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Book Review

Grue, Jan (2015): Disability and Discourse Analysis. Farnham: Ashgate.

Introduction

The cover of Jan Grue's book »Disability and Discourse Analysis« shows a metal construction that spirals upwards and tapers to a point. This picture visualises in a plain, yet intriguing, manner the intention the author pursues with this monograph: to bring the research fields of disability studies and discourse analysis together. Both fields have not yet found each other, even though they share the same concern: the re/production of social categories that re/produce and re/enforce asymmetric power relations, marginalisation, and discrimination (p. ix/x). Therefore, the book's main objective is the analysis of disability as a complex phenomenon created in and through language (Chapters 1 and 2), and its effects in different contexts and social environments (Chapter 3 to 6).

Background Information

The book, published by Ashgate as a part of its eight-volume series *Interdisciplinary Disability Studies*, is characterised by a distinct methodological approach: It focuses both on the current disability discourses and the significance of discourse analysis for disability studies. This approach parallels publications in other fields of minority studies such as gender studies, LGBT studies or post-colonial studies, which also prioritise the study of language.

Trying to clarify the relationship between disability research and discourse analysis has not yet been undertaken in the field of disability studies. Neither older nor more recent publications provide an overview of the research on disability discourses or its employable research methods: e.g. »The Disability Studies Reader« (Shakespeare 1998), »Disability Discourse: Disability, Human Rights, and Society« (Corker/French 2002), the comprehensive »Handbook of Disability Studies« (Albrecht/Seelman/Bury 2003) or the »Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies« (Watson/Roul-

stone/Thomas 2012). Grue's monograph tries to fill this gap by applying a discourse perspective on disability. By discussing the role of language in the social construction of disability, he maps the current area of research on discourses of disability, impairment and discrimination within the field of disability studies.

Summary of the Book's Main Points

The book deals with »different ways to talk about disability« (p. 4), which is why the author explicates in Chapters 1 and 2 the reasons as to why the study of language and power should be considered as an integral part of disability studies.

Chapter 1 argues that language about disability entails symbolic orders embedded in different texts and contexts. This point is illustrated with examples from the Norwegian and English language (p. 11). The analysis of disability as a word and a concept, including its symbolic orders and power effects, is critically approached by a discourse perspective. For that reason, Grue introduces the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, its origins (namely the critical theory and the Foucauldian discourse analysis, pp. 13ff.), and a toolbox for the subsequent empirical analysis of textual structure, argumentation and topics in relation to disability (pp. 17ff.).

Chapter 2 illustrates the discourse approach to disability studies using the example of four disability models, i.e. the social, minority, gap and medical model. The analysis of these models, considered as »foundational truths« of the field of disability studies (p. 33 ff.), focuses on topics and topoi that »frame disability as a particular kind of epistemological object« (p. 40). Subsequently, Grue argues that the four models are not mutually exclusive or incompatible, but produce and reproduce disability in relation to specific purposes and embedded discourses (p. 48). Therefore, they signify *different* aspects of disability in social fields (p. 50), which eventually allows disability researchers »to align them in an ecumenism« (p. 48).

Chapters 3 to 6 analyse the ways in which disability and disablement are constructed in and through language within the fields of medi-

cine, politics, economy, disability identity and media respectively.

Chapter 3 deals with discourses in which subjects meet medical language and specialised knowledge that is concerned with their illnesses, and the corresponding diagnoses and cures. Considering the »absolutely central position of medical knowledge, language and power in the disability field« (p. 51), Grue primarily criticises the »narrower phenomenon of *medicalization*«, including its medical power asymmetries and abuses (p. 53). The analysis focuses on the specific ways medical discourses talk about disability (p. 55) and on the communicative needs medical discourses address (p. 56). Based on the analysis of documents issued by a Norwegian disability NGO and its diverse member organisations, Grue shows how medical knowledge and language support the creation of a group-identity (p. 61) and helps to maintain organisational integrity (p. 69). This example illustrates that – even in a context where a socio-political approach to disability is prominent – the medical discourse remains hegemonic (p. 72).

Chapter 4 examines how disability is embedded in political and economic discourses in Anglo-America and Scandinavia. Regarding disability models as key topoi, the analysis reveals that Scandinavian discourses primarily elaborate on disability as a gap between capacities and opportunities, while Anglo-American discourses primarily conceive disability as a form of oppression. Though upholding this »tale of two discourses« (p. 76) for the purpose of analytical productivity, this line gets explicitly blurred when Grue analyses the »Norwegian Discrimination and Accessibility Act« (p. 85). This legislative text »mixes discourses« as it medically defines disability as the cause of discrimination, but develops solutions that are rooted in a socio-legal discourse (p. 96).

Chapter 5 deals with the intricacies of disability identity highlighting that disability can serve as a »linguistic tool for building alliances across the impairment divide« (p. 101), yet it can also evoke alienation. While disability identity thus might be a problematic category, Grue argues that disability identification can in fact become meaningful as much as it can alter »social, political, economic or other salient consequences« (p. 103).

Chapter 6 provides a short analysis of media discourses and focuses on popular, idealised or stereotypical representations of disability. As discourse objects and identity topoi, these representations generate descriptive and normative conceptions of disability. Grue criticises the cause-and-effect representations of impairment and injury as the source of extraordinary will-power and achievement (p. 120) by analysing the »supercrip«, »cyborg« and »techno-marvel« (p. 110).

A concise final note summarises the discourse approach to disability and concludes that models and theories about disability are elements of the disability discourse themselves. Therefore, Grue argues that pursuing a »narrow disability model« is futile. Instead, he advocates an »ecumenical view of Disability Studies«, which is able to »continuously re-appropriate« the concept of disability itself (p. 124).

Evaluation

Grue presents his main points in a clear, comprehensible language and substantiates them with the clear definition of the book's subject, aims and limitations. The equally long chapters (with Chapter 5 and 6 being shorter than the other chapters) are enriched by various personal examples and experiences. While the importance of each chapter for the overall analysis is clear, the individual chapters could have profited from a more structured outline that informs readers at each chapter's beginning about structure, scope and content. Notwithstanding, Grue's book has achieved its aim: It elucidates the role of language and discourse in the social construction of disability. The analysis is conducted in a deliberate, analytically sound and empirically profound manner. The author provides evidence from several empirical studies and emphatically presents the complexities of studying disability. Interestingly enough, Grue repeatedly refers to the real-life situation of persons with disabilities as he considers the connection between theoretical discourses and real-life as crucial for disability studies (e.g. p. 72). This book therefore teaches first of all researchers in the field of disability studies not to take disability models at face value. Instead, they are topoi of discourses and should for that reason not be presented as »global ideological frameworks« but as »tools for specific purposes« (p. 35).

At this point in the book, one of Grue's arguments is especially noteworthy: The author states that disability studies »can, a little facetiously, be conceived as an imperialist project« (p. 114). This metaphor is, however, not »somewhat questionable«, but fundamentally important. Why? Because it points out, in an almost frivolous manner, the serious challenge of universalising disability narratives that the field of disability studies produces itself (e.g. Meekosha 2008, 2011). Even more, it is with and by the distinct means of discourse analysis that this challenge could and should be reflected in the future.

Altogether, the book lives up to the expectations raised by its title – »Disability and Discourse Analysis« –, as theoretical implications for the field of disability studies derive from this particular methodological approach. Even though Grue mainly refers to CDA in order to »establish an analytical vocabulary« (p. 3) that follows »a particular form of discourse analysis« (p. 9), he eventually uses a rather broad approach to discourse analysis throughout the book. Symptomatically, the author already asks in Chapter 1 »Why Discourse Analysis?« and not »Why CDA?«, and declares to follow »an ecumenical discourse-analytical perspective« (p. 10).

For that reason, the book thus offers more detailed insights into the field of disability studies than into the field of discourse analysis. For that reason, the discussion of disability models, in particular their analytical applicability, becomes the connecting thread of all chapters and can, at times, appear as self-referential. Grue interweaves the methods of empirical analysis with their results in a compelling, though non-instructive way, which might pose a problem especially for novice discourse researchers (i.e. pp. 62 f.). Apart from a toolbox (pp. 17 ff.) and a »model of textual production and interpretation« (p. 63), the book does not contain more detailed information on the methodology and methods of CDA, or on how to actually conduct a subsequent discourse analysis. Even though the empirical evidence is rich and ample, it lacks more explicit contextualisation: When was this research done? What kind of documents comprises the corpus and why? How was the data analysed? Thus, the book is not a text book on how to conduct discourse analyses, in particular a CDA, but rather presents the results of such an

analysis and its implications for models of disability.

Consequently, one question resonated with us while engaging with the book: What could the analysis of discourses gain from the focus on disability? Taking up Grue's argument that »disability is always-already a theoretically informed concept« (p. 27), it might be worthwhile to discuss additional conceptualisations of disability, particularly on the level of knowledge. For example, Weisser (2007) proposes to conceptualise disability as a conflict between expectations and abilities whose solution hinges on knowledge about disability. Focusing on disability knowledge could, in addition, help disability and discourse researchers alike to delve deeper into the institutional analysis of disability phenomena, of which disability models are one vivid expression. To this end, the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse could offer useful insights.

In sum, Grue impressively strengthens and contours the field of disability studies. He demonstrates the valuable and strong analytical impact of discourse analysis on the study of disability models and different fields of disability research. For that reason, the book will certainly have a huge impact on discourses in the field of disability studies.

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Jugendpolitiken

Wie geht Gesellschaft mit
»ihrer« Jugend um?



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