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Contextualizing the 'Cultural Model of Disability' in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* Trilogy

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Abstract:

Disability studies cannot neglect the rising need for interdependence among power and politics in disability culture and the identification, consumption, and representation of disablism in the study of ableism. While researching this topic, it became apparent that a conceptual framework that functioned as a guide for these interwoven processes was required. This study seeks to integrate the Cultural Model of Disability (CMD) with Stuart Hall's 'Circuit of Culture' (1980) to evaluate the cultural aspects related to the construction and administration of disabling culture, as portrayed in the selected fiction.

While examining the consumption of ableist representation, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2014) trilogy. The objective of this research is to provide insight into the inherent contradictions in the production and consumption of a text that both criticizes disability and facilitates the Darwinian notion of the fittest, advocates for 'normalcy,' and vehemently rejects the ubiquitous idea of the difference. Through this interdisciplinary approach, this study endeavors to illuminate the complexities of power, production, identity, and representation within society.

Keywords: disability; significance; production; identity; consumption; regulation.

Circuit of Culture

Jamaican sociologist Stuart Henry McPhail Hall begins his influential "Encoding/Decoding" paper at Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies with following argument:

> *"traditionally, mass-communications research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity — sender/message/receiver — for its concentration on the level of message exchange. But it is also possible to think of this process as a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments — production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction"*
>
> (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding,* 1980:128).

The focal point of Stuart Hall's communication circuit model is the transformation of information into streams, with a particular emphasis on the progression from production to consumption and waste. By adhering to language laws and generating encoded signals during meaningful conversations, communication structures facilitate the transition from production to consumption. He initially theorized the circuit of culture (CoC) as "*the articulation of linked but distinctive moments - production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction*" (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding,* 128). Johnson's production concept, as a circuit of cultural products, embodies the notion that each moment influences the others and necessitates unique form modifications. This notion underscores the interdependence between culture and capital throughout the manufacturing process.

Hall's CoC centres on the concepts of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. Du Gay, Janes, Mackay, and other thinkers have employed this paradigm to demonstrate how the physical construction and societal applications of the Sony Walkman exemplify these cultural phenomena. The circuit undergoes a transformation into an intricate political ecosystem of design, highlighting the significance of being attentive to even the most ordinary items and services. By analysing nodes or moments in the circuit, we can gain a more profound understanding of the flow of meaning. Hall's work in Saussurean semiotics highlights the significance of 'representation' in comprehending the world. He posits that representation fosters a shared comprehension of the essence and boundaries of a given entity. Hall perceives representation as a deviation from reality, quantifying the disparity between the true

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significance of an occurrence and its verbal depiction. Furthermore, he argues that it plays a fundamental part in the process of creating meaning. Hall and Du Gay's research delves into the convergence of 'identities' and cultural creation in contemporary societies characterized by late modernity. They argue that cultural significance, standards, and principles play a vital role in the creation of economically prosperous products, inherently blending the 'economic' and 'cultural' realms. The term 'cultural economy' reflects a departure from the concept of 'political economy', which typically portrays economic processes and activities as independent entities. "*There is a deep cultural involvement in the genesis and production of this illness,*" normality or disability (Davis, 34). The recognition of discourses and their circumstances performs a parallel function in the creation of significance and identity, emphasizing the interrelated procedures involved in identity formation. Meaning production is an ongoing process of mutually constitutive meaning-making and meaning-taking. Language and representation exert an influence on the production and administration of international education, thereby emphasizing the political and cultural dimensions of the process and preventing their compartmentalization. David Mackay's research on identity construction focuses on the constructive correlations that exist between consumption and the formation of identities. He argues that consumers are not passive or resolute; rather, they are proactive and inventive and contribute in an *"anxiety-generating and resource-consuming surveillance"* (Mackay, 1997). In this particular context, regulations may take the form of formalized governmental policies or abstract depictions of the industry, guaranteeing that the depictions appear consistent or organic. The potential for consumption and the presence of a consumer are implicit in the act of production.

Cultural Model of Disability

> *"Disability discourse boasts potentialities for new forms of exchange, production and consumption"* (Goodley, *DIS/Ability Studies*, 89).

A model should fundamentally reflect its own cultural essence. Understanding culture as both a social endeavour and a conceptual framework goes beyond mere cultural activities, regardless of whether they are considered elements of popular culture. Instead, it proves fruitful to use a comprehensive examination of culture that encompasses all aspects of a particular community or society's creations and practices. This includes tangible and intangible elements such as objects, institutions, ideas, symbols, values, interpretations, narratives, traditions, rituals, social behaviours, attitudes, and identities. Using such a broad understanding of culture

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would not dismiss a third model of disability, the Cultural Model of Disability (CMD), as solely focusing on symbols and meanings. Expanding the analytical framework could entail investigating the interconnections among symbolic systems (comprising knowledge), categorization and institutionalization processes, material objects, practices, and behavioural norms, as well as their implications for individuals with and without disabilities, as well as their social statuses, interactions, and modes of subjectivity (Waldschmidt, 2017). The method examines the societal perception of disability, with a specific emphasis on the concept of normality rather than the individual's destiny or instances of prejudice. This study investigates the relationship between denormalization and the emergence of the social construct of disability. This shift in focus leads to the emergence of four programmatic ideas, the discussion of which continues in this paper.

The CMD does not view disability or impairment as specific categories that inherently lead to social prejudice. Media, information, and discourse shape society's view of impairment, which can be positive or negative attributions of ability and normality. Power structures, present in any culture, produce and shape these categories through hegemonic discourses. The second aspect suggests that we should not view disability as an innate characteristic of an individual, but rather as a category of differentiation that is always present. This happens because of changes in people's bodies, even if the changes aren't obvious at first glance. While looking them through the lens of two types of body differences: those who are seen as healthy, whole, and normal, and those who are seen as sick, lacking, and different. The term "disability" is multifaceted, closely associated with an individual's identity and physical characteristics that often face social disapproval. The existing system of symbols and institutional behaviours closely connect to the third dimension of disability, underscoring the significance of understanding and addressing stigmatization, exclusion, and recognition in diverse cultures. It can also demonstrate how culture, power, and resistance shape experience and identity. Disability refers to societal obligations that necessitate the involvement of professionals in assistance and rehabilitation, as well as individuals who have both able-bodied and disabled perspectives. Sociocultural norms have the power to shape how individuals adapt to or resist certain expectations. While analysing social construct Goodley says, "*social model scholars turned attention away from a preoccupation with people's impairments to a focus on the causes of exclusion through social, economic, political, cultural, relational and psychological barriers"* (Goodley, *Disability Studies,* 11). One cannot overstate the essential nature of the interconnectedness between individual and social subjectivities. A 'de-centering' approach

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allows for the examination of the dynamics, developmental trajectories, and mechanisms of transformation in modern societies. By directing attention towards the broader scope of mankind and culture rather than solely focusing on the challenges experienced by disabled individuals, one can gain unforeseen perspectives on the dynamics and support systems within society. The paper aims to assist the comprehension of the dominant approaches in problematizing health, normality, and functioning and the production, transformation, and mediation of body knowledge; the construction of normalities and deviations; the design of exclusionary and inclusive practices in everyday life by various institutions; and the creation and shaping of identities and new forms of subjectivity. A third model would not be dismissed as focusing solely on symbols and meanings, but would broaden the analytical perspective to investigate the relationships between symbolic systems, categorization and institutionalisation processes, practices, and 'ways of doing things,' and their implications for people with and without disabilities, their social positions, relationships, and modes of subjectivation. Therefore, the CMD differs from other approaches in important ways: It views disability as more than just an individual fate, as in the individualistic-reductionist model, or as solely a result of discrimination and exclusion. Rather, "*this model questions the other side of the coin, the commonly unchallenged 'normality,' and investigates how practices of (de-) normalization result in the social category we have come to call 'disability'*" (Waldschmidt, 24).

Analyses

Analyzing Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy through the lens of the CMD and Stuart Hall's CoC presents a rich opportunity to delve into the intricate interplay between power dynamics, societal norms, and representations of difference. Divergent, Insurgent, and Allegiant, the trilogy, present a dystopia, which "*is the eradication of the free market under state regulation and the collapse of all resource management into a centralized government—whether corporate or fascist,"* where personality traits categorize individuals into distinct factions (Alexander and Black, 228). Through the protagonist, Beatrice "Tris" Prior, and her experiences in this rigidly structured society, the trilogy navigates themes of identity, conformity, and rebellion, providing ample material for a multifaceted analysis. Roth's novel depicts a dystopian society where a member must make a lifetime decision on which of the five factions to join. Oppressed and shunned by those who do not adhere, the factionless community opposes the Panopticon's disciplinary goals. They endure the most deplorable living conditions, as well as the permanent stigmatization that distinguishes them from the other members of the

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faction. The factionless, a group of deviants (i.e., divergent, genetically damaged/GDs, and fringe people), represent the acceptance and tolerance of punishment in the social compact. The government uses a punitive system to discipline and control faction members, which they oppose. Resistance to social norms shapes identity, emphasizing the social contract's relevance. The trilogy examines biological and societal deviations, including fringe rebels and factionless people. These differences pose problems about identity, resistance, and political or ideological reality, as faction members and factionless persons are clearly distinguishable. The oppressive regime regulates citizens, defining their normalcy by emphasizing the anomaly of factionlessness. The authoritarian rule defines people's normalcy and makes factionlessness seem abnormal. By amassing an extensive administrative archive to oversee their disciplinary measures, this oppressive authority has brought to light the illusory prejudice they encounter. Simon emphasizes how panopticons' administrative features permit power to shape people, institutions, and states' views of social groupings and populations. The author delves into the social conventions that sustain disability through the text, shedding light on the prejudice towards individuals who are dissimilar on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, social class, or physical or mental impairment. In contrast to societal norms, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work demonstrates that disability can manifest in any way. She observes that:

> *"Because disability is defined not as a set of observable, predictable traits – like racialized or gendered features – but rather as any departure from an unstated physical and functional norm […] disability unites a highly marked, heterogeneous group whose only commonality is being considered abnormal"*
>
> (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* 24).

Scientists from the Bureau in Chicago classify individuals exhibiting atypical characteristics as abnormal, establishing the criteria for what is considered normal. David, a genetic specialist, cautions against the detrimental consequences of genetic modification, which might unintentionally eliminate undesirable qualities such as apathy and low IQ, perhaps fostering aggressive behaviour: "*take away someone's aggression and you take away their motivation, or their ability to assert themselves. Take away their selfishness and you take away their sense of self-preservation*" (Roth, 122-23). The scientists aimed to eradicate detrimental characteristics such as aggression in order to enhance the quality of human beings. Nevertheless, the experiment was unsuccessful as a result of unforeseen gene responses. The government's manipulations have caused disabilities and restrictions on those with genetic

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impairments, which in turn have led to poverty, crime, and limited access to education. This gives rise to a generational cycle of scientists advocating for eugenics programs as a means to eliminate bodies that deviate from the norm in order to rectify issues within society. As "*while discipline stabilizes and objectifies bodies, control modulates them. One way to understand this difference is that control does not act on the body so much as the environment through which the body moves"* (Simon 15). Foucault's concept of classification entails a hierarchical examination that categorizes individuals according to their temperaments, capacity for compliance, and genetic integrity. He calls "*the body as the major target of penal repression disappeared"* (Foucault, 8). This process entails the performance of rituals to establish and categorize individuals, confining them to their own identities and making comparisons with other social groupings. This examination standardizes the process of monitoring and categorizing individuals, reconstructing their identities based on abilities, leading to the creation of unique characteristics at the cellular, organic, genetic, and combinatory levels.

Factionless, situated in the lowest echelon of the social hierarchy, are intentionally contrasted with factions to emphasize the gap in their vocation and status within society. This emphasizes the economic inequality between the extremely poor and the working class, who are also quite poor, and their severe poverty sometimes indicates a criminal identity. The role of large-scale organizations in perpetuating social inequality within the working class, leading to the emergence of a unique criminal group that stands apart from the broader community. The factionless individuals shown in the literature exhibit a lack of respect and engage in illegal behaviours, indicating their deviation from accepted social standards. The differentiation between groups upholds the former while vilifying the latter. Tris's interaction with a factionless individual showcases her capacity to aid him, despite her apprehension of potential assault. The book emphasizes the correlation between a group's destitute condition and its deviation from societal standards.

The totalitarian regime establishes five distinct faction groups through the use of aptitude and initiation examinations, categorizing each social group according to their examination performance. This style of government allows the authorities to determine and offer what they consider to be the standard or acceptable behaviour, as opposed to what is considered abnormal or deviant. The scientific analysis and systematic documentation enhance the government's ability to monitor, regulate, and manage the entire population. The scientific prison described in the text allows for the distinction between individuals who conform to

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societal norms and those who deviate from them, placing them within a well monitored social structure. Amy Myrick's talks about the scientific prison reveals how prison society creates anomalies by constantly monitoring and scrutinizing inmates' daily routines:

"Transformed into an "object" by penal mechanisms beyond his control, a prisoner must either demonstrate "normality" (thus earning his release), or serve in the role of "delinquent," marked always by measurable deficiencies. It matters little which route the prisoner chooses: "normality" is a relative term that can't exist without surveillance, which makes it as restrictive as any other state" (Myrick, 97).

This process transforms inmates into objects of a vast social apparatus, robs them of political volition, and creates a label of "delinquency" that excludes them from normal society. Tris draws attention to the alarming consequences of this label, drawing a comparison between well-organized lifestyles and the deplorable conditions faced by factionless individuals. She displays a profound sense of fear and anxiety before receiving her aptitude test results, highlighting the potential consequences of her classification as factionless:

> "w*hat if they tell me that I'm not cut out for any faction? I would have to live in the streets with the factionless… To live factionless is not just to live in poverty and discomfort; it is to live divorced from society, separated from the most important thing in life: community*"
>
> (Roth, *Divergent,* 20).

The government's faction system emphasizes the lack of identity among its members. The government leader Marcus declares during the annual choosing ceremony; "*In our factions, we find meaning, we find purpose, we find life… Apart from them, we would not survive*" (Roth, 43). Goodley stresses the negative social deviance experienced by those with disabilities, underscoring the necessity for a more comprehensive approach to characterizing these marginalized communities. He contends that crippled people frequently become the complete antithesis, resulting in society's inclination toward their nonexistence. Jeanine desires control over Tris, fearing her divergence and the dangerous actions of her faction members due to their shared experiences with such individuals. For instance, a little boy, Hector, tells Tris, "*You're Divergent […]. My mom said to stay away from you because you might be dangerous*" (Roth, 165). Tris and readers witness the continuation of bigotry and misconceptions in society as youngsters acquire discriminatory attitudes from their parents towards people who are

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different, emphasizing the difficulties she encounters. Despite false accounts about her divergent nature, she finds acceptance among the faction members. They realize that they share commonalities in their interpersonal connections and identities, such as courage or altruism, and gradually embrace them. Jeanine manipulates and regulates her divergence using brain scans on Tris to manipulate and regulate her divergence. This experiment exposes the possible ramifications of viewing people as mere test subjects, resulting in prejudice. She tells Tris that, according to the results, Tris is the strongest, and she must study her "*to shore up all weaknesses in the technology*" (Roth, 328). She struggles with the notion that her identity and personality are influenced by her biological traits and life experiences. She proposes a remedy for the divergent mindset, a notion that has the potential to enable the government to suppress diverse individuals. Simulations shape her understanding of her identity, highlighting the complex interplay between her character and surroundings. When she witnesses young ones navigating through adults in "the factionless repository," irrespective of the hue of their attire. When the factionless gather as a group, they appear ordinary, despite their intended isolation and noncommunal nature. She encounters the humane and civilized factionless members and finds herself surprised by their challenging circumstances and the government's contradictory portrayal of them. Once again, the notion of normality versus abnormality reveals itself as a socially constructed and false concept. The text "*highlights that disability itself is a social construct, as the normate group decides what is normate and what is non-normate. Those in power, who label disability, ignore complex embodiment – that society affects how someone is dis/abled and how someone's difference can affect society"* (Fishcher, 76). Following the Erudite group's defeat, Evelyn implements a totalitarian regime characterized by extensive monitoring and control under her factionless administration through a curfew, while security forces carry out uninterrupted patrols. This exemplifies the transition of the factionless from a political punishment to a totalitarian regime, eradicating social and ideological boundaries while upholding carceral processes. "*The carceral', as notion, can be understood as a network of strategies that links punitive practices with ideological representations"* (Chamberlain, 5). Four argue that factions create a totalitarian and panoptic society by providing the illusion of choice without actually offering a genuine option, resulting in repression. He confronts his mother for eradicating them, ensuring their division into groups remains intact. The factionless rule experiment duplicates the faction's production and consumption mechanisms, resulting in disorder and oppression. According to Susan During, "*Codes of this order clearly contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society. These codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses"* (During,

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513). The leaders of the bureau employ biopolitical serums to exert control over their followers' lives and perpetuate an artificial sense of societal peace. These biometric tools intrude upon the physical bodies of individuals, establishing power dynamics and shaping the structure of society. Panopticons, as observed in the context of divergent or disabled's, enable the establishment of a network of disciplinary procedures that span across society. "*The trilogy offers a set of naming and labeling that serves in many directions, and yet ends with one purpose; that is to control and contain the individuals' sense of their identity and agency"* (Eldoliefy, 33). Erudite and the Bureau are scientific-governmental entities that utilize a covert system of data surveillance and networking to exert control over power. Highly intelligent computers have the ability to access information from computers belonging to different groups. In this case, Jeanine used a Dauntless faction computer for a simulated attack, exposing all data from various factions to intelligent computers over the data network. The trilogy is characterized by a system of surveillance and control that establishes the social structure and power relations. Allegiant delves into the notion of panopticon, a political device that establishes power dynamics by intruding on the daily lives of individuals. The main characters uncover the Bureau's ability to tap into Dauntless surveillance cameras, revealing the Panopticon's effectiveness in facilitating both confinement and monitoring. "*The object of traditional disciplinary surveillance is the body but in dataveillance the object of control is simply the digital representation of the body,*" which emphasizes the notion of data surveillance and biopolitical experimentation and goes beyond the geographical boundaries to include a society that is characterized by the constant monitoring and gathering of information (Simon, 15). The government uses panopticon techniques to assert control over individuals. By utilizing data networking and employing biopolitical approaches, the government intrudes into the privacy of individuals, conducting tests, carrying out research, and collecting data on their biological functioning. This process enables power to constantly monitor, discipline, and control individuals, thereby shaping their identities, abilities, and political loyalties. This uninterrupted process allows power to locate its subjects under its perpetual surveillance, disciplinary, and controlling gaze.

Mental simulations are employed to assess the cognitive abilities and faction allegiance of faction members. Adolescents endure aptitude assessments, which unveil their personal preferences and affiliation. The results reveal their faction, and they take part in a selection ceremony. Faction members employ the dominance of normalcy to argue that faction identification is considered standard, while deviation is considered non-standard. Medicine

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identifies disabilities, which can lead to prejudice. Genetic alterations and labelling serve as eugenics initiatives, sanctioned by the government, that separate individuals with impaired genes. These tests provide a mechanism for faction members to uphold their faction identity.

Conclusion

The CMD provides a theoretical framework for comprehending disability as a socio-cultural construct, influenced by societal attitudes, norms, and power dynamics. The *Divergent* trilogy is metaphorically depicted through the faction system and its treatment of individuals who defy prescribed societal norms. Tris, along with other characters labeled "divergent," embodies a form of cognitive diversity that challenges the faction-based hierarchy. Their divergence from the normative structure renders them both marginalized and feared by the ruling elite. The faction system functions as a microcosm of society, categorizing individuals into predetermined roles based on perceived abilities and traits. The social construct of disability mirrors this, distinguishing and marginalizing individuals based on perceived deviations from the norm. Tris's divergence challenges this construction, highlighting the arbitrary nature of societal categorization and the inherent fluidity of identity. Within a faction-based society, power dynamics play a pivotal role in perpetuating marginalization and exclusion. Jeanine Matthews leads the Erudite faction, which views Divergent as a threat to their authority and seeks their eradication. Real-world power struggles mirror this, targeting marginalized groups to uphold the status quo. Her journey reflects the resilience and resistance of marginalized individuals against oppressive systems, illustrating the potential for collective action and empowerment. Her narrative arc in the trilogy underscores the importance of representation and agency in shaping perceptions of disability. As "*representations are produced and consumed but they are also affected by regulatory practices, identity and assumed meanings"* (Leve, 10). Despite facing discrimination and persecution, Tris refuses to be defined by her divergence and asserts her agency by challenging societal norms. Her journey serves as a powerful narrative of self-acceptance and empowerment, challenging traditional narratives of disability as inherently negative or limiting.

The work examines the deleterious effects of social prejudice, rooted in genetic abnormalities, on both individuals and society at large. The divergent, Tris, strives to eradicate the unfavourable correlation of genetically impaired individuals as incapable, advocating for inclusivity instead of emphasizing divergence. The text employs a social framework to prevent scientists from performing research on them and to evade being socially excluded. It entraps

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individuals, "*in societies that position them as consumers or by heading off any troublesome tendencies through genetic modification, medical intervention, and the enforcement of educational and career tracks that on the surface are presented as being the best match for the student but actually are the best for the society depicted"* (Alexander and Black, 231). It also illustrates that achieving social acceptance at a cultural level is a gradual process that can only be attained following Tris' death. She acknowledges that it would take years to be accepted by scientists without any meddling. Although the essay is ambivalent about the rebels' tactics, it contends that social acceptance is vital for a robust and equitable society.

Stuart Hall's CoC offers a framework for analyzing the production, consumption, and representation of cultural texts within broader socio-cultural contexts. Applying this framework to the trilogy reveals the complex interplay between cultural production, reception, and interpretation, shaping the narrative's meaning and significance. As mentioned above, the production of the *Divergent* trilogy involves a network of cultural producers who shape the narrative's content and form. Decisions about character development, plot structure, and thematic elements shape the representation and interpretation of disability by audiences during this process. Audience reception and interpretation play a crucial role in shaping the cultural significance of the trilogy. Readers and viewers engage with the text through their own socio-cultural lens, interpreting themes of identity, conformity, and rebellion in relation to their lived experiences. The portrayal of disability in the narrative elicits varying responses from audiences, reflecting diverse perspectives on difference, marginalization, and empowerment. It also reflects broader cultural attitudes and discourses surrounding difference and belonging. Tris's divergence serves as a metaphor for cognitive diversity, challenging conventional notions of normalcy and conformity. The narrative's representation of disability influences how readers and viewers perceive and understand issues of identity, inclusion, and social justice, contributing to ongoing debates within disability studies and cultural criticism. Therefore, analyzing the trilogy through the lens of the CMD and Stuart Hall's CoC provides valuable insights into the representation and interpretation of disability in popular culture. The trilogy's exploration of identity, conformity, and resistance resonates with broader discussions about power, marginalization, and agency, offering a nuanced portrayal of disability that challenges traditional narratives and fosters critical engagement. One can gain a deeper understanding of how contemporary society constructs, contests, and negotiates disability by scrutinizing the production, consumption, and representation of cultural texts. In sum, the CMD implies a fundamental shift in epistemological perspective because it does not deal with the margin but

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rather with the 'centre' of society and culture. As a result, disability studies are transformed into 'dis/ability studies.' Impairment is a type of difference that shapes societal transformations and trajectories. It is a contingent, embodied difference affecting health, functioning, achievement, and beauty. Understanding disability as a contingent, always 'embodied' difference offers essential knowledge about the legacies, turning points, and transformations of contemporary society and culture.

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