability that gave rise to these language patterns. The authors argue that this analogic work has marginalized the experiences of disabled people of color and has masked the processes by which whiteness and able-bodiedness have been privileged in these respective movements. Finally, the authors argue that centering the positionality of disabled people of color demands not analogy but intersectional analyses that illuminate how racism and ableism intertwine and interact to generate unique forms of inequality and resistance.

Keywords

disability, intersectionality, analogy

The framework of intersectionality calls attention to how dynamics of inequality are mutually constituted. The term *intersectionality* was introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), who sought deeper recognition of how single-axis analyses and legal policies, specifically around dimensions of race and gender, failed to adequately account for the lived experiences and types of discrimination black women often experienced. Crenshaw and other intersectional theorists, including sociologists Collins (2000) and Choo and Ferree (2010), have challenged and interrogated how both feminist and critical race scholars have universalized racial and gendered subjects in their research, leaving white women to represent the category of women and black men to represent the category of black.

Intersectionality has become a prominent research and theoretical paradigm, and scholars are using intersectional lenses to examine an increasingly wider range of processes and identities. Yet

disability appears to be an uncharted area in intersectionality research, particularly in the discipline of sociology. This is likely the result of the discipline’s general neglect of disability as a category of inequality altogether (Gerschick and Stevens 2016; Maroto and Pettinicchio 2015). The intersection of race and disability remains a particularly neglected area in sociology (Phelan, Link, and Dovidio 2008). Although a few sociological studies have explored the intersection of gender and disability (Frederick 2017a, 2017b; Hammer 2012), the

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discipline has not offered much in the way of expansive intersectional analyses of race and disability beyond social determinants of health. This omission is quite stunning, given that racism and ableism are powerful interacting forces in contemporary issues of concern to sociologists, including mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline.¹

Marking an important step toward filling this gap, our research interrogates how race and disability have been deployed as analogy in both disability rights activism and in critical race discourse. We argue that the “minority model” framework of disability rights has been racialized in ways that center the experiences of white, middle-class disabled Americans, even as this framework leans heavily upon analogic work likening ableism to racial oppression. Conversely, we examine the use of disability as metaphor in racial justice discourse, interrogating the historic linking of race and disability that gave rise to these language patterns. We argue that this analogic work has marginalized the experiences of disabled people of color and has masked the processes by which whiteness and able-bodiedness have been privileged in these respective movements. Finally, we argue that centering the positionality of disabled people of color demands not analogy but intersectional analyses that illuminate how racism and ableism intertwine and interact to generate unique forms of inequality and resistance.

THE DIS/ABILITY SYSTEM

Because disability could arguably be the form of inequality that has received the least attention from sociologists (Gerschick and Stevens 2016; Maroto and Pettinicchio 2015), we begin our analysis by placing disability into view as a political category and an axis of inequality. We regard “disability” as a category of demarcation of people with atypical functioning and/or appearance. The boundaries of disability are maintained against cultural values of normalcy in the binary system of deviance and normalcy, or what is also referred to as the dis/ability system. People with disabilities experience profound forms of inequality. In 2014, only 17 percent of working-age people with disabilities were employed, compared with 65 percent of those without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). Twenty-eight percent of working-age disabled Americans are living at or below the poverty line, which is the highest poverty rate of any group in the United States (Erickson, Lee, and von Schrader

2014; Rivera Drew 2015). Disabled Americans experience other forms of marginalization, including high rates of preventable health disparities (Goode et al. 2014; Gulley and Altman 2008) and incarceration (Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey 2014). Serious violent crimes are committed against disabled Americans at three times the rate as for nondisabled Americans (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2015), and disabled people experience unique, yet often hidden, patterns of hate crimes and police brutality (Bagenstos 2016; Sherry 2016). Furthermore, disabled Americans continue to experience serious challenges to their citizenship rights, including the right to basic forms of autonomy (Ben-Moshe et al. 2014; Carey 2009) and the right to parent (Frederick 2017a, 2017b).

Because biomedical understandings of disability pervade the culture, and even social science research, these inequalities are often dismissed as natural consequences of biological deficiencies. The medical model of disability views disability as a problem located in the body of an individual. Thus, the inequalities faced by disabled people are regarded as natural consequences of problematic bodies. Attempts to “solve” the problem center on preventing, curing, and normalizing disabled individuals. By contrast, the social and minority models of disability emphasize how disability experiences are profoundly shaped by social processes. These critical disability frameworks emphasize how disability is created, othered, and exaggerated by social arrangements and discrimination. For example, disability is “created” through social practices and inequalities that damage bodies (Shakespeare 2006; Wendell 1996). Disability is also “created” and “erased” through cultural meanings that delineate differences and define their significance (Blanchett 2010; Carey 2009). And the consequences of disability are exaggerated by social practices, such as the construction of the built environment and adherence to exclusionary institutional arrangements, prejudice, and discrimination (Shakespeare 2006; Wendell 1996).

The dis/ability system is co-constituted with the system of racial stratification. For example, disability is experienced disproportionately by certain minority groups, patterns Nancy Krieger (2012) termed “embodied inequalities.” African Americans and American Indians have the highest rate of experiencing disability in the United States, patterns created by both economic disparities and racial discrimination (Anderson 2012; Krieger 2012; Shifrer, Muller, and Callahan 2011; Turner 2013). Furthermore, disability labels themselves,

such as *intellectual disability* and *mental illness*, have been bound up with racially charged meanings. Racial minorities have tended to receive more stigmatizing diagnoses and interventions (Metzl 2009), while less stigmatizing disability labels have been created to protect racial and class privilege (Blanchett 2010). For example, the label *learning disability* was initially created as a means for white, middle-class parents to justify their children's underperformance. Today, with the labels *autism* and possibly *attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder* more common across socially advantaged youth (King and Bearman 2011), scholars argue that the label *learning disability* (and *intellectual disability*) is now used largely to relieve schools and teachers of responsibility for the underperformance of racial minorities and economically disadvantaged youth (Blanchett 2010; Ong-Dean 2009; Ramey 2015).

DISABILITY RIGHTS AND THE RACE ANALOGY

We now turn to an analysis of the "disability is like race" analogy work that has often been performed in the disability rights movement and in critical disability scholarship. Activists and scholars have attempted to articulate how disability inequality operates by establishing "likeness" between disability oppression and the more widely recognized form of inequality, that of racial injustice. To understand how this analogy work became a cornerstone of disability rights, we first provide a brief overview of the origin of the disability rights movement. The dominant origin story of the disability rights movement is that it emerged after the civil rights movement opened doors for other forms of social change (Kornbluh 2011). This narrative is only partially true. Disabled people have resisted their oppression both individually and collectively throughout American history, but they most often did so by organizing solely on the basis of their specific disabilities (Burch 2002; Kornbluh 2011). The 1970s marked a dramatic shift in disability-based organizing, as the disability rights movement cultivated a shared political identity across disability categories. The aims of the disability rights movement centered largely on gaining legal civil rights for disabled Americans. Some of the specific aims of the movement included deinstitutionalization, establishing legal protections against discrimination, and desegregating education for children with disabilities. The greatest successes of the disability rights movement came in sweeping federal

legislation, often negotiated without much fanfare, which included Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Barnartt and Scotch 2001; Scotch 2009; Shapiro 1993). The movement also included goals of cultural change. Activists sought to challenge negative cultural values about disability and insisted that only disabled people themselves could speak on behalf of their communities. For example, one campaign within the movement used public demonstrations to challenge the pity-evoking images of disability charities used in their fundraising campaigns, most notably the MDA Labor Day Telethon hosted by Jerry Lewis (Longmore 2015). Although profoundly negative images of disability still pervade the culture, discourses of inclusion, access, and accommodation have also become part of our lexicon as the result of these efforts.

The disability rights movement in the United States cultivated the "minority model" framework, which emphasizes discrimination as the primary barrier limiting the life chances of people with disabilities. The minority model was constructed to establish similarity between disability oppression and the prejudice and discrimination experienced by racial and ethnic minority groups, particularly by African Americans. Some of the earliest scholarship upon which the paradigm of the minority model of disability rests drew analogies between the experiences of racial minorities and those with disabilities. In his formative legal essay "The Right to Live in the World," legal scholar Jacobus tenBroek (1966) argued for the right to equal access to public accommodations for disabled Americans. His argument came on the heels of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination in public accommodations on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, and sex but not disability. In asserting the right of disabled individuals to exercise the full rights of citizenship, tenBroek drew an analogy between disability inequality and racial inequality when he wrote, "As with the Black man, so with the blind. As with the Puerto Rican, so with the post-polio. As with the Indian, so with the indigent disabled." TenBroek's legal work, establishing the likeness between disability discrimination and racial discrimination, laid the foundation for federal disability civil rights policy (Bagenstos 2016). Federal civil rights protections for Americans with disabilities would come later than those for other groups, and the language used to develop key civil rights legislation, including the

Americans with Disabilities Act, was directly derived from the Civil Rights Act, from which disability was excluded.

The “disability is like race” analogy became the dominant narrative through which activists and critical scholars understood disability inequality and made claims to civil rights. Early scholarship (Gliedman and Roth 1980) and journalistic accounts (Shapiro 1993) both reflected and reinforced the minority model. Furthermore, activists also used this analogy in their organizing tactics. In 1964 a group of disabled student activists at the University of Illinois printed a provocative picture in their student newspaper seeking to highlight the injustice they experienced navigating an inaccessible campus. Campus administrators had failed to act on student demands to make more classrooms accessible for wheelchair users, leaving these students with limited curricular opportunities on the campus. In protest, these student activists printed a picture of campus administrators dressed in Ku Klux Klan attire, holding signs that read “Disabled Keep Out.” The tactic was designed to draw parallels between racism and racial segregation and students’ experiences of segregation on the university campus due to inaccessibility (Patterson 2011).

The use of the race analogy is not unique to the disability rights movement. Social movement scholars find that activists draw from frames that have been successful for other movements, adapting these frames to suit the new claim makers (Barnartt and Scotch 2001; Snow et al. 1986). The success of the civil rights movement propelled analogy-making within other contemporary movements, including second-wave feminism and LGBTQ movements. Drawing analogy to racial discrimination likely played an important role in helping foster a sense of disability pride within the disability rights movement, as the focus on social injustice provided an alternative paradigm that promised to dislodge disability from the clutches of biomedicine. As Schweik (2010) explained,

The heuristic power of these analogies for readers unaccustomed to thinking of disability in political terms was obvious at the time. Analogized to “the race question,” disability could become a “question,” in a logic of equivalence that not only compared but connected the two struggles for equality. (p. 142)

Furthermore, the American legal system has demonstrated a preference for the establishment of civil rights and group protections based on precedent set

forth by previous legislation. This all but demands analogous reasoning to establish new rights claims (Jakobsen 2000; Mayeri 2001).

The Minority Model and Disability Essentialism

Despite its obvious benefits, the analogy work performed in the disability rights movement has contributed to a form of “disability essentialism,” which remains embedded in much disability activism and critical disability scholarship (Mollow 2006). Disability essentialism assumes disability discrimination is a monolithic experience that is divorced from other forms of oppression. In other words, disability essentialism assumes that there is a defining essence to disability experience and inequality. Although ostensibly race neutral, the disability essentialism generated through analogizing with race has assumed a white racial identity. It is only from the starting place of a white disabled person’s positionality that parallels can be drawn between the distinct categories of race and disability. In other words, because disabled people of color cannot divide aspects of themselves or their experiences, it is only from a white disabled person’s standpoint that racism and ableism can be segregated and compared (Grillo and Wildman 1991).

Schweik (2010) provided a poignant example of how race, social class, and gender can be rendered invisible under the minority model of disability. Schweik examined the history of ugly laws and the construction of a particular narrative about this set of laws by disability rights activists and scholars. At the turn of the twentieth century, urban city governments passed a series of unsightly beggar ordinances, known as “ugly laws,” that prohibited individuals with visible disabilities or other bodily anomalies from begging on urban streets. For disability activists and scholars, ugly laws came to be a touchstone for disability oppression, serving as a tangible manifestation of the negative cultural values and profound discrimination with which disabled Americans have contended. Schweik argued that the use of the euphemism “ugly laws” to refer to this set of ordinances served an analogous purpose for disability activists, as it linked the discrimination and body policing of disabled people to resistance efforts that were under way in the civil rights, Black power, and feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet Schweik argued that ugly laws and their uneven enforcement were far more complicated a story than a one-dimensional focus on disability suggests. The laws were not enforced against a

monolithic group of disabled people, but poor disabled people who occupied locations of suspicion generated at the intersections of race, nativity, gender, and sexuality on urban streets. Thus, by claiming ugly laws as a shared oppression experienced by all disabled people, the disability rights movement and critical disability scholarship have erased the ways these ordinances were constructed and carried out at the intersection of oppressions.

The focus on independence and legal rights, which were hallmarks of the disability rights movement, also reflected the cultural values of middle-class white Americans and emphasized solutions to disability injustice that most benefited those with social class privilege and those with clear-cut experiences of discrimination on the basis of the singular status of disability (Shaw, Chan, and McMahon 2012; Spade 2013). Because legal rights tend to operate around singular-identity statuses, people who experience multiple forms of inequality, and for whom racism and ableism are powerful, interlocking forces in their lives, cannot as easily benefit from the legal rights model, which demands proof of blatant and intentional discrimination directed at an individual on the basis of a singular aspect of the victim's identity (Bagenstos 2009; Shaw et al. 2012; Spade 2013). According to Spade (2013), movements that prioritize obtaining legal rights tend to use singular-identity models that inevitably draw boundaries between deserving and undeserving members of the marginalized group. Spade distinguished between rights-based movements such as the disability rights movement and justice-based movements such as the disability justice movement, whose intersectional frameworks lead them to make more radical demands for structural change. We will return to the disability justice movement later in this article.

Although analogy work has given way to more intersectional perspectives in recent scholarship within disability studies, these analogies still permeate the cultures of disability communities. For example, in his study exploring how blind people understand race, Obasogie (2014) found that white blind people continue to draw analogies between their experiences of oppression and that of racial minorities, while blind people who are members of racial minority groups do not draw such comparisons. Furthermore, the minority model, predicated on this analogy work, undergirds fundamental tenets of disability activism and critical disability scholarship. For example, the minority model of disability has emphasized prejudice and discrimination leveled against people with disabilities as

the central form of political injustice facing disability communities. Yet for communities marginalized at the intersection of racism and economic inequality, the acquisition of disability itself is also a major source of injustice (Mollow 2006). The minority model paradigm has not left room for interrogation of the fact that disabilities are frequently caused by racial and class-based inequalities, including economic injustices, environmental degradation, war, and mass incarceration (Dunham et al. 2015; Finley 2011; Nowotny and Kuptsevykh-Timmer 2018; Ralph 2012). Erevelles (2014) illuminated this tension when she asked,

What does it mean to say "no more disability" for those "becoming" disabled via violence and then compelled to live in deplorable social conditions? And what do these negations mean for disabled people who have struggled valiantly to convince the world at large that living with a disability is an "ingenious way to live"?

Critical disability perspectives often demand an unequivocal rejection of the medical model. Because the medical model has portrayed disability as an unwanted deficiency, dislodging disability from the clutches of biomedicine has been central to the cultivation of disability pride. Yet this tenet of disability activism masks the tensions that arise when intersections of inequality are considered. People of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have disproportionately experienced the harm that comes from medical coercion and surveillance of disabled people, the very forms of medical injustice that have driven the rejection of the medical model. But these groups also commonly experience lack of access, or denial of access, to quality medical care that middle-class white Americans are less likely to endure (Nelson 2011). In other words, there is a privilege in being able to call for a distancing from the biomedical regime, a privilege not enjoyed by those whose oppression has included denial of medical care.

Mauldin's (2016) findings from her ethnographic study of a cochlear implant clinic illuminate the ways these multiple forms of inequality operate and converge. Mauldin identified patterns indicative of common critiques of the medical model leveled by deaf and disability activists: the pathologization of deafness and deaf culture, the blame placed on deaf and disabled individuals and their mothers when the promises of biomedicine fail to be realized. Yet Mauldin also found another pattern of inequality. Medical professionals assumed the role

of gatekeeper for this technology, and their decisions about which families were “good candidates” for cochlear implantation were largely determined along ethnic and social class lines. Families who were poor and families who spoke multiple languages were deemed to be inadequate candidates for a child’s cochlear implantation.

Living Intersectional Oppression:

Junius Wilson

Born out of the U.S. disability rights movement, the minority model sets disability up as a form of inequality analogous to racism. Yet this framework leaves little room for deepened understandings of how racism and ableism interact to shape the lives of people of color with disabilities. Few biographies more powerfully illuminate the complex and devastating interaction between racism and ableism in the United States than that of Junius Wilson, a deaf black man born outside of Wilmington, North Carolina in 1908. Wilson spent much of his childhood at the North Carolina School for the Colored Deaf and Blind, a residential school that segregated deaf and blind children on the basis of both race and disability. With few educational resources and no exposure to American Sign Language, black students and staff members cultivated their own sign language system. As a teenager, Wilson returned home to a community in which he was linguistically isolated from both hearing and deaf people. Accused of the attempted rape of a neighbor, Wilson was committed to the State Hospital for the Colored Insane in 1925, where he was incarcerated for 76 years, castrated, and forced to labor on the institution’s farm. Hospital staff members concealed the fact that the criminal charges against Wilson had been dropped in 1970. Jim Crow segregation, along with profound ableism, generated a context in which Wilson was linguistically isolated for nearly the entirety of his life. These historic forces also led to a denial of due process at multiple points, leading white officials to read his black, gesturing body as particularly dangerous and professionals later to deny him the right to the freedom to which he was legally entitled.

CRITICAL RACE AND THE DISABILITY METAPHOR

Although disability activists have used racial oppression as an analogy, writing on racial inequality is replete with disability metaphors. A metaphor is a form of analogy work that uses one term or

image as a stand-in for another. Rather than drawing a logical argument establishing similarity between two groups or processes, a metaphor is a figure of speech used to evoke a vivid image and a powerful emotional response. Disability is integral to our lexicon of insults more broadly, and disability metaphors remain powerful rhetorical devices, precisely because they draw from taken-for-granted values that regard disability as a wholly undesirable social status. Yet they are evoked with unique frequency in critical social justice discourse. As Titchkosky (2015) asserted with tongue in cheek,

Still we say color blind, deaf to the call of justice, suffering from historical amnesia, blind to structural oppression, limping under the weight of inequality; an amputated self, simply crazy, subject to colonial aphasia, agnosia, even alexia; nothing but a deformed autonomy made to fit a crippled economy—devastatingly disabled. (p. 1)

Disability metaphors are used quite often in critical race scholarship specifically. The widely popular concept of “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2017), along with blindness and paralysis metaphors such as “post-race paralysis” (Valiente-Neighbours 2015) and “paralyzed by white privilege” (Taylor 2007) are frequently used to illuminate how racism persists in the post-civil rights era. Titchkosky argued that these metaphors serve as a vehicle of cultural diagnosis within racial and other social justice writing, as terms from the domain of medicine are appropriated to emphasize the critical nature of a problem. The use of damage imagery within scholarship on race also suggests the urgency of fixing. “Blindness” and “deafness” to racism demand “vision” and “hearing” to identify the problem, acknowledge the pain, and address injustice. Racial paralysis demands its opposite, to “stand” and “march” for justice.

Disability scholars have critiqued disability metaphors on several grounds (Ben-Moshe 2006; May and Ferri 2005; Schalk 2013). First, damage imagery reinforces disability as the ultimate other, what Mitchell and Snyder (2001:3) called the “master trope of human disqualification” against which other groups are compelled to distance themselves. Second, the metaphoric use of disability separates the presumed nondisabled reader from the recognition that the damage imagery used is the lived, embodied reality, and even valued political identity, of deaf and disabled individuals (Schalk 2013; Vidali 2010). As Garland-Thomson (2005)

argued, “the always overdetermined metaphoric uses of disability efface and distort the lived experiences of people with disabilities, evacuating the political significances of our lives and mitigating the influence of disability culture” (p. 1565).

In a recent critique of the term *color-blindness*, Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison (2016) argued that the use of blindness as a metaphor for a dominant racial attitude among whites masks the ways this is an actively oppressive ideology. Because blindness is often equated with passivity, color-blindness presents the false notion that this system of racial ideology is not deliberate. Research, of course, demonstrates the opposite, that the color-blind ideology is strategically deployed by whites to maintain a racial order through disguised means. Thus, Annamma et al. called for us to replace the term *color-blindness* with *color-evasiveness*, not only to avoid the problematic ableist metaphor but to emphasize the agency involved in carrying out this ideology.

Our aim here is not merely to provide a critique of the use of ableist metaphor in racial justice rhetoric. Rather, we seek two alternative goals. First, we illuminate the historic forces that placed disability analogy at the center of racial discourse. Second, we consider what this analogy work means in terms of the representation of those who experience both race and disability inequalities.

Whiteness, Normalcy, and the Disability Metaphor

The historic intertwining of whiteness and normalcy play an important role in our overreliance of the disability metaphor in racial discourse. Under the Enlightenment, democratization, and industrialization, notions of the worthy citizen came to be defined against categories of deviance. To protect the fledgling democracy against the dangers of social disorder, white elites made concerted efforts to delineate between legitimate Americans, who were worthy of the rights to full participation in the new democracy, and bad citizens, who threatened the precarious social order (Baynton 2001; Carey 2009; Nielsen 2013; Samuels 2014). Ideals of good citizenship, including independence, rugged individualism, and moral and intellectual competence, were delineated through the othering of bad citizens, those who were defined as dependent, incompetent, and morally depraved. In fact, the word *normal* in its current meaning entered the English language in the mid-1800s, as the binary between “normalcy” and “deviance” was solidified (Davis 2013). Thus, notions of deviance, disability, and

normalcy were imbued into citizenship laws, practices, and cultural values.

Developing notions of race and of disability were inextricably interwoven. White elites relied on imagery of disability and deficiency to argue that African Americans, immigrants, women, and the poor were groups inherently unfit for citizenship rights. Proslavery advocates argued that blacks possessed defective minds, bodies, and moral character, rendering them best suited for a life under slavery (Baynton 2001; Nielsen 2013). Others argued that freed slaves were more susceptible to acquiring debilitating disabilities, including deafness, blindness, and mental illness, as they were not equipped to handle the responsibilities of citizenship (Baynton 2001). Similarly, antisuffragists argued that women were incapable of effectively exercising political rights because they were evolutionarily inferior to men physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Anxieties about disabled people were also intertwined with fears about newly arriving European immigrants during the late 1800s. Immigration policy reflected a deep fear that immigrants possessed inferior genetic makeup and would spread disability if allowed to enter the country. U.S. officials monitoring the influx of European immigrants were charged with identifying immigrants who had, or were suspected to be hiding, physical, sensory, or mental impairments. As newly arriving immigrants sought to enter the country through Ellis Island, officials marked those suspected of having disabilities on their backs with chalk to identify them for more rigorous scrutiny (Baynton 2001; Nielsen 2013). Entire groups of ethnic minorities were also labeled as disabled on the basis of their supposed inferior genetic makeup.

Although racial and ethnic minority groups were attributed with disability labels of deviance and defectiveness, a pattern of unwhitening also occurred for white disabled people. For example, John Langdon Down, who identified the condition now known as Down syndrome, originally conceptualized the disorder in 1866 as marking evolutionary and racial regression of the European children he studied. Down labeled the condition mongolism, likening it to the “mongoloid” racial category of the time. In the paper in which he first identified the condition, Langdon wrote, “It is difficult to realize he is the child of Europeans, but so frequently are these characters presented, that there can be no doubt they represent ethnic degeneration” (cited in Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe 2014:8). Similarly, in the early part of the eugenics movement, poor white women labeled with cognitive

disabilities and/or insanity were the targets of eugenic sterilization practices (Isenberg 2017; Wray 2006). The label *feeble-minded* became a catch-all category for various groups of white women who were defined as “tainted whites” because of poverty, sexual promiscuity, ethnic origin, and disability. The majority of so-called feeble-minded Americans institutionalized and sterilized during the early part of the eugenics movement were white women defined as being a threat to the purity of the white race (Isenberg 2017; Wray 2006). Thus, the category of feeble-mindedness became the signifier of tainted whiteness. In later decades, the focus on controlling poor white women, particularly those labeled as disabled, would give way to a focus on women from racial and ethnic minority groups.

Within this historic context, how did those committed to racial justice both within and outside the academy rely on disability to make claims for racial equality? Discourses emphasizing how “racism is disabling” date back to abolitionism. Abolitionists often emphasized the debilitating consequences of slavery, and freed slave activists and writers emphasized, even displayed, the wounds acquired through slavery and freedom journeys, highlighting how slavery damaged the body (Boster 2013). This discourse continued through the twenty-first century. For example, Wailoo (2001) documented how sickle-cell anemia took on cultural and political meanings in the 1970s and 1980s as the disorder came to symbolize suffering in black American communities. Finally, disabled activists of color have confronted discourses in racial justice activism, which claim that all black people are disabled by racism (Lukin 2013).

Although disability served as a category into which activists and intellectuals would lean to claim the perniciousness of racial injustice—because discourses of defectiveness and damage were used to justify racial/ethnic oppression—disability simultaneously became the category against which racial minority groups had to distance themselves to make claims to citizenship rights (Baynton 2001; Boster 2013). The effort to distance race from disability is particularly pronounced in scholarship on race. This makes sociological sense given the ways previous work in the academy, which established a false association between race and “normalcy,” demanded to be undone (Gould 1996). Yet this legacy has diminished dialogue between race and disability scholarship. Research that should ostensibly sit at the intersection of race and disability has often failed to problematize disability inequality. Thus, scholarship on a variety of topics conveys the

message that the problem is simply that racial minorities have been attributed with disability. This has been the case with scholarship on freak shows (Samuels 2011), eugenics (Duster 2000), and the racialization of special education (Connor, Ferri, and Annamma 2015). Scholars have rarely deconstructed the disability tropes used to justify other forms of inequality, even as they critique the ways these tropes have been deployed against other groups. As Baynton (2001) argued,

While many have pointed out the injustice and perniciousness of attributing these qualities to a racial or ethnic group, little has been written about why these attributions are such powerful weapons for inequality, why they were so furiously denied and condemned by their targets, and what this tells us about our attitudes towards disability. (p. 41)

Living the Metaphorical Other

What does the pervasive use of disability metaphor in racial discourse mean for members of racial minority groups who also experience disability? Rowden’s (2009) study of the legacy of black blind musicians in American history provides a compelling illustration. Chapter 2 of his book *The Songs of Blind Folk* explores the self-presentation strategies of black blind blues singers in the rural American South. To appeal to their audiences, these blind musicians emphasized their blind identities, but only as a metaphor for the suffering black Americans endured. These musicians downplayed their corporeal experiences of blindness, as it was thought to be alienating to their sighted audiences.

A controversy over a statue of Representative Barbara Jordan, erected on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, is also illustrative of the ways disability metaphor, used within a conversation about racial justice, can render invisible the embodied lives of people of color with disabilities. Jordan occupies an important place in American history, as the first African American to serve in the Texas Senate since Reconstruction and the first African American woman from the South to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. She was also a disabled American. In 2008, the original design of a statue honoring Jordan was unveiled. The design depicted her sitting on a bench, reflecting the fact that Jordan was a wheelchair user. The representation of Jordan received outrage from the community, as outspoken critics argued that the statue diminished Jordan’s power, particularly in

comparison with the erect statues of white men already found throughout the campus. The controversy resulted in a new design being selected, which depicts Jordan standing. One local newspaper headline proudly proclaimed, "Standing Like She Stood Up for the Constitution" (Faires 2007). Two years later, the same reporter began an article with the description: "She stood watch over the Constitution of the United States, and now she's about to stand watch over the University of Texas." The article goes on to say, "Barbara Jordan will take up permanent residence under West Campus' Battle Oaks with the unveiling of a bronze statue in her likeness" (Faires 2009).

The emphasis on disability as metaphor clouds our ability to recognize that the statue does not, in fact, represent Jordan's "likeness," as it erases the disabled body she inhabited. The controversy over the representation of Jordan illuminates the ways disability metaphor can render disabled identities invisible. It appears difficult to both hold onto disability metaphor—to emphasize standing as a metaphor for Jordan's strength and leadership, yet also recognize her as not only a black woman but a disabled black woman. The controversy begs some important questions. How does the use of disability metaphor diminish opportunities to engage with people of color who have "real" disabled bodies? Who claims ownership over representations of those who experience multiple forms of marginalization and who belong to multiple communities?

RESISTANCE AT THE INTERSECTIONS

A strong tradition within intersectionality scholarship is to center the experiences of those whose lives are shaped by multiple and interlocking forms of oppression. Indeed, intersectional scholarship has been uniquely insightful in illuminating the forms of agency and resistance individuals exercise as they negotiate interacting forms of inequality. There is still much ground to be laid, however, in developing intersectional scholarship and activism at the nexus of race and disability. Yet in moments when cross-fertilization has occurred, disabled activists of color are found to have played pivotal roles.

One important example of this work was the 25-day sit-in held by disability rights activists who took over the federal Health, Education, and Welfare building in San Francisco in 1977. Through this sit-in, activists successfully demanded federal enforcement of Section 504 regulations of the Federal Rehabilitation Act, the first federal

regulations prohibiting discrimination based on disability. The protest, which has come to be known as "504," marked one of the most important moments in the disability rights movement and one of the most impressive acts of civil disobedience in the late twentieth century (Barnartt and Scotch 2001; Schweik 2013; Shapiro 1993). Activists who lived in the federal building for 25 days were supported by myriad racial justice organizations in the Bay Area, a coalition facilitated by disabled activists of color who worked in both arenas of social justice. Among the coalition of supporters, the Black Panthers fed the protesters a daily dinner, publicly and financially supported the protests, and documented the sit-ins in their newspaper (Schweik 2013; Scotch 2001).

Disability Justice: Challenging Police Brutality at the Intersections

More recently, the disability justice movement has emerged, propelled by local organizing groups in urban areas and by social media activists. Led by disabled people of color and LGBTQ activists, the disability justice movement calls for a more intersectional approach to dismantling disability oppression. These activists challenge the emphasis on independence that was a hallmark of the disability rights movement. They also call for more expansive models for inclusion than the popular, but narrow, focus on legal rights and accommodations. While the goals of the disability rights movement prioritized the interests and perspectives of wheelchair users, the disability justice movement seeks also to center the experiences of people with psychiatric disabilities, chronic illnesses, and other disability groups that have been marginalized in previous disability organizing efforts.

One issue centered by disability justice writers and activists is that of patterns of police brutality, which are generated at the intersection of racism and ableism. It has been widely documented that black men are most likely to experience injury or death at the hands of law enforcement (Hyland, Langton, and Davis 2015; Ross 2015; Roussell et al. forthcoming). Disability also appears to be a high predictor of the likelihood of experiencing police force; however, because disability remains relatively invisible as a demographic category, we lack comprehensive research on patterns of police use of force against civilians with disabilities. Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies are not required to report instances of police violence against civilians with disabilities, and no national database tracks these

patterns. And although the discipline of sociology has produced important research on the hypercriminalization of racial minorities, the intersection of race and disability remains largely unexamined in this literature.

A few media outlets have compiled databases tracking police shootings, and this evidence suggests that between one quarter and one half of police shootings involve people with psychiatric disabilities (Perry and Carter-Long 2016; Treatment Advocacy Center 2013). These studies have not tracked other disabilities, however, and they do not include forms of police-on-civilian violence outside of shootings. In the most comprehensive analysis of media coverage of police violence and disability known, Perry and Carter-Long (2016) found that approximately one half of instances of police violence involved civilians with disabilities.

Although law enforcement's engagement with people with psychiatric disabilities is receiving some public attention, these patterns are not often placed within a broader disability story. Yet evidence suggests people with a surprisingly wide range of impairments are at heightened risk for police brutality (Perry and Carter-Long 2016). Disabled people are also subjected to unique, and particularly brutal, forms of violence at the hands of law enforcement. For example, journalists have called attention to several recent incidents in which law enforcement officers have pushed people from their wheelchairs. In one such case, the officer did so to "prove" that the civilian was faking his disability (Perry and Carter-Long 2016). Incarceration continues to be a profound injustice committed against Americans with disabilities. People with disabilities, particularly those with psychiatric disabilities, are overrepresented in prisons and juvenile detention centers (Binswanger, Krueger, and Steiner 2009). These institutions often breed unique and brutal forms of degradation, including physical, sexual, and emotional violence (Nowotny and Kuptsevykh-Timmer 2018). Inhumane treatment within institutions, such as solitary confinement, can also cause permanent impairments and exacerbate the severity of existing medical conditions (Arrigo and Bullock 2008; Nowotny and Kuptsevykh-Timmer 2018). Police abuse of people with disabilities, both inside and outside of institutions, also includes denial of accommodations or attention to medical issues.

The complex enmeshment of racism and ableism has been rendered largely invisible not only in scholarship but also in racial justice and disability activism. This issue was not taken up by the

disability rights movement, perhaps because it was not central to the lives of middle-class white activists and perhaps because people with psychiatric disabilities have traditionally been marginalized in the disability rights movement (Jones and Lewis Brown 2013; Gossett Zakrajsek et al. 2014). Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement has largely been silent on the issue of disability, despite their pronounced commitment to intersectionality. Thus, writers and activists of color, who also belong to disability communities, have organized to call out how the intersection of racism and ableism has fallen through the cracks by multiple social justice movements who fail to recognize these patterns. The Harriet Tubman Collective, an organization of black deaf and black disabled organizers, released a statement challenging Black Lives Matter for failing to include disability in its vision statement, even as this platform committed the movement to amplify the voices of "the most marginalized Black people." Although other intersections of inequality were named, the vision statement of Black Lives Matter did not mention disability once. The Harriet Tubman Collective challenged this erasure, questioning "how a movement whose primary focus is ending police brutality, could outright ignore the violence experienced by Black Disabled and Deaf people."

Challenging Disability Essentialism

Finally, we turn to two examples of how resistance at the intersection of race and disability can potentially unsettle taken-for-granted tenets of the minority model of disability. Resting upon the race analogy, the minority model locates the "problem" of disability as prejudice and social exclusion and simultaneously seeks to divorce disabled people from the pathologizing gaze of medicine. Consequently, pain, fatigue, and problems relating to "impairment" have been regarded as private matters that should not take up too much space in public conversations about disability. Ralph (2012), however, found that ex-gang members in Chicago who experienced paralysis as the result of gun violence often emphasized, even displayed, the bodily shortcomings and failures they lived with as they spoke to youth about the dangers of gang violence. In doing so, these men defied values and codes of conduct shared in the disability rights movement in service to social justice. As Ralph argued, these men were willing to disempower themselves in order to empower the youth for whom they are committed to reaching:

Disabled ex-gang members are willing to insist on the defectiveness of their bodies in order to highlight the burden that violence creates in communities like Eastwood. Their methods contrast sharply with the aims of the disability rights movement, in which constructing physical difference as an inferior identity is routinely and unequivocally criticized.

Thus, allowing multiple forms of disability-inflected resistance requires a recognition of the ways fundamental tenets of disability studies have been coded white.

Although we have critiqued the unreflective use of disability metaphor in critical race literature, the use of playful disability metaphor and performative disability embodiment within hip-hop begs consideration of the ways analogy can be used to empower at the intersection of race and disability. Language and performative styles within hip-hop both draw from and transform dominant conceptualizations of disability and damage imagery (Bailey 2011; Porco 2014; Rios 2011). Porco (2014) argued, "As vernacular theory and practice, hip-hop flips the script on disability, transforming a physical condition and social stigma into a desirable aesthetic value." One example of this playfulness is the hyphy movement, which emerged in the Bay Area during the early 2000s. This hip-hop style involves performances termed "going hyphy," "going dumb," and "getting retarded" (Rios 2011). In these displays, black and Latino youth intentionally embody deviant identities of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and intellectual disability of which they are disproportionately labeled in schools. In contrast to the ways boys distance themselves from disability identities in other social spaces (Morris 2012; Pascoe 2007), youth in the hyphy movement transform disability into symbols of empowerment and resistance. Going "hyphy" or "retarded" challenges the racialized patterns in which these labels are deployed and simultaneously imbues these symbols with positive social meanings. Although this form of resistance might be unsettling to disability activists who have called for the rejection of the "R" word, intersectionality calls us to sit with the disquieting recognition that our own universal prescriptions are layered with racialized meanings.

CONCLUSION

Disability and race have most often been taken up together not as intersecting forms of inequality but as analogies used to substantiate the validity of the

other. One of the great ironies that emerges in the literature on critical race scholarship is that although we have made disability metaphor central to our discourse, we have rendered disability as an actual analytic category nearly invisible in work on race and intersectionality. A similar critique has also been leveled against the field of disability studies, which some have argued has often silently assumed whiteness (Bell 2006; Lukin 2013). Having the greatest access to leadership roles, white disability activists and critical disability scholars have cultivated understandings of disability on the basis of a presumed white, middle-class identity.

We do not offer prescriptions here for determining appropriate or inappropriate analogizing. We do contend that the deployment of race and disability analogies should be regarded as cultural terrain worthy of sociological investigation. As we have demonstrated, the strategic use of racial analogies by disability activists and scholars has served a valuable purpose in establishing "people with disabilities" as a group who have endured profound injustices and who are deserving of legal protections. Yet the deployment of the "disability is like race" analogy has also served to privilege the interests and perspectives of white, middle-class disabled Americans and marginalized the voices of people of color with disabilities. Furthermore, we have explored how our overreliance on disability metaphor in racial discourse is rooted in a history in which disability and race were deeply intertwined in the construction of notions of the worthy citizen. Out of that history has come an emphasis on distancing racial minority groups from disability. This has meant that negative cultural values about disability remain embedded in progressive racial discourse. Furthermore, the voices, perspectives, and identities of people of color with disabilities have not found a rightful space within critical race scholarship and activism.

We hope that the critique of race and disability analogy work is only the beginning. Important scholarship that centers the interaction between race and disability remains to be generated within American sociology. Indeed, many issues of concern to contemporary sociology are generated at the nexus between racial and disability inequalities, yet they remain underexplored. We have discussed patterns of police brutality that are generated by the interaction of racism and ableism; yet much ground is left to be turned in examining these patterns and their consequences from sociological perspectives. In addition, race, social class, and gender are all deeply implicated in patterns of educational

experiences and outcomes of children and youth with disabilities. These patterns deserve more sociological attention using methodological and analytic tools that are truly intersectional. In short, there is much exciting and generative intersectional work to be done at the crossroads of critical race and critical disability scholarship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback on this article.

NOTE

1. Though we foreground the intersection of race and disability in our analyses, we recognize that other forms of inequality are also enmeshed in the patterns we examine.

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