

Introduction
Stephanie Patterson, M.A.L.S.
Pamela Block, Ph.D.
Stony Brook University

Niel Bohrs' famous quote "Nothing exists until it is measured" (as cited in Ross, 1997) refers to quantum physics, but it can also be applied to the history of disability and employment. Scholarly information concerning this history is almost nonexistent. While cursory examination of employment issues may be included in discussions about past social movements and legislation, these discourses are often anecdotal and always secondary to the main topic. With few exceptions (studies on freak shows, for example) it appears that scholarly, historical pieces specifically about disabled people as workers are rare.

Without readily available, factual accounts on the experiences of disabled workers throughout the centuries, it can appear, to those with and without disability, that "disability" and "employment" are mutually exclusive terms. An example of such an assumption in the United States is shown by current language usage separating the images of "disability" and "work." A useless car in need of repair is labeled "disabled"; a "disabled" computer has been altered to prevent it from working.

But having a disability does not automatically and inherently bar a person from the world of work. Through research, we have discovered that people with disability have always been members of worldwide workforces. To address this under-represented aspect of disability studies and endeavor to negate the resulting assumptions, this Forum initiates the task of compiling information about the historical experiences of disabled workers. It is neither an attempt to negate or minimize the concerns that unemployed disabled people currently experience and have experienced in the past; nor infer that employment discrimination did not and does not exist. We simply hold the belief that in order to accurately portray the experiences of people with disability, it is important to collect accounts of their careers and work enterprises.

Our Forum begins with "*A Historical Overview of Disability and Employment in the United States (1600 to 1950)*." Through the centuries, disabled people have been important members of the US workforce, adding their skills, unique abilities and hard labor with able-bodied worker's to manifest the American dream. Although, due to the limitations set by this journal, a relatively scant amount of the available data has been included, this article initiates the task of telling some important stories. The time span was chosen arbitrarily in an attempt to provide the broadest overview. Examples were used that best illustrated the chronological periods addressed and are by no means exhaustive. Much remains to be told through future research efforts.

England's Elizabethan Poor Laws were written in the 1600's and their purview transferred to the American colonies. The distinction they made between the deserving and undeserving poor based on the ability and willingness to work continues to influence the consciousness of western societies. Martin Atherton's "*Deserving of Charity or Deserving of Better?: The Continuing Legacy of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act for*

Britain's Deaf Population” discusses this legislation’s effect on deaf employees in the United Kingdom today.

The significant historical experiences of African Americans with disability are in the process of being chronicled. For those enslaved on plantations, information exists in the records kept by landowners. Dea Boster uses these and other sources to write about tasks performed by disabled slaves and how they were treated in *“Useless”: Disability, Slave Labor, and Contradiction on Antebellum Southern Plantations.*”

Existing histories were created by telling the stories of individual citizens. From such a lens, the accounts of disability and employment are colorful, varied and full of accomplishment. From a biographical perspective, these life stories are an important component of our historical research and add personality and resonance to our endeavor. For this reason, our Forum includes *“Electioneering and Activism at the Turn of the Century and the Politics of Disablement: The Legacy of E.T. Kingsley (1853-1929)*, Ravi Malhotra’s research on the life of a largely unknown, but significant, North American political figure.

Considerable legislation and social attention has been afforded veterans who have incurred disability as a result of military service. Government initiatives throughout the world have included vocational rehabilitation, education and employment programs. Jeff Grischow’s article *“Disability and Rehabilitation in Late Colonial Ghana”* discusses the British government’s 1940’s Social Orthopedics Program, an attempt to retrain disabled soldiers and reintegrate them into the workforce.

As often with scholarly undertakings, we have many hopes for this Forum. The first is that it has the potential to effect the way people with disability perceive themselves and transform the way they are perceived by others. The second is that these accounts demonstrate that, in many cases, being disabled does not have to result in being unemployed. Lastly, that this collection piques the interest and curiosity of scholars and encourages them to gather further information, ushering in a new era of disability research – one that records the rich and varied legacy of the work-related accomplishments of people with disability.

Stephanie Patterson is a Clinical Assistant Professor at Stony Brook University. She has a Masters in liberal studies with a concentration in disability and employment and has actively worked in the field of disability and employment for over 15 years. She is a staunch member of the campus President’s ADA Advisory Committee and is Chair of the ADA Awareness Subcommittee. Currently, she teaches a course she created entitled *Disability and Employment* for the Disability Studies concentration and *Professional Ethics in Health Care* for the Health Science program.

Pamela Block, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor at Stony Brook University in the School of Health Technology and Management. She completed a doctorate in cultural anthropology at Duke University in 1997. Her dissertation research addressed historical intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability in Brazil and the United

States. She was on the Board of Directors of the Society for Disability Studies from 2007-2011, serving as Vice President in 2008-2009 and President in 2009-2010.

References

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