RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between crippling and reclaiming: epistemological implications of Disability Studies’ feeling strategies

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Disability Studies promote different feeling strategies by pushing for social change towards a more inclusive and less ableist society. There is a utopian touch to this: how can we change the world by feeling differently about disability? Disabled people have long discussed how to navigate the emotional toll of ableism. This article oscillates between two strategies that Disability Studies scholars and activists have advocated for: crippling – deliberately changing one’s emotional reaction towards disability; and reclaiming – acknowledging hurtful emotions connected to an ableist society. Both strategies acknowledge the sociality of emotion but differ on what this sociality entails. Whereas crippling preaches the deliberate enactment of different feelings, reclaiming promotes acknowledging authentic feelings – feelings rooted in a discriminatory society and thus social in origin. However, crippling as a political endeavour has often been criticised as an elitist issue – irrelevant to the lived reality of most disabled people. In contrast, a contemporary take on authenticity problematises its performative constitution and commodification in consumer capitalism. Considering crippling and reclaiming as complementary feeling strategies promoted in Disability Studies for social change, I argue that we should engage with the underlying epistemological questions to point out their respective implications. To this end, shared theoretical concepts and terminology on feelings, affect and emotion should be developed for a comprehensive engagement with emotionality in the field of Disability Studies.

Key words Disability Studies • ableism • crippling • reclaiming • affective practice

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Introduction

This article seeks to acknowledge how disabled people navigate and counter how society makes them feel about their difference. To this end, I introduce two converse yet complementary feeling strategies promoted in Disability Studies: crippling and
reclaiming. Crippling invites us to feel proud about disability, whereas reclaiming acknowledges the hurtful feelings that, at times, belong to the disability experience. The following sections will elaborate on what those two feeling strategies do, the utopian hopes attached to them, their major critique and respective preconditions, differing epistemological implications and their common ground.

I am using the term ‘strategy’ here to describe a subjectively meaningful action to solve a problem, navigate a situation, or survive the everyday. These mundane strategies should be valued, made visible, and regarded as a resource to develop. At times, feeling strategies are collectively negotiated and claimed by scholars and activists (Johnson and McRuer, 2014a). Nevertheless, they similarly encompass the subjective navigations of an ableist society, developed intuitively by different disabled people and their allies (McLaughlin and Goodley, 2008a). This rich archive of intuitive, experiential knowledge unfolded in Disability Studies journals and other publications informs this article.

Disability Studies are a research programme that argues from a ‘subaltern’ (Spivak, 1988) standpoint similar to Gender or Queer Studies. They, thus, do not take their topic – disability – as epistemologically given (Boger, 2017) but rather as ‘a difference constructed in and through society and culture’ (Waldschmidt, 2018: 69). When taken as epistemologically given, disability has commonly been cast as tragic and equated with functional impairment, then framed as the sole explanation for disabled people’s exclusion (Dobusch and Wechuli, 2020). Disabled activists and scholars have criticised such an understanding of disability as individualising a social problem. Disability Studies as a research programme were launched when the Disability Rights Movement condemned social barriers, which include those disabling attitudes (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976). Hence, a basic understanding that emotions are socioculturally shaped is not new but even inherent in Disability Studies. However, countering a tragic and pitiful view of disability brought about a reluctance to engage with emotionality in this research programme due to a fear of playing into such individualising views of disability (Watermeyer, 2009). This reluctance has led some Disability Studies authors to lament that ‘[t]here is definitely no crying in Disability Studies’ (Donaldson and Prendergast, 2011: 129)

This article draws on a PhD project that seeks to outline how emotions are theorised in Disability Studies. It will suggest productive extensions and a common language on emotion to facilitate a comprehensive engagement with emotional topics in Disability Studies, which is still lacking. After all, it can be assumed that feelings play a paramount role in lived experiences of the disabled bodymind and societal disablement. Disability Studies provide a rich archive of emotional topics that is yet to be tapped into by the sociology of emotions.3 This article seeks to specifically unpack the strategic handling of feelings towards difference as promoted by Disability Studies.

In my PhD, I outline that centring emotion from a Disability Studies perspective can hold three meanings. (1) Repertoires of emotion (Poser et al, 2019) in reaction to disability say less about disabled people (as subjects or a collective) than about the respective social and cultural context, in which we acquire display rules or mutually intelligible labelling of feelings as discrete emotions (Poser et al, 2019). After all, one of Disability Studies’ main concerns is investigating how society and culture shape how we react to dis/ability4 and what this tells us about underlying norms (Waldschmidt, 2018). Ableism is a focal point for Disability Studies as a research programme to elaborate on such (specific) sociocultural contexts. An ableist logic
contains information on what is considered normal – namely, an able body and mind that one should strive for (Campbell, 2019) – including ‘the kinds of emotions and affect that are suitable to express’ (Campbell, 2019: 147). It further divides people into allegedly distinct categories of either normal or not normal (Campbell, 2019). However, Disability Studies’ theory building in this domain mainly relies on reconstructive sense making where scholars speculate about emotional reasons for, among other things, discrimination. Hence, it remains at least questionable what emotions are triggered by disability. (2) Irrespective of whether non-disabled people subjectively experience fear, hate or other emotions, socioculturally shaped reactions have an impact on disabled people’s lives. I term this impact disabling affect to stress two aspects: disabling hints at the performative character of the processes at hand and its ‘enormous weight’ (Campbell, 2009: 166) for disabled people’s subjective experience. Affect – understood as a ‘relational dynamics’ (Slaby and Mühlhoff, 2019: 27; emphasis in original) reminds us that we do not have to distinctly name emotional reactions to inquire about their consequences for disabled people. Foregrounding disabling affect ties in well with the Disability Studies principle that disabled people’s experiences are supposed to take centre stage in this standpoint epistemology. (3) Last, we can acknowledge how disabled activists and scholars navigate ableism’s emotional toll and push for social change towards a more inclusive and less ableist society. To tackle ableism, Disability Studies promote different feeling strategies, which are the focal point of this article.

Trying to map the vast emotional archive provided by Disability Studies, this distinction/taxonomy was developed by the author to further theorise emotions in Disability Studies by suggesting a common language on emotion and affect for this field. This taxonomy understands emotions as sociocultural and historic by aiming to show that the emotions of non-disabled people in reaction to disability and the emotions of disabled people are interrelated. From another angle, this taxonomy explores the role of emotion in shaping disability as a negatively perceived difference in society (ableism). Hence, the distinction I am suggesting is supposed to sharpen the theoretical toolbox for carving out the sociocultural function of emotions in sustaining, experiencing or struggling against ableism as a social structure.

This article will, first, introduce cripping and then reclaiming as feeling strategies promoted within Disability Studies. In a second step, their differing epistemological implications and complementarity will be explored.

**Cripping: celebrating difference, interconnection and subverted norms**

Disability Studies promote to feel proud of disability as a strategy to advocate for social change. In the following, two related feeling strategies will be introduced and distinguished: disability pride and cripping.

What is disability pride, and why do I call it a feeling strategy? Uncountable disabled activists and scholars have called for a positive revaluation of disability as a source of pride (McRuer 2006; McLaughlin and Goodley, 2008a; Clare, 2015). Disability pride serves as an empowering counter-narration to a tragedy narrative of disability, eliciting feelings like guilt and shame (Corbett, 1994). Like other social movements, disabled activists redefine the feeling rules (Hochschild, 2012) about their social identity that elicit ‘demobilizing feelings such as shame or guilt’ (Flam, 2005: 20). Adopting a politicised disabled identity is framed as coming out disabled or crip – as overcoming
passing (Goffman, 1963) when learning to feel differently about disability (Corbett, 1994). Disability pride is read as a precondition for resisting ableism, internalised oppression, and specifically, disabled people's material exclusion.

Without pride, disabled people are much more likely to accept unquestioningly the daily material conditions of ableism: unemployment, poverty, segregated and substandard education, years spent locked up in nursing homes, violence perpetrated by caregivers, lack of access. Without pride, individual and collective resistance to oppression becomes nearly impossible. (Clare, 2015: 107)

Disability pride does not refer to a single, distinct emotion but facilitates a whole range of other feelings, like anger (for example, at one's exclusion), strength and joy (Clare, 2015). Pride and anger have been similarly paired in a sociology of emotions perspective on public collective action in democratic Global North settings (Flam, 2005).

When disabled people and their allies are invited to feel proud about disability, the question remains how to induce this change of feelings. As feeling strategies, disability pride and cripping celebrate difference. They emphasise the affirmative to counter tragic notions of disability (Garland-Thomson, 2007). Even facets of disabled lives that seem unambiguously negative, like a shortened life expectancy (Liddiard et al, 2019) or pain experience, can be framed as entailing positive aspects. Pain, for example, can be affirmed as constitutive of being alive, as generative of opportunities to empathise (Mintz, 2011), as creating a focus of attention or an instant of pause (Scheuer, 2011), or even as enabling a different kind of pleasure when taken up in non-normative sexual practices, which crip sexuality (McRuer, 2006; Shildrick, 2007; Sheppard, 2018).

While disability pride and cripping share the basic idea of intentionally changing our feelings towards difference into the affirmative, the two strategies can also be distinguished. Inspired by Queer Studies, the more recent notion of cripping specifically explains why we should feel positive about or even proud of disability. Crippling frames disability as a source of pride due to its potential to subvert norms: it makes toxic sociocultural norms more visible and, therefore, workable. The unachievable, ableist ideals we aspire to – for example, autonomy and independence, or bodily perfection – are detrimental to many disabled people and many ablebodyminded people (Goodley, 2014). Ablebodyminded people can strive to learn from disability arts, disability culture, and disability history (Goodley, 2021) to overcome their attachment to ableist ideals (Goodley, 2014). Framing disabled people as avant-garde in this sense does not have to lead to inspiration porn (Grue, 2016) or other forms of fetishisation (Kuppers, 2008; Cain, 2010; Goodley, 2021); it can encourage imagining social innovations.

Crippling can, for example, challenge our aspirations and positive feelings towards independence or achievement (Kafer, 2013; Samuels, 2017) and embrace vulnerability instead (Kuppers, 2008). From a crippling perspective, we can also question what it means to be beautiful (Liddiard and Slater, 2018), human (Goodley et al, 2015), or a good worker. When disabled workers in the service sector struggle to meet the sector's demands (Wilton, 2008) in terms of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), crippling as a feeling strategy will take this observation as an occasion to replace alienating with
needs- and experience-based feeling rules (Hochschild, 2012). For instance, it can be challenged whether tirelessly smiling at customers is an essential feature of the performed task (Wilton, 2008).

One subverted norm that crippling centres as a source of pride is interconnection. From a crippling perspective, disability can teach us to value interdependence, self-care or pleasure instead of independence or achievement (McRuer, 2006). Many Disability Studies writers draw on Deleuze and Guattari (1983; 1987) for affirmative understandings of desire and interconnection. Crippling draws on the fact that objects of desire – what we desire – are socioculturally shaped, not least by our social position (Goodley, 2021). Crippling desire questions who is considered as an object (or subject) of desire. Affirmative readings of desire, thus, often focus on but are not limited to disabled people’s sexuality. First, affirming disabled people’s sexuality means allowing disabled bodies to be attractive, pleasurable and desirable – but not fetishised (Campbell, 2009; Kafer, 2012). We could say that crippling desire starts with a transgression of compulsory ablebodymindedness in the realm of sexuality.

A Deleuzoguattarian (1983; 1987) reading of desire is further taken up to cherish the feeling of interconnectedness, and the innovative ways of conviviality beyond sexuality that disability enables. An affirmative reading of interconnection has been employed to make sense of the lived realities of disabled families (Goodley et al, 2015). Families with disabled family members provide a rich archive for such proud affirmations and revaluations of non-normative bodies (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2013). Ablebodied parents ‘resist normative modes of feeling about their disabled children, as they seek out productive alternatives’ (McLaughlin and Goodley, 2008a: 19). Based on their lived experience, parents often rework their understanding of disability towards accepting difference – affirming their disabled children as independent personalities contributing to their family life (McLaughlin and Goodley, 2008b). Social interconnectedness is further cherished in mutual crip care and community when interdependency is framed as a source of pleasure to be desired, allowing survival and thriving despite abjection and stigma (Kolářová, 2014).

However, crippling and even disability pride as political endeavours have been condemned as elitist. Crippling is criticised for its exclusionary notions, as being irrelevant to the lived reality of most disabled people. ‘First, most disabled people do not live in the world of SDS [Society of Disability Studies] and we can’t ignore the majority whose experiences and feelings have less to do with disability pride than with stigma’ (Brune and Garland-Thomson, 2014). This critique specifically targets the terminology of crippling, which is perceived as firmly rooted in an ivory tower. Notably, the neologism of cripistemology/cripistemologies, a composite of crip and epistemology, which is meant to convey a call to literally crip epistemology (Johnson and McRuer, 2014a), received polarised feedback. It kicked off emotionally charged discussions (Johnson and McRuer, 2014b), despite a sympathetic grassroots origin story provided by its authors.

The back and forth in this mix generated discussion about knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability epistemologies, and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently ‘know’ about ‘disability’, as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge. We were questioning, in other words, what we think we know about disability, and how we know around and through it. Two weeks later, Lisa texted
Robert, ‘We’re really talking about cripistemologies here.’ (Johnson and McRuer, 2014a: 130)

However, the core of this critique hits the notion of pride since feeling proud to be disabled might feel outright impossible when struggling with adverse ‘impairment effects’ (Thomas, 1999: 43) like unreliable bodyminds due to, among other things, pain or fatigue (Meekosha, 2000; LaCom, 2007), or aetiologies rooted in inequality. Inequality complicates pride: Disability Studies are accused of not adequately representing disabled people who do not claim this social identity because their poor health is expected; for example, exploited workers in the Global South (Grech, 2015; Puar, 2017).

If deemed possible, revaluations like cripping generally require emotion work (Campbell, 2009). To claim a politicised disabled identity, one has to feel entitled to belong to the disability community, not as an impostor who is not disabled enough (Clare, 2015). ‘Pride is not an inessential thing. […] But disability pride is no easy thing to come by. Disability has been soaked in shame, dressed in silence, rooted in isolation’ (Clare, 2015: 107). Further, belonging and entitlement are difficult to claim in a blame culture that contests disability status and eligibility (Campbell, 2015). Thus, pride and cripping are preconditional feeling strategies.

In a nutshell, what do the feeling strategies of disability pride and cripping do? Both redefine feeling rules (Hochschild, 2012) about difference to enable resistance to demobilising feelings. To this end, both celebrate difference and elicit a whole range of feelings – not only pride. Cripping specifically establishes why we should feel proud towards disability; disability invites us to subvert toxic norms and instead cherish the interconnection that disability enables. Yet, both feeling strategies require emotion work and a sense of entitlement as preconditions. Consequently, disability pride and, even more so, cripping are criticised for being elitist and irrelevant to many disabled people’s lived experience.

When pride is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain at times, other feeling strategies are called for. The following section elaborates the reclaiming of hurtful feelings as a converse yet complementary feeling strategy to cripping.

Reclaiming hurtful feelings: nuanced subjectivity and survival

A converse feeling strategy to disability pride and cripping is the reclaiming of hurtful feelings that are often – if not always – connected to the experience of disability, like loss, trauma, sadness or loneliness. Why do I call reclaiming a converse feeling strategy to cripping? While cripping argues for intentionally changing how we feel about disability, reclaiming seeks to depathologise feelings that are assumed to be present all along yet subject to feeling rules (Hochschild, 2012) that prohibit their expression. Namely, pride strategies counter tragic and pitiful notions of disability that individualise the social problem of disability. To express hurtful feelings allegedly confirms such stereotypes and thus cements discrimination. Disability Studies’ reluctance to negotiate unpleasant feelings is, at times, read as pride strategies gone too far rather than as avoidance of other emotions (Shakespeare, 2013). That pride is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain at times (see earlier) is an indication that these feeling strategies went too far. Reclaiming stays mindful that the reclaimed...
emotions are frequently instrumentalised to medicalise disabled people’s experience\textsuperscript{7} and emphasises disabled people’s own emotional needs instead (\textit{Watermeyer}, 2009).

If medicalisation is a threat, why should unpleasant feelings be strategically reclaimed? Reclaiming is supposed to enable a nuanced representation of disabled subjectivity, to allow survival or even healing, political activism and, ultimately, a self-determined knowledge production.

From a reclaiming perspective, a representation of disabled subjectivity may be called nuanced when it includes the emotional exploration of a potentially traumatic acquisition, lost functioning, or pain experience. Alison Kafer (2016) argues that neither disability experience nor disclosure can be separated from (potentially traumatic) experiences of becoming disabled connected to feelings of mourning and loss. Several Disability Studies scholars seek to elaborate emotional aspects of lost functioning. Disability Studies should explore ‘the deepest emotions of living with a failing/changing body and all that comes with it – envy, fury, loss of self-esteem and often a complete inability to know how to cope with deteriorating bodily functions’ (\textit{Meekosha}, 2000: 814). Pain as a socioculturally shaped affective experience is another nuance of the disability experience that many authors claim to engage with, albeit in a depathologising way (\textit{de Wolfe}, 2002; \textit{Campbell}, 2009). A pain-induced loss of functionality, fatigue and the somatic experience of pain itself might feel destabilising and depressing (\textit{Scarry}, 1987). (Chronic) pain is ‘reliably unreliable’ (\textit{Sheppard}, 2020: 8) because severe pain can render daily routines impossible (\textit{Dederich}, 2020) when it dominates all consciousness (\textit{Mintz}, 2011). Negotiating (and affirming) pain should be acknowledged as an emotional process, and listening to pain as (often gendered) emotion work (\textit{Bendelow and Williams}, 1998; \textit{Sheppard}, 2020). Unfortunately, ablebodyminded people are often unwilling to hear about pain (\textit{Dederich}, 2020; \textit{Sheppard}, 2020).

Reclaiming hurtful emotions or engaging with a nuanced disabled subjectivity as a feeling strategy is supposed to enable survival. Surviving in emotionally healthy ways requires resources like energy and time. Yet, disabled people are kept busy with the unfulfillable task of complying with feeling rules (\textit{Hochschild}, 2012), which demand concealing or not even experiencing stereotype-confirming feelings. Neither ableist violence nor ‘impairment effects’ (\textit{Thomas}, 1999: 43) like chronic pain or fatigue can be discussed away or removed by a sole insistence on social accommodation (\textit{de Wolfe}, 2002). One can argue that these feelings also do not vanish when adopting a proud \textit{crip} identity (\textit{Kafèr}, 2016). Most importantly, disproving stereotypes must be deemed impossible since such feelings may have good cause in an ableist, inaccessible environment. When disabled people do not concentrate on their own emotional needs, they stay rooted in the same devaluing stereotypes they try to disprove and, thus, are complicit in ableism (\textit{Watermeyer}, 2009). If they acknowledge feelings of, for example, grief, they unsubscribe from such futile endeavours and may, thus, focus their freed energies on their own emotional needs.

Enabling survival also entails the prevention of further injury. From a reclaiming perspective, disabled people prevent being hurt further by expressing their subjective experiences of ableism and impairment. Christiane Hutson (2016: 240; my translation) reminds us not to ignore any form of violence as ‘\[i\]t still hits us’. In a discriminatory society, it causes further injury to keep emotional injuries a secret because victims of violence tend to feel ashamed and blame themselves for experiences that remain unshared (\textit{Hutson}, 2009a). Paying attention to shame can make us aware of disabling
narratives and, thus, prepare us to resist them. Shaming narratives about welfare eligibility, for example, undermine disabled people’s feelings of worth. Shame is, thus, not to be understood as a solely negative emotion or antonym of pride (Tabin et al., 2020). Rather, it may expose (and thus challenge) the labour and pain caused by ableism to discourage internalisation and individualisation when it is disclosed (Campbell, 2009). In this sense, a collective reclaiming of pain experience can discourage individualisation and, instead, encourage people living with pain to claim disability as a social position (de Wolfe, 2002). Non-disclosed shame is demobilising (Flam, 2005), individualising (Clare, 2015) and isolating (Hutson, 2009a), though.

Whether reclaiming as a feeling strategy can successfully prevent further injury and free energies to be engaged according to disabled people’s own emotional needs crucially relies on the availability of safe spaces. Whoever has experienced sharing unpleasant, socioculturally rooted feelings only to learn from the audience’s reactions that those feelings have been read as rooted in one’s difference rather than discrimination knows that making oneself vulnerable is a risky strategy that can backfire. To find the courage to share emotions stereotypically ascribed to disability, disabled people need to feel confident that others’ impressions of them will consequently not be dominated by those same stereotypical ascriptions (Watermeyer, 2009). When can a space be called safe? There is a widely shared consensus that the safe in safe space translates as a judgement-free (Watermeyer, 2009; Liddiard, 2018), acknowledging (Watermeyer and Swartz, 2008; Forrest, 2020), non-bureaucratic (Titchkosky, 2020) and relational way to respond to, for example, suffering. A safe way to engage with one another when difficult feelings are expressed has to be negotiated based on the emotional needs of the involved persons (Rogers, 2015; Kafer, 2016). However, safe spaces are unequally distributed and associated with privilege (Hutson, 2009b); they are particularly hard to find for disabled people, even among other minority groups (Campbell, 2009; Watermeyer and Swartz, 2016). After all, most disabled people grow up among non-disabled relatives who do not share their bodily nor social experiences. Many continue to rely on ablebodied people when they depend on support (Watermeyer and Swartz, 2016). Further, safe spaces and community building have been confounded with segregation and, hence, discouraged (Campbell, 2009). Just like disability pride and cripping, it transpires that reclaiming is a preconditional feeling strategy.

Beyond disabled people’s subjective or collective emotional wellbeing, hurtful emotions are considered a resource for political activism or even knowledge production. Some authors advocate breaking the ‘cycle of silence’ (Watermeyer, 2009: 101) surrounding the personal and psychological effects of ableism to build a political movement (Watermeyer and Swartz, 2016) or activist communities (Marks, 1999). Brian Watermeyer (2009) even reads emotional oppression as the central obstacle to a worldwide, revolutionary disability movement. ‘Political movements, like people themselves, cannot become strong by denying what is stigmatized as weak – strength comes from recognizing, naming and engaging with the difficult emotional issues which oppression causes, and may even be designed to cause’ (Watermeyer and Swartz, 2016: 275).

Such claims are founded on the feminist insight that the personal is political (Marks, 1999; Liddiard 2013; Douglas et al., 2021). Politicising the private realm should attend to disabled people’s emotional wellbeing and thus seek to depathologise disabled people’s emotional experience (Liddiard, 2013) in ‘revealing linkages
between structural and psycho-emotional forms of disablism’ (Liddiard, 2013: 126). Acknowledging the politicisation of the emotional lives of disabled people and their allies opens up ‘political possibilities of affect and activism’ (Douglas et al, 2021: 40). It allows them to make anger or even rage fruitful for resistance and activism (for a similar reasoning within the sociology of emotion, see Flam, 2005). ‘[W]e cannot separate feelings from action’ (Douglas et al, 2021: 48). Hence, a reclaiming perspective politicises the private to use hurtful emotions as a resource for political activism.

Beyond political activism, the navigation of difficult emotions is also recognised as an epistemological resource for research and theory building in Disability Studies that can foster ways of knowing, which can be called ‘criphystemological and that might also be described as disabled’ (Mollow, 2014: 199–200). Alison Kafer (2016) urges Disability Studies to build an ‘archive of feelings’ (Cvetkovich, 2006) and an anti-ableist vocabulary on the link between disability and (ongoing) trauma, for instance. Disability Studies scholars reclaim anger (Cheyne, 2016), grief (Watermeyer, 2017), fear (Liddiard, 2018) or disgust (Campbell, 2009) to advocate for self-determined knowledge production. The recognition of different unpleasant emotions as a resource for knowledge production is unsurprising given that many scholars’ commitment to Disability Studies as a research programme is experience-based. ‘Many if not most of us come to Disability Studies with this experiential knowledge, and we know that experiential knowledge is necessarily emotional knowledge’ (Chrisman, 2011: 179).

In what way can unpleasant feelings serve as a resource for knowledge production? They can be used as a motivator for research or for deeper reflection in data analysis and theory building.

The motivational function of emotions for research has been emphasised elsewhere (Barbalet, 2002; Morton, 2010), specifically for creative and explorative research concerned about the research subjects (Morton, 2010). Unfortunately, affective motivations for research projects are not commonly accepted in the academic context and are usually erased from publications (Bergman Blix, 2015; Wettergren, 2015). In Disability Studies, reclaimed anger and grief bear the potential to motivate emancipatory research. Anger at ableism and omnipresent barriers, for instance, can be a powerful driver for research (Cheyne, 2016). Similarly, by drawing on the notion of melancholy, grief can be used as a motivation to address discrimination (Watermeyer, 2017). Melancholy – a permanent state of grief blocked by self-reproaches and distinguished from healthy forms of mourning (Freud, [1917] 2004) – refers to the failure to properly mourn one’s degradation caused by the constant pressure to assimilate into an ableist society. Disabled people are subject to such pressure to fit in when expected to fulfil non-disabled norms as in ideas about the good life, which at the same time remain barred from them (Watermeyer, 2017).

In research already initiated, emotions may unfold their reflective potential in data analysis, if they have not been not obscured or even lost by rationalisation (Barbalet, 2002) – an epistemological resource that qualitative research has long drawn on.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods take the researcher’s communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge instead of deeming it an intervening variable. The subjectivity of the researcher and of those being studied becomes part of the research process. Researchers’ reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings, and so on, become data in their own
right, forming part of the interpretation, and are documented in research diaries or context protocols. (Flick, 2011: 16)

Researcher-centred methods like autoethnography specifically draw on the reflective potential of emotions by employing what can be called an emotional epistemology (Marvasti, 2014). Also, in qualitative interviews, the researcher’s reflection on her or his emotional engagement is used as an epistemological tool. Well-versed interviewers should be able to register which interview passages sparked feelings of irritation or discomfort and thus use their emotionality as a source of information in data analysis. If the specific type of interview allows further questions, like later phases of narrative interviews, the researcher’s emotionality can guide attention to what questions should be asked (Helfferich, 2011). Kirsty Liddiard (2018) argues that the researcher’s emotional engagement is necessary for reflexivity in qualitative research within Disability Studies. During the course of one research project, some of her worst fears were confirmed by her informants to be a real cause for concern, something which she had previously dismissed as irrational. These concerns were specific to her own embodied experience and informed by identities and marginalisation shared with her informants. To keep up a professional performance, she initially felt compelled to surface act (Hochschild, 2012) rather than disclose her emotional distress. Liddiard is implying that her anxious investment in her research topic allowed her to reach a deeper engagement with her qualitative material.

From an intersectional perspective, Christiane Hutson (2016) calls on sick people of colour to produce their own knowledge to trace and reject projected unpleasant feelings and oppressive epistemologies. Tapping into their experiential knowledge, sick people of colour, for example, know that they are blamed and shamed for their health status: for instance, when cancer is linked to depression (Lorde, 1997) or the failure to be or become happy. Such framings individualise the responsibility for health and happiness but oversee unequal opportunities to stay healthy or happy (Hutson, 2009b). Spelling out what it means by the personal is political, unpleasant feelings are an epistemological resource for a self-determined knowledge production for activist and scientific communities.

What does the feeling strategy reclaiming do? It acknowledges and reappropriates hurtful feelings connected to the disability experience that usually tend to be medicalised. Reclaiming explores disabled people’s subjectivity in a nuanced way that includes traumatic aetiologies, lost functioning and pain. As for the hopes connected to this feeling strategy, reclaiming is supposed to enable survival in an ableist society by preventing reinjury and freeing the emotional energy that was previously used up to disprove stereotypes. Ultimately, reclaiming is supposed to enable emancipated knowledge production, in terms of research motivations and a deeper analysis of (qualitative) data. However, reclaiming is a risky strategy that might contribute to the medicalisation of disabled people’s feelings. To avoid medicalisation or an objectification disabled people’s feelings, reclaiming centres their subjective experiences. At the very least, it necessitates safe spaces that are unequally distributed.

**Concluding discussion**

This contribution mainly focuses on feeling strategies promoted by Disability Studies to tackle disabling affect that is informed by socioculturally acquired repertoires of
emotion in reaction to disability. Crippling and reclaiming are discussed as converse yet complementary feeling strategies. To this end, their differing epistemological implications and common ground will be elaborated on in the following.

Both crippling and reclaiming acknowledge the sociality of emotion but differ on what this sociality entails. Following Katharina Scherke (2009), a sociological perspective on emotion may look at two aspects: the social origin of emotions or the social impact of emotions – their role in social change, for instance. While crippling and reclaiming are both connected to hopes of social change, they understand and use emotions' social origin differently.

The crippling discourse acknowledges that emotions are socioculturally contingent as it preaches to feel differently about disability. As previously mentioned, the feeling strategies of crippling and even disability pride have often been criticised as elitist endeavours – irrelevant to the lived reality of most disabled people (Campbell, 2008), as overlooking inequality (Grech, 2015; Puar, 2017), and requiring considerable – and potentially exhausting – emotion work (Campbell, 2009; Clare, 2015; Sheppard, 2020). Arguably, this notion of simply feeling differently towards disability provokes such outrage precisely because it is not that simple. Therefore, inclusive notions of crippling stay mindful of the emotion work involved in proud revaluations of disability (Campbell, 2009; Clare, 2015; Sheppard 2020) while acknowledging disabled people’s lived realities that complicate relationships with pride: for instance, unreliable bodyminds (LaCom, 2007) and traumatic aetiologies (Kafer, 2016), or socially produced impairments (Puar, 2017) and a blame culture (Campbell, 2015).

Quite contrary to that, reclaiming as a feeling strategy acknowledges that hurtful feelings connected to the disability experience are rooted in a discriminatory society and, thus, are social in origin. However, reclaiming does not promote changing such hurtful feelings but, rather, becoming conscious of and depathologising them by recognising their social origin. Still, the worry that reclaiming might confirm stereotypes and cater to the medicalisation of disabled people’s experiences expresses a concern that reclaiming might not achieve the social change it seeks to inspire. Moreover, reclaiming’s call to acknowledge hurtful feelings implies the idea of authentic feelings and a sense of alienation of one’s (presocial) self or feelings (Watermeyer and Swartz, 2008; Samuels, 2017). Yet, a contemporary take on authenticity problematises its performative constitution (Illouz, 2018a) and commodification in consumer capitalism (Illouz, 2018b). The notion of authenticity further stands in opposition to crippling’s approach to feelings.

To consider crippling and reclaiming as converse feeling strategies highlights the need to engage with underlying epistemological questions and their respective implications. For the sociology of emotions, Disability Studies can provide an extensive archive of emotional topics drawn from disabled people’s lived experiences and explored from their standpoint. However, so far, these topics have not been discussed comprehensively. For this reason, Disability Studies would profit from a more thorough theorisation of emotions, affect and feelings: for instance, from guidance regarding emotional terminology. Still, its emotional archive is a resource for the further theorising of, for example, subaltern emotions, while neither taking the (neat) categorisation as subaltern nor the preference of able bodies and minds as given.

Based on their opposing epistemological implications, reclaiming and crippling transpire as antithetical feeling strategies. Still, both seek to prevent disabling affect
and, particularly, a medicalisation of disabled people’s feelings (Johnson, 2011). Both feeling strategies cherish community building and mutual learning to enable survival in an ableist society – be it in families, arts or political activism. Drawing on Randall Collins’ (2008) interaction rituals theory, social movements can foster feelings of solidarity and end the draining emotions experienced in subordinating interactions outside the movement. By generating emotional energy, social movements build the emotional foundation for social change (Summers-Effler, 2002). Both cripping and reclaiming foster solidary and nurturing emotions to counter the emotional interactions in an ableist society experienced as draining.

Circling and reclaiming struggle for a common cause, which advocates of both feeling strategies have also grasped. Not surprisingly, proponents of reclaiming still endorse pride (Meekosha, 2000; Watermeyer, 2009), just like proponents of cripping value unpleasant feelings (Johnson and McRuer, 2014a; Clare, 2015) – similar to reclaiming’s key concern – when cripistemologies (see above) intend to point out suffering (Johnson and McRuer, 2014b). Thus, a comparison of cripping and reclaiming emphasises how important it is to move beyond an alleged dichotomy of positive and negative emotions.

In this article, I have framed pride/cripping and reclaiming as feeling strategies. When seeking connectivity to methodology in the sociology of emotions, feeling strategies could be further discussed as affective practice (Wetherell, 2012). Practices are what the social world is made up of – embodied, meaningful performances routinely reenacted and inscribed into people (habitus) and things (artefacts). The notion of affective practice centres the processual, collaborative production of affect. It highlights how affective interpretations are endlessly unfinished and can, thus, continually be revised (Wiesse, 2019). As both circling and reclaiming aim at changing affective interpretations of dis/ability, they can be read as affective practice. What is to count as affective aspects of practice can only be reflexively reconstructed in a second-order observation (Wiesse, 2019). When exploring affective practice, one can ask how affect is enacted and how actors themselves reflexively thematise the affective aspect of their actions (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019). In this way, affective practice promises to provide a fruitful perspective when reconstructing the feeling strategies of circling or reclaiming in qualitative research in the future.

This article has introduced and distinguished disability pride, circling and reclaiming as feeling strategies promoted by Disability Studies. It has outlined what those feeling strategies do, the utopian hopes attached to them, their major critique, and respective preconditions. Their differing epistemological implications and their common ground have been pointed out. Considering circling and reclaiming as complementary feeling strategies proves highly relevant for Disability Studies, other standpoint epistemologies and the respective social movements. Recognising their complementarity can highlight that one can fight for the same cause with different means. This realisation might invite activists and scholars who draw on one strategy to cherish the others’ approach instead of contesting each other. Moreover, conceptualising different feeling strategies as complementary can encourage to employ them situationally as needed, thus promoting greater flexibility in the struggle towards a less ableist and more inclusive society.
Notes
1 Voted the best paper from the European Sociological Association RN11 Emotions Network midterm 2020.
2 I speak of disabled people here to indicate the social position of being disabled by society. This disablement is to be distinguished from impairment-related restrictions of activity – staying mindful that impairment is a biosocial phenomenon not to be naturalised (Thomas, 1999).
3 Up to Volume 3(1), no article on disability or disabled people has been published in Emotions and Society, for instance.
4 The neologism dis/ability foregrounds that disability and ability ‘can only ever be understood simultaneously in relation to one another’ (Goodley, 2014: xiii) as socioculturally co-constructed notions.
5 Inspired by queer theory, crip theory (McRuer, 2006) defines the notion of ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ (Kafer, 2003: 77) as the cultural assumption of a general preference for able bodies, identities and subjectivities: like being heterosexual when sexual orientation is framed as choice, ‘[n]early everyone, it would seem, wants to be normal in the able-bodied sense as well’ (McRuer, 2006: 7). Since this prescription not only targets the body but also the mind, it is compulsory to be able-bodied and ableminded (Kafer, 2013).
6 Whether or not feeling proud of being disabled should be deemed impossible is for disabled people themselves to decide, not academics or practitioners who are supportive of emancipatory notions of disability but ‘draw the line to different degrees on the notion of celebrating and indeed enjoying disability’ (Campbell, 2009: 170).
7 Disabled people’s emotions are frequently medicalised (Wechuli: in print): expressed unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger are misinterpreted as ‘impairment effects’ (Thomas, 1999: 43) rather than a reaction to discrimination. Expressed anger is often heard as disabled people being rude or (inherently) bitter (Cahill and Eggleston, 1994; Goodley et al, 2018) against the general expectation to make others comfortable with their difference and with their experiences in a discriminatory world (Watermeyer and Swartz, 2008).

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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