



**TOWARD INCLUSIVE AND RIGHTS-BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH  
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

**Ioana-Eva CĂDARIU**

*Institute of Psychotherapy, Psychological Counseling and Clinical Supervision*

*“Tibiscus” University of Timișoara, Romania*

**Marius MARICI<sup>1</sup>**

*“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania*

**Abstract**

Today, practice with individuals with disabilities in the area of social work requires that there be conceptual approaches to disability that move beyond the paradigms of deficits and medicalization. This paper proposes a critical analysis of the concept of disability in social work practice, social work education, and social work supervision, with special emphasis on the social and human rights models of disability. The paper discusses recent research on theoretical approaches and their influence on social work practice by highlighting the role of supervision in social work practice with individuals with disabilities. It is argued that the models of disability tend to get pulled apart by considerations of care, competence, and creativity. Supervision is viewed as a special context of social work practice that allows social workers to work through their assumptions, tolerate structural impediments, and maintain a person-centered/rights-based approach to practice with individuals with disabilities. An integrative approach that considers disability as a social production is proposed by juxtaposing disability studies research with research in social work practice, social work education, and social work supervision.

**Keywords:** *social justice, disability, inclusion, ethical practice.*

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author: [marius.marici@usm.ro](mailto:marius.marici@usm.ro)/ +40-747-494-707

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Disability, Rights, and the Challenge of Inclusive Social Work Practice**

Beaulaurier & Taylor (2001) argue that practice with either individual or group clients with disabilities must be viewed through the larger shift that was initiated by the disability rights movement. Despite this shift in thinking, practice and training remain characterized by contradictions between rights-based ideologies on one hand, and institutional practices that often carry subtle notions of exclusion or dependency on the other.

Within social work education literature, Dupre (2012) argues that disability is often viewed through limited cultural/ diversity lenses that do not encompass the political, historical, or collective aspects of disability. Instead, it is possible that disability could become viewed as an individualized characteristic that is actually a social position that is created by power relations. Such a limited definition is a hindrance to the development of anti-oppressive practice.

At the same time, empirical research demonstrates that curricular exposure to disability-related content does not automatically translate into inclusive attitudes or professional readiness. Bean and Hedgpeth (2014) show that students' levels of self-esteem and perceived preparedness significantly influence their social attitudes toward people with disabilities, suggesting that educational outcomes are mediated by psychological and relational factors, not solely by knowledge acquisition. Consequently, social work education must address affective and reflexive dimensions alongside technical competence.

Transcending the more traditional models of pedagogy, Ward et al. (2016) assert convincing evidence that the direct inclusion of people with disabilities in social work education is potentially disruptive of some of the taken-for-granted beliefs about expertise, communication, or learning. These participatory strategies challenge models of hierarchical learning, provoking students into critical reflection about their own positionality in their professional practice. It is significant that this inclusion is thought of not just in terms of symbolic representation but through active participation.

Despite this, however, as Acosta-Jiménez (2022) suggests, the adaptive application of inclusive and rights-based values into everyday social work practice is not consistent. This is because social work practitioners tend to work in settings that underscore individualized service practices, with the result that structural empowerment practices are restricted. Within such a setting, reflection for social work practitioners tends to be impeded by structural considerations as opposed to serving as a critical resource for social transformation.

From this position, Dupré (2012) argues that understanding disability culture is imperative in developing cultural competency for social work. Disability culture emphasizes collective histories, subversive practices, and other frameworks of understanding embodiment or identity that are inclusive of the constructions of normalcy of the disabling body. A neglect of these cultural issues would mean that social work is supportive of assimilationist practices instead of self-determining practices.

Historically, the disability rights movement has promoted a transformation of professional roles that emphasize advocacy, collaboration, and support for informed choice approaches over more professional-dominant interventions (Beaulaurier & Taylor, 2001). More recent scholarship suggests that such models of practice are not consistently represented in educational offerings or practices.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that for social work practice with persons with disabilities to be effective, what is called for is clearly the development of an integrative framework that synthesizes rights approaches, critical pedagogy, participatory practice, and cultural competence. As shown by Ward et al. (2019) and Acosta-Jiménez (2022), such a framework is one that must be able to tackle both individual levels as well as structural levels. The present article seeks to critically synthesize key contributions from social work scholarship in order to clarify pathways toward more inclusive, reflective, and socially just practice with people with disabilities.

## **1.2. The social model of disability**

The social model of disability emerged as a critical response to dominant medical and individual approaches to disability that prevailed throughout much of the twentieth century. Its foundational premise was that disability should not be understood as an inevitable consequence of impairment, but as the result of social arrangements that exclude and marginalize people with bodily, sensory, or cognitive differences. Early formulations emphasized the political nature of disability and framed disablement as a form of social oppression rooted in environmental barriers, institutional practices, and cultural norms (Barnes, 2019; Bampi et al., 2010).

It was not until the earliest years of the 2000s that researchers found themselves questioning the epistemological foundations of both impairment and disability. One of the key works of this era was carried out by Goodley (2001), who analyzed the role of such concepts as “learning difficulties” in constructing impairment through various forms of professional talk. This work

showed that impairment is far from a biographical category that could or should be viewed as separate from considerations of power; it is actually one that is constructed through power relations and dominant forms of knowledge (Goodley, 2001).

Around the same time, the social model was progressively incorporated into professional practice areas such as counseling and social care. Swain, Griffiths, and Heyman (2003) argued that the disabling assumptions that commonly underpin counseling practices were often perpetuated by a counseling framework that emphasized adapting to oppressive conditions. Instead, they proposed that a counseling framework with a social model of disability could provide a framework that viewed suffering as socially caused and legitimated clients' experiences of oppression. This represented a significant movement towards integrating the social model into practices that were both relational and therapeutic, as opposed to being simply structurally critical.

In 2004, significant philosophical and theoretical refinements of the social model were introduced. Terzi (2004) offered a sustained philosophical critique, arguing that while the social model successfully exposes structural injustice, it may inadequately address questions of individual well-being and moral concern if impairment is treated as analytically irrelevant. Terzi's critique did not reject the social model, but instead called for a framework capable of integrating social responsibility with attention to individual flourishing.

In the same year, Burchardt (2004) proposed one of the most influential theoretical developments of the social model by merging it with the Capabilities Framework. In this regard, the author argues that disability could be viewed as a capability restriction—that is, a restriction of individuals' real opportunities to live their valued ways of living—which stems from both impairment and social arrangements. This approach, again, preserves the social model's emphasis on structural issues but resolves concerns raised by philosophical critiques by paying direct attention to agency, freedom, and choice (Burchardt, 2004).

Following these trends, research on the integration of the social model with practice-based models gained traction. In their study of the link between the social model of disability and social role valorization, Race, Boxall, and Carson (2005) suggested that structural transformation and role-based inclusion approaches should be viewed as complementary, in contrast to being dichotomous, by suggesting that for genuine participation to occur, both the elimination of barriers and support for role-based engagement with the existing social order are important.

In the years that followed, the emphasis of academia was on the limitations of the social model in dealing with embodiment, especially with chronic illnesses. According to Goering (2015), pain, fatigue, and variability do not necessarily lend themselves to solutions by purely environmental adjustments. However, it is important to note that the recognition of embodiment does not mean abandoning the social model but seeking to extend it to better encompass embodiment without falling back into medical dominance.

More recent scholarship has rightly emphasized the continuing relevance of the social model, while also recognizing the need for its adjustment. Barnes (2019) argues that the continuing relevance of this social model is to be found in its political clarity, despite the recognition that current disability studies need more theoretical eclecticism. It is through such an understanding that it is possible to position the social model not as a unitary or definitive theoretical position, but as one that is developing through its consistent influence on practice that is inclusive, critically reflexive, and rights-based.

This chronological development demonstrates that the social model of disability has evolved through sustained dialogue, critique, and refinement. From its early political foundations to its engagement with epistemology, counseling, capabilities theory, and embodiment, the model has expanded in scope while retaining its core commitment to social justice. This historical trajectory underscores the model's continued relevance for social work theory and practice, particularly in efforts to promote inclusion, participation, and human dignity (Barnes, 2019; Burchardt, 2004).

## **2. Critical perspectives on disability in social work education and practice**

More recent scholarship, however, has refocused the study of disability in the area of social work onto a critical assessment of how paradigms of disability are embodied in educational institutions. Gilson and DePoy (2002) were some of the initial thinkers to illustrate that curriculum related to disability in social work is not objective but is instead filtered through theoretical perspectives, which, in turn, shape understanding of responsibility, intervention, and social transformation on the part of students. It would appear that if disability is viewed more from a diagnostic framework, then the emphasis of professional practice is more likely to be on adapting to the disability, as opposed to altering the disabling environment.

On the basis of this concern, Ballan (2008) argues that theoretical constructions have significant and real-world ethical implications, particularly in respect of areas that are regularly marginalized in both practice and educational domains, including sexuality. Ballan's analysis

of disability and sexuality highlights that social work educational agendas often marginalize by promoting either silence, awkwardness, or paternalism, effectively inhibiting the promotion of autonomy/support for rights practice in that area. Contrary to viewing issues of sexuality as marginal, the results point to the marginalization of sexuality as a manifestation of professional concerns about agency, risk, or control in the context of practice with a disabled group (Ballan, 2008).

While both articles focus on curricular gaps, Kattari, Lavery, and Hasche (2017) extend the critique by introducing a life span perspective that challenges the fragmentation of disability content across age-based practice areas. Their analysis shows that separating disability from aging reinforces deficit-based narratives, particularly in later life, and obscures how ableism and ageism intersect over time. This life course approach reveals that disability-related exclusion is cumulative and structurally produced, requiring social workers to adopt longitudinal and intersectional perspectives rather than episodic or stage-bound interventions. In contrast to analysis that focuses more on curriculum, the work of Haegele & Hodge (2016) considers disability through a discursive analytic, suggesting that professional models of disability are powerful forms of interpretation that not only influence practice, but crucially influence moral assessment of competency and worth. Their critical analysis of the medical and social models of disability clearly illustrates the dangers of binary thinking, particularly in relation to embodied pain or chronic illnesses that are often reduced by binary thinking. Perhaps more importantly, their research cautions that it is essential that no one model is regarded as definitive, emphasizing the role of reflexivity in application of models in both practice and professional training (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

This is a call for reflexivity that strongly resonates with the analysis of the relationship between the social model of disability and the human rights model of disability by Lawson & Beckett (2021). Instead of one being a replacement or an improvement over the other, their complementary relationship proves that both approaches work on entirely different levels of analysis. While the social model of disability traces disabling structures, it is the human rights model that provides the framework for implementation. Their findings show that by merging description with prescription, one ends up with a critique that is inappropriate for both models (Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

A critical juxtaposition of these contributions reveals that progress towards disability-inclusive social work practice requires simultaneous work at various levels. Discourse-inappropriate reforms of the curriculum risk perpetuating hidden power relations, whereas rights-based

approaches that do not critically engage with their educational practice could become mere expressions of good intentions (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). Similarly, life-course or intersectional approaches would lose their critical potential if they were not accompanied by deliberate challenges to their own taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in professional education (Kattari et al., 2017).

What ties these approaches together is a shared critique of conceptions of disability that are either static or reductionist. Disability is framed in these approaches as something that is necessarily relational, contextual, and political, such that it demands flexibility in analysis as well as a depth of moral understanding that is sensitive both to rights and to experience (Ballan, 2008; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). These approaches together point the way toward a practice of social work education that is sensitive both to complexity and to power that is grounded in both rights and experience.

These studies indicate a collective concern with the implications of the framing of disability in social work practice, but with a difference in the arena of practice that takes precedence. While Gilson & DePoy (2002) point to the role of curriculum theory, Ballan (2008) places more emphasis on pedagogical ethics, Kattari et al. (2017) center their work around issues of temporal practice, Haegele & Hodge (2016) explore the power of models themselves, while the emphasis of Lawson & Beckett (2021) rests with institutional accountability.

### **3. Supervision in social work practice with people with disabilities**

Supervision is a critical area for promoting thinking, ethical, and rights-based social work practice (Vişcu & Marici, 2025; Vişcu & Marici, 2024) with people with disabilities, especially where there is complexity, uncertainty, and structural constraint (Rothman, 2018). More fundamentally, however, supervision is more critical as it is a key area where social work practitioners explore and examine the impact of professional values, organization-based expectations, and societal discourses on everyday decision-making in social work with people with disabilities (Nickson et al., 2020).

One of the major issues that supervision seeks to address is that of the relationship between protection and self-determination. Social care staff in the disability sector often need to manage such issues, for example, in their work with intellectually or psychosocially disabled clients. Supervision offers a formal setting where direct analysis of the way risk assessment or determinations of capacity could potentially perpetuate paternalistic approaches is feasible

(Gur & Klein, 2025). Such analysis would enable staff to better differentiate between support and restriction by using more subtle forms of reasoning (Rothman, 2018).

Aside from the complexities that disability practice involves, it is also characterized by significant emotional labor. Working with people who live with marginalization, stigma, or neglect for an extended period of time can create feelings of frustration, moral suffering, or uncertainty. According to Nickson et al. (2020), supervision is a significant practice that legitimates these feelings of practitioners, helping to convert these into opportunities for learning instead of dealing with burnout. This is likewise important in disability practice since it is characterized by poor resourcing or high client loads, which could limit opportunities for informal reflection (Gur & Klein, 2025).

Supervision emerges as an important site for challenging deficit-based approaches to disability that continue to remain pervasive in interdisciplinary service models. As Rothman (2018) highlights, social work practitioners often work together with biomedical or clinical practitioners whose understanding of disability is more grounded in concepts of diagnosis and functional impairment. Supervisors can help social work practitioners critically evaluate the extent to which such understandings influence the language of assessment, the language of intervention, or interactions with service recipients, thereby promoting a social understanding of disability (Gur & Klein, 2025).

Role of supervision is more visible in the context of family work, including intellectually disabled parents. According to Pacheco et al. (2022), social work practitioners face challenges of uncertainty in their work with these families, arising from the critical gaze, risk-conducive work environments, as well as a lack of training. Supervision offers an important space for work with unconscious biases, boundary work of professional identity, and the development of strength-based practices that recognize parental strengths while addressing support deficits (Pacheco et al., 2022).

From an educational point of view, supervision is very relevant to the social worker's readiness to practice in the disability area. A great number of social workers, as Laws et al. (2010) state, lack relevant training in the area of developmental disabilities, with supervision being their key learning source. Thus, the role of the supervisor is educational, helping social workers connect their theoretical background with values through critical reflection of their practice, more often in complex or difficult cases (Nickson et al., 2020).

Person-centered practice is given further emphasis by the importance of supervision as a relationship and reflection. This is emphasized by the argument by Washburn and Grossman

that fully person-centered practice involves being fully engaged with people through their lived experiences in order to authentically connect with them. Being supervised helps in this regard as it involves practitioners slowing down their practice, observing relationship, and not getting bogged down by tasks (Washburn & Grossman, 2017).

The role of supervision is essential in ensuring that social work practice among people with disabilities remains inclusive, ethical, and reflexive. This is achieved through supervision, which allows for the integration of care/support, critique, and development to ensure that social work practitioners remain grounded in their practice despite the institutional challenges while still adhering to the ideals of dignity, participation, and social justice (Rothman, 2018; Gur & Klein, 2025). Supervision is, therefore, critical in promoting accountability and engaging with practice among social work practitioners.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This analysis highlights the need for a more integrated and practice-based understanding of disability for social work. This understanding must account for the complexity and ambiguity that is inherent in disability studies, as well as the limitations of standardized professional practice. In contrast to the expectation that the implementation of discretized approaches would necessarily equate with inclusive practice, it is evident that the ethical practice of social work is instead one that emerges through reflexive practices.

One of the major contributions of this research is its focus on the role of supervision in playing a key role in implementing theoretical ideals into practice. Supervision not only serves as a support system for practitioners, but it is also an area where power relations, uncertainty, and institutional factors can be critically explored. When supervision remains limited to its management focus, it is likely that opportunities for learning in ethics would be limited. However, when supervision becomes more reflective, it allows the practitioner to remain more connected with real-world practice.

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