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Reimagining personal and collective experiences of disability in Africa

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This paper explores understandings of disability in Africa through the personal and collective experiences of a group of postgraduate students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. The students, as disabled people themselves or practitioners working in the field across Africa, were required to capture their understanding of disability on the continent in a poster, set as a summative assessment task. What emerges from the students' posters provides valuable insights into the complex social, political and economic factors that influence and shape the experience of disability in Africa. The paper argues that these insights are especially important to existing conceptual thinking around disability and its importance to discussions on Africa and its development. It suggests that grappling more carefully with the experience of disability in Africa brings much needed voices from Africa and the global South into the field of Disability Studies and deepens these debates in valuable and necessary ways.

Keywords: Africa; colonialism; interdependence; context

Introduction

In discussing the political economy of Africa within a global context, Amin (2014) argues that, rather than being economically marginalized from a dominant global system, the majority of African countries are deeply integrated into this world order in 'super exploitative' and 'brutal' ways. For the majority of disabled people in these countries, this means their occupation of 'particularly disadvantaged places in the global capitalist 'able' order– places that not only produce and exacerbate impairment but also expose disabled people to particularly severe deprivation and exclusion' (Chouinard, 2015:2). Although an increasing number of studies have sought to expose and understand more carefully the depth and breadth of this deprivation and exclusion and the resultant poverty of disabled people on the continent (Yeo, 2005; Eide and Loeb, 2006; Loeb et al., 2008; Eide and Kamaleri, 2009; WHO and World Bank, 2011), this reality remains central to the disability experience in Africa.

Embedded within such relations, and therefore key to reproducing them, is what Meekosha (2011:667) refers to as a 'form of scholarly colonialism' within the existing field of Disability Studies, a developing field of knowledge that makes little reference to the theoretical contributions or lived experiences of people from the global South. While important contributions to the field have challenged this dominance, particularly through a consideration of the experiences of disabled people in the global South (Stone, 1999; Ghai, 2001; Grech, 2009, 2011, 2014; Barnes and Sheldon, 2010; Grech and Soldatic, 2016), it 'remains the arena of the global North (read British and US) academics, with solid white, Western, middle-class foundations retaining an almost exclusive focus on the global North' (Grech, 2013:49). Stubbs (1999) has argued that even where southern authors have been writing about these contexts, they have still tended to '(dance) to the tune of Northern academics'. On the one hand, the consequence of these distortions is one of omission and ignorance about those contexts in which the majority of the world's disabled people live. However, it also means that the lives of disabled people in the global South are primarily considered through a northern lens (Stubbs, 1999; Grech, 2009, 2011, 2014; Meekosha, 2011), a lens constructed from 'Western disability tenets, epistemologies and discourse' (Grech, 2014:63).

These gaps and biases within the field of Disability Studies are deepened through equally problematic lacunae within those knowledge areas that focus more directly on the historical creation and contemporary reproduction of these relations of power within the global order. Thus, Barker (2010:15) argues that within the field of Postcolonial Studies, for example, while 'disability is a constitutive material presence in many post-colonial societies (it) remains surprisingly absent as a subject of analysis in the field of Postcolonial Studies'. This tendency for disability to be either omitted or severely marginalised within disciplinary fields that are arguably important to critically engaging with the development of Africa and its people, means that disability rarely features in these discussions. Moreover, the conceptual and analytical tools which these disciplines offer to understanding the nature of inequality and oppression across the continent are rarely used to make meaning of the disability experience.

The reproduction of these distortions and omissions around disability in the global South is enabled and legitimized within universities as the spaces where knowledge is produced and given authority (Pillay, 2015), so that the knowledge that emerges and is transferred here is trusted and regarded as accurate and reliable. This means that what happens within universities, especially in relation to the curriculum and the nature of the research undertaken, is key to the perpetuation of the status quo. What is especially important to the concerns of this paper is, as already suggested, the persistence of the colonial legacy or coloniality as the basis of the knowledge, power and being nexus that frames the inequalities of our society of which the universities are part (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Pillay (2015), responding to the recent student protests across South Africa[1], argues that the reproduction of these inequalities by the universities through their core knowledge function is a form of epistemic violence, where colonial knowledge and thought dominates and gives effect to the political and economic violence in our society, the kind of structural violence that is fundamental to the experiences of the majority of disabled people in the global South. What is needed, then, are processes of fundamental change in universities, increasingly captured as 'decolonizing universities' (see Pillay, 2015; Mamdani, 2016; Mbembe, 2016).

We would argue that if we are to change the status quo around how disability in the global South is grappled with and understood, then the field of Disability Studies needs to be centrally located within these calls for the 'epistemological decolonization' of universities (Mamdani, 2016). While recognizing that a number of important and substantial changes are needed in the field, an important starting point is the facilitating of new ways of understanding and making meaning of disability on the African continent, particularly through the experiences of disabled people themselves and people working with them and their organisations on the continent. This paper discusses some emerging issues from a small teaching and learning initiative, undertaken by teaching staff in the Disability Studies Division at the University of Cape Town in South Africa that attempted to do this. Specifically, it draws on the knowledge and understandings of a group of post-graduate students grappling with what influences and shapes the experiences of disabled people on the continent as an assessment exercise in one of their courses. The paper argues that the insights of these students who came from a number of countries across Africa and are either disabled themselves and/or work as practitioners around disability, challenge much of the dominant thinking about disability on the continent. In this way, their reflections contribute to a necessary 'refounding of our ways of thinking' (Mbembe, 2016:37) that is so important to the decolonization project while reinforcing the importance of engaging with disability and disablement in more careful, nuanced and contextually relevant ways.

Building understandings of disability in Africa through the exploration of disability as diversity

One of the core courses that forms part of the requirements for the Postgraduate Diploma in Disability Studies offered by the Division of Disability Studies in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT is entitled 'Introduction to Disability as Diversity'. Its overarching intention is to explore the construction of disability through broader considerations of diversity and difference, and through this to deepen students' understanding of what informs our world views, particularly towards those positioned as the 'other'. It does this by introducing students to theories and 'models' of disability that underpin how people understand disability, and how societies position and respond to disabled people. Central to the course are explorations of oppression, power and privilege and how patterns of inequality that characterise our society are produced and reproduced. This exploration also draws strongly from the literature on race, class, gender and sexuality, bringing in concepts such as intersectionality (Yuval–Davis, 2006) to understand how disability oppression is interlinked with other forms of oppression and thus what shapes the experience of disability in different contexts. Developing a set of conceptual and analytical tools to be able to grapple with and make sense of disability in a student's own particular context, mostly different country contexts in Africa[2], forms an important learning outcome of the course.

One of the summative assessment tasks for the course involved the development of a poster by each student for presentation to the internal and external examiners. The student was asked to capture in their poster the experience of disability in Africa and, in particular, their own specific context. They were expected to draw from what they had learnt in the course, to critically engage with these conceptual frameworks within the African context and capture their understandings of what shapes the experience of disability on the continent. While it is recognized that there are pros and cons to the use of posters as an assessment tool in higher education (O'Neill & Jennings, 2012), as lectures and researchers involved in the course, we have consistently been made aware of the richness of thinking that is captured in the student posters. In particular, we have recognized that it provides a valuable tool for bringing together the broad and complex threads of the course and summarizing this in an accessible form. Moreover, it enables the student to draw from their own knowledge and experience, including from indigenous knowledge systems, and integrate this with the theoretical frameworks and conceptual issues they have grappled with in the course.

This paper draws from a thematic analysis of thirty student posters - the posters produced by students who completed the course at some time over a three-year period. While it is recognized that this analysis, drawing from a small sample, over a defined period of time, and only from the specific country contexts in which the students come from, has inherent limitations as a research exercise, we believe that the student's insights captured in their posters are still valuable and deserve attention. Especially important are the insights they provide into the complex social, political and economic factors that influence and shape the experience of disability in Africa and thus what influences how disability is understood and responded to by communities, governments and the broader society. Similarly, in reflecting on the nuances and complexities of the experience of disability in Africa, they also challenge much of the dominant thinking about disability on the continent, with its inherent deficit discourse. The section that follows, captures the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis and considers what they mean for understanding the experience of disability in Africa.

Findings and discussion[3]

Two overarching themes emerged from the analysis and that bring together the range of issues that the students captured in their posters. We have called these; i) Umntu ngumntu ngabantu (You are who you are because of others) and ii) The complexity and multi-faceted nature of disability in Africa.

Umntu ngumntu ngabantu (You are who you are because of others)

In most of the students' posters, disabled people were positioned pictorially and discussed as members of a community having both an identity as an individual and as a member of that community, with both having associated rights and responsibilities with regard to disability. While most of the students stressed the inherent rights of a disabled person as an individual, they also emphasised the collective responsibility of the community towards, as one student put it, 'solving the challenges of disability'. Such community responsibility involved 'Non-disabled people form(ing) alliances with disabled people to advocate for their rights, management of personal support, liaise with other services and advocate for removal of barriers in the local environment' (*Justus Mckenzie Nthitu*), while another student used the African proverb 'Together we can lift an elephant' (*Patrice M Malonza*) to capture the importance of the collective in responding to disability.

Especially important to this focus on collective responsibly was the emphasis which many students placed on the concept of Ubuntu to capture the nature of the relationship between a disabled person and their community within the African context. One student described the concept in the following way:

> It is an age old African term for humaneness and is founded on values of caring, sharing, mutual respect, equity and assuming responsibility for the welfare of others (Bryson Nsama Kabaso).

Others used it to frame what they captured as an 'African model' of disability - building on from their critical reflections on the medical and social 'models' of disability (Oliver, 1990) they had interrogated in the course. The following three exerts from the posters capture these conceptualisations of an alternative African approach to disability that draws strongly on the concept of Ubuntu:

> An African model creates an opportunity for the learning and reconsideration of important values and conditions of the community. It promotes the important African principles of caring for one another and the spirit of reciprocal support. An African word, Ubuntu better captures this underlying African worldview that expresses interdependency through respect, support, solidarity and cooperation in order to achieve the goal of creating equal opportunities for contribution and responsibility towards everyone's development…(The) African model reflects interdependency amongst the community and that everything is intertwined and essential to this

> African world view. Therefore if one strand could be left out, the whole model is incomplete and broken and these aspirations will not be achieved. It promotes the saying of Ubuntu, which states that ‘umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu’ (a person is a person through other people) and the saying ‘nothing about us without us. (Lieketseng Yvonne Ned)

> Human beings do not thrive when isolated from others; therefore this [African] framework requires the consideration of values such as: personhood, morality, respect, human dignity, group consolidarity, compassion and collective unity. Africa is a melting pot of differences and an African model of disability should be ageless, universal, transcultural, indigenous and humanitarian while fostering social consciousness and disability confidence. (Fadia Gamieldien)

> Huduma Kwa Wote’ means 'Service For All' in Setswana. This is a symbol of traditional African disability model. This model of disability is based on the need to provide support through joint effort at a community level where there is a collective and mutual social responsibility. (Khadija SA Mashuka)

One student, like Mbigi (1997), who likens the concept of Ubuntu to the workings of a thumb arguing that it is only at its strongest when it works collectively with the other fingers, used the body as a metaphor to express their argument:

> Just like there is unity in the body, in families, communities, nations and the whole world, there should not be any division but that individuals should have equal concern for each other. If one individual suffers, every whole community is affected. Each member has a unique form, place, and purpose. As human beings we are all parts of a big body called society meant to be complete if we enhance each other in order to improve quality of life. (Sibongile Zembe)

While it is important to recognize that the concept of Ubuntu requires ongoing reflection and interrogation (Manyonganise, 2015), its use by a number of the students in their posters, is important for two reasons. Firstly, the students considered it to be a key concept able to capture for them important elements towards understanding and making meaning of disability in Africa. Secondly, using the concept in relation to the experience of disability immediately challenges some of the dominant assertions about disability within the global North and thus what is important towards the creation of equitable opportunities for disabled people. These two reflections require further discussion.

Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013:84) in their exploration of the concept of Ubuntu, demonstrate that despite nuances in how it is denoted in different African languages, its basic tenets remain the same and are fundamental to an African view of social relations, reflecting a 'social and humanistic ethic'. Most important to the concerns of this paper, is what they argue is one of these central tenets. That is, to recognize that 'to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others' (ibid, 2013 citing Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Thus while we are distinctive beings, being human involves recognizing and valuing one's connectedness to others and recognizing the inherent responsibilities we have towards other people (Ndlovu, 2016). Wiredu (2008:332) characterises this as 'African communitarianism' arguing that it involves a 'system of reciprocities' where individuals have obligations to and rights within the broader collective such as the family or community. Moreover, 'the sorts of things around which the obligations and rights revolve are all the different kinds of needs that arise in human existence and interaction' (ibid, 2008:332)– including the needs of disabled people.

As the quotations from the students presented above imply, it is this inherent 'interdependency' and 'mutual responsibility' of people that seemed so important to them, suggesting that there is an important relationship of interdependence between disabled people and the communities within which they live with the associated reciprocities that Wiredu (1998) emphasizes. For disabled individuals, this notion of interdependency is a necessary and valuable part of their life within their community. This argument is developed further by Dubois and Trani (2009) who draw on Sen's capabilities approach (1999) and the associated work of Nussbaum (2000). They argue that, 'each individual is embedded within a network of relationships with others that allows them to act collectively and support each other' (ibid, 2009:199). Thus 'an individual set of capabilities (what they are able to do and to be effective) is not only determined through an individual agency, but can result from interactions with other people' (199). This is especially important for disabled people as it means that their ability to effectively exercise their agency is strongly linked to the collective capability of a community, including around addressing disability within that community (ibid, 2009). Many of the students' posters, by emphasizing and drawing on the concept of Ubuntu, reinforced the importance of this collective capability to understanding the experience of disability within the African context.

However, what is equally important about the use of the concept of Ubuntu and the associated emphasis on interdependence is that such understandings challenge much of the thinking about disability in the global North. Grech (2011) argues that central to this thinking is a discourse of 'individualism' that fails to recognise the fundamental importance of the collective in the global South and the value of it for disabled people. He argues that 'in contexts where survival hinges on the ability to tap into collective resources based on group membership, communities continue to play a fundamental role in the lives of poor people' (92). This devaluing, and, at times, critique of the collective, is part of the colonial legacy and its impact on disabled people (Meekosha, 2011; Businge, 2016; Barnes and Sheldon, 2010). A legacy that was 'concerned with rearranging social relations– so that traditional ways of supporting impaired people would be undermined– the kinship, family and community systems' (Meekosha, 2011: 677) with the resulted exclusion in many cases of disabled people from communal life (Barnes and Sheldon, 2010). Thus, in addition to the brutality of colonialism and its impact on the experience of disability, colonial thinking and epistemologies have framed how disability has been constructed and responded to in the global South and thus to the dominance of understandings and practices that fail to recognize and value philosophies and ways of being that may be important in these contexts.

It is also interesting to note that for many of the students, this interdependence also encapsulated the relationship between disabled people and donor–funded, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with them in communities, and between NGOs and government. Through the graphics that the students used in their posters as well as the particular projects or initiatives they referred to, they demonstrated a strong awareness of the presence of these NGOs within communities and saw them as part of the community collective. In all instances, their presence was discussed in a positive way, with the students often emphasising the critical role that they were playing, particularly through community based rehabilitation (CBR) to promote inclusive, sustainable development. None of the students seemed to question this presence, with one student emphasising their service providing, 'complementary' role to that of government- where 'governments develop guidelines or frameworks while NGOs and members of communities provide the actual service' *(Khadija SA Mashuka).*

What seems important is that none of the students explored the implications of such high levels of dependence on NGOs and donor funding, a concern raised by other writers. For example, Booysen et al. (2015), in their study that interviewed community disability workers in the rural areas of Botswana, Malawi and South Africa, emphasise the power that donors wield within organisations and thus the influence they have on the nature and focus of what is done. The impact of this is often the taking forward of an agenda that may not be defined by and relevant to disabled people within that local context (Kabzems & Chimedza, 2002) and driven by priorities that effectively serve to exclude rather than include the active participation of disabled people (Dube, 2005). Despite these very real concerns, as the student's posters suggest, donor-funded NGO's remain a central feature of the disability experience in many parts of Africa and, arguably, form part of the collective capability of communities of which disabled people are part.

The complex and multi-faceted nature of disability in Africa

The student's posters also showed, often in creative and interesting ways, that the experience of disability on the continent is a complex one. Their insights and the way in which they sought to visually present the connectedness between different elements of the disability experience suggested that disabled people's lives in Africa are shaped by a range of social, economic and political factors that come together in complex ways to shape their lives and their participation within society. But there were also differences in what the students emphasized from the contexts from which they drew, suggesting that the contextual factors which impact disabled people's lives may be different and particular to that context. For example, in contexts shaped by high levels of conflict and forced migration, a feature of a number of African countries, the forms of exclusion disabled people experience are strongly informed by the nature of the conflict and responses to it within these contexts, including humanitarian responses (Berghs, 2015; Businge, 2016). The students' posters therefore reinforced the argument that the experience of disability and the disabling barriers that people with impairments are subjected to are strongly influenced by the nature of the contexts of which they are part, and the particular social, economic and political forces shaping them.

These expressions of the disability experience by the students and what they suggest, once again, challenge a distortion in understanding about disability in the global South that emerges through the application of a Northern lens in these contexts. A number of writers have argued that the impact of the dominance of a Northern discourse here is the homogenization of the experience of disability within the global South (Grech, 2011; Meekosha, 2011; Kett and Twigg, 2000). Grech (2011:88) argues that such homogenisation and the assumptions that underpin it, contribute to a situation where 'critical issues related to context, culture, economy, history, community and relationships of power among others are often bypassed or reframed to accommodate a minority world view'. For Barker (2010), this homogenisation and failure to engage with the complexity and multi-faceted nature of disability within the global South also serves to objectify disabled people– most often reflected through 'ubiquitous 'poster child' narratives of dependency and pity' (22) and represented in pictures of the 'disabled beggar' (Meekosha, 2011:674). The inherent vulnerability and neediness (Abbott and Porter, 2013) which is portrayed through these dominant images and perceptions locate the cause of such vulnerability with the existence of an impairment, rather than with the social, political and economic conditions responsible for the oppression and exclusion of disabled people (Hemingway and Priestley, 2006). The students' posters showed clearly how important it is to identify and 'unpack' these contexts and the forces that shape them if the experience of disability in Africa is to be properly understood. Understanding these contextual factors becomes central to shifting the focus away from individual impairment and developing a deepened understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to the persistent oppression and exclusion of disabled people (Dubois and Trani, 2009).

While context and its heterogeneous nature is important to understanding the experience of disability in Africa, not unexpectedly, a common concern captured in all of the students' posters was what they saw as the intractable link between disability and poverty (WHO, 2011). Although it is important not to engage uncomplicatedly with the relationship between disability and poverty (Eide and Loeb, 2006; Loeb et al., 2008; Eide and Kamaleri, 2009), recognising among other things that not all disabled people are poor (Yeo, 2005) and that living in conditions of poverty does not always mean the absence of personal fulfilment and a richness in experience (Mji, 2006), when the students drew from their own experiences of disability in their countries, this link appeared to be uppermost in their minds. In almost all of the posters, even where the agency of disabled people was emphasized and their active participation in their communities highlighted, they were still depicted as people living in conditions of extreme poverty.

A number of the students' posters emphasized, not surprisingly, that the conditions of poverty in which many disabled people live are linked to or exacerbated by disabled people's lack of access to education, work opportunities and services such as transport and health care. Similarly, many of the posters made connections between the poverty of disabled people and the impact of other key political and social challenges prevalent in their countries. Issues raised by the students included: the impact of HIV/AIDS; gender discrimination; witchcraft and 'wrong beliefs'; as well as the disproportionate impact on disabled people of socio-economic issues such as; inadequate housing; long distances to schools and clinics; lack of clean and accessible water resources; and lack of necessary assistive devices. The students recognised that these factors played a major role in shaping and exacerbating the levels of poverty experienced by many disabled people on the continent (Booysens et al., 2015).

The manner in which most of the students addressed the issue of poverty and disability in their posters reflected a relatively composite and nuanced understanding of poverty and what it means for disabled people in the global South. In many respects, their understandings reinforced the conceptualization of poverty as a 'complex matrix of social exclusion' that extends beyond just income to include access to education and employment opportunities, the provision of accessible and adequate housing and transport, and opportunities for meaningful family and social relationships (Barnes and Sheldon, 2010).

For some students, key to this complex matrix was the issue of belief systems and their importance for disabled people on the continent. The quotations below capture how two students described this issue:

> (The) majority of disabled people live in fear from several reasons. They are poor, discriminated, isolated, stigmatised and been killed from wrong beliefs. Psychological torture/forced to be inside house/isolated (no freedom of movement and residence within their country, some go for exile, others looking for refuge in different places (no name on poster).

> People with disability in Africa encounter various obstacles in their daily life. Disabled people in African society are considered or interpreted by society in

> different ways such as beliefs in witchcraft. There is a growing tendency of majority of people to think of power of witchcraft in realizing their success dreams, e.g. in politics and business. The most dangerous effect witchcraft identified so far is albino killings by witch doctors for their organs, which are considered lucky and used in magic for 'get rich quick conceptions' (no name on poster).

The second quotation is especially important in capturing the complexity of the issues concerned. Here, the student implies that particular beliefs inform exploitative practices towards disabled people in pursuit of material rewards within extremely deprived circumstances - but it is essentially the pursuit of these rewards that drives the exploitation, with particular beliefs the vehicle for its justification.

If the concerns raised here about belief systems and what they may mean for disabled people are considered together with what has been discussed earlier about the importance of Ubuntu and African 'communitarianism' (Wiredu, 2008), then it suggests once again that the experience of disability in Africa cannot be understood in simple, binary terms. What emerged from the students' posters, on the one hand, suggests that particular beliefs are central to valuing disabled people as active members of an interdependent, caring community. However, other beliefs and associated practices devalue and stigmatize disabled people and are used, as they are in many societies, to justify particular forms of exploitation and oppression– often in pursuit of political and economic power. Ndlovu (2016:32) emphasizes what he sees as this ambivalence in indigenous African beliefs around disability, arguing that this ambivalence arises 'because they depict disability and persons with impairments both negatively and positively'. This ambivalence is then woven into the 'intricate network of ideas, knowledge, values, ethics, art, attitudes, norms, rituals, taboos, social traditions, and institutions' that frame people's lives on the African continent (ibid, 2016:31). If this ambivalence is acknowledged, then understanding the role of belief systems in shaping the experience of disability in Africa requires careful engagement from scholars and a willingness to move away from the restricted depictions of disability in the global South that dominate the literature (Barker, 2010).

A further issue that is important to this discussion on the complexity of the disability experience was how disabled people themselves were depicted or positioned within the posters, and what this suggests about how the students viewed the agency of disabled people. In a number of the posters, the local community was the focus of attention with graphics, quotations and descriptions capturing local community activities, such as village meetings or social gatherings, as well as local political institutions such as village and district councils and traditional authorities. Importantly, these posters showed disabled people as actively engaged within these activities, including in income generating activities, and thus as active contributors to the economic wellbeing of communities- rather than as highly dependent individuals and a drain on limited community resources. Similarly, in some of the posters, disabled people were also depicted as participants in formal political structures such as local councils.

The students' depictions and positioning of disabled people in these posters emphasizes their overall agency, and portray this exercise of agency as multi-faceted, ranging from formal political participation and activism to participation in community activities, including income generating ones. What is most important about the students' recognition of disabled people's agency is that it once again challenges the absence of agency that dominates Northern perceptions of the disability experience in the global South (Grech, 2011; Wickenden et al., 2013). It would be remiss not to recognize that a range of barriers restrict the political engagement and participation of disabled people in the global South, with many of them arising directly and indirectly from the 'disadvantaged places (of these countries) in the global capitalist order' (Chouinard, 2014). However, the activism of disabled people in these contexts, especially through Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), and their importance to influencing broader political spaces is increasingly being recognized (Howell et al., 2006; Kotze, 2012).

Cock's (1989) study on the experiences of black disabled people with spinal cord injuries living in a township in South Africa under Apartheid was one of the first studies on the African continent to do this. Despite the profound poverty, violence and deprivation experienced by the majority of individuals interviewed for her study, Cock (1989:18) argued persuasively that the findings of her research would present an 'extremely depressing picture were it not for the individual qualities of resilience, strength and courage that also emerges from this social context'. Her research captured how, at this time, disabled people, positioning themselves as part of the broad liberation movement, built strong, community-based organisations as 'political instruments' aimed at both the generation of income and the articulation of a collective political voice (Cock, 1989:7)– a voice that was to have a profound influence on South Africa's post-apartheid democratic dispensation and its constitutional framework (Howell et al., 2006).

While the above example of the political agency of disabled people speaks to a particular context, that is South Africa's transition to democracy, it draws attention to the exercise of political agency by disabled people, even under the most disabling of conditions. Across the continent, the exercise of such agency is reflected through examples of legal challenges to electoral processes, disabled people's participation in the development of new political and research participatory processes, the development and enforcement of constitutional provisions protecting the rights of disabled people, and the formalized representation of disabled people in different levels of government and statutory bodies. These examples, like the students' posters, emphasise that disabled people on the continent are actively involved in local, regional and national political processes. While this does not mean that their political marginalization still remains a serious challenge across the continent (Kotzé, 2012; Nairobi

Declaration, 2014; Opoku, M. et al., 2016; Virendrakumar et al., 2018), it does suggest that once again the dominant perception of disabled people as having no political voice or influence, needs to be challenged and the issues explored more carefully.

Conclusion

Drawing on the insights and understandings of a group of post-graduate students in Disability Studies and captured in posters developed as an assessment exercise, this paper has explored some of the issues that emerge as important to understanding the experience of disability in Africa. Central to this, has been recognizing the complexity of this experience and the importance of making sense of it through a careful and nuanced understanding of context and the value of the collective within Africa societies. What emerges from the students' posters and what is discussed in this paper, challenges many of the dominant perceptions and understandings of disability in the global South- understandings that are informed by a Northern lens which draw on theories of disability only constructed within that context. This dominant Northern lens reproduces the legacy of colonialism and the associated patterns of inequality that continue to frame the existing global world order. It also distorts the personal and collective experiences of the majority of disabled people across the world.

There is growing recognition that it is up to disability activists, scholars, and practitioners working in these contexts to challenge these distortions, and in doing so to reimagine and rearticulate the experiences of disabled people in the global South. While it is important to acknowledge that a small study of this nature has inherent limitations in its scope and generalizability, we believe that the students' insights are important to this imperative. They make a valuable contribution to developing new ways of understanding and making meaning of the experience of disability in Africa. The challenge remains for us to continue to expand research and scholarship that seeks to do this, including through post-graduate studies, and to position such efforts as an important contribution towards decolonizing Disability Studies and the universities where its dominant epistemological frames are reproduced and given legitimacy.

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Notes

[1] In 2015 two country wide student protests took place in South Africa, now referred to as #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall, which fundamentally challenged the persistence of the

colonial legacy in South African higher education and in the case of #Feesmustfall the high costs of higher education in South Africa, making the fees students are expected to pay out of the reach of many South African learners and thus, despite some government funding to support poor students, perpetuating many of the inequalities of the past in relation to who is gaining access to higher education in the country.

[2] Students from other parts of the world have also undertaken the course, although since its inception fifteen years ago, most of the students have come from Africa.

[3] The findings discussed draw from the thirty posters looked at. However, where material from a student's poster is directly quoted, the name of the student follows the quotation where their name is visible on the poster. Some students did not write their names on their posters.

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