Defining the boundaries of disability critical perspectives

Licia Carlson and Matthew C. Murray (Eds.)
Routledge, London, 2021
ISBN 9780367684167, pp.156, paperback, $NZD75

The book *Defining the boundaries of disability: A critical perspective,* provides a number of perspectives on the identity of disability situated in many contexts. The editors, Licia Carlson and Matthew C. Murray, are both professors of philosophy focusing on areas around social justice and inclusion. Reflecting this background, the volume cleverly asks contributors to reflect on the commonly expressed phrase, "we are all disabled," from academic, artistic, and autobiographical perspectives. The authors critique the concept in principle and the meaning beneath it, providing numerous examples of the underlying ableism, epistemologies, and orientations that frame the idea that disability is an identity that *everyone* will inhabit at one point or another.

The concept, 'we are all disabled' (or its linguistic relative, 'we will all become disabled one day') is a frequent but conceptually lazy teaching device and advocacy lever. The notion is used by many (including me), In theory, to 'prod' people into thinking about the world they would want when they or their relatives reach that point. The popularisation of such a concept concerns and aggravates the scholars in this volume because it misses the nuance and complexity of inhabiting different identities and arbitrarily tries to 'dissolve' the distinctions between peoples, as if it is conceivable to have a notion that 'we are all' anything.

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK *36(2)*, 116–117.

The essays, poems, and reflections centre around five main elements, bringing in a mixture of academic literature, social justice in practice, and personal reflections. First is the ways in which disability is enacted in a range of different settings, both by people with disabilities and weaponised against these groups. Second is critical examinations of the power dynamics in particular situations, for example, disability (under) representation in academia, the fraught landscape of depending on frequently undependable systems, structures, and support as a disabled person. Third is the limits and problematising language around 'designing for everyone' and universal design and the clash for equitable civil rights. Fourth, the ways in which music, art, and poetry can provide ways to explore the concept of 'we are all disabled' as a thought-provoking poetic device rather than a hollow cliché. Finally, the difficulties, disembodiment, resilience, and adaptability that disabled people (were forced to) experience and display during the Covid-19 pandemic. The ways in which these skills and knowledge can scaffold for planning future crises.

Some of the essays and constructions that stood out to me were "Power, disability and the academic production of power" in Matthew C. Murray's reflections on the philosophical underpinnings of 'we are all disabled" and what the concept leaves out. "*We are all disabled: The conundrum of problems and solutions,*" where Madeline Dewelles examines the representation of disability and the perceived university and 'being special,' and what these put in the foreground, imply, centre, and leave out. "*We are all disabled, until we are not*", where Teresa Blankmeyer Burke gives a personal reflection on being confronted with the term 'we are all disabled' to counter her request for qualified support. "Being deafness", where Michael E. Skyer explores the ontological tensions between biomechanical hearing loss and 'deaf gain' in the way people are treated.

While I am not a social worker, based on my experience as a health advocate, this could be a valuable resource for social workers working with whānau and individuals with long-term health conditions. The chapters on support structures and institutional dynamics in particular could serve both people in clinical practice or those who work in the areas of policy development, professional development or research.

This is an excellent volume with important points made in an interesting and innovative way. I would have preferred a greater grounding in how the others construct their critical orientations in the first section—some of it was a little unclear—along with further exploration of definition and boundaries as critical start points. The editors talk about the volume being intended for a broad audience, including philosophers, historians, activists, clinicians, and moral theorists. I would agree with this assessment; however, when this volume is introduced to any audience, it should be carefully considered. It›s not a 'beginner's text.' To me, these works are best suited to supplement more senior scholarship or experienced activism reporting or action research, particularly with the range of approaches. While the volume relies heavily on American references, legal frameworks, and social justice movements, the underlying elements can be adapted to Aotearoa New Zealand, especially the deconstructing 'we are all disabled' as part of the often repeated '1:4 New Zealanders have a disability'.

The part of me that has a love of neatness and completion would have liked to have been offered an alternative to 'we are all disabled.' Of course, relying on such conventions and tropes would defeat the purpose and unifying message, that lumping everyone and every difference together under a supposed rallying cry is problematic and delegitimises the struggle for rights by individuals and groups. Instead, the boundaries of disability are messy, fluid, and reflect unique and complex constructions of identity, especially in a post-Covid-19 world.

Reviewed by **Amy Hogan**, Heath Advocate/Master's Candidate University of Auckland