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**Watermeyer, B. *Towards a Contextual Psychology of Disablism*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.**

This ambitious text seeks to bring together the disciplines of disability and psychology, which have so often been regarded as uneasy disciplinary bedfellows. In recent years, materialist approaches to disability as oppression have dominated the field of disability studies (particularly in the United Kingdom) whereas, as Watermeyer acknowledges, 'most psychological theory on disability has taken an individual, pathology-orientated position, ignoring social realities almost completely. (p. 15). Nonetheless, Watermeyer goes on to argue that: 'this does not mean that a critical, contextual psychology of disability is impossible to create' (p.15). And, indeed, this book aspires to create such a critical, contextual psychology of disability.

As a clinical psychologist and a disabled person, writing from South Africa, Watermeyer brings a unique perspective to this project. Throughout the book, Watermeyer draws from his 'straddled identities' (p.1) to promote thought and reflection. From the outset, Watermeyer is critical of the traditional dominance of materialist approaches to the study of disability at the expense of personal experience, drawing on the work of feminist disability writers to make his case. Watermeyer is particularly critical of the reluctance of social model advocates to engage with psychological aspects of disablism and he sees this refusal as having limited the usefulness of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Watermeyer is, doubtless, aware of the irritation that such criticisms of the social model may provoke, but he is right to insist that disability studies must become a 'freer, more curious discipline' (p. 4), as well as arguing for a rejection of 'totalising splits between players in the disability arena who are right and good, and those who are bad a wrong' (p.6). It is only by creating safe spaces for a theoretical engagement with disablism that it is possible to promote the thought and reflection to which Watermeyer strives for.

Despite Watermeyer's attachment to the discipline of psychology, he explicitly rejects its individualising and pathologising tendencies. Watermeyer clearly states that '[b]eing impaired in a disablist culture embodies a psychological predicament composed of historical, relational, cultural, political and material aspects' (p. 4). Crucially for Watermeyer, an analysis at the psychological level is 'part of the struggle for disability equity' (p.13). Watermeyer's commitment to exposing the

psycho-emotional aspects of disablism and to disability equality never wavers throughout the text.

The book is informed throughout by Watermeyer's extensive knowledge of the literature. He draws on a wide range of texts from the global North (North America, Canada and the United Kingdom) as well as including contributions from India, Africa and Latin America. The subject areas covered in the book are extensive and wide ranging; in what follows, I can only give a brief taster of some of that diversity.

Chapter Three has the engaging title: "Psychoanalysis and disability studies: An unlikely alliance". In this chapter, Watermeyer begins by stating that 'the psychoanalytic model may appear a peculiar framework for interrogating disability' (p.51). I would agree. However, although psychoanalysis may be unfamiliar territory for some readers, Watermeyer gently guides us through a history of psychoanalysis and disability. On reflection, however, at the end of the chapter, it was difficult to resist the temptation to fall back on the view that psychoanalysis and disability remain uneasy bedfellows.

In Chapter Four, 'Bioethics, disability and the quality of life debate', Watermeyer discusses contemporary moral issues including: pre-natal testing, assisted suicide and the right to die as well as eugenics. Having allied himself with the critical realist view of disability promoted by Shakespeare (2006) in earlier chapters, here, Watermeyer challenges Shakespeare's position on prenatal testing and abortion and eugenics. Watermeyer is uncomfortable with what he describes as Shakespeare's 'coolheaded' approach and urges Shakespeare to use a psychological frame of reference to engage with disability studies' 'furious critique of modern genetics' (p.103). Here, by turning to the psycho-emotional aspects of disablism, Watermeyer is able to offer a nuanced discussion of these sensitive issues.

In Chapter Five, 'Exploring the cultural shaping of socialisation: The psychological positioning of disabled lives', I was drawn to the section on "Disability and the family'. Watermeyer acknowledges, and I would certainly agree, that psychoanalytic theorists have viewed families of disabled children as problematic. Viewed through the lens of a 'bereavement' model, the focus has been on loss, grief, denial and insecure attachments among parents (in particularly, mothers) of disabled children. Watermeyer is critical of approaches that fail to examine the 'aversive feelings about disability within parents or society at large' (p.123). On the other hand, he is equally critical of some of the literature that has challenged these negative views of parenting a disabled child. He describes such literature as offering 'romanticised' notions of

mothering disabled children that are simply another (unhelpful) stereotype. However, given the persistent dominance of the bereavement model in contemporary cultures, 'romanticised versions' of mothering disabled children are, perhaps, better understood as counter-narratives in a disabling world.

Finally, Watermeyer's stated aim in writing this text was to promote thought and reflection, and, for me, this book certainly achieves that aim. This book is unusual in bringing together ideas from sociology and psychology to think about disability, and would be of interest to both undergraduate and postgraduate readers as well as others working in the field.

## **References**

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