Research focused on disabled populations has been undertaken significantly by the two sub-disciplines, behavioral geography and social geography. The methodological approach traditionally taken by these subfields are very different. Social geography is dominated by social theory and qualitative methods; while behavioral geography was born out of the quantitative revolution and seeks to understand spatial behavior through empirical studies (Park et al. 1998). Perhaps not surprisingly there is a clash between these two parties in the way that they believe disabilities research should be undertaken. There was much debate in the literature that took place in the 1990’s that created two “camps” of research methodology; most notably in the exchanges between Imrie (1996a), Butler (1993), Gleeson (1996), and Golledge (1993, 1996).

Perhaps the most basic difference between the two research styles is the definition of disabled. The definition but forth by Golledge (1993, pg. 63) refers to those with disabilities as individuals that are prevented, “wholly or partially from performing the full range of actions and activities usually performed by member of the society or culture in which the person lives.” He refers to persons with disabilities as those with, “loss of limbs, loss of sensory apparatus (such as vision, hearing, and touch in particular) or those with inferior mental abilities.” Imrie (1996a) criticizes this definition as simplifying disabilities into the abled-bodied (which is normal) and the disabled (abnormal). He (and Oliver, 1990) coined the term “disablism’ to “describe [the] socio-political processes with marginalized and oppress disabled people,” which creates a social environment that prevents persons with disabilities from fully engaging in society and culture.

At the heart of disabilities geography research, as put forth by the school of thought founded by Golledge and practices by researchers such as S. Ungar, M. Blades, J. Jacobson and S. Jehoel, is understanding the cognitive and perceptual foundations of the
disabled group and the material transformations of the environment they use. Golledge defines the world that disabled people live in as alerted through perception, knowledge acquisition and use. The “transformed” environments that disabled people encounter are set apart from the one that non-disabled people live in because of the limitations of the disability itself as well as the limitations of their ability to use space. The behavioral perspective to disabilities research emphasizes that geographers need to know the similarities and differences of the problems of the disabled before they can direct their efforts to researching and solving them (Golledge, 1993).

Methodologically the behavioral disabilities research group addresses, identifies and theorizes the different forms of spatial cognitions and behaviors of the disabled group. Golledge believes that through basic empirical research and technology the unique barriers and obstacles that the disabled face can be solved. This research paradigm views the disabled population as important participants, as those who posses the “secrets” that researcher can unlock and the guiding voices that create the scaffolding that supports this research paradigm. The behavioral model of research often seeks to apply a research agenda that provides optimal solutions, such as personal guidance systems with GIS technology (among others), for more immediate access to the environment (Loomis, 1994; Golledge, 2004).

The social model of disability is defined by notions that disabled people are a marginalized group and suffer many different negative social attitudes that bear their identity on the landscape to produce “ableist environments”, with countless physical and social barriers that limit people with disabilities from full participation in society (Oliver 1990). Those in favor of the social model of disability research (R. Imrie, R. Butler, P. Sample and T. Shakespeare) argue that disabilities are socially produced rather than a result of physical or mental impairment. The social model of disabilities was shaped by
theories of dominant power structures that have been traditionally applied by feminist and
critical race theorists; and is heavily infused with an emphasis on political and economic
forces in explaining disabilities (Shakespeare, 1996).

The research paradigm produced from this perspective seeks to provide critical
comment to the social and political institutions and barriers that disabled populations
face. It attempts to change policy and attitudes. The social disability researchers believe
that the disabled population should be the dominant voice in how society needs to
change. The disabled population should not be reduced to “subjects” in an experiment but
rather supported by researchers to be an empowered group that has a political voice
(Irmie, 1996b).

I think the difference between the social and behavioral models of disability
research is one of scale. The behavioral perspective conducts research on a small scale;
looking at the small obstacles (such as the physical environment and the physical body)
that cause disabled persons to live in a different reality than the general population. The
large scale that social perspective views disability research is one of large socio-political
change and demystifying the ideological structures that are oppressive.

It would be inappropriate to suggest that either the social or behavioral models of
disabilities research are doing nothing less than seeking the best for the group being
studied. The disabled population becomes the ultimate stakeholder in both models. The
research is not only about them, their disabilities (a personal and sensitive subject) and
their ability to interact with people and space; but they are also the informants, the
subjects, and the recommendations made through the research directly effects their lives
through mobility and independence. Within geography the theme of stakeholders often
cuts across the traditional bounds of the discipline, jurisdiction, ownership (Bennet et al.
1999); and in this case the views of two research models. The stakeholders in other
studies notoriously have opposing views and come from various backgrounds that lead to opposing perspectives and wanted solutions to the issues. Within disabilities studies in geography the stakeholders have the advantage of sharing physical struggles, embrace the want for change and ultimately come to sharing a similar voice that leads to unity (although disabilities vary and so might ideas of what change should be).

Although I think the disabled populations under study have the potential to be unified; the methodological approaches of the two forms of research addressed above often pull the disabled population apart (which has a negative impact on this area of study). A study undertaken by Kitchen (2001) highlighted how disabled groups are disenfranchised by both models of research and how the research itself has a polarizing effect on disabled populations. A criticism of behavioral disabilities research is the lack of connection between theory and the day to day lives of disabled people. Oonagh (a disabled person who has been a research participant), “there has to be an outcome to it. There is no point doing research for the sake of research.”

A criticism of social disabilities research is the failure of academia to present findings (and possibly recommendations) to the disabled community. Robert (also a disabled research participant) says, “I think an awful lot of research to be...we talked about Colin Barnes and Mike Oliver earlier….are very hard to read and I think that is one of the things with academic research is that it is very jargonized (Kitchen, 2001).”

While disabilities affect many people, the group of potential participants is surprisingly small. Within the disabled population there are people who only participate in certain kinds of studies (as prescribed by the research agendas of the differing models discussed above) and those who simply become fatigued (and stop participating) because of an over need of research subjects. The lack of communication between the social and behavioral perspectives causes overlap in research (albeit from different methodological
points of view) and causes statements such as, “there is so much research being written and so much being researched, again, again, and again about disabilities. The whole thing is ludicrous (Frank).” The excessive use of jargon, the difficulty in access to research findings and lack of perceived impact has created a barrier between researchers and the disabled population. It is difficult to expand current research in disabilities when the group being studied is no longer willing to be part of the research process.

Disabilities research as a whole does not benefit from a hard and fast split between research perspectives and the disabled community does not come together to participate when statements put forth by prominent researchers include comments such as “the ‘expert’ model of research represent a ‘rape model of research’ that is alienating, and disempowers and disenfranchises disabled research participants by placing their knowledge into the hand of researchers,” as a criticism to Golledge’s (1993) call that, “geographers have the expertise to understand, perhaps better than any other discipline the problems and process of activity and interactions that take place between disabled populations and their environments.” While constructive critiques are important it is difficult to continue expanding research in disabilities geography without some kind of cohesiveness between researchers. Even T. Shakespeare (1996) recognizes that research can become political but he emphasizes that academics cannot be perceived by the public as having axes to grind. Not only does it create confusion for policy makers (those with the power to create change) but it may also disenfranchise funders who do not want to be caught up in a political game.

When the communication between two research approaches (looking at the same research area) becomes as broken down as has taken place in disabilities geography it is perhaps inevitable that a third research perspective will emerge. A second way in which the methodological split has impacted disabilities geography is the call for a new
approach to research. Coined the bio-sociological approach in the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, this research approach attempts to move past the duality of the two models outlined above by recognizing the complex interactions between physiology, culture and wider socio-economic and political relationships. Studies within the bio-sociological approach study issues of how persons with disabilities view their bodies, their appearance, their physical ability to negotiate physical space, and their self-preservation within their experience of public/social spaces (Bulter and Parr, 1999).

Butler and Bowlby (1997) argue that disability theorist and activists need to develop the bio-sociological approach by treating the experience of the body as the outcome of a relationship between the material body and social processes. They contend that the human “body is not passive and fixed ‘fact’ onto which social relations are mapped but nor can what seem to be physical experiences of the body simply be accepted as ‘facts’ which are prior to or determinative of these social relations.” The bio-sociological approach accepts the notion that disabled individuals identities cannot be disentangled from their impairment and the experiences of embodiment is social as well as physical. This “new” approach has the potential to bring a research agenda that considers the interconnections between biology, the body and disabled people.


