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Embodied Reflexivity: Positioning Embodiment in Disability Studies Research

La réflexivité incarnée: Définir la position de la cognition incarnée dans les recherches et les études sur le handicap

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of embodied reflexivity, positioning embodiment in disability research. The overarching aims of this research are first to critically outline the key/guiding tenets of embodied reflexivity to locate its theoretical groundings. Second, the research critically assesses how embodied reflexivity has been taken up in Disability Studies (DS). Third, it determines if and how the practice of embodied reflexivity is experienced differently by scholars with and without disabilities within the context of DS research. Fourth, it illustrates the methodological implications of embodied reflexivity for scholars with a disability and determines the methodological value of embodied reflexivity for disability-related research. This paper concludes with a summary of key findings and implications for future research.

Résumé

Ce papier présente une analyse de la réflexivité incarnée, définissant la position de la cognition incarnée dans la recherche sur le handicap. Les buts globaux de cette recherche sont, premièrement, de souligner critiquement les principes clés/directeurs de la réflexivité incarnée afin de situer ses bases théoriques. Deuxièmement, la recherche évalue essentiellement comment la réflexivité incarnée a été reprise dans les études sur le handicap ; troisièmement, elle détermine si la pratique de la réflexivité incarnée est subie différemment par des chercheurs et des chercheuses avec et sans des handicaps ainsi que comment ces individus subissent ces différences dans le contexte des études sur le handicap. Quatrièmement, la recherche illustre les implications méthodologiques de la réflexivité incarnée pour les chercheurs et les chercheuses avec un handicap et elle détermine la valeur méthodologique de la réflexivité incarnée pour la recherche concernant les handicaps. Ce papier conclut avec un sommaire des résultats clés et des implications pour la recherche ultérieure.

Keywords

Embodied reflexivity; Embodiment; Disability; Disability studies; Reflexive embodied empathy

Mots clés

La réflexivité incarnée ; la cognition incarnée ; le handicap ; les études sur le handicap ; l'empathie incarnée et réflexive

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

What does it mean to research disability from within disability? How can a researcher's own embodied experiences concurrently illuminate and complicate the pursuit of knowledge? These questions underpin my doctoral research, which critically examines how people with disabilities (PWDs) in Ontario engage with self-managed models of attendant care through the province's Direct Funding program. In a policy context where the language of "self-management," "choice," and "independence" is promoted, my research critically unpacks what these terms mean in practice, and for whom. Although Ontario became the first province in Canada to legislate accessibility with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) in 2005 (Yoshida, 2004), the promise of inclusion compared to countries such as Japan, Sweden, Germany, and Australia (Titchkosky, 2011) has faltered in its implementation. People with disabilities continue to navigate complex, underfunded, and often inaccessible systems. My research explores how access to direct funding impacts occupational engagement and performance for PWDs who receive funding from the Ontario Direct Funding (ODF) program to "self-manage" their attendant services, with the aim of informing broader, more equitable approaches to disability policy. Importantly, this research constitutes an inquiry into my own positionality: how my identity as a researcher living with a disability, a visual impairment, shapes the questions I ask, the methods I choose, and the knowledge I co-produce.

In undertaking this research, I adopt Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as both a methodology and a theoretical orientation. CDA enables an interrogation of policy texts, institutional language, and public discourse to reveal how systemic power relations are encoded in language and practice (Fairclough, 2013; Janks, 1997). This approach is particularly suited for Disability Studies (DS) research because it attends to the structural and ideological conditions that produce and perpetuate exclusion and inequity. As Fairclough (2013) articulates, CDA aims to expose and challenge “social wrongs,” aspects of social systems that are harmful to human well-being and potentially remediable through structural transformation. This perspective is especially relevant to disability, an area in which legislative reforms often fail to shift the deeply entrenched discursive constructions of dependency and deficit that marginalise PWDs.

My research not only applies CDA to disability policy; it interrogates the epistemological and methodological implications of conducting disability research as a researcher living with a disability. Central to this exploration is the concept of embodied reflexivity, which I use to critically reflect on how my own experiences, identity, and subjectivity shape the research process. Embodied reflexivity has been defined as being wholly aware of one’s own emotions and feelings in order to be fully present in the moment (Vettraino et al., 2019). It entails recognising that no individual is a mere observer; rather, an observer is both influenced by and has an impact on the actions occurring. All reflexive action has been conceptualised as embodied and constitutes a form of knowing (Vettraino et al., 2019). Hutchins (2014) has noted, for example, that “organisms create their own experiences through their actions” (p. 428). This conceptualization of action, however, transcends the individual to encompass embodied action in which one’s physical and mental engagement in the world is deeply interconnected with the learning experiences that arise from interaction with others. The focus on embodied action, therefore, not only relates to the individual or self, but to the learning experiences that can be garnered and how one's actions, thoughts, and words can impact others.

Ultimately, my own positionality as a researcher with a disability provides an opportunity to engage in the co-construction of knowledge through dialogic exchange (Chaudry, 2019). Invariably, reflexivity is a precondition of critical engagement. I argue that reflexivity is an important precondition for the articulation of critique and must, therefore, be a focus of CDA. Without critical reflexivity, CDA can reinforce and perpetuate some of the same dominant discourses that I critique as a researcher with a disability. Embodied reflexivity adds another dimension to this equation because it enables me to rely on my embodied experiences as a researcher to question these dominant discourses; it requires me to develop a heightened sense of awareness with respect to my subjectivity as performed throughout the research process and its various phases. It also involves being acutely aware of my shifting position with regards to the discursive processes of domination or power in terms of how the occupational performance of adults with physical disabilities is impacted by direct funding models. As noted by Hutchins (2014), experience is not received passively but is actively created through one's actions — actions which are always embodied, situated, and relational.

In this paper, I draw upon these insights to problematise dominant framings of embodied reflexivity, particularly as articulated by Finlay (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014, 2015). Finlay's model focuses on the importance of self-awareness and co-participation in the research process, thereby encouraging researchers to reflect on their own embodied experiences and how these impinge on their interactions with participants. While Finlay provides an important foundation for understanding reflexivity as a bodily and emotional process, I argue that her emphasis on co-participation and shared experience can obscure the power dynamics and ableist assumptions that continue to shape the research relationship. In inclusive disability research, shared embodiment (Clare, 2017; Chaudry, 2019) may create the illusion of epistemic sameness, masking the diversity of disability experiences and the structural inequities that differentiate them (Imrie, 2004). In the context of my study, although I identify as a disabled researcher, I do not have a physical disability—the focus of my study, which places me in a complex position as both insider and outsider. This ambivalence necessitates a more critical and nuanced application of embodied reflexivity. Against this backdrop, this paper contributes to the literature on critical disability studies and qualitative methodology by advancing a more critical, situated understanding of embodied reflexivity. It positions disability not as an essential trait or static identity, but as a dynamic, socially constructed experience that is always mediated by other axes of power and difference.

My journey to writing this paper was shaped in part by my experiences as a disabled athlete. During my time in sports, I learned first-hand how the body can both limit and empower and how physical engagement with the world shapes one’s sense of self. There was a pivotal moment when I recognised that my own bodily experiences were central to how I understood the world and interacted with others. This realisation led me to explore the deeper connections between embodiment and research, ultimately guiding me to this work on embodiment reflexivity.

Although there has been a tendency in advocacy research and spaces to conceptualise disability in non-relational terms (Foreman, 2005), I consider disability to be social or relational in nature. Within such discourses, disability is almost imposed on the individual, negating embodied experiences and how environmental barriers can have psycho-social impacts such as feelings of isolation and exclusion, as well as lowered self-esteem linked to societal stigma or lack of access (Stebnicki et al., 2012). The focus on embodiment in this paper requires me to use language thoughtfully and with precision to capture the complexity of the disability experience (Adams et al., 2015). As a researcher with a visual impairment, I consider disability as a part of my identity, which is why I use the term researcher with a disability or researcher living with a disability.

1.2 Outline

The first section of this paper will critically explore the concept of embodied reflexivity and its theoretical tenets. It will introduce Finlay's (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014, 2015) model of reflexive embodied empathy which focuses on the embodied intersubjective relationship between researchers and research participants. The second section of this paper will focus on how embodied reflexivity has been applied in DS. In the third section, I will build on the discussion by focusing on how the concept of embodied reflexivity can be different for scholars with a disability engaged in DS research. Subsequently, I will consider the implications of researchers with disabilities positioning themselves within the context of embodied reflexivity. I will also introduce a reflexive component in which I focus on how this impacts the research approach of my own work. This paper concludes with a summary of key findings and implications for future research.

2. Conceptualising Embodied Reflexivity

Social constructivist perspectives on knowledge generation have highlighted the role of reflexivity in creating awareness about the biased and context-specific nature of knowledge claims (Pollner, 2017). As noted by Katzman (2015), "reflexivity reveals not just the incompleteness of claims to knowledge but also highlights the tendency of truth claims to mask and serve particular interests” (p. 158). Traditionally, reflexivity has been conceptualised in cognitive terms as an intellectual practice that enables the critical analysis of knowledge production processes (Katzman, 2015). Many researchers (see Burns, 2003; Edvardsson & Street, 2007; Finlay, 2005; Sauer, 1998; Seymour, 2007; Sharma et al., 2009; Tomkins & Eatough, 2013), drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), have, however, understood knowledge generation as not merely a cognitive process but also one that is embodied. Understandings of reflexivity as a cognitive process are rooted in Cartesian ideas that view the body and mind as distinct (Moran, 2013; Sermijn et al., 2007).

Merleau-Ponty (1962) offers a more nuanced view of the relationship between the body and mind, arguing that the body serves as “the vehicle of being in the world” and that our cognizance of the world is intimately connected to the body (p. 94). He suggests that at the core of all our experiences and reflections lies a being that recognises itself not through observation or inference but through direct engagement with experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Building on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) ideas, the concept of embodiment has emerged as a critique of the tendency to prioritise the mind over the body, challenging the traditional focus on mental processes at the expense of bodily experience (Katzman, 2015).

Qualitative research, particularly with phenomenological underpinnings, has positioned the body as being central to the research process. This viewpoint encourages researchers to engage with their personal lived and felt experiences as part of the knowledge production process (Husserl, 2001). While this is a key tenet of phenomenological research, it is imperative to clarify that, in this paper, I do not take up a phenomenological methodology. However, I do draw on aspects of phenomenology, particularly the emphasis on reflexivity, to inform my process of self-reflection. In this regard, I incorporate journaling as a method for capturing and reflecting on my personal experiences, which supports my engagement with the research topic and enriches the interpretation of the findings.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) understood the body as a medium that facilitates such a process; it is the body that mediates physical perceptions and, consequently, shapes the experiences of a researcher (Swain & French, 2000). Qualitative research designs have largely identified the body as central to research processes used to draw out unconscious pre-understandings (Sandelowski, 2002). The embodied responses of researchers or the engagement of researchers with their embodied reactions and senses ("embodied reflexivity") has been shown to enrich research findings (Burns, 2003; Edvardsson & Street, 2007; Finlay, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014, 2015). It does this by guiding researchers to focus on the interphysical linkages between themselves, their subjects, and the research environment, thus highlighting the intertwining of individual subjectivities (Swain & French, 2000).

Embodied acts are those that are actualised through the human body and occur in real-time and within specific physical spaces (Haas & Witte, 2001). Embodied acts involve the internalised manipulation of the body and constitute virtual extensions of the body (Haas & Witte, 2001). Embodiment is typically manifested as a sense that is felt, and while it "exists in an uneasy relationship with abstract language…that does not mean that embodiment is always unavailable for analytic observation" (Haas & Witte, 2001, p. 414). From a practical standpoint, much of the research on embodied reflexivity has traditionally focused on one-to-one contexts where researchers directly engage with their participants. This approach often assumes a direct, de-contextualised interaction between the researcher and those being researched.

However, this framework may be limited, particularly in research areas like DS, where the research context might not always involve such direct engagement (Swain & French, 2000). This raises the question of whether phenomenology, traditionally focused on the lived experiences of participants, could be adapted in a way similar to autobiography or autoethnography, in which the researcher's own embodied experience becomes a central part of the research process. This approach could offer new insights, particularly in contexts where the researcher's perspective is integral to understanding the phenomenon under study.

Finlay's (2014) model is the focus of this paper because conceptually, it addresses these limitations. This model shows how people can achieve insight into others' way of being through their own embodied reactions; it focuses on coexisting layers of empathy and how understanding can be garnered through collaborative research methods that involve hermeneutic reflection. Finlay (2005) delineated her model of embodied reflexivity, reflexive embodied empathy, to capture the process of relating to others' embodied way of being and to capture the interlinked nature of individual subjectivities. Furthermore, Finlay's (2015) model consists of three layers of embodied reflexivity, which are interpenetrating but each entail different, although coexisting, dimensions of embodied intersubjectivity (Finlay, 2006b). In the first layer, Finlay (2006a) asserts that researchers must focus on their embodied reactions, both during and after research interviews, to connect with participants. This layer is predicated on the idea that people can gain a nuanced understanding of another's bodily way of being by appealing to their own embodied reactions (Finlay, 2015).

The second layer highlights empathy as an imaginative self-transposal that focuses on how beings are interlinked in a symbiotic way of mirroring and doubling (Finlay, 2014). Thus, according to Finlay (2006a), researchers are expected to use their imaginations to both re-experience and re-enact the experiences of participants (Rinaldi, 2013). The third layer relies on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of a "reciprocal insertion and intertwining" (p. 138). This process enables an understanding of the self and others through the processes of intersubjective corporeal commonality (Finlay, 2006b). According to Finlay (2005), this process enables empathy, which in turn enables an "understanding of the Other and self-understanding" (p. 10). This third layer thus constitutes a process that involves the integration of researchers' self-understanding and the understanding of participants in order to enhance research findings.

Even before Finlay (2005) developed her model of embodied reflexivity, Sauer (1998) applied the concept in research on miners, introducing the idea of pit sense: a form of embodied, sensory knowledge that helps miners make critical decisions regarding risk and safety independent of managerial oversight. According to Somerville (2006), pit sense involves an interconnected use of all senses, blending sound, smell, touch, and kinaesthetic perception. This challenges the conventional view that knowledge is an abstract, objective asset held by professionals as described by Kamoche and Maguire (2011). Sauer's work highlights tacit knowledge that arises from everyday practice, aligning with Gherardi's (2006) notion that knowledge is not just information but the ability to navigate complex social and material contexts. Sauer's concept of pit sense emphasises that such knowledge is not acquired through formal teaching but through embodied experience, action, and social interaction, thus challenging traditional ideas about the separation of knowledge from those who create or experience it (Katzman, 2015). Against this backdrop, embodied reflexivity can act as an important conduit for generating a unique form of knowledge that is derived from the subjective experiences of practitioners, which they develop through their embodied professional experiences (Katzman, 2015; Del Busso, 2007). While reflexivity has traditionally been conceptualised from a cognitive standpoint, the idea of embodied reflexivity positions it as both a cognitive and embodied process that facilitates knowledge generation (Katzman, 2015).

I suggest that the concept of embodied reflexivity has immense value in qualitative research because it focuses on bodily specificities as a productive source of knowledge. It challenges prevailing views that position the body as discursively constructed by acknowledging embodiment's active role in producing knowledge. Thus, the body is not framed as passive; rather, it is the locus of learning and knowledge-production through which researchers gain access to the world. The concept has particular value in DS research because knowledge production does not involve bodily activities but, rather, activities that are mediated through perceptual, bodily activities or embodiment. This focus on embodied senses and reactions can produce nuanced research because the researcher must make a conscious commitment to the interphysical dynamics that exist between themselves, their research environments, and research participants. In doing so, there is the potential to uncover complex and multi-layered forms of knowledge. Finlay's (2008) model is particularly useful because it demonstrates how insight into others can be attained through embodied reactions across various layers and, thereby, aptly illustrates the diverse dimensions of embodied intersubjectivity.

In the next section, I present an analysis of how attending to embodied reflexivity in the context of DS can generate knowledge by highlighting invisible embodied knowledge. I will examine the usefulness of embodied reflexivity in the co-construction of knowledge within the context of DS research while paying attention to the embodied experience of disability in terms of the constraints that researchers with a disability encounter as they seek to connect to embodied experiences. Invariably, the reflexive process takes place in the body (Katzman, 2015), which has important implications for researchers with a disability.

3. Embodied Reflexivity in Disability Studies

DS is an interdisciplinary, politically grounded field that emerged from political activism in the UK and North America during the 1970s and 1980s (Johnstone, 2012). It was a direct response to the dominance of the medical model, which individualised disability as a pathological deficit (Goodley, 2014). The social model of disability gained traction, championed by scholars such as Oliver (1986), marking a radical shift that foregrounded how societal barriers, as opposed to bodily impairments, create exclusion. Thus, DS has political roots and was driven by the quest to deconstruct ableist norms embedded in the social, cultural, and institutional aspects of life (Goodley, 2014; Oliver, 1990). Although the social model of disability was instrumental in shifting attention away from individual pathology and toward societal barriers, it has been critiqued for neglecting the lived, embodied realities of impairment (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2006). By focusing primarily on structural exclusion, the model can obscure the complex ways in which impairments are experienced and negotiated by PWDs. This has led to calls for more nuanced approaches that account for both social and embodied dimensions of disability. Consequently, research that foregrounds disabled embodiment is vital to understanding how impairment interacts with social norms and structures in lived contexts. Furthermore, DS recognises that knowledge production is never neutral. Historically, disability research has often been conducted *on* disabled people rather than *with* or *by* them, thereby reinforcing asymmetrical power relations (Barton, 1997). This has generated calls for more inclusive, participatory, and emancipatory methodologies that challenge normative standards of research and representation.

In this section, I focus on how embodied reflexivity has been applied in DS. I will note explicitly how critical disability praxis itself constitutes an engaged and embodied form of enquiry into disableism and ableism (Chaudhry, 2019). In doing so, I will highlight the conceptual linkages between critical disability praxis and embodied reflexivity. Following this, I will discuss the transformative potential of disability embodiment in the context of knowledge production through the experiences of a scholar with a disability doing disability research.

DS analyses disability within specific historical, social, cultural, political, and relative contexts. It focuses on scrutinizing the social norms that conceptualise specific attributes as impairments (Schalk, 2017). In doing so, it exposes and analyses ableism, which is discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived ability (Campbell, 2009). Ableism is rooted in a network of practices, beliefs, and processes that give rise to a particular and idealized corporeal standard of human functioning (Campbell, 2009). Within such discourses, as well as within social and political structures, disability is framed as a diminished state of being human. This gives rise to collective subjectivities that conceptualize disability as inherently negative. This political and social structure encapsulates disableism (Goodley, 2014). Importantly, scholars such as Thomas (2019) and Goodley (2014) distinguish between ableism and disableism. While ableism denotes the broader cultural privileging of ability and the systemic idealisation of normative bodies and minds, disableism refers more specifically to the social oppression and exclusion faced by disabled people as a direct consequence of this ableist system (Thomas, 2019; Goodley, 2014). Disableism captures the structural, attitudinal, and institutional barriers that actively disable individuals with impairments. Thus, the political and social framework that positions disability as an inherently negative condition can be understood as disableism, which operates within, and often because of, ableist norms.

I will explicitly note how critical disability praxis, defined as “prioritising the process such as building holistic access and community–academia relationships as a measurement of progress, instead of the usual methods valued in higher education such as productivity and the linear notion of progress and effectiveness” (Nishida, 2018, p.239), constitutes an engaged and embodied form of enquiry into disableism and ableism (Mol, 2002; Mol, 2008; Chaudhry, 2019).

Traditionally, people with disabilities have been excluded and marginalised from the research process and knowledge production in favour of researchers without disabilities carrying out research related to disability (Chaudry, 2019). This has effectively reproduced the unequal power relations that underpin the production of knowledge and marginalisation of people with a disability by subjecting them to ableist norms (Rinaldi, 2013; Barnes and Mercer, 1996). As a result, people with disabilities have often been analysed through the lens of ableist norms and terminology (Chaudry, 2019). These non-disabled responses embody either over-attentiveness or social invisibility (Loja et al., 2013; Thomas, 1999). The application of embodied reflexivity to DS recognises that the subjective and intersubjective experiences of impairment constitute an important aspect of constructing disabled identities. This is because impairment is largely contextualised within the social structure of ableism (Loja et al., 2013). Loja et al. (2013) have argued that

> [D]isabled embodiment is produced and experienced within an ableist context that mobilizes the charitable gaze and the medical model to signify impaired bodies at the expense of the recognition of disabled identity. In order to deconstruct ableism and to recognize and respect the value of the disabled identity, a politics of recognition is required. (p. 190)

Loja et al. (2013) suggest that the experience of embodiment is intricately tied to identity, as it is shaped and constrained by societal norms and expectations. To challenge this ableist framework and adequately recognise the value of disabled identity, a politics of recognition is essential. Thus, embodiment is not just a physical experience but is deeply intertwined with how one's identity is perceived and acknowledged within a broader social context. This “politics of recognition,” enabled by embodied reflexivity in the context of disability research, focuses on the corporeal practices of a researcher with a disability and how this affects the research processes. This is important because ableism dictates a corporeal standard that marginalizes researchers with a disability, distances them from each other, and promotes research practices that fit within ableist norms. The politics of recognition thus highlights the problematic power relations that exist in the everyday world. Consequently, a researcher with a disability can draw on their embodied experiences to generate knowledge in various contexts and discuss the epistemological implications for their research.

Scholars such as Chaudry (2019) have explored embodied reflexivity in DS by drawing on their experience as a researcher with a disability while addressing broader issues related to disability, race, and neoliberal development in the Global South. In her research, Chaudry discusses how her own disabled embodiment provided a basis for engaging in critical dialogue with disabled interlocutors in an ethnographic study. This approach privileges the knowledge of a researcher with a disability, a perspective often marginalised. Chaudry critically examines her positionality as a disabled ethnographer, illustrating how her embodied experience plays a role in generating similitude and co-constructing knowledge (Chaudry, 2019). Her study highlights how embodied reflexivity allows researchers to bridge power differentials in the research process, with her own visual disability facilitating synergies that disrupt traditional power dynamics. Chaudry (2019) demonstrates that these embodied practices can transform research, support critical discourse, and raise awareness about structural barriers and injustices within the disability community.

Other scholars who have applied embodied reflexivity in the context of disability research have noted its epistemic advantage in that it highlights the problematic power relations that exist in the everyday world (Rinaldi, 2013). Rinaldi (2013) aptly states that when marginalised people are positioned as lacking control over their own experiences, they experience bifurcated consciousness whereby they are divided between dominant normative interpretations and material reality. This bifurcated consciousness emerges from the social relations that exist as part of everyday practices. Against this backdrop, researchers with disabilities are increasingly using their embodied experiences to generate knowledge. Brown and Boardman (2011) highlight how their own disabilities shape their epistemological positioning in research, particularly how and where they conduct it. They argue that embodied reflexivity helps unpack the challenges faced by disabled researchers in qualitative research. While reflexivity is often viewed as contentious, Brown and Boardman (2011) found it valuable for addressing issues related to their visible disabilities. Their research acknowledges the intersectional identities of researchers and the limitations these pose, such as the tendency for disabled researchers to focus primarily on other disabled individuals. While this can offer an insider perspective, it also risks reinforcing stigmas due to societal assumptions about normality. Through their reflections, Brown and Boardman (2011) reveal how decisions about disclosing disabilities involve complex negotiations that are underexplored in the literature but significantly impact the research process for disabled scholars.

In contrast to scholars who have taken up embodied reflexivity in DS, Crooks et al. (2012) found that researchers do not have to embody the experience of a disabled academic in order to relate to the research outcomes and findings. Crooks et al.'s (2012) research is particularly insightful because it offers an experiential account of the process of embodied reflexivity in the context of collaborative research involving disabled researchers. Consequently, it shows how the unpacking of embodied relationships to disability in collaborative studies supports knowledge construction. In this research, dialogue about reflexive engagement was found to be crucial for collaborative research since it makes clear the various embodied positionalities that researchers bring to a study, which relates to the phenomenon under examination. Crooks et al. (2012) found that such dialogue provided insight into the divergent understandings of the research outcomes and processes held by members of the team, which were directly linked to their experiences of disability. Researchers' experiences of disability were found to shape their emotional responses to the research findings. As a result, it became apparent to the scholars that "some of us might be too detached in our reading of the findings to achieve a good analysis while others might be too emotionally involved to do anything beyond attempt to validate our own experiences" (Crooks et al., p. 63).

Rinaldi (2013) has also explored her own position to gain a nuanced understanding of the limits to positionality in the field of DS. Her ruminations, presented below, illustrate some scepticism concerning the role of embodied reflexivity:

> It is not my intention to argue that we need to do away with our methodologies, for even I find them valuable. My purpose has instead been to illustrate that there are complications to coming out, that at least my coming out comes with baggage, and that not all moments of coming out lead to a community embrace.

> Within the span of this paper, I meant not merely to self-identify, but to express the discomfort that accompanies my self-identification, so that I might further the discourses around the call to disclose. I remain unconvinced that we have enough safe spaces, even and especially in our own field, for all of our stories. Until that day comes, I would like to think it possible for a researcher to practice reflexivity without publicly taking a position, to conduct responsible research all the while working quietly. I would like to think that while narratives and standpoints have their use, they are not our only approach, and they should not be required. (Rinaldi, 2013, p. 9)

From my position as a researcher living with a disability, having analysed the existing literature on embodied reflexivity and its application in the field of DS, my main takeaway is problematised by current and dominant discourses about lived experiences because it has become a ubiquitous concept. Further, it has particular meanings that are rooted in phenomenology but translate differently when transposed into other domains.

While this paper does not adopt phenomenology as a formal methodology, it would be remiss to ignore the significance of phenomenological insights, particularly in relation to embodiment, for understanding disabled subjectivity. Scholars such as Toombs (1993), who writes from her perspective as a philosopher living with multiple sclerosis, argue that the disruption of bodily normativity profoundly alters one's engagement with the world, rendering the disabled body not simply an object of medical scrutiny but as central to meaning-making. Similarly, Carel (2016, 2018), who draws on her experience with a chronic lung condition, shows how illness and impairment reshape temporal, spatial, and intersubjective relations. Their work illustrates how the disabled body is not only experienced differently but is also situated within a complex landscape of socio-cultural meanings that challenge normative assumptions about function, independence, and normality. These phenomenological accounts resonate with and expand upon the social model's assertion that disability is produced through interactions with an ableist world. However, they also highlight a limitation of the social model: its tendency to downplay the material and experiential dimensions of impairment. By foregrounding lived embodiment, Toombs (1993) and Carel (2016, 2018) show that the phenomenology of impairment cannot be entirely bracketed from socio-political critique. Instead, the two must be held in productive tension to fully understand the layered nature of disablement. In this way, phenomenological accounts can enrich critical disability praxis by enabling more nuanced and embodied forms of reflexivity.

I consider disability as part of my identity, which is why in this paper I use the term researcher with a disability or researcher living with a disability. I am still considering whether person with a disability/researcher living with a disability better brings to the fore my identity and positionality. Ultimately, disability and how it informs my work is something I am continuing to negotiate. I am also grappling with “lived experience” or “experiential knowledge.” In my view, the notion of lived experience does not capture my experiences. Within my research, I have had to shift the concept of lived experience to experiential knowledge. In my world and among the people I interact with, experiential knowledge is something I possess but that I also continue to gain. It is based on critical and theoretical thought and is also situated socially (within society). I feel that when we frame disability as lived experience, it can objectify people and create a passive experience; I tend to be cautious when people want to hear about lived experiences because I always wonder whether my contribution will be tokenistic. And as a critical DS scholar, I actively try to forefront critical perspectives to initiate conversations about disability within social and policy spaces.

4. The Researcher with a disability and Embodied Reflexivity

In this section, I build on the previous discussion, which highlighted the transformative potential of disability embodiment in the context of knowledge production through the experiences of a scholar with a disability doing disability research, and focus on how the concept of embodied reflexivity looks different for a scholar with a disability engaged in DS research. I problematise the idea of embodied reflexivity as a form of reflexivity within which research participants engage in co-participation by focusing on the ableist conceptions that guide this framework. The fact that this framework is contingent on embodied connections with research participants will also be problematised by focusing on how biases and stereotypes can interfere with or undermine the process of embodied reflexivity. This section will introduce the idea of embodied self-reflexivity and determine how this concept addresses some of the limitations associated with embodied reflexivity. Embodied self-reflexivity differs slightly from embodied reflexivity in that it focuses specifically on how the researcher uses bodily sensations to gain insight into their psychological states, emotions, and past experiences. According to Pagis (2009), embodied self-reflexivity “anchors the self in the reflexive capacity of bodily sensations” and illustrates “how bodily sensations are used as indexes to psychological states, emotions, and past experiences, while constant awareness of embodied responses is used as a tool for self-monitoring” (p. 265). This practice involves a constant awareness of bodily responses which the researcher uses as a tool for self-monitoring, thereby enabling deeper self-awareness throughout the research process. In contrast to embodied reflexivity, which emphasises the researcher’s physical presence and its impact on the research process, embodied self-reflexivity focuses more on how the researcher engages with and interprets their own bodily experiences to further reflect on their research role and identity. I will then consider this in the context of DS by focusing on how scholars in the field have applied the concept. As a starting point for discussion, reflexivity constitutes:

> [A] continued self-awareness about the ongoing relationship between a researcher and informants, which is certainly epistemologically useful: the researcher becomes more aware of constructing knowledge and of the influences of their beliefs, backgrounds and feelings in the process of researching. Reflexivity is a position of a certain kind of praxis where there is a continuous checking on the accomplishment of understanding. (Wasserfall, 1993, pp. 24-25)

As has been noted in the previous section, researchers have pointed to the importance of an embodied type of reflexivity through which they co-participate with research participants (Kittay, 1999; Sharma et al., 2009). Embodied reflexivity is distinct from reflexivity such that the former constitutes an embodied practice so that researchers pay attention to their physical reactions during the research process (Kelly et al., 2017). I propose that embodied reflexivity is particularly challenging for researchers living with a disability because the emphasis is placed on the self within the context of the reflexive capabilities of bodily sensations. Ultimately, if qualitative methods such as interviews are to be reciprocal processes, then researchers must focus intently on their embodied experiences and reactions in specific research contexts and in relation to research participants (Denzin, 2001). With regards to researchers living with a disability, sometimes there is an erroneous assumption that disability can be “read on the body” since the body “is a narrative horizon for all texts” (Tregaskis & Goodley, 2005, p.363). Since embodiments situate the narratives of a researcher with a disability, they may consequently be inscribed upon and read as well as misread (Rinaldi, 2013), evoking Derrida’s (1992) concept of “doing violence to the Other.” The connection to Derrida’s (1992) concept of doing violence to the Other is evident in how the embodied experiences of disabled researchers may be misread or reduced by ableist assumptions. According to Derrida (1992), interpretation often involves violence when it distorts or suppresses the subjectivity of the “Other,” reducing them to a stereotype. In the context of disability research, a disabled researcher’s body may be inscribed with meanings that are not their own, shaped by dominant, normative perspectives. This “violence” occurs when their lived experience is overlooked or distorted, such as when the researcher’s embodiment is viewed through lenses of incapacity or pity rather than as a legitimate source of knowledge. Thus, Derrida’s (1992) notion highlights the power dynamics involved in how disabled bodies are interpreted in research; the researcher’s subjectivity may be silenced or misrepresented when their body is misread or reduced to stereotypes. This underscores the importance of critically engaging with the embodiment of disabled researchers, ensuring their experiences are acknowledged and respected without the violence of ableist interpretation.

When co-participants conceptualise the researcher’s disabled body as different or defective, this gives way to ableist biases and stereotypes that can interfere with or undermine the process of embodied reflexivity. Even in contexts where both researchers and participants are disabled, people experience disability differently and these experiences are also determined by intersectionalities including age, gender, and sex (Imrie, 2004). At the core of an embodied approach is the assumption that disability is underpinned by bodily difference, introducing the possibility of the misreading of experiences when researchers seek to create embodied connections with research participants. Rinaldi (2013) has also raised the point that embodied reflexivity can be problematic when analytic or data collection processes that researchers must engage in are conducted remotely and they have no personal contact with participants. It is due to this limitation that embodied self-reflexivity presents the opportunity for researchers to advance reflexive practice in the context of qualitative research (Rinaldi, 2013).

Another challenge linked with embodied reflexivity for researchers with a disability concerns the difficulties in attending to both the bodily and social aspects of disability in the research context. Consequently, the emphasis on embodied experience may undermine, marginalise, or ignore the oppressive dimensions of disability. In the field of DS, Crooks et al. (2012) have also shown that collaborative or team research can be problematic since researchers have diverse operating models of disability. Their embodied experiences of disablement are highly subjective and contingent upon various positionalities (personal and professional) and intersectionalities, which come into play when addressing a specific research question. The diversity in embodiments and positionalities could have positive implications for the research process and its output, but it can also create challenges in the form of difficult roadblocks (Crooks et al., 2012). Ultimately, it is imperative to note that while positive conceptualisations of disabled identities have gained traction in the literature, these identities are not fixed and unchangeable (Rinaldi, 2013; Swain & French, 2000). Rather, they are co-constructed and negotiated as part of social interactions (Mogendorff, 2013).

As researchers with visible disabilities, for example, Brown and Boardman (2011), the scholars experienced the notion of their identities as requiring various forms of negotiation. They explicitly say:

> Our disabilities were not always attributed the same meanings by the participants in our respective research projects as we assigned them ourselves…the cultural construction of disability as a site of oppression has been underplayed by the social model of disability theorists, and yet such cultural notions of disability and their influence on communication and identity negotiation within research relations is an important consideration for researchers with a disability. These identity negotiations demanded conscious

> effort and action on our part, and…were associated with very specific ethical, social and political dilemmas. It is our belief that these negotiations cannot be overlooked as they are an integral part of the research process for disabled researchers, who, regardless of their own perceptions of their disability, must take on the work of managing physical barriers, impairment effects as well as the personal reactions and responses to disability of others within their own research projects. (p. 26)

The excerpt above documents the difficulties faced by researchers with disabilities when trying to use their embodied experiences in the co-construction of knowledge because of how people respond differently to a disability as well as the reality of managing various positionalities and intersectionalities. There is an assumption in the context of disability research that because of their embodied experiences, researchers with a disability have symbolic value in terms of their insider status and ability to establish authenticity (Seymour, 2007). This assumption is erroneous because having a disability or impairment does not necessarily imply a gravitation towards disability research (Brown & Boardman, 2011). Furthermore, this view posits a limited perspective of researchers with a disability because researchers with a disability capture their bodily experiences beyond this realm.

While the previous section noted that disability can assist in building a rapport between researchers and their participants in the process of co-constructing knowledge through embodied experiences, it can also create dilemmas. Most of these dilemmas are linked to how and when researchers disclose their disability. All researchers with a disability must negotiate their disabled selves; however, different types of disabilities bring new dimensions to such negotiations. Researchers who have visible disabilities, for example, cannot easily conceal their impairments and, consequently, may experience such negotiations differently than those who can (Davis, 2005; Lingsom, 2008; Valeras, 2010). Ultimately, people make assumptions about bodies and read into subjectivities and identities on the basis of markers of difference (Hughes, 1999). In this context, how disability is culturally constructed also shapes the negotiation of professional identities and whether the co-construction of knowledge is supported or not. Another problematic aspect of embodied reflexivity in disability research is the power relations within qualitative research. Historically, interview contexts create unequal power relations, with power predominantly concentrated in the hands of researchers, making participants vulnerable to exploitation. In response, scholars such as Oakley (1981) have emphasized the importance of reciprocal relationships between researchers and research participants in order to promote the mutual sharing of information.

However, these assumptions about power have traditionally and erroneously led to the idea that only research participants are potentially disempowered and exploited during qualitative research (Kaaristo, 2022). For researchers who are visibly disabled, there are different dimensions to how power and identity are negotiated during the research process. Lester and Nusbaum (2018) explain that relationships of power are invariably played out via identity categories, which are also rooted in relative social power that shapes everyday relations. In these relationships, some positions are privileged while others are marginalised. Dichotomies are established between men and women or non-disabled people and disabled people, for example. In the context of qualitative research, the researcher may have power over the participant, but the research relationship is not merely a matter of researcher dominance. It is well documented that power imbalances in researcher-participant relations shape and impact disclosure imbalances, whereby the researcher remains unknown to the participant (Butler et al., 2007). Some researchers hold the view that when "writing out of bodies," non-disclosure permits the researcher to hold dominance over their participants because their positionality is effectively obscured (Castrodale, 2018).

Relations between a researcher with a disability and non-disabled participants, however, do not align with these traditional dynamics and are significantly more complicated.

Because of the complex power relations involved, embodied reflexivity does not always facilitate the co-construction of knowledge noted by Brown and Boardman (2011). Power relations between a researcher with a disability and non-disabled participants are contingent on various factors. For example, Brown and Boardman (2011) found that these power relations were determined by how they, as researchers, were perceived by participants. In some instances, they were perceived as academics and, consequently, ascribed a high status. Concurrently, due to their visible disabilities and choice to disclose information about their disability when asked, this status was altered (Brown & Boardman, 2011). Additionally, the researchers found that in the context of face-to-face interviews, complexities emerge regarding perception management due to the presence of a visible disability. Specifically, Brown and Boardman (2011) write that the presence of a visible disability shaped both the ethical and practical dimensions of the interview, introducing not only new challenges but new considerations. Various tensions existed because of their intersectional identities as researchers but also as visibly disabled women. These tensions ultimately shaped the negotiation of power during the interviews. Despite some of the challenges associated with this approach, Chaudry (2019) maintains that the value of embodied reflexivity lies in its ability to bridge power differentials during the research process while concurrently generating critical and transformative knowledge. This point of view is informed by the idea that the centring of disability embodiment effectively challenges deeply-rooted disciplinary practices and discourses.

While the concept of embodied reflexivity looks different for a scholar with a disability engaged in DS research, which itself is concomitant with some challenges, Chaudry (2019) has shown that in the context of inclusive disability research, embodied reflexivity creates intersubjectivity experientially because of shared disability embodiment. Furthermore, intersubjectivity is created in a discursive way through a dialogic process which occurs as a corollary of the dialectical movement that exists between discursive and experiential processes (Chaudry, 2019). As part of these processes, dialogic exchange and shared disability are consistently intertwined (Chaudry, 2019). Invariably, disability-embodied practices develop similitude and, in doing so, create an intersubjective space that promotes the co-construction of disability knowledge. It is imperative to recognise that the perspective that Chaudry (2019) offers is based on inclusive disability research (i.e., it involved researchers and research participants with a disability), which can account for the creation of an intersubjective space that may not exist in contexts that feature only a researcher with a disability. Why this may be the case has been discussed in detail above. Nevertheless, in the case of inclusive disability research, Chaudry (2019) found that the experience of similar disability barriers fomented similitude and facilitated a structural analysis of disability. According to Chaudry (2019), “the two were dialectically intertwined—building similitude by itself was not enough, neither was it sufficient to do only structural analysis; rather, they went hand in hand, further generating solidarity and critical consciousness” (p. 769). In this context, the centring of disability embodiment provides a means of knowing. Specifically, shared disability embodiment has transformative potential in the processes of knowledge production.

4.1 Embodied Reflexivity, the Researcher with a Disability, and Positionality

While embodied reflexivity constitutes an important tool for engaging critically with my positionality as a researcher with a disability, it is concomitant with some limitations, especially regarding Finlay's (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014, 2015) model of embodied reflexivity. As a starting point, this model focuses on the importance of self-awareness and co-participation in the research process, thereby encouraging researchers to reflect on their own embodied experiences and how these impinge on their interactions with participants. For researchers with a disability, this model is limited because the emphasis on co-participation can inadvertently idealise shared embodied experiences while ignoring the role of power dynamics and ableist conceptions in shaping these interactions. Although Finlay (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014, 2015) advocates for an awareness of the researcher's subjectivity, her model may unintentionally diminish the potential biases and complexities resulting from the researcher's position as both a disabled individual and a researcher that exists within a system that still marginalises disability. In my case, embodying the research process in this way may risk reinforcing a narrative of "shared lived experience," which can mask the diversity of disability experiences and the systemic oppression that people with disabilities face.

Finlay's (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2014, 2015) model risks assuming that these experiences provide universal insight, neglecting the reality that my embodiment is shaped by specific socio-political and historical contexts that are not necessarily shared by all participants with disabilities. Furthermore, this model tends to emphasise the researcher's subjective experiences without sufficiently interrogating how these embodied understandings might reinforce rather than challenge dominant discourses around disability. In my work, this poses a challenge: how can I draw on my own embodied knowledge without allowing it to overshadow the nuanced and varied experiences of others with different disabilities or socio-political contexts? The critique, therefore, lies in recognising that embodiment reflexivity, while useful, requires careful navigation to avoid oversimplifying the complexity of disability and to ensure that the research remains inclusive and representative of the broader disability community. Adopting an intersectional focus is crucial for unpacking how the various dimensions of my identity — as a woman who is pursuing a PhD, for example — mediates the dialogue between my research participants and me. Furthermore, as I have previously noted, shared disability or my role as an “insider” raises the risk of making premature conclusions because of my own preconceptions about disability, which I have garnered through my subjective experiences. Fleming (2018) has shown that insider researchers may become too familiar with the data; they might not “see” the emergent nuanced patterns, because they take them for granted as part of their everyday experiences.

As a researcher, my identity is not a fixed, stable construct, and thus cannot be reduced to a simple binary of disabled/not-disabled. My own research, for example, focuses primarily on adults with physical disabilities, but not having a physical disability myself places me in a complex position; yet, having familiarity with disability in terms of accessing supports, services, and resources gives me a broader perspective even when studying a disability other than my own. However, it is important for me to consider the full complexity of identity even when I believe I share an identity with people impacted by my work.

In recognising my positionality and the various intersectional identities that I bring as a researcher, another question that I must address relates to the difficulties of balancing both the bodily and social aspects of my disability and how these may impinge on my research. This is crucial because ultimately, emphasizing embodiment may undermine, marginalise, or ignore the oppressive dimensions of disability. In analysing my positionality, I must also remain aware of how the process of co-constructing knowledge through embodied experiences can be fraught with challenges. Many of these dilemmas are linked to how and when researchers must disclose their experiences of disability. All researchers with a disability must negotiate their disabled selves. However, different types of disabilities bring new dimensions to such negotiations, which is a crucial consideration as I embark on my research. I feel that when we frame disability as lived experience, it can objectify people and create a passive experience. I tend to be cautious when people want to hear about lived experiences because I always wonder whether my contribution will be tokenistic.

In reflecting on my own positionality and approach to research, it is also imperative to engage explicitly with the ethical dimensions of conducting disability research as a disabled researcher. While ethical concerns are often framed in terms of procedural ethics, such as informed consent or safeguarding, there are deeper relational ethics that must be acknowledged, particularly when working with participants who may share aspects of one’s own identity or social location. As Scully (2018) argues, disability research must grapple with the reality of “epistemic injustice,” where PWD’s knowledge is historically devalued or excluded. In this context, the positionality of a disabled researcher carries both an ethical and epistemological weight: it can act as a corrective to marginalised perspectives, but it also requires careful attention to the power dynamics that emerge in shared spaces of identity.

Moreover, conducting research from a place of lived experience, while potentially empowering, can be emotionally demanding and expose the researcher to a unique set of vulnerabilities. Broun and Heshusius (2004) note that when researchers draw on their own embodied histories and identities, particularly within disability research, there is a heightened risk of emotional fatigue and over-identification. Disclosure of one's disability, though often seen as a route to transparency and authenticity, can simultaneously place researchers in a position of risk, especially within academic environments where ableism continues to shape expectations and perceptions of competence (Brown & Boardman, 2011). This is a tension I have experienced personally, especially in interactions with supervisors and committees, where my visual impairment has sometimes been framed implicitly as a constraint rather than as a source of insight. These moments highlight how ableism operates not just in research design but in the very institutional spaces where research is evaluated and legitimised.

The ethical terrain is further complicated by the emotional and cognitive labour involved in peer research, particularly when working with disabled participants in the community. There is a real risk of role conflict, balancing empathy and professional distance, insider solidarity and critical engagement. Questions arise about whether participants expect shared understanding and how I, as a researcher, manage the differences in embodiment, privilege, and knowledge. As my research focuses on people with physical disabilities, I must remain attentive to the different ways of knowing that emerge through different kinds of embodied experience. A shared label of "disabled" does not negate difference. Rather, it invites ongoing reflexivity about how knowledge is co-produced and whose knowledge is centred or validated in that process. Therefore, ethical disability research demands more than procedural compliance; it calls for an ongoing, situated, and relational ethics — one that recognises the emotional demands, power asymmetries, and systemic exclusions that shape both the production and reception of knowledge within DS.

As I engage with my research, “pit sense” (Sauer, 1998) becomes an invaluable tool in navigating the complex terrain of my embodied reflexivity. This concept helps me attune to the subtle, often unspoken dynamics at play in my interactions with my doctoral supervisor, committee members, and participants, as well as the broader process of conducting qualitative research with a visual impairment. As previously noted, “pit sense” (Sauer, 1998) is an intuitive feeling—a discomfort or unease—that signals something is amiss, unexamined, or overlooked. For instance, in discussions with my supervisor and committee, I sometimes feel a tension between the need to assert my autonomy as a researcher and the implicit, sometimes unspoken, assumptions they may have about my capacity to engage in certain research processes due to my visual impairment. This tension can manifest in subtle ways—perhaps in the form of paternalistic language or assumptions about the limitations of my experience. My “pit sense” alerts me to these moments, prompting me to reflect on how my embodiment as a researcher with a disability influences these interactions. It is a reminder to question whether my research is being framed through a lens of perceived vulnerability or limitation rather than my agency and expertise.

Moreover, in terms of risk and safety, “pit sense” serves as a guide for navigating the risks associated with qualitative research when my own embodiment is a significant factor. For example, I must carefully consider how my physical limitations, such as difficulties in accessing certain spaces or resources, might impact my ability to engage with participants or collect data in certain settings. While I strive to maintain autonomy in designing and conducting my research, “pit sense” helps me recognise moments when I may feel excluded or when certain methodological choices may inadvertently make my disability feel like a barrier rather than part of the broader research context. This heightened awareness fosters a sense of responsibility to continuously advocate for my needs and to ensure that the research environment remains accessible and safe, both for myself and my participants.

5. Conclusion

The overarching aim of this research was to: 1) critically outline the guiding tenets of embodied reflexivity; 2) locate the theoretical groundings of embodied reflexivity as a concept; 3) critically assess how embodied reflexivity has been taken up in DS; 4) determine if and how the concept of embodied reflexivity is experienced differently by disabled and non-scholar with a disability within the context of DS research; and 5) illustrate the methodological implications of embodied reflexivity for scholars with disabilities to determine the methodological value of embodied reflexivity for disability-related research. I showed that while reflexivity has traditionally been conceptualized from a cognitive standpoint, the concept of embodied reflexivity is positioned as both cognitive and embodied process that facilitates knowledge generation.

Against this backdrop, I discussed the usefulness of embodied reflexivity in the co-construction of knowledge within the context of DS research while also focusing on the embodied experience of disability in terms of the constraints that researchers with a disability encounter as they seek to connect to embodied experiences. I also discussed some challenges for disabled qualitative researchers as they engage in embodied reflectivity. For example, I noted that regarding the process of co-constructing knowledge through embodied experiences, while disability can assist in building a rapport between researchers and their participants, it can also create dilemmas. Many of these dilemmas are linked to how and when to disclose their experiences of disability.

All researchers with a disability must negotiate their disabled selves; however, different types of disabilities bring new dimensions to such negotiations. Researchers who have visible disabilities cannot easily conceal their impairments and, consequently, may experience such negotiations differently. While acknowledging these limitations, I nevertheless suggested that embodiment, for the most part, privileges knowledge from researchers with disabilities who are typically marginalised. In doing so, it highlights the problematic power relations that exist in the everyday world, aligning with the methodological approach that I have adopted in my own research. Consequently, researchers with a disability can use their embodied experiences to generate knowledge in various contexts and discuss the implications of these experiences for their research. the epistemological implications for their research.

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