

University Major Proposal: Disability Studies

“Disability Studies recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that the study of disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and nondisabled people.”

Mission Statement of the Society for Disability Studies

Prior to entering Wesleyan, I thought I had a very enlightened view regarding disability. Since I was eight years old I had advocated for my classmates with disabilities and worked within my communities to not only raise awareness of the abilities of everyone, but also to provide and support recreational opportunities for youth with disabilities. As the founder of a soccer program for children with disabilities and a resume that showed few activities outside of working with individuals with disabilities, I came to Wesleyan convinced that I knew it all. I quickly learned that this was not the case.

The spring of my freshman year I enrolled in Social Norms and Social Power with Professor Margot Weiss (AMST 118/FGSS 119) and quickly found myself grappling with important questions about embodiment and cultural discourses surrounding the construction and enforcement of “normality,” a question that queer studies critically investigates. Theorists such as Foucault and Althusser started to reshape the way I understood individuals as products of society and the class discussion in response to *Exile and Pride*, by Eli Clare troubled me, as I listened to my classmates’ ideas about how disability is discussed and viewed by those that are able-bodied. I walked away from Social Norms and Social Power with the knowledge that I had previously failed to critically think about disability outside of discourses focusing on medical cures and pity, and started to question my approach towards disability and working with the disabled. During that spring, I also became involved with Wesleyan Students for Disability Rights (WSDR). Since then, both my coursework and conversations with those around me have helped me learn how to evaluate the social and medical/pathological discourses surrounding disability, and in

turn reshaped my own views. This is an important process with which I am still engaged, and want to deepen as well as formalize by pursuing a university major in Disability Studies.

In alignment with the many models of disability (social, medical/pathological, and charity/tragedy)¹, I am interested in developing an inter-disciplinary approach to disability using the tools of anthropology, American studies, queer and feminist studies, psychology and the biological sciences. I am interested in discerning the common, reoccurring, and discipline-specific tropes that act upon and through the disabled body and its representations. Furthermore, I am interested in thinking about the cultural and political work these tropes perform and how specialized language may be co-opted to perform this work.

Although Wesleyan has strong departments in all of fields listed above, studying disability within any one or two of these fields would not provide a well-rounded view of this subject. For example, the psychology and biology departments offer classes that characterize disability and give insight into how disability is studied. However, these two fields tend to emphasize pathology and cure. Departments that focus more on discourse and the social construction of individuals such as Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (FGSS), American Studies, and Sociology programs don't fully integrate biological and psychological realities of disability. Finally, no combination of a social science and natural science would give the well rounded picture of disability that could be found in the flexibility of a University Major.

As the Science in Society Program (SiSP) combines both the natural and social sciences, it may seem that I am proposing a very similar major, but SiSP falls short of my goals. Delving deeply into both the biological sciences and psychology *as disciplines* while completing the SiSP major would not leave room for a serious and focused *interdisciplinary* investigation of social and cultural constructions

¹ Shakespeare, T. (2006). The Social Model of Disability. In Davis, L. J. (Eds), *The Disability Studies Reader* (197-204). *Title of book* (pages of chapter). New York: Routledge.

of disability. My rationale behind this claim is that SiSP requires concentration within specific disciplines with a “core” cluster of required classes. Therefore, this program’s emphasis on disciplines and their intersections would hinder my ability to organize a truly interdisciplinary course of study around disability and its tropic configuration through the lenses of anthropology, American studies, the biological sciences, psychology, and queer studies.

To critically investigate the production of disability, one must understand and evaluate the methods used to construct the “normal” body. This applies not only to sociologically and anthropologically constructed bodies, but also to scientifically and medically constructed bodies that cannot be understood without the study of both psychology and the biological sciences. Courses in psychology and the biological sciences, and my experience in a Professor Manju Hingorani’s research lab have given me insight into how disease and disability are constructed, understood, and researched by (i.e. the medical/pathological model of disability). The combination of the biological sciences and psychology in understanding the medical/pathological model and construction of disability is invaluable, and it is these types of courses that will constitute the “Medical/Scientific Constructions” course cluster in the major.

The majority of my coursework my first two years at Wesleyan has been largely focused on the medical construction of disability through biology and psychology courses. However, in addition to Social Norms and Social Power, I explored the construction of Disability from a more sociological stance in the student forum I co-lead, Introduction to Disability Studies (FGSS 420) in the Spring of 2010. The readings that dealt with embodiment and discourses constructing the (dis)abled body excited and challenged me the most, and I hope to focus on similar work in my last two years at Wesleyan with courses such as Bodies of Science, Bodies of Knowledge with Gillian Goslinga (SISP313/FGSS/ANTH 312) and Reading Medical Ethnography with Professor Laura Stark (SISP300/SOC318). These and other courses that investigate and challenge the social construction of different bodies and discuss

embodiment will fall under the “Social/Cultural Constructions” course cluster of the major. I would like to note that in many ways, psychology provides a link between the two clusters I’ve defined, as this field employs the scientific method and works to isolate patterns of behavior and cognition, but often takes social context into account in the design and interpretation of research.

I believe that I have defined a flexible major that could be adopted by future students and enable them to concentrate in areas of their interest. For example, I am interested in the molecular basis of disability—specifically the chemical differences between those classified as “disabled” versus those classified as “abled,” as well as psychological assessments and interventions for people diagnosed with disabilities. Therefore, the courses that I will choose to complete the Medical/Scientific Constructions “cluster” are those that focus on signal transduction pathways and biochemical reactions and psychological assessment and treatment, and how these processes are researched, treated, but most importantly, defined as (a)typical. I am also very interested in how biological sciences and psychology converge to inform and construct societal ideas of “normality” and how these different fields are integrated, yet use different methods. Another person though, may be more interested in sensory disabilities, and may choose to concentrate within the neuroscience and psychology departments. This breadth is also found within the Cultural/Social Constructions “cluster,” as one could select courses that interrogate media constructions of disability, while others could track the production of disability historically, whereas I am choosing to focus on discourses surrounding disability and disabled embodiment.

Disability Studies Curriculum Plan

Clusters

Courses are divided into Scientific/Medical Constructions and Social/Cultural Constructions as these are the two main ways in which disability will be explored. Those courses believed to propose ways to diagnose and medically research disability are part of the Scientific/Medical Constructions cluster and are labeled as “S” in the table below. Those courses believed to investigate how bodies are constructed and discussed are part of the Social/Cultural Constructions cluster and are labeled as “C” in the table below.

Core Courses

Those classes believed to introduce either the of the clusters are indicated as “core” courses; these classes are believed to lay a foundation for further investigation within the cluster. In addition, the student forum, “Introduction to Disability Studies” (FGSS420) is also considered a core course, as it specifically discussed disability and gave a survey of the field.

Methods (“M”)

Central to the study of disability is its definition and its diagnosis. Therefore, I have included several courses that I believe discuss the process of defining and diagnosing disability. These courses are largely in the natural sciences, however, there are some methodological courses in the social sciences, as disability is also studied and defined through social science research (such as anthropology).

Thematic (“T”)

There are many courses offered at Wesleyan that provide and detailed look at specific physical and psychological systems. As most of these courses discuss pathology and normality, these courses are quite informative in the way that disability is not only defined, but in providing detailed information about one or a few physical or psychological systems in enough depth to support understanding of advanced research and literature about these systems.

Courses Completed and/or Enrolled In as of Fall 2010

As I have a very diverse select of courses whose titles don't necessarily match their content, I've included a brief description of how each course addresses disability.

Sem/Yr	Dept/No.	Title	Cluster
F2008	PSYC245	Psychological Measurement	Core/S/M
This course critically evaluated psychological tests and described their production, flaws, and benefits. This introduced me to the idea of challenging "normality" even from a scientific perspective. In addition, several of the tests analyzed are those used to diagnose a variety of disabilities.			
S2009	AMST 118/ FGSS 119	Social Norms and Social Power	C/Core
This course introduced me to queer theory and several theories and theorists about the constructed identities of human variation. In addition, two weeks were spent on crip theory, a radical form of disability studies.			
F2009	PSYC230	Developmental Psychology	M/T
This class delved into human development and established "normal" development. In addition, there was discussion of intervention to treat and prevent developmental disabilities.			
F2009	PSYC/NS&B311	Behavioral/Neural Basis of Attention	M/T
This class focused on methods in neuropsychological research and the role of attention in many psychological and intellectual disorders. My final project in the class focused on autism spectrum disorders.			
S2010, F2010	MB&B421	Undergraduate Research	S/M
As a student researcher in Manju Hingorani's lab, I have been introduced to the way in which the biological sciences conduct research. This experience has been invaluable in my critique of the role of the natural sciences in the field of medical and psychological treatment, as many molecularly based studies are used to inform such treatment.			
S2010 F2010	MB&B 237 MB&B 231	Signal Transduction Microbiology	S/M
I would like to combine these two courses to fulfill one credit for my major. Signal Transduction focused on molecular processes in the cell involved with "normal" human functioning. Pathologies were addressed and I often found myself finely attuned to the scientific language that plays a role in the construction of pathology even at the molecular level. Microbiology analyzes the microbe as an agent of disease and its study. Since many diseases and chronic illnesses are coded as disability, I think this courses, similar to my research experience will help me continue my critical analysis of the role of biomedical science and the cultural work it performs.			

S2010	FGSS420	Introduction to Disability Studies	Core
I co-lead this student forum, and read through several articles and books in order to construct a syllabus that covered the following topics: Models of Disability, History of Disability, Social Theories of Disability, Ethical Issues/Eugenics, Embodiment, Crip Theory, Deaf Studies, Neurodiveristy, and Universal Design.			
F2010	PSYC 206	Research Methods in Cognitive Development and Education	S/M
Throughout the year, there will be a focus on mathematical knowledge and skill acquisition in Deaf children as contrasted with hearing children. This course involves two hours of volunteer work at local preschools and visits to schools for the Deaf. Contrasting the schools will illuminate the societal and institutional implications of scientific and cultural tropes and beliefs about the disabled body.			
F2010	SISP 313 ANTH/FGSS 312	Bodies of Science, Bodies of Knowledge	C
This course uses an interdisciplinary approach to study the body. This is a very important course in terms of providing a theoretical backdrop for further inquiry about the disabled body.			

Proposed Courses: Spring 2010-Fall 2011

S2011	SISP 300/SOC 318	Reading Medical Ethnography	C
S2011	UNIV410	Thesis Tutorial	
F2011		A cultural constructions course TBD	C
F2011		A cultural constructions course TBD or psychology course exploring psychopathology	TBD
F2011	UNIV409	Thesis Tutorial	

Additional Potential Core Courses

Sem/Yr	Dept/No.	Title	Cluster
F2010	SISP/PSYC 259	Discovering the Person	Core
S2011	ANTH 101	Introduction to Cultural Anthropology	M/Core

Potential Courses for the Medical/Scientific Constructions Cluster

Sem/Yr	Dept/No.	Title	Cluster
F2010	PSYC 337	Mathematical Cognition and Children's Learning	M
F2010/S2011	PSYC/NS&B 220	Cognitive Psychology	
F2010	BIOL 222	Issues in the Health Sciences	
F2010	BIOL/ NS&B 239	Functional Anatomy of the Human Brain	
F2010	BIOL/NS&B 351	Neurobiology of Learning and Memory	
S2011	BIOL/MB&B 210	Genomics: Modern Genetics, Bioinformatics, and the Human Genome Project	
S2011	BIOL 223	Integration of Clinical Experience and Life Science Learning	
S2011	MB&B 294	Advanced Laboratory in Molecular Biology and Genetics	
	BIOL/MB&B 333	Gene Regulation	
	BIOL/NS&B 324	Neuropharmacology	
F2010	BIOL/NS&B 213	Behavioral Neurobiology	
F2010, S2011	PSYC/NS&B 222	Sensation and Perception	T
S2011	PSYC/NS&B 393	Advanced Research in Cognition and Neuropsychiatric Illness	T/M
	BIOL/NS&B 345	Developmental Neurobiology	T
	PSYC/NS&B 390	Experimental Investigations into Reading	T/M
	PSYC 235	Health Psychology	
	PSYC 105	Foundations of Contemporary Psychology	
F2010	PSYC/NS&B 221	Human Memory	T
	PSYC 223	Psycholinguistics	T
	PSYC/NS&B 228	Clinical Neurophysiology	
	PSYC 355	Psychology of Reading	T

Potential Courses for the Social/Cultural Constructions Cluster

Sem/Yr	Dept/No.	Title	Cluster
S2011	FGSS 210	Ethics of Embodiment	Core
S2011	ANTH 101	Introduction to Cultural Anthropology	M/Core
S2011	FGSS/HIST 349/AMST 345	Intimate Histories: Topics in the History of Sex, Gender, and the Body	
F2010	ANTH 295	Theory 1: Anthropology and Political Economy	
S2011	ANTH 269	Theory 2: Anthropology and the Person	
S2011	ANTH 308/AMST 316/ FILM319	Television Storytelling: The Conditions of Narrative Complexity	
F2010	SISP 262/SOC 259	The Sociology of Medicine	
F2010	HIST/SISP 304	Disease and Epidemics in Historical Perspective	
S2011	SISP/SOC 206	Theorizing Science and Medicine	M
S2011	SISP 300/SOC 318	Reading Medical Ethnography	
	PSYC 295	Cultures and Histories of the Mind	
S2011	BIOL/FGSS/PHIL 118	Reproduction in the 21 st Century	
	CCIV/SIPS 225 HiST 282	Medicine and Health in Antiquity	
	SISP 263/ SOC 261	Regulating Health	
	PHIL/SISP 334	Biomedical Ethics Seminar	
	HIST/SISP 395	Brain, Mind, Soul, and Self: Historical and Ethical Dimensions of Neurology, and Neuroscience	