Making innovation better: the promise and challenge of new discoveries for disability

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Innovation

• Newness and novelty…
• …fresh directions, new paths…
• …new things, new processes, new (social) practices…

• …Innovation is thinking in a new way, and seeing what comes out of it…
Taxonomies of innovation

incremental

radical

disruptive
Morally loaded background of innovation

- Assumptions about
  - …normativity of innovation
  - …innovation = progress
  - …innovation as inevitably ethical and social good
- Innovation should make the situation better
- Evaluation is an intrinsic, embedded part of innovation process
Innovation in disability: the conceptual landscape

- Innovation in thinking about disability
- Disability activism 1970s/80s
- Sent out a radical innovative message…
Innovation in disability: the conceptual landscape

• Individualized/medical framework
  • Deviation from biological norms of form/function
  • Innovation through biomed intervention to restore individual body to norms

• Social-relational framework
  • Mismatch between embodiment and social/material environment
  • Innovation through social/environmental transformation (changing norms)
example: stair-climbing wheelchairs

The necessity for access ramps and in-home elevators can vary and may not always be feasible. Some individuals or organizations have the option of avoiding out-of-pocket expenses by choosing a stair-climbing wheelchair.
Innovation in disability: co-production

- Traditional *lack of engagement or consultation* with people with disabilities
- Excluding knowledge and experience of people with disabilities from processes of research and innovation
- People with disabilities seen as passive *recipients* of innovation rather than agential co-researchers or co-producers
Innovation in disability: co-production

• Working in partnership with people with disabilities at different stages of innovation process
  • Addresses real problems
  • More likely to produce feasible, workable solutions
  • Treats people with disabilities as agents in control of their lives
An example: sign language ‘translating’ gloves

The gloves convert signs into spoken words.

Students can learn how to communicate with low-

Jose Hernandez-Rebollar demonstrates his AcceleGlove, which claimed to "translate" sign language into written and spoken forms. (STEPHEN J. BOITANO / AP)
Innovation in disability: co-production

“…Still, as long as actual Deaf users aren’t included in these projects, inventors are likely to continue creating devices that offend the very group they say they want to help. “To do this work, the first rule you have to teach yourself is that you are not your user”

Thad Starner, quoted in Erard, 2017
Innovation in thinking about disability: normalization or diversity?

- Disability as deviation from norm of form/function
- Solution to the 'problem' of disability = restoring to the norm
- 'Enforcing normalcy' (Davis) vs engaging with people with disabilities to imagine responses to their needs
Disability Innovation Institute UNSW

• Disability isn’t a problem to be solved: it’s part of the human condition, we need to engage with it

• Aim is to foster interdisciplinary, inclusive research and development

• And to encourage co-research practices to build capacity in the research community

• Building partnerships between researchers in academia, industry, government, DPOs in Australia and beyond
Thank you for your attention!

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