



HEX CoE in the History
of Experiences

Digital Handbook of the History of Experience

Disability Experience

9.2.2024

[Daniel Blackie](#) , Tampere University

<https://doi.org/10.58077/e1k3-5w43> 

Seeking a 'usable past' for the disability rights movement, disability historians, following the 'new' social historians of the 1960s and 70s, often invoke 'experience' in discussions about the historical agency and 'voices' of 'disabled people'. However, despite the centrality of experience to disability history, there has been little effort within the field to define the concept.^[1] Consequently, while recent years have witnessed significant advancements in the historical study of disability, more focused and theoretically sophisticated work on experience is needed to shore up the field's conceptual foundations.^[2]

Disability theory could be of help here. For instance, Tobin Siebers' theory of 'complex embodiment' – with its insistence on the 'feedback loop' that exists between bodyminds and societies – echoes the biocultural approach to experience promoted by Rob Boddice and Bettina Hitzer.^[3] Such theorisations of disability would seem to hold similar generative potential, both for disability history and the history of experience. Scholars in these fields would do well, then, to engage more widely and fully with disability theory as they seek to explicitly conceptualize 'experience'.

Experience may be poorly defined in disability history, but a consideration of the kind of ‘experiences’ that have most interested disability historians reveals a lot about the way the concept has been understood and deployed in the field. Paul Longmore, a pioneer in disability history, often referred to ‘disability experience’ in his work.^[4] His use of the expression indicates that it is a specific type of experience above all others – *disability* experience – that has particularly fascinated disability historians since the inception of our field in the 1980s.

But what counts as disability experience? Although disability historians generally use ‘disability’ to signify experiences profoundly shaped by perceived bodily or cognitive difference, how we do so varies. These differences stem, in part, from the different theoretical frameworks popular within the field.

Initially, disability history was strongly influenced by the so-called ‘social’ and ‘minority’ models of disability. Despite some differences, both models grew out of the disability movement of the 1970s and attempted to denaturalize disability by stressing its sociocultural origins. These approaches tend to associate disability with social disadvantage and often downplay embodiment. They also stress disability as a category of collective identity.^[5] In short, the two models reflect key theoretical planks of late twentieth-century disability activism, particularly as it developed in North America and Britain. Informed by these approaches, much early work in disability history highlighted ‘disability’ experiences that were easily recognizable as such from a social or minority model perspective. For example, the first-ever self-described published work in ‘new disability history’ focused on ‘handicapped people’ in 1930s America, highlighting their experiences of ‘job discrimination’ and collective protest.^[6] Such studies tended to emphasize ‘shared’ or ‘collective’ experiences over individual ones.

Over the last decade or so, a newer ‘cultural model’ of disability has become increasingly popular among disability historians. As Essaka Joshua states, this ‘approach distinguishes itself from the *social model* by suggesting that disability is not “synonymous with the processes of social disablement” but describes a broader experience that includes both the body and the social world and does not solely describe discriminatory encounters’.^[7] Such an expansive definition of disability makes room for unique or individual experiences that can be difficult to accommodate within a social or minority model framework. It also allows more positive outcomes of bodyminded difference to be included under the rubric of ‘disability experience’. As a result, historical studies that recognize the beneficial effects perceived difference can have in certain contexts are becoming more common. For example, focusing on the ‘era of the transatlantic slave trade’, Jenifer Barclay argues that some ‘differently abled’ people in West Africa were ‘accorded a great deal of respect and social standing’ precisely because of their perceived differences.^[8] The cultural model’s insistence that

disability is embodied has also encouraged historians such as Mari Eyice to emphasize the significance of bodily factors to experiences of disability. Rather than sideline bodymind functioning or pain, as histories informed by the social or minority models often do, such scholarship considers them an integral part of 'disability experience'.^[9]

'Disaggregating' disability experience may be a useful way of thinking about the meaning of experience in disability history, but it also raises an important question.^[10] How appropriate is it to use the 'language of disability' when addressing the topic of experience in history? Disability, after all, is a very modern category, the product of a particular set of historical conditions primarily found in the 'West'.

In premodern societies 'disability' did not operate as a social category or category of identity in the way it currently does. Consequently, applying a disability lens to history potentially risks foisting modern understandings on to the past that people of the time would not have recognized, misrepresenting their perceptions and experiences of human difference in the process.^[11] The key to using disability as a conceptual framework for historical research, as Nadja Durbach observes, is to distinguish its use as an 'analytical category' from the 'specific meanings and connotations' attached to the word 'disability' and its cognates *today*. Durbach and Sara Scalenghe, for instance, employ disability as a category of analysis, but draw back from using current disability terms to describe people who stood out from others historically because of perceived bodyminded difference. A Victorian 'freak show' performer and a 'holy fool' in the Ottoman Empire undoubtedly had different experiences from each other. Referring to them as 'disabled' people would imply a commonality that they or their contemporaries would probably not have comprehended. Yet the lives of both *were* shaped by their perceived difference from others.^[12] Viewing their experiences through a disability prism, then, serves a valuable analytical purpose, since it allows us to make comparisons across time and place. Without this, charting historical change or recognising cultural nuances concerning perceptions and experiences of human difference would be difficult.

Historians undoubtedly need to be careful about the language we use when exploring experience. Without clarification, modern disability terminology can obscure the historical meanings of bodyminded difference. However, used judiciously, current terms can help make the link between historical insights and contemporary concerns more apparent, and this is a central goal of disability history.^[13] Indeed, for disability historians, it is perhaps the desire to make our findings relevant to modern disability politics above all else that ultimately determines what counts as 'disability' experience.

Notes

Work for this entry has been carried out as part of the 'Lived Religion and the Changing

Meaning(s) of Disability' project, funded by the Research Council of Finland (grant number 340242).

[1] Pieter Verstraete, 'Doing disability history and the notion of «limit-experience», *History of Education and Children's Literature*, 6 (2011): 321-36.

[2] Daniel Blackie and Alexia Moncrieff, 'State of the Field: Disability History', *History*, 107 (2022): 789-811.

[3] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), esp. 22-30; Austin Duncan, 'Living "with TBI" as complex embodiment', *Disability & Society*, (2022): 1-22, (2022); Rob Boddice and Bettina Hitzer, 'Emotion and experience in the history of medicine: Elaborating a theory and seeking a method', *Feeling dis-ease in modern history: Experiencing medicine and illness*, eds Rob Boddice and Bettina Hitzer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 13.

[4] E.g. Paul K. Longmore, 'The Life of Randolph Bourne and the Need for a History of Disabled People', *Reviews in American History*, 13 (1985): 581-87; Paul K. Longmore, *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability and the Business of Charity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), xviii, 207, 218.

[5] Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996), 30-5; Jeffrey A. Brune, 'Minority', *Keywords for Disability Studies*, eds David Serlin, Benjamin Reiss and Rachel Adams (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 122-4; Blackie and Moncrieff, 'State of the Field', 791.

[6] Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger, 'The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History', *Journal of American History*, 87 (2000): 888-922.

[7] Essaka Joshua, *Physical Disability in British Romantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20.

[8] Jenifer L. Barclay, 'Differently Abled: Africanisms, Disability, and Power in the Age of Transatlantic Slavery', *Bioarchaeology of Impairment and Disability: Theoretical, Ethnohistorical, and Methodological Perspectives*, eds Jennifer F. Byrnes and Jennifer L. Muller (Cham: Springer, 2017).

[9] Mari Eyice, 'Experiencing the Dis/abled Body in Early Modern Sweden: An Exploration of Perspectives', *Memini. Travaux et documents*, 28 (2022).

[10] My approach to and notion of 'disaggregating' disability experience in this article

has been inspired by Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8.

[11] Sari Altschuler, 'Disability', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 43 (2023): 121-9; Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 16-18; Julie Singer, 'Disability and the Social Body', *Postmedieval*, (2012) 3, 135-6; Jenni Kuuliala, *Saints, Infirmary, and Community in the Late Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 19-20.

[12] Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, 16-18; Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 104-23.

[13] Altschuler, 'Disability'.

Theory • **bodily experience** • Concepts

← Older

Contact

hexhandbook@tuni.fi

ISSN

2953-920X

Creative Commons License: cc-by-nc-nd



Contact →

Data protection →

[Accessibility evaluation report →](#)

[Cookie policy →](#)