

---

# ‘The issue is about her ’social capacity’’: exploring ‘risk’ as another category of difference in intersectional analysis in disability research.

Godfred Boahen\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>London Metropolitan University – United Kingdom

## Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork between 2011/2012, this paper is an intersectional analysis of how social categories - ‘learning disability’; ‘mental capacity’; ‘woman’; ‘ethnic minority’ - were operationalized in a learning disability service. Research involved observation of ‘everyday’ practice – multi-professional risk assessments, team meetings, needs assessments - and interviews with professionals. In England and Wales the Mental Capacity Act 2005 (MCA) established a framework for assessing cognitive capacity, classified incapacitated adults as uniquely susceptible to risk, and enshrined a legal duty to ‘protect’ them from ‘harm’. Within the MCA, cognitive incapacity and risk are mutually constitutive, with the aim being to ‘safeguard’ the adult concerned. In a Foucauldian sense, ‘mental capacity’ is another social category because it is defined in law and professionals have powers to identify corresponding individuals. The findings from this research show that professionals operated with an informal conception that ‘learning disability’ and ‘mental (in)capacity’ were associated categories, which together put service users at risk and strongly impeded their ability to protect themselves. Women learning disabled service users provoked particular anxieties about their ‘sexual vulnerability’ or ‘promiscuity’. While hitherto researchers have highlighted the intersectionality of ‘learning disability’ and other social categories (Gustavsson et al, 2005) this paper suggests that risk is another mark of differential treatment. Being a woman taking ‘unwise’ and ‘risky’ decisions about your sexual relations could lead professionals to question your ‘social capacity’ and cognitive abilities to deal with everyday uncertainties. Relatedly, certain cultural practices and beliefs were considered risks to service users because they led service users and/or their families to make questionable decisions about their lives, including sexual relations.

## Reference

Gustavsson, Anders, Jan Tøssebro, and Rannveig and Traustadóttir. 2005. ”Introduction: Approaches and Perspectives in Nordic Disability Research.” In *Resistance, Reflection and Change: Nordic Disability Research*, edited by Gustavsson A, Sandvin J, Traustadóttir R and Tøssebro and J, 23-39. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

**Keywords:** Risk, mental capacity, intersectionality, culture, ethnic minority, ethnography

---

\*Speaker