


Research paper

Teaching Disability Studies in Undergraduate Psychology Programs: Common Themes and Gaps

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Abstract

Psychology has been criticized for its tendency to personalize disability issues that have reinforced the stigmatization of people with disabilities as inferior individuals. In response to these critics, there has been a call for integrating the social model of disability into psychological studies and teaching. Against this background, the current study aimed to explore disability teaching in undergraduate programs of psychology at some universities in Indonesia. More specifically, the study wanted to identify the common focus and gap in disability teaching and the extent to which social model of disabilities have been integrated into the existing teaching practices. The orienting questions of this study included: how disability has been generally taught, through what kind of subjects, and what areas of teaching have been less developed. The study employed a qualitative methodology and involved six participants, who are lecturers of undergraduate psychology programs. Data collection was conducted by using semi-structured interviews and analyzed by using inductive thematic analysis. The findings of this study suggested three themes that represented two common focuses and a gap in disability teaching. These include: 1) focusing on disability as a special need, 2) people with disabilities as the focus of interventions, and 3) social model of disability as an underdeveloped area of teaching.

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1 Introduction

People with disabilities (hereafter, PWD) are among those groups in Indonesian society, which have continuously experienced many forms of stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination. As documented in several reports, PWD commonly have a lower quality of life compared to non-disabled people due to the inequalities that they experience in various aspects of their life including health, education, and livelihood (e.g., Adioetomo et al., 2014; Cameron & Suarez, 2017; Siyaranamual & Larasati, 2020; Kementerian Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional, 2021). The prevalence of disability in Indonesia is reflected, among others, in the report of the *Direktorat Statistik Kependudukan dan Ketenagakerjaan* (2024), which presents data on persons with disabilities based on the Long-Form Population Census 2020. Using the Washington Group indicators of disability, the report notes that for Category 1 (capturing those with

severe functional difficulties, the core disability measure recommended by the Washington Group) the proportion of the population aged five years and above experiencing disability in 2022 was 1.88 percent among males (approximately 2.5 million persons) and 1.43 percent among females (approximately 1.9 million persons). Despite disabilities affecting millions of people in our society, their lived experiences and struggle remains poorly recognized and understood.

The history of disability studies and movements in other countries, particularly those that have developed better awareness and law enforcement concerning equality and inclusivity for people with disabilities, indicate that empirical research can have significant roles in advancing the struggles of PWD for eradicating various forms of stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination (Goodley, 2011; Watson, et al., 2012; Shakespeare, 2015). Literature on disability studies suggests that research on disabilities can function as a strategic platform for advocating the voices of PWD as well as for raising public awareness of the pervasive injustice and inequalities experienced by PWD (Mmatli, 2009; Mertens, et al., 2011). In addition, research on disabilities can inspire collective movements that aim at eliminating discriminative social systems and practices, which have maintained and perpetuated the disadvantages of PWD (Carling-Jenkins, 2016; Gordon, et al., 2017).

Despite its potential, research on disability may also become another mechanism that reproduces and reinforces the stigmatization of PWD. The history of disability studies has shown that even well-intended scholarly activities, such as research and teaching on disabilities, may inadvertently perpetuate and normalize stigmatizing views of PWD as inherently problematic and inferior individuals (Oliver, 1990; 2009; Goodley, 2014; Becket, 2015). There are various ways through which research and teaching on disabilities may reinforce the stigmatization of PWD. One of those is through the tendency to personalize disability issues, in which disabilities are merely viewed and addressed as personal problems caused by one's physical or mental conditions. As a result, the nature of disabilities as a socio-politically constructed phenomenon becomes largely neglected. The personal and collective difficulties experienced by PWD are mainly seen as a consequence of having physical or mental conditions, which are considered dysfunctional, rather than as disadvantages caused by discriminatory systems and practices that neglect the rights or even existence of PWD (Goodley & Lawthom, 2006; Marks, 2014; Gesser, et al.; 2023;).

Literature on disability studies has highlighted how psychological research and teaching on disabilities have contributed to reinforcing stigmatizing views on disabilities through its tendency to personalize disability issues (Goodley, 2019). Central to such a tendency is psychology's emphasis on the notion of normality versus abnormality. Underpinned by such a tendency, psychological research and teaching on disabilities have been mainly oriented toward the understanding of disabilities as personal problems caused by one's physical or mental abnormality (Davis, 2017; Goodley, et al., 2017; Goodley, 2019). Therefore, within the field of psychology, research and teaching related to disability interventions have been predominantly focused on assisting PWD to overcome or lessen their functional disabilities (Goodley, et al., 2017; Gesser et al., 2023). On the other hand, disability research and teaching, which are focused on

examining the discriminatory socio-cultural and political contexts that have instigated and maintained the disadvantages of PWD remain less developed.

Responding to such a tendency, disability scholars and activists have made a call for advancing psychological research and teaching on disabilities that emphasize critical approaches to disability. Critical disability theories refer to conceptual frameworks that address disability issues as complex phenomena shaped by the intertwines of various factors including cultural, social, historical, and political factors (Meekosha & Shuttleworth 2009; Goodley, et al., 2019). Adopting this kind of framework is considered crucial for complementing the tendency of psychology to personalize disability issues with perspectives, which are more socially oriented (Goodley et al., 2017). Taking up socially oriented perspectives on disability is particularly importance in a context like Indonesian society where cultural factors have determining roles in shaping the ways people view, respond to, and experience disabilities (Thohari, 2011).

In the historical development of disability studies, the *social model of disability* represents only one among several perspectives that have been used to understand disability, alongside the moral and medical models. In the context of struggles for justice and equality, the social model is considered to hold distinct advantages over the moral and medical perspectives because it frames the disadvantages experienced by persons with disabilities as forms of social injustice and human rights violations. Through this lens, the social model has served as a key conceptual and theoretical paradigm underpinning social movements advocating for a more just and inclusive social order for persons with disabilities. This understanding marks a fundamental departure from earlier interpretations advanced by the moral and medical perspectives, which tended to define disability as a personal tragedy or a physical/mental impairment. Both perspectives have been widely critiqued for normalizing, and at times justifying, unequal and unjust treatment of persons with disabilities (Brown et al., 2023; Ned et al., 2024; Retief & Letšosa, 2018; Rioux et al., 2024). Such a social perspective remains relatively rare in psychology, which has tended to personalize disability-related issues (Watermeyer, 2024).

Encouraged by these backgrounds, the current study aimed to explore common focuses and gaps in the teaching of disability in undergraduate psychology programs in Indonesia. This study also wanted to examine the extent to which the social model of disability has been included in the teaching of disability. The development of disability research in the field of psychology in Indonesia has been marked by the emergence of studies, that reflect the social model of disability, such as those that examine discriminatory systems and practices in our society as well as those that advocate for more inclusive systems and practices (e.g., Andriana & Evans, 2021; Bonati & Andriana, 2021; Handoyo, et al., 2022). However, whether such an orientation has also been included in disability teaching is still hardly investigated. Disability teaching has a crucial role in advancing disability research because through learning about disabilities students can develop familiarities with various perspectives on disability, including those, which are oriented toward critical frameworks on disability. Several articles in the *Indonesian Journal of Disability Studies* (e.g., Supriyanto, 2019; Hikmiah & Pratiwi, 2023) have explored teachers' and students' attitudes toward disability. However, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no studies have examined how disabilities are taught in

related fields, such as psychology. Such research is essential, as learning experiences about disability can significantly influence and shape students' attitudes toward it. In responding to this gap, the current study sought to identify issues or areas of teaching that need to be further developed to advance disability teaching in psychology, specifically at the undergraduate level.

2 Theoretical framework: social model of disability

The current study aimed to explore common focuses and gaps in the teaching of disability in undergraduate programs in psychology. Particularly, the study examined whether there has been considerable coverage given to topics related to social model of disability. Therefore, this section presents an overview of key concepts that signify this model.

The social model of disability is part of an interdisciplinary area of critical disability studies (Oliver, 1990; 2009; Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2017). Historically, this model was developed in the context of disability movements in Britain in the 1960s. The social model of disability emphasizes an understanding that the disadvantages commonly experienced by PWD are more a product of how a society responds to people with impairment, rather than being caused by the impairment itself (Oliver, 2009). According to Oliver, the proponent of this theory, the social model of disability is "... a way of applying the idea that it was society and not people with impairments that should be the target for professional and intervention practice" (Oliver, 2009, p. 43).

The social model of disability has driven the development of disability studies and activism, which are focused on altering socio-political systems and practices that have sustained and normalized the disadvantages of PWD. This model has encouraged disability scholars and activists to decentre medical and welfare interventions on disability, and to focus more on advocating social changes needed for removing systemic barriers commonly experienced by PWD (Oliver, 1990; 2009; Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2017). This model has become a point of reference for disability studies and activism in various other regions and countries around the world, including Indonesia (Yulianto, 2011).

By framing disability as primarily a social issue, the social model of disability represented a paradigmatic shift from the medical and individual model, which had previously been the dominant framework in disability studies and interventions. Through the lens of the medical and individual models, disability is generally framed as a personal problem caused by one's impairment that needs medical interventions for correcting or rehabilitating dysfunctional physical or mental conditions experienced by the person. Opposing such a view, the social model advocates the understanding of disability as a form of injustice caused by discriminatory social systems and practices. Therefore, it demands social actions targeted to foster a more equal and inclusive society (Oliver, 1990; 2009; Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2017).

Emphasizing social interventions does not mean that the social model rejects the relevance of medical and individual approaches to disability (Oliver, 2009). Rather, this model stresses the importance of acknowledging the limitations of such approaches, including the possibilities of these approaches in perpetuating the stigmatization of

PWD as abnormal and problematic individuals. In this sense, adopting the social model of disability requires awareness to prevent and disrupt modes of research and interventions that patronize PWD as abnormal and problematic individuals who need to be corrected and rehabilitated. Instead, the social model of disability has made a call for disability studies and interventions that can unpack the socio-cultural and political mechanisms through which the marginalization of PWD has been maintained and perpetuated (Goodley, 2014). Driven by such a view, therefore, within the social model of disability, concepts such as social justice, equality, inclusivity, marginalization, and discrimination are crucial to be taken into account in studying and teaching about disability. Also, this model encourages researchers and learners to have critical views on the notions of normality and abnormality and how these notions may legitimize and sustain the disadvantages of PWD in society (Goodley et al., 2017). It was this theoretical lens that guided the current study in examining the common focus and gaps in the teaching of disability in undergraduate programs of psychology in Indonesia.

3 Method

3.1 Study design

This study aimed to explore common themes representing trends in the teaching of disability in undergraduate programs of psychology. Driven by its exploratory aim, this study adopts a qualitative approach, for it enabled the researcher to not only generate descriptive information, such as the names and objectives of the related subjects but also to generate richer data that represented the rationales underpinning the subjects and how lecturers reflected their experiences in teaching those subjects. Qualitative studies that are generally focused on generating insights on a particular topic through the use of non-numerical descriptive data align well with the purpose of this study (Willig & Rogers, 2017).

3.2 Study participants

As of 2020, there were 110 public and private universities in Yogyakarta (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020). Of these, only ten had faculties or departments offering psychology programs. Letters of invitation to participate in this study were sent to the psychology departments of these ten institutions. The letter outlined the study's objectives and the type of information to be requested from participants. It explicitly stated that the research invited lecturers who were currently teaching or had previously taught courses that included content related to disability or individuals with disabilities. Six lecturers from six different universities who met this criterion agreed to participate. At the time of the study, all held a master's degree in psychology, and none identified as having a disability. Their teaching experience ranged from two to eight years, with the exception of one participant who was in her final year before retirement during data collection. The participants consisted of one man and five women. All participants provided written informed consent prior to the commencement of data collection.

3.3 Data collection

The data were analysed by using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). It involved five stages, which are: 1) Gaining familiarity with the data by conducting a line-by-line close reading and re-reading all of the transcriptions; 2)

Developing initial codes throughout the data, by making short descriptive labels that best represent key ideas appearing in sentences or a paragraph; 3) Categorizing initial codes that shared similar ideas into preliminary themes (it was conducted by creating a table with several columns, each column represent a preliminary theme and then all related codes were put within the designated column); 4) Ensuring the accuracy of the preliminary themes by repeatedly comparing the themes to each other; and 5) Making final conceptualization of each theme, by describing its meaning and the supporting quotations.

4 Finding

The current study sought to explore common focus and gaps in the teaching of disability at undergraduate levels in psychology. Also, this study wanted to examine the extent to which the teaching of disability has included the social model of disability. The analysis led to the identification of three themes, consisting of two themes that depicted the common focus and one theme that represented a gap in the teaching of disability. Each of these themes is described below:

4.1 *Focusing on disability as a special need*

The findings suggested that in the sixth study programs participating in this current study, the teaching of disability has been mainly focused on discussing disabilities as diverse forms of special needs. Such a focus was reflected through both the names of the subjects and the main topics covered in those subjects. The names of the subjects include: *Psikologi Anak dan Remaja Khusus* (The Psychology of Children and Teenagers with Special Needs), *Perkembangan Anak dan Remaja Khusus* (The Development of Children and Teenagers with Special Needs), *Pendidikan Anak dan Remaja Khusus* (The Education of Children and Teenagers with Special Needs), *Hambatan Perilaku* (Behaviour Difficulties); and *Kesukaran Belajar* (Learning Difficulties). These titles reflected that the teaching of disabilities has been mainly associated with personal characteristics that mark PWD as individuals with special needs or conditions.

The focus on disability as a special need is further reflected in the topics generally covered in these subjects. The common topics commonly addressed in these subjects are developmental milestones, types of special needs, characteristics of children and teenagers with special needs, the screening process, and risk factors associated with each type of special need. With such a focus, therefore, the notion of normality versus abnormality becomes a central assumption underpinning these subjects. Within these subjects, PWD are positioned as individuals who experience abnormalities in their physical, mental, and social functioning, as reflected in the following excerpt, in which the participant explained the topics covered in the subject that she taught: “We also discussed normal and abnormality and that those children and teenagers who have special needs are part of those who experience abnormalities, whether physically, emotionally or socially” (Participant 1).

4.2 *People with disabilities as the focus of interventions*

By mainly approaching disability as a special need, therefore, the findings also indicated that in the sixth study programs participating in this research, the teaching of disability has mainly equipped the students with knowledge and skills that are needed to conduct

interventions that are focused on the persons experiencing disabilities. Such a tendency was particularly reflected in the learning objectives set up for the aforementioned subjects. Some of these objectives are developing students' capabilities to conduct screening procedures for identifying types of abnormalities experienced by the persons being assessed, building students' skills to recognize the impacts of abnormalities experienced by the person being assessed, and developing students' skills to be able to design types of learning strategies that suit the special needs of the person being assisted.

This kind of emphasis is reflected in the following excerpt: "This subject is focused on educational aspects of individuals with special needs. So, how can we help their learning, both in terms of formal and informal learning? What will be the best way to facilitate their learning?" (Participant 6). This participant explained this point when she described the learning objectives for a subject called *Kesukaran Belajar* (Learning Difficulties). It is such a quotation that reflects the emphasis on building students' competence to develop interventions that are focused on assisting persons with disabilities.

4.3 Social model of disability as an underdeveloped area of teaching

The current study found that the teaching of disability in the sixth study programs being examined has not specifically covered topics related to the social model of disability. The understanding of disability as a form of social injustice that causes the stigmatization and discrimination of PWD has not been specifically taught in the abovementioned subjects. Therefore, the findings of this study suggested that introducing the social model of disability is an area of teaching that needs to be further developed. The following excerpt describes this lack of coverage on topics related to the social model of disability. When asked about the extent to which the social model of disability has been included in her class which is entitled *Perkembangan Anak dan Remaja Khusus* (The Development of Children and Teenagers with Special Needs), one participant replied:

This topic [the social model of disability] has not become a specific topic in the subject, therefore it is quite a challenge to encourage the students to situate individuals with special needs within their social contexts. Most of the students still tend to mainly look at the persons having special needs (Participant 6).

Although the social model of disability has not been specifically included in the teaching of disability, this study also found that there are early attempts made by the lecturers to cover social factors that may influence the experience of PWD, such as the roles of parenting, familial, and schooling contexts. There was also a lecturer who shared that encouraging students to have a critical awareness of the roles of disability labelling in reinforcing the stigmatization of PWD, as shown in this excerpt:

"They become disabled because of the social factors, not because of their characteristics ... So, they [the students] need to know about the difference between cacat (impaired) and disabled. It is about people's first language. Do you know that there are terms that are no longer used, such as the term mental retardation? It is an offensive term. So, you [the students] have to

know about these things. You should not use the term autistic children but children with autism (Participant 5).

In this quotation, the participant explained that in her teaching, she addressed the topic of disability labelling and how these may bring detrimental impacts on PWD. She thought that it was important to include this topic in her teaching so that students can have better awareness of the kind of terms, which should be avoided and those which are more politically correct.

In addition, among these study programs, few have a subject particularly teaching about inclusive education. Although this subject does not specifically cover topics related to the social model of disability, its contents reflect the emphasis of the social model of disability on the importance of creating inclusive social systems and practices to address the disadvantages commonly experienced by PWD.

5 Discussion

The history of disability studies and movement has demonstrated the crucial roles of scholarly activities, such as research and teaching, in supporting the struggle of PWD for a more just and equal society. Research and teaching can be a strategic platform for achieving such a purpose when it is conducted in ways that respect the voices and rights of PWD, including their rights to be free from stigmatizing and discriminatory attitudes (Meertens, et al., 2011; Goodley, 2014; Goodley et al., 2017; Gesser, 2023).

The findings of this study suggest that the teaching of disability in some undergraduate psychology programs has paid attention to the issue of disabilities and its relation to the notion of special needs. Framing disability as a special need has its own contribution in advocating the voices and rights of PWD. The notion of special needs fosters collective awareness about the importance of creating social contexts and arrangements, which are responsive to the needs and rights of PWD. In educational settings, for example, the adoption of this term has encouraged schools to better facilitate their students who have disabilities (Foreman, 2005; Hanurawan, 2017).

However, an emphasis on the understanding of disability as a special need also has its own harming risk, as noted by Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009), “The language of current policy which focuses on children who are ‘special’ and in ‘need’ emphasizes individual deficits and, therefore, plays a part in constructing and sustaining exclusionary practices” (p. 200). In other words, the notion of special needs may inadvertently frame PWD as the other due to their differences or deficiencies. Especially given that the notion of special needs is usually built upon the assumptions about normality and abnormality. It is this kind of understanding that needs to be considered in reflecting the findings of this study. The current research found that the teaching of disability in the sixth study programs being studied has emphasized the understanding of disability as a special need. On the one hand, this kind of emphasis may advance the contributions of psychology in addressing the needs of PWD. On the other hand, it is important to be aware of the risk of reproducing the stigmatization of PWD as dysfunctional individuals through such an emphasis.

To avoid such a risk, it is important to integrate the social model of disability into psychology subjects that address the issues of disability. Introducing this perspective

may generate an awareness among students that studying disabilities needs both the process of learning and unlearning related to the notion of disability and how it has been situated within the discipline of psychology (McLean, 2008; Goodley et al., 2017; Garzón Díaz & Goodley, 2021; Gesser et al., 2023;). For example, one of the things that need to be unlearned is about the assumptions concerning the definitions and criteria of normality and abnormality and the socio-cultural and political implications that may come with these. The findings of this study indicated that some of the participants of this study have initiated the integration of the social model of disability into their teaching. However, the initiatives tended to come from individual attempts rather than from an institutionalized policy of the study programs. Such a finding suggests a teaching gap that needs to be addressed to promote more progressive disability teaching, especially at undergraduate levels.

6 Conclusion

The current study explored disability teaching in undergraduate programs of psychology at some universities in Yogyakarta Province, Indonesia, to identify the common focus and gaps. The findings of this study suggested two common teaching focuses, which are approaching disability as a special need and positioning people with disabilities as the focus of interventions. A teaching gap found in this study is the limited coverage of study topics that are related to the social model of disability. It is expected that the findings of this study may outline some directions for developing disability teaching in the field of psychology. However, given the limitations of this study, which include the lack of exhaustiveness in the data collection process, therefore, the findings of this study are not intended to be a generalizable conclusion rather these are proposed as preliminary ideas to be followed up through further studies on this topic. Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations can be proposed. First, for undergraduate psychology program organizers, the findings are expected to spark greater awareness of the need to provide a more balanced inclusion of social perspectives on disability within courses related to disability issues. Second, future research may explore key topics that should be incorporated into disability-related teaching to enhance students' understanding of disability as a socio-culturally and politically situated phenomenon.

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Data Availability

The author declares that no research data is available for public access.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Additional information

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