American Sociological Association
Status Committee on
Persons with Disabilities in Sociology

Five Year Report to Council
2013 - 2017

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Introduction

The ASA Status Committee on Persons with Disabilities in Sociology was established in 1981 as an *ad hoc* committee, charged with ascertaining if and how the ASA meetings met the accessibility needs of members with disabilities and recommending changes, if needed, to enhance accessibility. In 1987, the ASA Council made it a standing committee. In 1999, Council set forth the following two charges for the committee: to ensure the full participation of sociologists with disabilities in the life of the Association, and to encourage sociological scholarship on disability issues (Howery 2007).

This was an important moment in the discipline of sociology in the United States. These formal committee charges represent an official recognition on the part of the discipline’s national scholarly organization that there exists within U.S. sociology marginalization of both disabled scholars and disability scholarship, and an organizational commitment to do something about it. Despite this commitment, disability as a consequential social characteristic has not drawn sociologists’ contemporary attention in the way that race, class, gender and sexuality have. In order to understand why, it is instructive to analyze how disability has been framed since the inception of the American Sociological Society, now known as the American Sociological Association.

Since 2013, co-chairs Sara Green and Thomas Gerschick have met with the ASA staff liaison Margaret Vitullo in monthly conference calls to plan and carry out a group of activities. We have examined the positionality of disability within sociology in two areas: the history of sociological scholarship on disability; and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the Status Committee as an agent of social change within the association. During this time period, the committee has also taken on a more active mentoring role in order to support and encourage both graduate students and junior scholars with disabilities and those who take the risk of focusing on this underappreciated area within the discipline. Progress and products related to these goals are described below.

**Sociology Looking at Disability: The History of Sociological Scholarship on Disability**

Although there have been a number of thoughtful books, edited volumes and review essays exploring the history of the discipline of sociology, none of them have attended to the history of disability within the field. In an effort to address this gap, the Status Committee decided to embark on a collaborative effort with members of the ASA Section on Disability & Society to examine the history of disability scholarship within sociology. Sara Green and Sharon Barnartt co-edited, *Sociology Looking at Disability: What Did We Know and When Did We Know It?*, *Research in Social Science and Disability, Volume 9* (2017). This volume includes chapters by senior disability scholars, many of whom have served as members of the Status Committee, as well as junior scholars and graduate students interested in the sociology of disability (see Appendix A).
In the first chapter of the volume, Gerschick and Stevens (2017) demonstrate that disability as a category of analysis and as a social process underlying inequality has been poorly represented within mainstream sociology from the earliest days of the Association’s history. They report findings of an intensive, systematic and comprehensive content analysis of the first ten years of the Proceedings from the American Sociology Society’s Annual Meetings, 1906-1915. Three key themes emerged from their content analysis of these proceedings. First, people with disabilities were largely invisible in those papers. Second, influenced strongly by a social reform agenda that stressed progress and the powerful eugenics movement of the time, those early presenters who did address people with disabilities in their papers vilified them. Third, this denigration was met largely with silence in the printed commentary which followed in the proceedings. Gerschick and Stevens also report that a literature search in our discipline’s flagship journals, *The American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology*, using the broadest search term, disability, as a keyword located nine total publications: two in the 1960s, two in the 1970s, two in the 1980s and two more in the 1990s, none in the 00’s and one in 2010. Although disability as a unit of analysis is more fully represented in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior (with 154 articles since 2004), the nearly complete concentration of consideration of disability in this one journal reinforces disability as a medical condition rather than an axis of inequality that is socially situated. While this situation has gotten slightly better in more recent years (5 articles were found in AJS and 1 in ASR in the issues published between 2011 and 2017), disability remains a seriously underrepresented area of scholarship on inequality.

In addition to calling attention to this lamentable dearth of mainstream sociological work in which disability is interrogated as more than an individual medical issue, RSSD Volume 9 also highlights the early scholarship that bucked this trend. Authors of the chapters in this collaborative effort critically examine both the value and the gaps, lapses, and assumptions in early work on disability in sociology and related disciplines. They also point to gaps and lapses in current knowledge and suggest avenues for future research that are suggested by their reviews. The Status Committee hopes that this volume will prove to be a useful reference tool as our discipline makes its way toward a future in which disability is valued as a socially constructed category that is as worthy of sustained theoretical interest and meaningful political action as race, gender, class and sexuality.

**ASA Looking at Disability and Accessibility: The Effectiveness of the Status Committee as an Agent of Organizational Change**

**Digital Archive of ASA Programs**

In preparation for the RSSD chapter, Tom Gerschick, with support from ASA staff, produced a digital archive in which all extant ASA Annual Meeting programs are now scanned and stored in a digital archive. This is a permanent and valuable asset for the organization and is available for use by all members. The availability of the archive was announced to section chairs at the 2016 annual meetings, and can be accessed at: http://www.asanet.org/news-events/meetings/previous-annual-meetings
Historical Collection of Status Committee Recommendations and ASA Response

The Status Committee, with assistance from ASA staff, gathered all of the historical documents pertaining to the committee since its inception, including committee-specific correspondence between committee members, official committee reports, periodic committee status/progress reports to ASA council, and other memoranda to ASA council. Under the direction of Sara Green, graduate students Douglas Engelman and Chase McCain conducted a systematic text analysis of these documents, resulting in the identification of 165 specific recommendations to ASA for how to better serve the needs of persons with disabilities in sociology. These detailed recommendations were then organized into eleven broad categories of recommendations:

1. Promote respect for scholars with disabilities and disability scholars
2. Assure accessibility of meeting sites (hotel rooms, meeting rooms, registration area, exhibit hall, meeting programs and other materials, presentations, etc.)
3. Provide clear accessibility information and signage and assure that it is abundant and located in easily accessible areas
4. Increase presence of disability scholarship at meetings
5. Increase presence of disability scholarship in pedagogy and publications (journals, textbooks, academic presses, etc.) and push for inclusion of disability (along with race, class, gender and sexuality) as an axis of inequality, minority status, and valuable source of diversity
6. Provide mentorship for scholars with disabilities
7. Provide mentorship for disability scholars
8. Increase effectiveness and visibility of the Status Committee, its members, and its activities
9. Provide accessibility information about off-site restaurants, bars, area attractions, transportation, etc.
10. Connect with other professional organizations to develop best practices for encouraging participation and inclusion of faculty and students with disabilities
11. Provide professional development on teaching students with disabilities

These categories and each of the specific recommendations pertaining to them are listed in full in Appendix B of this report. Specific recommendations may be listed under more than one category.

In order to assess the degree of progress that has been made in fulfilling the recommendations, ASA executive office staff, led by Margaret Vitullo, reviewed the 165 specific recommendations and coded each as (A) standard ASA policy or practice or complete; (B) no longer accommodation preferred by people with disabilities; (C) implementation not complete; or (D) not clear enough to interpret, investigation needed. In some cases, when a recommendation included several distinct elements, multiple codes were used, resulting in a larger total number of codes than recommendations.
In 118/165 cases recommendations were coded as part of standard ASA policy or practice or complete. For example, the ASA diversity statement has been changed to include disability, orientations or walkthroughs of annual meeting facilities are listed as a standard accommodation that can be provided upon request, and all-gender restrooms are now a standard feature at annual meeting facilities. The Status Committee Co-Chairs believe this demonstrates terrific commitment on the part of the ASA and its staff.

Eighteen of the 165 recommendations were coded as no longer the preferred accommodation. Examples include providing electronic copies of the annual meeting program upon request. This is not necessary since the annual meeting program is now online and available through a meeting app that is accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities.

In six of the 165 cases, recommendations were coded as being unclear, or requiring additional investigation due to insufficient information.

For 33 of the 165 recommendations implementation was not complete. In some cases, these recommendations are things that require sustained effort and are thus never be fully complete—such as aiming to not “classify individuals [as having disabilities] but rather environments [as being inaccessible].” In other cases, the recommendations that fall into this category are related to long term society-wide goals, such as increasing employment for persons with disabilities. Sustained effort, in and outside of ASA, will be continue to be needed to redress these problems. In an important number of cases, however, the recommendations in this category are things that have simply never been fully implemented—such as providing the Status Committee with documentation of accessibility checklists and follow up visits to annual meeting sites. Such information would help the Status Committee to fulfill its mandate to ensure the full participation of sociologists with disabilities in the life of the Association.

Our analysis reveals that since the Status Committee on Persons with Disabilities was established, the ASA has made substantial progress in responding to the recommendations of the Committee. It has made the Annual Meetings and the Association more accessible and responsive to the needs of scholars with disabilities, and in bringing scholarship on disability to light.

Perhaps the single most influential and important step was the establishment of the Section on Society and Disability in 2011. This was another landmark moment because the existence of this section guarantees a place for disability scholarship in the annual conference program and provides a formal mechanism for mentoring and networking among disability scholars. The Section and Status Committee both continue to advocate for changes that enhance inclusion of scholars with disabilities and disability scholarship throughout the discipline.

The analysis also revealed that changing technologies and practices and norms within the association can create opportunities for greater inclusion as well as new barriers and limitations for sociologists with disabilities. For example, it has become increasingly common for sections to hold off-site receptions. In 2016, at the Annual Meeting in Seattle, an Accessibility Concerns
An Intersectional Approach to Disability

Intersectional approaches examine the ways in which membership in various social, biological and cultural categories interact to affect social and economic outcomes for individuals. Grounded in feminist research, this approach most often explores the ways in which gender, class and race/ethnic identity combine to create multiple, simultaneous sources of oppression for people. More recently, disability scholars have begun to call attention to disability as a missing axis of intersectionality. The status committee and section on disability are joining with other sections to address this important omission.

At the 2017 annual meetings, the section will collaborate with three other sections on co-sponsored sessions that directly address disability as an axis of inequality and intersectionality: 1. *Disability as a Dimension of Intersectionality and Inequality* (open session co-sponsored by Disability & Society, Race, Gender & Class, and Body & Embodiment); 2. *Feminist Disability Studies: Advancing Intersectional Analyses* (invited session co-sponsored by Race, Gender & Class, and Disability & Society); and 3. *Disability, War/Social Conflict, and Inequality* (open session co-sponsored by Disability & Society, and Peace, War & Social Conflict).

We are very encouraged by these collaborations and trust that they will advance our discipline from a past in which disability was viewed as an individual tragedy to a future in which disability takes its place as a powerful analytic category. It is clearly worthy of sustained theoretical and empirical interest in its own right and in intersection with other locations of disadvantage and oppression. In 2016, Gerschick and Green published an article in *Footnotes* in which they made a call for broad participation among ASA scholars and sections in this collaborative effort. The co-sponsored sessions received a substantial number of strong submissions.

In 2016, the Status Committee and the section also began to work together to negotiate special issues of journals that focus on the intersection of disability and other categories of inequality. Section officers Laura Mauldin and Heather Dillaway were successful in negotiating the first such issue to be published in *Gender & Society*. A call has gone out for submissions. We have also explored interest in disability related special issues with editors of ASA journals, but have been told that the ASA Publications Committee advises journals to be careful about special issues because of the impact they can have on the journal’s reputation. This is a matter to be pursued further in the future.
Status Committee as Research Incubator: Mentoring Activities

Moving beyond the traditional model of committees and task forces, the Status Committee has sought to act as a small incubator for peer-reviewed research on persons with disabilities in the discipline. In this way the work of committee members can serve the ASA by providing recommendations and insights on the conditions of persons with disabilities in sociology based on solid peer reviewed research, while also advancing research on persons with disabilities in sociology and the careers of persons with disabilities and their supporters who serve on the committee. Sara Green and Sharon Barnartt specifically solicited submissions for the peer reviewed RSSD Volume 9 from graduate students and junior faculty and worked extensively with them during the revision process.

Tom Gerschick and section officer Robyn Brown are conducting a workshop at ASA 2017 that is designed to respond to the fact that although it is a status much like sex, gender, race, ethnicity, social class and sexual orientation, scholarship on disability has significantly lagged these contemporary research and social action areas and its implications for intersectional theory and scholarship remain largely unexamined. The goal of the workshop will be to demonstrate the many research gaps in the sociology of disability and to demonstrate ways of addressing them. The session is envisioned as a catalyst where young scholars can get ideas for new projects, network with potential collaborators, and learn of publication opportunities and outlets. We hope that this incubator process will become a lasting aspect of the work of the Status Committee.

Recommendations for the Future

While much remains to be done to improve the positionality of disabled scholars and disability scholarship in the discipline of sociology globally, encouraging progress has been made. The formation of the ASA Section on Disability & Society in 2011 was one major progressive step. Its existence guarantees a place for disability scholarship in the annual conference program, thereby increasing the visibility of disability in the discipline. It also provides a formal mechanism for mentoring and networking among disability scholars. With the help of this section, the Status Committee continues to advocate for changes that enhance the inclusion of scholars with disabilities and disability scholarship throughout the discipline. Given sociological commitments to understanding social inequality, the time is overdue for serious examination of disability as a social category.

In order to continue efforts toward the full inclusion of sociologists with disabilities in the activities of the association and to further the sociological study of disability, the Status Committee asks Council to accept the following six recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** Renew the term of the Status Committee on Persons with Disabilities in Sociology.

*Note from the Executive Office:* It is the EO’s role to provide relevant information about implementation issues and context regarding issues under Council consideration. Such information might be useful when considering this recommendation. Please refer
to item #2 in the memo preceding this report that describes the current and proposed calendars for status committee renewals.

**Recommendation 2:** Endorse as a framework for future committee work and ASA activity the following principals:

1. The ASA, within its mandate as a scholarly association working to promote sociology as a profession and discipline serving the great good, promotes respect for scholars with disabilities and disability scholars;
2. Continuously and consciously strives to assure accessibility of meeting sites (hotel rooms, meeting rooms, registration area, exhibit hall, meeting programs and other materials, presentations, section receptions, etc.);
3. Works to increase presence of disability scholarship in pedagogy, publications, and meetings and encourages the inclusion of disability (along with race, class, gender and sexuality) as an axis of inequality, minority status, and valuable source of diversity;
4. Facilitates and acknowledges the critical importance of mentorship and professional development for scholars with disabilities and disability scholars;
5. Collaborates with other professional organizations to develop best practices for encouraging participation and inclusion of faculty and students with disabilities.

**Recommendation 3:** Adopt a policy stating that sections must provide documentation that off-site reception locations are accessible in order for them to be listed in the annual meeting program. A simple checklist, provided by ASA and signed by section leaders, will constitute documentation of accessibility. Continue the practice of sending a letter to section chairs (See Appendix C) to remind them of this requirement and sensitize them to the issues.

*Note from the Executive Office:* In most cities it is unproblematic to find an accessible venue for a section reception. In places like Montreal it can be more challenging. And onsite receptions can be significantly more expensive than offsite receptions, so that is not always a viable option for sections. In addition, at present sections often have not identified reception locations in time for inclusion on the program. Hence, a lot of “TBDs” in the program book. As such, it is not only feasible but helpful to provide section leadership with an accessibility checklist to use while searching for an offsite reception location. But it could prove difficult to make documentation of accessibility mandatory for inclusion in the program book. Perhaps a first step would be mandating distribution of the checklist and we can then consider other options for ensuring accessibility of all receptions over time.

**Recommendation 4:** Encourage the Status Committee, during its next term, to develop a proposal for a meaningful and systematic mentorship program for graduate students with disabilities, along the lines of, but not in competition with, the ASA Minority Fellows Program. Explore opportunities for the creation of a scholarship element within this program. This suggestion has also been made by the ASA section in previous annual reports.
**Recommendation 5:** Include the regular paper session, *Disability and Social Life*, in the ASA program every year.

The status committee agrees with the following statement from the Annual Report for the Disability and Society Section for Membership Year 2014-2015 (Kutner, 2015):

*Being able to count on one standing session would be very meaningful for a small section like ours. It would then give us more flexibility to use our session (or sessions) earned on the basis of our membership size to agree to co-sponsor with other sections, which then obligates us to “pay back” these arrangements the following year.*

In addition, the Status Committee offers the following evidence that the time is right for this session to be included annually rather than biannually:

1. In 2017, the program includes an unprecedented number of disability themed sessions (one cross listed invited session; two cross-listed invited open submission sessions; one section round table session; and the regular session on *Disability and Social Life*). This extraordinary number of sessions (5) is due to the rare event in which the year for the regular *Disability and Social Life* session coincided with the year in which the section day fell on the final day of the program, resulting in an extra section session. **The fact that all five sections were successfully filled offers solid evidence that the regular session could be filled each year.**

2. Even with the regular session and an invited session in the program in 2017, the two open submission section-sponsored paper sessions received far more papers than they were able to accept (22 were submitted, 9 were accepted).

3. The round table session accepted 13 papers, and many of these would have more appropriately been presented in paper sessions, had there been room in these sessions.

4. There are papers related to the social construction of disability or disability inequality being presented in more than a dozen non-disability specific sessions across the 2017 program. (NOTE: this count does not include papers in which disability is considered as a health outcome).

5. During the term of this report, the number of sessions sponsored by the Disability Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems in their annual meeting program has increased dramatically from five in 2013 to nine in 2017. This is further evidence of increased interest in disability scholarship. Since the SSSP conference is held concurrently with the ASA annual meetings, this increase could also be driven in part by the smaller number of disability-related sessions in the ASA program.

**Note:** The Status Committee is aware that Council will be considering a proposal to eliminate the regular topic sessions and reassign those slots to sections for programming. If that proposal is accepted by Council then the Section on Disability and Society would receive three sessions per
year, which it would prefer to making the currently bi-annually scheduled regular session on “Disability and Social Life” an annual topic, which would result in only two guaranteed session slots focused on disability.

*Note from the Executive Office:* The exact number of sessions that the Session on Society and Disability would have under the new proposal may vary depending on the total number of slots available in a given year and the section’s membership numbers. The Status Committee is aware of this.

**Recommendation 6:** Encourage the Status Committee to continue to update the compilation of committee recommendations (Appendix B) and work with ASA staff to track organizational progress toward implementation.

**References**


**Appendix A:**

*Forward and Table of Contents for Research in Social Science and Disability, Volume 9*  
See appendix at end of meeting packet.

**Appendix B:**

*Major Themes Reflected in Recommendations Made to and by ASA Status Committee on Persons with Disabilities in Sociology from 1983-2012*  
See appendix at end of meeting packet.
Appendix C:
Email to Section Chairs Regarding Reception Accessibility

On January 9, 2017 the following email was sent from the account of the ASA Meeting Services Director, Michelle Randall to “Section_Leaders@listserv.asanet.org.”

Dear Section Chairs –

If you are planning an off-site section reception in Montreal, please make sure that the location is accessible to all ASA members, including those with disabilities.

Sociologists are deeply aware of the reality that status and privilege are often invisible to those who have it, and can create insurmountable barriers for those who don’t. Sometimes inadvertently, discrimination continues to occur, such as when ASA Sections hold their receptions at sites which are inaccessible to people with disabilities. For instance, locations with steps may be inaccessible to people with mobility considerations. Dark or very noisy venues may make it hard for those with visual and hearing impairments or for those who use ASL. Transportation to sites far away from the Meeting hotels can also be exceptionally difficult to arrange for persons who use electric wheelchairs thereby making attendance impossible.

The ASA Meeting Services Department and Committee on Status of Persons with Disabilities in Sociology understand the good intentions of section leaders and recognize the amount of work that goes into planning a section reception in an unfamiliar city. We also understand that small sections may not be able to afford to host onsite receptions due to the high cost of hotel catering. We know that section leadership aspires to be inclusive despite the difficulties. Towards that end, when planning your off-site section reception, please ensure that your chosen venue is close to the hotel cluster and accessible to all.

Sara E. Green, PhD
Co-chair, ASA Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in Sociology and Associate Professor, University of South Florida

Tom Gerschick, Ph.D.
Co-chair, ASA Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in Sociology and Associate Professor, Illinois State University

Michelle Randall
ASA Director of Meeting Services

Margaret Weigers Vitullo, Ph.D.
Staff Liaison, ASA Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in Sociology and
ASA Director of Academic and Professional Affairs
Appendix D:

List of Status Committee Members and Council Liaisons for the Reporting Period
2013 – 2017

Barbara M. Altman, Member (2012-17)
David Brunsma, Council Liaison (2012-2014)
Sharon Barnartt (2013-15)
Thomas Gerschick, Co-Chair (2013-17)
Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, Council Liaison (2015-17)
Sara Green, Co-Chair (2013-17)
Albert Herzog, Chair (2012-13), Member (2014)
Terrence Hill, Member (2015-17)
Nan Johnson, Member (2011-13)
Laura Mauldin, Member (2016-18)
Margaret Vitullo, ASA Staff Liaison (2008-2020)