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## INTRODUCTION

# Crippling Time – Understanding the Life Course through the Lens of Ableism

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Normative time occupies a prominent place in life course theory. Time intersects with the life course to dictate discourses of appropriate life stage progression in a linear chain of events from birth to reproduction and finally death. Taking crip time and the life course as their focus, the papers in this special section recognize that cultural understandings of what constitutes disability are connected to understandings of time and the idea of a normative life course, which in turn builds on ableist norms. The idea of ability as the desirable normal state creates a realm of compulsory able-bodiedness. Everybody that falls outside this hegemonic assumption is culturally deviant and wrong. Crip time creates an understanding of time that differs from ableist time and unravels the social construction of ability. Crip time is approached from multiple perspectives in this special section and traverse a number of disciplines and different methodologies.

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**Keywords:** disability; crip time; life course; ableism

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### Introduction

Time occupies a prominent place in life course theory. Despite recent recognition that the social pathways of human lives are undergoing significant shifts, the life course is still heavily influenced by normative linear time. Time intersects with the life course to dictate discourses of appropriate life stage progression from childhood through to adulthood. Four ages have been identified in life course theories. From dependency in the first age of childhood, through to independence in the second (adulthood) and third (post retirement) ages, to dependence again in the fourth age (the old old) (Laslett 1987). However, the life course is a social, historical and cultural product—normative life courses are subjected to change over time and in different societies and cultures. Taking crip time, or the way disability disrupts normative understandings of time and the life course as their focus, the papers throughout this section recognize that cultural understandings of what constitutes a disability are connected to understandings of time, ageing and the idea of a normative life course.

Expected and normative life courses have been subjected to critique from the perspective of marginalized groups, with queer perspectives particularly prominent. The normative life course focuses primarily on a linear chain of events from birth to reproduction and finally death (Halberstam 2005), a structuring of time centred on heterosexuality, reproduction and family. The normative structuring of time is also highly centred on labour and productivity. Simply put, a normative life course suggests one should transition from child to adult, find a partner, get married, reproduce, work, eventually transition from adulthood to old age, retire and die. These same events occurring separate from each other or in a radically different order are often deemed as deviant. Nonetheless, what this queer critique of temporality fails to acknowledge is how ableist norms are embedded in these structures of time.

Crip scholars have furthered these queer critiques of the previously taken-for-granted notion that the way we live in time is a universal way of existence. Ellen Samuels (2017 p. n), an associate professor of Gender and Women's Studies, explains:

*Crip time is time travel.* Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. Some of us contend with the impairments of old age while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get.

Disability therefore disrupts the stages of the life course both in terms of when normative life stages are achieved (if ever) and the time it takes to complete activities. Research within disability studies proceeding from a life course perspective (cf. Barron 2004; Priestley 2003; Söder 2009) has focused primarily on possibilities and/or obstacles for people with disabilities to achieve significant events associated with a 'normative' life course, while the construction of the normative life course itself is under-researched. This special section aims to address this gap. The papers advance knowledge and discussion of the ascribed disabled life course by employing perspectives on disability and time that draw from the understanding of ableist normalcy and crip time.

Disabled and ageing populations both suffer from ableist approaches to the normative life course (Gibbons 2016). The intersections between ageing and disability have been recognized by disability studies scholars who contend 'all of us live with disability at some point in our lives [...], suggesting that becoming disabled is "only a matter of time"' (Kafer 2013: 26; cf. Oliver 1996). However, depending on the nature of the impairment and when in one's life it occurs, it is not necessarily understood by the person or others as a disability. For example, while an impairment acquired at birth is considered a source of social and cultural stigma and explicitly framed as disability, the impairments acquired in old age are seldom considered a disability in the cultural sense. The cultural understanding of what constitutes a disability is hence connected to understandings of time, ageing and the idea of a normative life course.

### Ableist Time

Normative life course builds on notions of ableist time. Among others, Alison Kafer (2013) argues that the idea of ability as the desirable normal state/condition permeates our understanding of time and creates a realm of compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer 2006). Everything and everybody that falls outside these hegemonic assumptions is culturally deviant, wrong and ill (Baril 2016). Crip and crip time are analytical concepts that create an understanding of time that differs from the ableist time, an understanding that unravels the social construction of ability. The pejorative term crip has been reclaimed by the disability community and disability academics as both a site of identification and academic inquiry (McRuer 2006). Crip approaches are concerned with the ways disability is culturally located and how and why some bodies are normalized while others are pathologized. A normative life course also builds on heteronormativity where the notion of queer challenges the hegemonic understanding of heterosexual relationships. Crip and queer are intertwined concepts (McRuer 2006) with many similarities, not least the critical stance towards all forms of hegemonic normalcy, be it bodily, sexual or social. In this context, ableism appears even more naturalized than heteronormativity.

Crip time challenges ableist normativity and recognizes diverse bodies and minds by redefining time. This challenge to normativity facilitates a social approach to disability whereby the environment must be changed, not the body. Kafer (2013: 27) defines crip time as a shift in mindset: 'rather than bend the bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds'. Petra Kuppers (2014) describes crip time as a recognition that people move, think and speak at a different pace to the normate, embracing this is a form of 'disability culture politics'.

Alexandre Baril (2016) presents a model of three ways to understand crip time. First, crip time can mean the extra time needed to perform a task compared to ableist time. People with disability experience a compulsory meaning of this crip time, extra time, as a deviation from what is normal. This extra time does not only depend on a person's slower pace but just as much on ableist barriers that make things take longer, for example, inaccessible buildings or waiting for transportation to come. Second, crip time can mean, according to Baril (2016), society's dominant understanding of this extra time as wasted time, in the sense of being slow and unproductive and not living up to the norm. Finally, crip time can be used as an analytical tool for understanding flexible temporalities for different people and not one fixed normal temporality. This way disability can be liberated from its articulation within medicine. The articles in this special section via their consideration of time, culture, identity and experiences across the life course embrace a crip approach to disability as a political identity and site of academic inquiry.

### Outline of Papers

Time is approached from multiple perspectives in this special section, from acquiring disability over time, the experience of disability changing in time, experiencing life course events out of order, unexpected longevity and systemic frustrations with the additional time required to complete everyday tasks. Papers traverse a number of disciplines and use different methodologies and analytical approaches. We begin with three papers that strongly foreground the perspectives of people with disability and their experiences of crip time.

In *Performing Normal but Becoming Crip*, Emma Sheppard explores the tensions of crip time when it comes to the ways in which people living with chronic pain move in and through time in both normative and non-normative ways. In exploring how chronic pain develops slowly, and is often accompanied by disbelief and silencing, the paper considers whether crip time can include liminal spaces of becoming chronically pained, including medicalised spaces/times of testing and diagnosis.

The next paper, *Ableist constructions of time? Boys and Men with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy Managing the Uncertainty of a Shorter Life* by Thomas Abrams, David Abbott and Bhavnita Mistry, draws on studies of boys and men with Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD) carried out in Canada (2016–2018) and the UK (2009–2018). While life expectancy with DMD has increased significantly and generations of men lead lives that many did not expect them to be leading, there is little evidence of boys and men being helped to think through how to plan for a life expectancy that keeps shifting.

A systemic lack of support is also evident in the next paper, *'I Don't Have Time For This': Stuttering and the Politics of University Time*, where Dane Isaacs offers an autoethnographic account of his personal experiences of stuttering at two South African universities. Isaacs draws on Felt's (2017) concept of academic chronopolitics, finding that higher education institutions continue to create barriers to inclusion and participation for disabled students.

The next paper, *Arts Disability and Crip Theory*, by Susan Levy and Hannah Young shifts the focus from the perspectives of people with disability to the mutually beneficial interactions of artists working collaboratively with this group and their carers. This paper presents findings from an innovative project in Scotland, where Art is conceived as a social practice, a process, an embodied aesthetic and sensory experience that takes place between individuals. The results reveal an unsettling of prevailing norms and creative ways of doing and experiencing social care that is relational.

The final two papers in the special section draw on media studies approaches to disability and crip time. In *(Im) Possible Lives and Love: Disability and Crip Temporality in Swedish Cinema*, Josefine Wälivaara and Karin Ljuslinder analyze five contemporary Swedish fiction films with protagonists with disabilities in order to consider how and in what ways they depict romantic relationships, sexuality and reproduction as manifestations of adulthood in normative time and life course. Four of the five films confirmed the ableist norm and used normalizing strategies to assimilate the disability position into normative life course and timeline. One of the films challenged the ableist implications of the normative timeline, thus providing the possibility of crip time.

Finally, *Writing Letters to the Dead: Crippling Networked Temporalities on Social Media* by Maria Bee Christensen-Styro considers an innovative outcome of problematic media representation. Taking the social media initiative *Dear Julianna* as its case study, this article proposes a critical framework for challenging dominant understandings of disability in relation to time.

### Concluding Remarks

In the last few decades, scholars in disability studies have brought together a wealth of research and theoretical insights to reveal the social and cultural construction of nonnormative bodies. Life course perspectives in particular have revealed the ways notions of dependence, independence and interdependence are created within social structures. Amongst others, Alison Kafer (2013) and Fiona Kumari Campbell (2012) have scrutinized the concept of disabled people's futures by positioning ableism, and not disability, as the obstacle to a life course enabling a future, both imagined and real. Studies in ableism, as Campbell suggests, 'shift our gaze from a *disability pre-occupied minoritisation* towards *ableist normativity* [...]. The direction is to examine elements of what is presented as "normal" or aspirational' (215). These approaches and the insights of queer scholars have highlighted time as a topic of scrutiny for people with disability. This special section has brought together key writers and researchers seeking to advance the study of disability and ableism in relation to the notion of normative time and temporality. In particular, the special section has explored how ableist cultural norms and ideas shape both perceived and lived lives of people with disabilities. We believe this section's focus on crip time brings novel insights into the already recognized need to consider the influence of diversity throughout the life course.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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