
Crippling the Future: Making Disability Count

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Abstract

Over the last 8 years, we have been conducting research across a variety of sites where the presence of disability is dramatically increasing and transforming consciousness of this form of human variation. The book we are writing, entitled *Disability, Personhood, and the New Normal in the 21st Century*, is based on our multi-sited fieldwork. In locations as diverse as schools, medical laboratories, film festivals, homes and religious institutions, we have learned how families form new kinship imaginaries around the fact of disability; how disability publics emerge through a variety of media forms and art activism; how scientists are rethinking cognitive diversity; how schools engage with and too often fail in launching students with disabilities into the world.

Our keynote talk addresses questions of demographics and futurity that we have encountered in our work. As we have followed our subjects and our topic longitudinally across multi-sited domains, we have come to appreciate how ubiquitous disability is as a social fact in contemporary North America. The number of disabled citizens, currently estimated at almost 20% of the US population, is predicted to increase significantly over the next decade, both as an expanding portion of the population and a growing absolute number. Given the inevitable increase in disability across the life cycle, we predict that what some disability scholars/activists call "accessible futures" will remain under constant negotiation in an increasingly neo-liberal era where public expenditures are constantly at risk. At the same time, the initiatives of people with disabilities and their supporters are changing the face of both public and private culture, and most importantly, the shape of future imaginaries in which disability is understood as a central aspect of the human condition.

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