

Miro Griffiths – Nick Johnson – BERA Podcast 30-6-22 Transcript

BERA Narrator: [00:00:00] The BERA podcast research matters.

Nick Johnson: Hello and welcome to the BERA podcast today. My guest is Dr. Miro Griffiths from the university of Leeds Miro did an undergraduate degree in psychology from the university of Liverpool where his dissertation was on self-perception. How do disabled students value themselves?

And then he followed this up with the masters in disability studies from the university of Leeds and then worked on wider questions of young people's experience of disability and inclusivity in education. He is currently a Leverhulme trust early career fellow working on a research project, looking at disability activism in Europe, young, disabled activist views and experience.

And in our conversation today, we discuss how the educational system and processes can be made more inclusive. Talk about his own background. He holds a number of external advisory positions and how you combine that level of activism and [00:01:00] personal involvement with the rigor of an academic profile and academic career, and some lessons as to how academia and education can change to make itself far more inclusive.

I hope you enjoy the conversation. Find it very, very interesting. I think it has lessons for us all in how we go about setting ourselves up and structuring our educational systems to be more inclusive. Well, well, thank you very much for, for joining the BERA podcast today. I wonder if you could open by sort of introducing yourselves to our listeners and telling us a bit about your background.

Miro Griffiths: Sure. So my name is Miro Griffiths. I'm a Leverhulme trust early career research fellow within disability studies within the school of sociology and social policy. At the university of Leeds most of my research explores disabled people's experiences of activism, social movements, and resistance practices.

So why do people resist? What are they [00:02:00] trying to achieve through their resistance? And how is their resistance experienced within. The social world. I also do various amounts of teaching within disability theory, research methods and social policy analysis. Currently I'm working on a three year

research project funded by the Leverhulme trust and, and the university of Leeds which is exploring how young disabled people engage in activism.

And social movements across Europe, which is an extension of my doctorate research, which was exploring the similar issues. But within the UK context, outside of academia, I'm advisor on disability policy, I spent six years as a strategic and confidential advisor to the UK government across all government departments.

But I also now retain some links to department of health and social care and department of work and pensions and the European commission, thinking about how to ensure that policy is inclusive and is aligned with progressing disabled people's emancipation in society.

Nick Johnson: I mean, I [00:03:00] think we'll come back to it in a little bit. How you, in a sense, combine your, your activism with your research and how the two sort of compliment one another. What I'd like to explore a little bit more now is in terms of how you got into the research. I mean, you mentioned sort of your PhD. What, what motivated you to, to start looking at this from, I suppose, an academic point of view, as opposed to just a campaigning point of view

Miro Griffiths: sure. So, I mean, I think that the journey started with my own personal experience of disablement. So I have a physical impairment, which is a quite severe condition that affects muscle strength from the neck down. So my experience of disability was, was through my own personal gaze and through my own personal experiences.

And that was quite a turbulent time, really, because you are, you're grappling with questions of oppression and marginalization, and ultimately returning to the question. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that you can participate and include yourself. And often within disabled people's lives that is manifested [00:04:00] within the individual and the individual then internalizes their experiences of oppression.

And it was when I started campaigning and, and getting awareness of disabled people's organizations, which are organizations that are run by and controlled by disabled people. I started to encounter this politicized identity. Whereby disabled people were not marginalized because of their health conditions or impairments or diagnostic labels.

It is due to the way that we organize society. It's, it's due to the material and discursive aspects that constitute our social world. So understanding that then

led me to think about. Well, how do we collectively organize ourselves as a disabled people's community to highlight that narrative of society must change in order to include?

And the responsibility is within the political and economic and social and cultural arrangements. But what I quickly learned was that it's very dangerous then. To situate your whole analysis within your own personal [00:05:00] experiences, because I am afforded a level of privilege based on my identity and how my experience of disability intersects with my identities as white cisgender.

Male heterosexual who's, you know, comes from, uh, arguably a middle class background. So I wanted to try to expand my understanding of, of disabled people experiences. And that led me then to study it as an academic field and as an academic discipline. And I don't think disability studies gets enough attention in regard for its importance within, within sociology and, and social sciences, but also within other domains of, of, and bodies of literature, because what you have with disability studies, An exploration of what is the social position of disabled people?

Why is the experiences reflective of the political and economic and cultural and the various arrangements that constitute society? And for me, the most important question is why do we want to change that? And how do we want to change that? [00:06:00] And what does inclusion and accessibility look like? So that's what led me to, to where I am now, because in most of my conversations with other activists, the question is.

What are we trying to achieve and how do we go about doing that? And there's no answer to that. And I don't think there needs to be a, a definitive answer. I'm as a scholar, within social movement studies, I embrace the kind of the messiness of, of social movement. I want to revel in the messiness of activism and social movement organization, because I think that causes proactive engagement with.

Trying to be creative and trying to be imaginative about an alternative world, an alternative society, which is much more preferable for the numerous communities that are experiencing hardship and, and disadvantage. And so once I got engaged with disability studies and, and started to understand and combined disabled people's experiences with theory and, and conceptual frameworks, I found a home really.

And one that of course academia is, is it can be quite hostile and it can be. [00:07:00] Exclusionary to, to many groups of people, but it's somewhere that I feel my current position is, is necessary because it allows me then to expand my research and my interests and try to offer. Thoughts and narratives that will hopefully be useful.

Um, my thinking on activism is that, and, and my think of academia as well is if I can be of use to somebody, my ideas, my commentary, and so on. If I can be useful, then use it. And if I can't be useful, then just ignore me and, and, and move on with your own journey. So that's why I, I think where we are now is that disability studies has an opportunity to explore.

Disabled people's experiences of resistance. And, and it has something to say about the kind of world you want to live in.

Nick Johnson: And you mentioned a bit that sort, that you face some hostility at times, or academia can be a, a hostile place. What are some of the barriers that you've faced personally? And, and do you think that because.

Of your own background and, and your own sort of disabilities people, perhaps haven't engaged with your research on [00:08:00] a, on a level playing field.

Miro Griffiths: I, I, well, I think that's, that's a really important question. I, I, I think that there is various barriers I experience, I think, trying to juggle your, your own access requirements and your own health needs as well.

Because on the one hand I have impairment effects. I have effects upon my body that need to be managed and maintained. Various different interventions, but I have to combine that with trying to work within educational arrangement that doesn't recognize and acknowledge the flexibility that's required within the life of a disabled person.

And this is similar to many other communities who are struggling to fit in with the current ways in which we organize. Academia, we organize research and the, the, the productivity and outputs that are expected of academics, and that creates a lot of tensions then in trying to, to manage needs. And, and that you point to the evidence that shows that many people burn out and leave academia.

So on some hand, it's trying to ensure that you are in institutions that. Can [00:09:00] understand and value your support needs and your arrangements, and provide you with the extensive support necessary to participate in academia,

whether that is human support or assistive technologies or recognizing the roles and responsibilities you have as an academic, but making sure that.

Uh, you can, you can do and fulfill those duties and responsibilities in a way that is accessible to you. And I'm quite fortunate because being at the university of Leeds within the school of disability studies, there's been a constant legacy of thinking about disabled academics participation within, within academia.

So when, when I think back across my trajectory of the different institutions I've been at, there has been variance. In the way that I am regarded as a contributing member of the academic community, but also taking into account the access requirements I I have. And I think that we are now at a point where there is such widespread tension in academia between those who are trying to argue [00:10:00] that the academic spaces are not inclusive and not accessible, and that there is a possibility for an alternative way of rethinking education.

Not just for those of us who have scholarly activity, but also for students and for learners who are engaging in, in their own studies in order to progress their thinking on ideas. And I think we're, we are at a point now where we do have to think seriously and, and consider the different perspectives about how to reimagine education and how to reimagine inclusive education for, for different communities.

So I do experience, you know, difficulties, and if I, even things like the opportunity to progress my career, because as a, as an individual who relies upon 24 hour, Personal health assistance. So I employ, uh, personal assistants to assist me in every aspect of my life. The way in which disability policy works in the UK is that it would be very difficult for me to transfer my support package.

So if I was to move to a different institution that was outside of my local authority catchment area, I have [00:11:00] to reapply for my support. So as a disabled person, you are constantly seeking permission and request for assistance, you know, is, is very exhausting. But also you are persistently in a, in a, in a place of, of fear and anxiety.

And I think that, you know, trying to achieve my academic role whilst also trying to navigate through these anxieties and these concerns, uh, can be quite difficult and, and frustratingly, it can impact upon the, the work that I'm trying to do.

Nick Johnson: You're just not in the same position as, as other of your peers in the ability to say change institution for a different kind of role or a different opportunity.

Are you, you are, you're more constrained by the institutional framework that you're operating in.

Miro Griffiths: Yeah, absolutely. And that, that, that's where I think a lot of the frustration comes from is that, you know, you, you want to progress within careers, uh, within academia and you want to be able to get on and do the things you want to do within your role and why you wanted to be in academia, such as whether that's teaching or whether that's research or whether [00:12:00] that's a combination of two, or whether that's working within the institutions and the organization of these institutions.

But ultimately, and again, I think this applies back to the point I had before, about how I conceptualize the experience of disability. The, the reasons why there are frustrations, the reason why people struggle to gain access to and remain within academia. is because of the way we organize our educational environments and the way that we, we conceptualize and plan higher education.

And that's why the emphasis always has to be on how do we continue the dialogue and conversations about reimagining education and how do we ensure that there are spaces to experiment and be creative in the planning and the application of education and knowledge exchange. And, and how do we do that in a way where we are not.

Forcing individuals to change and fit within the system. Rather, we have a system that is flexible to the needs and desires and wants of the, of the communities that want to engage in, in [00:13:00] academia, whether that's from a learning perspective or whether that's through trying to enact research and, and try to exchange ideas and, and, and knowledge within subject.

Nick Johnson: And what would you say some of the things that that could be done? I mean, obviously there there's gonna be bigger things, but in terms of, for individual researchers, what are the kind of things they can do or they should think about to enable that more inclusivity to happen?

Miro Griffiths: I think there's, there's numerous ways.

So I think one, you know, if we go down the route of curriculum development one way is to think about the, the sharing of, of spaces between different

perspectives on the subject matters and. And the bodies of literature that we teach. So that's thinking through how to build and, and have sustainable engagement with civil society and third sector organizations and social movements and activist networks as a way to inform the ideas and the, the application of, of knowledge that we have within the curriculum and subject matters that we are creating.

So thinking through how do I ensure [00:14:00] that there is opportunities for the communities that may be deeply affected by the teaching and by the discourse that we are engaging with. How do we ensure that, that those communities have opportunities to inform our curriculum? I also think there's, you know, a need to expand our thinking on the curriculum that we use and, and, and incorporate within the application of, of our ideas.

So for example, disability studies, I think is, is a prime example where many voices within disability studies are really engaged with across the different disciplines and subject areas. A good example of that is if you think about how disability is often taught, it's taught from a medicalized perspective.

It's often rooted within the, the health sciences, which is deeply problematic from a disability studies point of view, but very rarely do we incorporate the ideas of disability studies across different disciplines. So I think it's about how do we become a little bit more serious about interdisciplinary work [00:15:00] within curriculum development so that we can have.

The learning and the ideas of the, of the studies that are often relegated or dismissed within the development of our, of our teaching. But when it comes to research, I think there are questions about how do we ensure that on the one hand, when research is conducted, It engages with the needs and the experiences of disabled people.

And that's not just within the areas of research, aims and objectives, but it's also within the, the research design. It's very rarely do I, and I, I say this as somebody who conducts research and observes other people's research and sits on ethics committees and, and advises research, uh, councils. And so on.

Very rarely do I see applications of research where the research design has centralized the importance of accessibility and thinking about how to ensure that there is accessible opportunities for disabled people to take part in research that sometimes is not about [00:16:00] disability, because one other aspect of this is ensuring that disabled people's voices are not constrained to just talk about disability and experience of disability. You know, I have, as a disabled

person, I may be engaged in disability studies, but my ideas and my commentary and my thinking transfers into other areas of materiality and, and, and discursive constitutions. So there's a question here about how do we understand the position of disabled people in academia and how do we understand the participation of disabled people?

And that I think leads to the third area for me, which would be thinking about disabled people's experiences of learning and knowledge exchange. I think there is a desperate need to reimagine the way in which we deliver curriculums and think about how do we move beyond the traditional forms of education, which is often being constrained to you do things in a classroom for a certain period of time. If you're lucky, you might have a little bit of asynchronous activity online. The pandemic showed that there was an opportunity to [00:17:00] understand and conceptualize education beyond the classroom. And of course, I know that within educational research bodies, you know, you have been talking about this for, for many years, but outside of that there's seems to be a disconnect because many people assume that good quality education is controlling and regulating people's engagement in, in a specified space at a specified time. So I think there are some questions about how do we reimagine the experience of education. How do we offer alternative pathways for education? Because I get incredibly fed up with the idea of assignments and assessment procedures, which are often rooted in people, just trying to remember as much information as possible, and then regurgitate that in a very short space of time, which is not reflective of, of everyday life, but it's also not accessible to many people.

So I think there are some opportunities to reimagine how education is provided and think about that from the starting point of accessibility. If you, if you think about accessibility at the beginning, You can have much more [00:18:00] opportunities for creative and experimental play within that development and application of, of conceptualizing and delivering education.

It's very hard to do that at the, at the back end of it. And so often when we think about accessibility, we narrow it to disabled people's experiences and we bolt it on at the end of our conversations. And if you start with the principle of inclusion, then you start with the principle of accessibility.

You are not just benefiting then disabled people's experiences. You're benefiting all different communities who are struggling within the way in which society is organized, because the way in which society is organized currently does not work for many communities for the majority of communities. So I think there's, this is, you know, one of the ways in which we can, we can reimagine education

and ensure that when we think about inclusion, accessibility, We are genuinely thinking about the inclusion of, of everybody

Nick Johnson: you mentioned earlier that your Leverhulme fellowship is, is looking, uh, across Europe at some of these issues. And I suppose, I mean, I know it's, it's, you're in the middle of that at the moment, but by doing that kind of [00:19:00] international comparison, do you think we are any better or worse in the UK than there are in Europe? And are there lessons there that you are finding that you could be applied to, to practice in this country?

Miro Griffiths: My, my initial position is I am always a little bit wary of comparisons. I get sometimes a little bit suspicious of people who, who, uh, try to offer a comparison as a, as a way forward, because there's a danger, I think, within thinking about policy transference and taking one, one approach and, and mapping it everywhere else because.

When you take something like disability, for example, you disability and the experience of disability and the reasons and the implications of disability occur because of the entanglement between micro and meso and, and, and macro issues. It's, it's the assemblage of different factors and aspects again, across the material and discursive continuum that that causes the experience of disability to be what it is in, in that particular context.

But what I do see [00:20:00] within, within the research and there's four phases to this research. So we've conducted a, an online survey capturing young, disabled people's experiences of activism and social movements. We are going through some interviews now, and then we have a documentary film being produced about disability, youth activism.

And we also have some what we calling future laboratory workshops where young disabled activists will come together to be presented really with two main questions. What is inclusion and accessibility and how do we realize inclusion and accessibility within society? and trying to capture some of their views on that.

What, what we tended to see in terms of the kind of key themes is that there is deep frustration within young disabled people's opportunities to have a politicized identity and to be part of the change making aspects of, of the social world. So whether that's internally within existing disability activist networks, so [00:21:00] having making sure that young disabled people have a space within disability activism.

But there's also deep frustrations with the intersecting of different social movements. So if we think about climate change, for example, very rarely do we have disabled activists having opportunities to entangle the important issue of climate change with the important issue of disabled people's inclusion and participation in society.

So thinking about the entanglement of disability and climate change, very rarely where if we think about other social movements that have born out. Do we think about the intersecting of, of disability, whether that's within black lives matter or when we think about feminist movements and, and, and so on, there are pockets of activity where young activists want to try to bring together these different intersecting social issues.

And not continue within the current guise of things, which is to fragment these different social issues and social problems. There's also, I think another issue, which is a, a deep frustration about how people can rely [00:22:00] on and access support in order to participate in activism and, and social movements. So again, if we think about the provision of support for people, and we've seen, if we think about the changes in political and economic objectives over the last 20, 30, 40 years, We are seeing across Europe and again, and the UK is a prime example of this residual forms of welfare and tightening of, uh, welfare and social security.

So when you have a community that are struggling to access support in order to meet their basic needs to survive and live, then the additional question of, well, I need support in order to have political participation or I need support in order to have opportunities to inform and influence my communities.

And so on. So many disabled young people struggle to access support in order to participate within activism and within their own broader communities. But there's also one thing which I think is, is, has been quite fascinating and [00:23:00] is, and is an extension of my arguments in, in my doctorate, which is the way in which we conceptualize youth.

And this is not, I'm not necessarily saying these. No, this I've, I've found this out, but. Building on the existing arguments of academics in the conceptualization of youth. What I did find in my research, when you entangle the conceptualization of youth and informing and influencing activism you get the situation where young disabled people are perceived as being naive and passive and are dependent upon the ideas and teachings of older established figures within social movements.

And this leads to then a disconnect, many young activists remove themselves because of these frustrations and these limitations to their participation. But you also, uh, then stifle the ideas of, of, of young people. So often young, disabled activists will talk to me about how they are only permitted to talk about youth issues.

They're not in [00:24:00] invited to have commentary on the broader complex arguments surrounding the experiences of disablement, the implications of economics and politics and the way in which we organize society and how that exacerbates disabled people's marginalization or how it tries to address it. Often disabled, young people are trapped to just offer a youth perspective and then, uh, or thanked for that participation and then they are requested to leave. So I think there's, there's some questions here for how we understand the ideas and the creativity and the experimentation of, of young people. And I think this is why we created these future laboratory workshops, because I wanted to understand from the perspective of young people, What do you mean by inclusion?

What do you mean by accessibility? We use these terms so often in the areas of change making in the areas of social change, but very rarely do we interrogate what do these terms mean and how do they impact and become affected by [00:25:00] the different political and economic and cultural and technological arrangements within society?

So there's questions about what we mean by this and, and learning from the ideas of young people, but then also asking young people to offer a perspective of how do we want to organize society? Because if we think about much of the conversations that we have with young people, they are very individualized and they're very fragmented.

So, you know, I am always compelled when I visit my young nephews to ask them, what do you want to do when you grow up? And then I remember that I'm asking them a very individualized question about their own future. Prompting a child in this way, leads us to constantly ask children to imagine the future only through their own self and through their own position in society, rather than ask children, young people.

How do you want your communities to be organized? What is important in the way in which we organize education, health services, economics and so on. And we can do this in very accessible ways because ultimately the best [00:26:00] people to ask about how you want an education system organized is the learners

because the learners can help you to shape what works well, what doesn't work well, and as analysts, it's our responsibility to try to extrapolate that.

To a broader commentary on the ways in which we organize education in different spaces, across different times with different factors that may affect that. But very rarely do we have those conversations. So I think the key thing for my research is how do we open up accessible and safe spaces for young people to have comments about.

How society and communities more broadly speaking should be organized,

Nick Johnson: obviously it's underway, but you've got stuff from your previous work. What are some of the ways in which we should be doing that? I mean, you've touched on some of them earlier, but just expand on that a bit for us please.

Miro Griffiths: So I, I think the ways in which we can, we can do that is one thinking about ourselves as members of existing social movements or activists networks.

And of course, you know, there is an entanglement between academia and activism. Many of us within academia are also [00:27:00] activists. And I use that term very loosely, depending on how people feel about campaigning and, and engaging in, in resistance movements. I think there's responsibility of all of those to ask within the networks that we already have a position within.

How do we create more accessible and inclusive ways to bring people and invite people and celebrate their participation? So for me, it's how do the existing members who are already established or already have a place. What are we doing in order to demonstrate warmth and acceptance of new members and newcomers to our social movements?

I also think there's an imperative, particularly within education to be offering narratives and commentaries about disability in the way in which I've been speaking about it for during this podcast and my other work and, and other disability study scholars have talked about thinking about how do we ensure that there is an awareness of the politicization of disability.[00:28:00]

Disability does not have to be something that resides within the individual that is not caused by the individuals impairment health conditions. It's caused by the way, in which disabled people experience the social world. And it's caused by the various different arrangements in society, because. If we are able to offer

that through education and to offer this alternative perspective of disability, which challenges the traditional and dominant perspectives of disability as a medical issue, we are then hopefully going to have more individuals who are either have experienced disability and disablement for many years, or are new to the world of, of experiencing disability.

We have the opportunity to actually provide people, not necessarily with a sense of, of empowerment. But with the recognition that if things are being experienced in a, in a deeply hostile, violent, negative, oppressive way. That doesn't have to continue that there is an alternative and that alternative is demanding change within society. [00:29:00]

Nick Johnson: You talk about the impact of marginalization and, and oppression built into the system. And I know from similar conversations I've had with other potentially marginalized groups or excluded groups. And, and I wonder whether. In your own work and your own sort of influencing work. You've had those conversations with other marginalized groups or other excluded communities as to what lessons you can learn from each other in terms of, of challenging those systems and, and that oppression.

Miro Griffiths: I think that's probably the, the key question really going forward. I is how do we bring together the different alliances and formations of marginalized communities? Some of which are deeply politicized and radical, some of which are reformist and, and perhaps rooted in incrementalism, how do we establish these alliances in order to a raise the concerns about the way in which we organize these different, our different institutions and our [00:30:00] different arrangements?

B what do we want to try to achieve? And I think as an activist and something that I want to expand on and explore in my research now, and in the future is what is the purpose of, of disability activism? Because we assume it's about trying to address the marginalization of disabled people. But for me, I think the success of disability activism is in highlighting to the expansive communities across the globe.

Things don't have to be the way they are and things are pretty awful for many groups of people. So why do we want to tolerate that? Why do we accept. How do we resist that? And what do we resist it for? And I think for me, that's why I want to argue that disability activism isn't about disability. It's disability activism is about disabled people, highlighting their experiences of injustice and saying the way in which we organize society, doesn't work for the majority of people.

Nick Johnson: Thank you. Um, it's been a fascinating conversation. [00:31:00] I hope sort of people will check out your, your page and your research and, and think about this more.

And I think it, it is so important for us to, to understand the different context in which people are coming at this. And, and as you say, Look at the structures and look at the systems that we've got in place and how we can do things differently to be more inclusive. So, uh, thank you for sharing that today.

Miro Griffiths: Thank you.

Nick Johnson: The British educational research association supports and represents the community of scholars, practitioners, and everyone engaged in and with education research, we recognize excellence through our rewards and fellowships support the career development of our members and nurture an active peer community organize around networks, forums, and special interest groups.

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