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Crip Flexibility and Painful Analysis: Critical Disability Methodologies of Swedish Welfare State Austerity

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to methodological debates in critical disability studies (CDS) by introducing the concepts of crip flexibility and painful analysis to describe how disability research is shaped under austerity. Drawing on autoethnography and qualitative interviews with disabled people in Sweden, it analyzes how austerity politics and academic ableism contour the methodological and affective orientations of a disabled researcher. Crip flexibility names the situated negotiations of access, method, and fieldwork that emerge when research is conducted in conditions of structural inaccessibility, while painful analysis captures the emotional labor and cripistemological work of interpreting data when one's own precarity is at stake. Grounded in the Swedish welfare state context, the article offers a distinct Nordic perspective to international CDS, showing how the production of disability knowledge is deeply entangled with welfare politics under austerity.

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INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to methodological debates in critical disability studies (CDS) by analyzing how Swedish austerity politics and academic ableism shape research design, implementation, and reflexive positioning from the standpoint of a disabled researcher. Drawing on autoethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011) alongside Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology of orientation, I examine how shifting welfare policies, academic norms, and personal circumstances intersect to orient the research process. This approach foregrounds how disabled researchers' positionalities are inseparable from the political economies in which they take place, making methodological choices key sites where knowledge production on austerity, ableism, and disability converge.

Critical disability studies (CDS) has long emphasized how methodological choices shape research claims, procedures, and outcomes. From the materialist social model (Oliver 1992) to feminist sit-point theory (Garland-Thomson 2005), cripistemologies (Johnson and McRuer 2014), and crip methodologies (Price and Kerschbaum 2016; Kent et al. 2018), scholars have interrogated the notion of the neutral researcher, showing how claims to objectivity often depended on erasing the lived knowledge of disabled people. Building on this, CDS scholars argue that reframing disability as political and cultural also requires scrutinizing how research practices themselves reproduce inaccessibility and harmful norms (Kent et al. 2018).

That CDS continues to engage deeply with methodological questions speaks to the notion that the narrative of the researcher as able-bodied and objective is still a hegemonic discourse (cf. Liddiard 2013; Price and Kerschbaum 2016; Kent et al. 2018). Many challenges faced by disabled scholars remain obscured in published accounts. These challenges include navigating inaccessible environments, confronting institutional biases, and managing emotional labor. As Liddiard notes in her discussion of her PhD process, to discuss these challenges in an attempt to 'de-mystify the research process' (2013, n.p.) is not only an act of scientific accountability but also a means of mapping the hegemonic conditions within which research is produced.

In the same manner, Minich (2016) argues that CDS entails 'scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments' and 'the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations' (n.p.) with the goal of 'producing knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatized bodies and minds' (n.p.). From this perspective, methodological debates become epistemological sites, illuminating the relations between researchers' bodyminds and the wider socio-political and material contexts in which they operate.

In contrast to Anglo-American traditions, where disabled researchers have increasingly shaped the field of disability studies, Scandinavian disability studies has only seen a centering of disabled researchers' perspective in the recent decades. Moreover, disabled scholars remain underrepresented in Sweden in particular. Disability studies in Sweden has often followed participatory paradigms that frame studies as commitments to empowerment, improved living conditions, and human rights for disabled people (Larsdotter 2018, 28). Yet, as Lars Lindberg notes in 'Forskningen som haltar' ('Research That Limps'), this commitment has rarely extended to creating space for disabled people as research leaders (Lindberg 2016). Instead, methodological debates in Sweden—and the wider Scandinavian region—have largely focused on how presumed able-bodied researchers relate to disabled participants (Larsdotter 2018, 3).

AUSTERITY POLITICS

In recent years, the wider socio-political and material context of disabled peoples' everyday life has been structured through austerity politics. In Sweden, as well as across Europe and the United States, austerity politics aimed at support and services for disabled people have become a defining feature of the normative structures shaping disabled people's lives (Hughes 2015; McRuer 2018; Norberg 2019). For disabled researchers, the same structural forces that restrict the lives of disabled research participants also constrain their possibilities in terms of research design, access, and scope. In this context, methodology becomes a lived negotiation of disability, ableism, and political economy. While the social and economic impacts of austerity on disabled people's lives are well documented (McRuer 2018; Ryan 2019; Norberg 2019), much less attention has been paid to how these same conditions shape the working lives and methodological choices of disabled researchers.

SWEDISH AUSTERITY POLITICS

In Sweden, austerity measures targeting disabled people have been underway for nearly two decades (Norberg 2019; Bylund 2022; Lewin 2021). Since the late 2000s, paralleling broader European trends, the Swedish welfare state has shifted toward a neoliberal emphasis on reducing the tax burden for those deemed 'contributors' (Norberg 2019, 66). Within this logic, disabled people are cast as non-contributors and constructed as a drain on public resources (Norberg 2019).

Swedish austerity rarely takes the form of large, explicit budget cuts to disability services. Instead, it operates through bureaucratic and legal mechanisms that restrict access to support (Norberg 2019; Berggren, Emilsson and Bergman 2021). A notable example is the 2016 *Regleringsbrev*—a formal appropriation directive from the government to a state agency—issued to Försäkringskassan (the Swedish Social Insurance Agency), in which the Social Democratic government under Prime Minister Löfven instructed the agency to reduce costs for personal assistance under Lag om särskilt stöd och service till vissa funktionshindrade (Bylund 2022). LSS, the Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments, is the core legal framework for personal assistance in Sweden.

In practice, cost reductions within these services are realized through the restriction of the number of assistance hours granted to each person. This means that disabled people who were previously deemed eligible for support such as personal assistance, based on the sum of their needs, have experienced substantial reductions through changes in eligibility criteria. As decisions have been appealed and tested in court, the legal system has largely ruled in favor of the Social Insurance Agency's narrower interpretations, creating precedents that further shift definitions of eligibility and limit disabled people's chances of receiving support, all while keeping the original legal text of the LSS-law formally intact.

A core aspect of these changes in eligibility lies in the use of fragmentation (Berggren et al. 2021), in which the hours and minutes of support are minimized by breaking everyday activities into their smallest components and recognizing only some of these as *basic needs* that count toward eligibility for personal assistance. Narrowed definitions now exclude, for example, parts of eating—where only bringing food to the mouth is counted as a basic need, not cutting or preparing food; dressing—where putting on outer clothes such as shoes, coats, and hats is not counted; or personal hygiene—where brushing one's hair is no longer considered a basic need that qualifies a person for personal assistance. Moreover, shifts in municipal practices and legal rulings have further entrenched these exclusions in other types of support, such as escorting services and supported housing (cf. Lewin 2021).

As a result of previous and ongoing austerity measures, thousands of disabled people in Sweden have lost essential support or experienced large reductions in assistance, leaving many dependent on services that do not fit their needs, housebound, or reliant on family members for intimate care (cf. Norberg 2019; Bylund 2022). Swedish austerity politics have also been shown to breach Sweden's commitments under the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Brennan et al. 2016). The UNCRPD has repeatedly criticized successive Swedish governments. Most recently, in its *Concluding Observations on the Combined Second and Third Periodic Reports of Sweden* (CRPD 2024), the Committee stated that these retrenchments violate Sweden's obligations under the Convention, particularly with respect to personal integrity, independent living, mobility, and full participation in society.

For disabled researchers as well as participants, the effects of austerity politics (re)shape the texture of daily life, determining not only who receives assistance with cooking, dressing, or mobility, but also who can realistically participate in or carry out academic research. Austerity politics therefore structure the conditions under which research can be conducted. Understanding how these dynamics unfold in Sweden requires situating them within the particular trajectory of Scandinavian disability studies.

AIM

The aim of this article is to develop a situated, methodological reflection on doing disability research under conditions of Swedish austerity politics, from the perspective of a disabled researcher. I seek to show how austerity politics and academic ableism orient the research process, and how lived experience and positionality shape research design, implementation, and reflexive practice. By situating the discussion in the Swedish context, the article also contrasts Scandinavian disability studies with more established Anglo-American traditions and addresses a critical gap in methodological debates on disability, austerity, and research practice.

The analysis is guided by the following questions:

1. How does the lived experience of a disabled researcher in the context of Swedish austerity politics contribute to methodological debates within Scandinavian disability studies?
2. What does a situated, reflexive account of research design and practice reveal about the entanglement of disability, knowledge production, and political economy?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

ABLEISM

Ableism, as developed by McRuer (2006; 2018), Campbell (2009), and Kafer (2013), is a hegemonic discourse that privileges able-bodiedness while marginalizing and oppressing those deemed disabled. It frames able-bodiedness as the norm and ideal, positioning those who deviate as deficient. This discourse is embedded in physical environments, political and bureaucratic systems, and social relations, and is internalized by both disabled and non-disabled people. Following Campbell (2009), I understand ableism as a normative regime that assumes an ideal, self-sufficient bodymind and measures the value of lives against this standard.

Campbell (2009) also distinguishes between ableism and disablism: whereas ableism refers to the underlying system of norms that construct disability as lack, disablism names the concrete practices, policies, and forms of violence that target disabled people. Norberg (2019), for example, uses disablism to analyze the targeted devaluation and exclusion of people who rely on personal assistance in Sweden. Following Goodley (2014), however, I do not treat ableism and disablism as separate systems, but as mutually constitutive. Ableist norms about the ideal person and citizen make disablist practices thinkable and legitimate, while disablist exclusions and sanctions continually reproduce and solidify those underlying norms.

Throughout this article, I use *ableism* to denote the broader normative and affective order that privileges able-bodiedness, while attending to how ableism and disablism operate together. My primary concern is with ableism as an orienting regime that shapes both welfare policy and academic practice, rather than with cataloging specific instances of disablist discrimination. Disablist practices—such as the withdrawal of support or exclusionary bureaucratic decisions—are important, but I approach them as enactments of this underlying ableist regime. This focus allows me to trace how ableism shapes the conditions under which research is conducted, the methodological choices that become available, and the forms of emotional labor demanded of disabled researchers under austerity.

ACADEMIC ABLEISM

Ableism is deeply embedded in the histories of knowledge and cultural value systems. Universities have historically been dominated by non-disabled researchers studying disabled people, producing a colonizing dynamic in which disabled people's bodies, minds, and experiences served as raw material for academic knowledge production (Dolmage 2017). Even in research traditions outside the medical model, disabled people are frequently positioned as 'knowledge carriers' rather than 'knowledge producers' (cf. Bylund 2022, 40–41). This exclusion is not only historical but persists in Scandinavian contexts, where disabled researchers remain rare and face persistent academic ableism (Apelmo and Nordgren 2022).

Academic ableism refers to the reproduction of these ableist norms within higher education, mandating able-bodiedness, able-mindedness, and forms of 'hyperability' such as constant productivity and availability (Dolmage 2017; Apelmo and Nordgren 2022). These expectations sustain structural barriers that limit disabled scholars' participation and advancement. Despite longstanding calls within disability studies for disability-led research, academia remains largely physically, cognitively, and socially inaccessible (Dolmage 2017; Rogers 2023).

ORIENTATION AND AFFECT

In *Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006, 551) asks: 'How do we come to inhabit the places we do?' She suggests that the answer depends on the body one has, how that body is culturally positioned, and the directions in which it is allowed or able to move. What appears within reach or as distant depends on this embodied and discursive starting point. Orientations can form gently, through habitual alignments, or more forcefully, through pressures such as the threat of being seen as culturally unintelligible (Ahmed 2006).

The Swedish welfare state can itself be understood as a mechanism of orientation. Historically organized around universalism (Esping-Andersen 1996), it has structured the conditions under which citizens move through everyday life by defining which supports and futures are accessible. Under austerity, these orientations shift: retrenchments in personal assistance and other services reorient disabled people away from independence and participation toward dependence on partners, parents, children, or other family members (Bylund 2022). In this sense, the welfare state directs not only resources but also the practical and emotional trajectories of disabled people in Sweden (Norberg 2019; Bylund 2022; Bylund 2025).

In this article, I use Ahmed's notion of orientation to examine how Swedish austerity politics orient both participants and me as a disabled researcher, shaping the research process and the methodological dilemmas that become visible.

Affects are central to the process of orientation. Ahmed (2014) theorizes affect not as a private or internal feeling, but as a social and political force that circulates between bodies and discourse. Affects such as anxiety, pride, or shame are productive in this process, orienting bodies toward or away from specific places, opportunities, and futures. They are not incidental to structures like ableism or austerity, but one of the ways these structures are felt and enacted (Goodley, Liddiard and Runswick-Cole 2018; Bylund 2025).

Ableism shapes not only the organization of material space but also the circulation of affect (Goodley, Liddiard and Runswick-Cole 2018; Bylund 2025), producing feelings such as fear, safety, shame, or pride that orient bodies toward or away from particular spaces, roles, and opportunities. Neoliberal austerity politics reinforce ableist ideals by equating economic and national independence with individual autonomy, positioning those who require support as economically and morally suspect (McRuer 2018, 177). In Sweden, this has been particularly visible in the welfare retrenchments of recent decades, where discourses of economic burden have been central to redefining disabled citizens as non-contributors (Norberg 2019; Bylund 2022).

Together, these concepts frame the analysis: *ableism* describes the overarching system of compulsory able-bodiedness shaping academic life; *academic ableism* identifies how those norms are embedded in scholarly structures and practices; *orientation* offers a lens for analyzing how welfare state policies and austerity measures shape the lived experiences of disabled researchers.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The empirical material for this analysis is drawn from my experiences of designing and conducting qualitative interviews with disabled Swedes who relied on welfare state services and support in 2017, as part of a larger study carried out between 2016 and 2022**.** The purpose of the larger study was to examine how changes in welfare state support over time impacted disabled people's possibilities to enter relationships and form families. The study was based on qualitative interviews with Swedish adults aged 20–73 with various impairments, following a cross-disability methodology, as well as autoethnographic writing by me as a disabled researcher.

The study followed a qualitative interview design, emphasizing nuance and participant perspective rather than statistical generalization. The interviews were semi-structured and open in format, with recruitment following a cross-disability principle (cf. Bylund 2022). The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority and conducted in accordance with national regulations. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were given pseudonyms. Identifiable data, such as occupation and place of residence, have been described only in general terms to protect participants' confidentiality.

Although the interviews offered unique insight into the relationship between welfare state bureaucracy and the existential experiences of everyday life, they are not analyzed thematically here. Instead, they are approached as sites of methodological practice, highlighting how research under austerity requires ongoing negotiations of access, orientation, and researcher positionality. The focus lies not on participants' narratives as empirical findings, but on the conditions under which the interviews were made possible and the methodological dilemmas they foreground.

The main material for this article consists of autoethnographic writing produced during the same period, documenting my encounters with the welfare state as a disabled person and researcher. These texts trace how austerity and ableist structures shaped my opportunities for academic participation and how affects such as anxiety, exhaustion, and vulnerability circulated between personal life, structural conditions, and academic work.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

To analyze how austerity and ableism shape both the research process and its conditions of possibility, I draw on autoethnography. Building on reflexive traditions in feminist and disability studies, I situate myself explicitly as a disabled researcher whose methodological decisions were formed at the intersection of disability, austerity, and academic ableism, and whose position is marked by both privilege and precarity: academic skills such as reading and writing enable participation, yet reliance on personal assistance means that austerity directly affects my capacity to perform research. Reflexivity is a central methodological and epistemological practice in CDS (Liddiard 2013; Kent et al. 2018). Drawing on feminist epistemology, it rejects the researcher as objective and disembodied; credibility instead derives from transparency and positionality, privileging the partial and situated over claims to universality (Price and Kerschbaum 2016).

Autoethnography extends this reflexive practice by treating the researcher's lived experience as part of the material. While Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) offered a foundational articulation, more recent work demonstrates its vitality. Jackson-Perry et al. (2020) explore autistic sensory difference, and Glazko et al. (2023) examine accessibility in human-AI interaction.

From this perspective, autoethnography is generative both methodologically and empirically. It not only provides a way of situating the researcher within the field but also produces empirical insights into the affective and material conditions of doing research under austerity. By foregrounding the emotions involved in producing research in this context, autoethnography shows that these are not incidental feelings but central ways in which ableism and austerity contour the very possibilities of research participation.

At the same time, my narrative cannot speak for all disabled researchers; it reflects the specificity of my body, my access to assistance, and my position in Swedish academia. I argue that precisely these possibilities and limits are analytically valuable.

REMOTE INTERVIEWS: CRIP FLEXIBILITY IN PRACTICE

I use the term *crip flexibility* to describe the adaptive strategies I developed in response to structural inaccessibility and the consequences of austerity politics. The concept emerged through the process of writing and reflecting on my research practice, rather than being defined in advance as an analytical framework. Crip flexibility reframes adaptability as a form of resistance to academic ableism: instead of complying with neoliberal ideals of productivity, it centers the capacities and needs of both me and the research participants. These strategies not only enabled me to navigate academic ableism but also opened possibilities for rethinking research practice in CDS more broadly. In contrast to neoliberal ideals of 'flexibility' as boundless productivity (cf. Apelmo and Nordgren 2022, 113), crip flexibility foregrounds limits, interdependence, and the negotiation of access. As Price and Kerschbaum (2016, 46) note, access is always personal. Crip flexibility makes this explicit by insisting that methodological decisions must bend toward particular bodies and situations rather than abstract norms.

Remote digital interviews constituted a central element of the study's methodological design. Because many interviewees and I faced difficulties traveling—due to constraints related to physical or mental health, inaccessible transport, or lack of support—interviews were conducted digitally. Most took place as voice or video calls, while others unfolded as text conversations, depending on participants' needs.

Together, the interviewees and I were oriented toward digital methods by the material realities of our capacities, ableist inaccessibility, and the uneven availability of support under austerity (cf. Price and Kerschbaum 2016; Rogers 2023). In 2017, remote interviews were not yet common practice, as they later became during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although early work on digital ethnography existed, in-person interviews remained the standard within Swedish qualitative research. The use of digital tools therefore challenged expectations of physical presence in the field and oriented me toward broader disciplinary tensions for disabled researchers. As Kasnitz and Shuttleworth (2001) note, ethnography has long been associated with 'adventure' and physical immersion, implicitly privileging the presumed able-bodied researcher who has both the ability and the opportunity to go 'out into' the field. More recently, Friedner, Kasnitz and Wool (2018) observe that this emphasis on presence constitutes a norm of academic ableism, leaving disabled anthropologists to feel their work is perceived as less than 'real' anthropology, regardless of its insights.

Initially, and in line with academic ableism, I regarded digital interviews as a limitation, a concession to austerity rather than a legitimate methodological choice. Over time, I came to understand them differently: not as a lesser option, but as a site where empirical findings and methodology intersected to produce what I call crip flexibility. Rogers reminds us that 'virtual worlds are of particular importance to disabled and chronically ill communities' (2023, 93). To distinguish too sharply between online and 'real-life' interaction, she argues, is to exclude the most marginalized disabled communities from ethnographic study altogether. In this sense, digital interviews were not a second-best solution but a necessary methodological adaptation, opening access and enabling forms of self-determination otherwise foreclosed (cf. Price and Kerschbaum 2016; Rogers 2023).

For example, Marcus, whose personal assistance hours had been severely cut, could not put on trousers while working from home, as he was unable to remove them to use the bathroom. He joined our interview by voice call. Leo, a trans man living with undiagnosed Myalgic Encephalomyelitis at the time, was largely bedbound and had difficulty speaking due to fatigue; we conducted our interview entirely through text messaging, allowing him to rest between answers. Agnes, who had lost all support when moving municipalities and become housebound, also participated via voice call. The interviewees with more substantial support were more likely to choose a video call.

These cases illustrate how austerity oriented not only the practical arrangements of interviews but also the very shape of the field. For Marcus, the field narrowed to his home; for Leo, to the written text he could manage from bed. Digital interviews did not merely substitute for 'real' fieldwork; they were faithful to the actual field—the terrain between domestic and digital spaces in which access could be renegotiated (cf. Rogers 2023).

In this sense, the interview method reflected the consequences of austerity politics by showing how support systems reoriented participation. Methodological choices thus became central to answering how welfare state services structure the everyday lives of disabled Swedes and how lived experience under austerity contributes to methodological debates within Scandinavian disability studies.

Crip flexibility becomes inseparable from what Price and Kerschbaum (2016, 46) call 'the personal nature' of access. Each negotiation stemmed from the relation between our bodyminds, support infrastructures, and vulnerabilities disclosed in the process. This aligns with what Hamraie (2017) calls critical access: understanding access not as a stable guarantee but as a situated, power-laden process that generates new possibilities while simultaneously exposing inequalities (see also Chandler et al. 2024).

The negotiations involved in crip flexibility were shaped by more than bureaucratic and logistical orientations produced through participants' access to support. They were also shaped by affect. Swedish austerity politics place disabled people in states of precarity, subjecting them to repeated, invasive reassessments that fracture everyday needs into bureaucratically measurable fragments (Berggren, Emilsson and Bergman 2021). This scrutiny constitutes a form of 'bureaucratic violence' (Norberg 2021, 657), eroding privacy and producing a persistent fear of losing vital services that saturates everyday life (Bylund 2025). Given this context, I was acutely aware that qualitative interviews risked replicating such invasions of privacy unless participants felt in control of the process. Ensuring this control became central to my methodological practice and will be further discussed in *Ethical Dilemmas and Orientations*.

The methodological negotiations in this study thus emerged at the intersection of bodyminds, austerity, and academic ableism. They demonstrate how the field, as a site, is shaped by economic and ableist structures, and how crip methods reorient research practice in response. These negotiations also laid the groundwork for what I later describe as a practice of painful analysis, where the interpretive process itself becomes marked by the same tensions of austerity, affect, and access that shaped the interviews.

PAINFUL ANALYSIS: EMOTIONAL LABOR AS CRIP METHOD

As previous CDS researchers have noted, insider research entails epistemological closeness but also emotional costs. Ryan (2019) shows how her position as a disabled person made it impossible to remain emotionally detached from the stories she encountered when interviewing disabled people affected by austerity in the United Kingdom. Her work was shaped by the fear that the precarious conditions of her interviewees might eventually become her own. By explicitly acknowledging this fear, Ryan articulated a central orientation of disabled researchers in times of austerity: the recognition that political decisions and bureaucratic changes can fundamentally alter everyday safety and stability.

As a disabled researcher dependent on the same welfare state services as my interviewees, austerity structured not only the conditions of their lives but also my ability to conduct research. Although I occupied a relatively stable position during my doctoral studies, with access to personal assistance, fear nonetheless permeated the analytic process. The stories of my interviewees reactivated prior experiences of bureaucratic violence and projected me into plausible futures where my own living conditions could be fundamentally altered (cf. Bylund 2022). These negative affects became part of what I came to call painful analysis. The concept names the way analytic work itself functioned as a cripistemological method. Painful analysis allowed me to register the existential impact of austerity, the emotional labor required to contain them, and to theorize fear as both personal and political:

> I'm scared all the time, but being afraid doesn't help; I know that. The only thing that helps is to write about it. I have to theorize this; it has to bleed from my wounds into a thesis. But how do I manage to open the wound? (Bylund 2022, 59 [my translation])

While Hochschild (1983) framed emotional labor as the management of feeling in the context of workplace performance, the term has since been developed in research contexts to name the embodied and affective work of negotiating proximity to one's material. In disability studies, emotional labor has been used to describe how disabled researchers manage this proximity and its costs (Norberg 2019; Mauldin 2023; Bylund 2025), in line with reflexive research practice. Following Ahmed (2014), I understand emotions as orienting: they circulate, direct attention, and shape what research becomes possible. Naming my process as painful analysis foregrounds how austerity orients disabled researchers away from the ideal of detached scholarship and toward embodied, affective modes of knowing.

Throughout the study, I resisted analyzing the stories of fear, initially interpreting this as procrastination. Engaging with my methodological choices again, I recognize it as an attempt—conscious or not—to avoid the physical and emotional reactions the work provoked and the affects it would put into play. Anxiety shaped my writing process: my fingers slipped on the keyboard; words I normally spelled without hesitation became unreadable. Sentences came either as long, unwieldy chains or as short, fragmented bursts. In my fieldnotes from the winter of 2020, I captured this disorientation:

> I feel like such a failure as a doctoral student. Others write clean texts free of spelling errors and with sentences that flow with ease. I write a burning mess of grief and theory. I didn't use to write like this. (Fieldnote, December 2020)

The emotional labor of this process extended beyond empathy; it encompassed the physical and psychological toll of reliving personal and collective trauma. Mauldin reflects on a similar orientation:

> I carry with me the things that broke me, all that I could not tell people because no one could understand. I am carrying the things that my participants also feel they cannot tell people because they are actually telling me. And I'm containing them all. (Mauldin 2023, 131)

Incorporating my own experiences of receiving interviewees' accounts of austerity into my PhD text became central to my cripistemology. Through the analysis, my feelings and reactions became affects; they were political, shaped by policy, and part of collective emotion shared by disabled Swedes in need of support from the welfare state (cf. Ahmed 2014; Bylund 2025). Employing the concept of painful analysis made these orientations empirical evidence for the epistemological and methodological claim of situated research, showing how scholarly work is conditioned by intersecting personal and collective experience.

Although I had managed to name these affects and trace their production, I worried that acknowledging how fear shaped my analysis might undermine its credibility. I was concerned that my position as a disabled researcher oriented me toward an excess of proximity. My worries echoed a central belief in academic ableism—that quality derives from distance and that academics cannot simultaneously occupy positions as activists and researchers (Dolmage 2017; Liddiard et al. 2024). Guided by a situated and reflexive crip methodological stance, and with the aim of reintroducing the voice of the Swedish disabled researcher into Swedish disability studies, I included my own experiences as both methodological and empirical material. My experiences of fear and worry, both as a disabled person in need of support from the welfare state and as a researcher, allowed me to orient toward a position that reframed these experiences as epistemologically and empirically useful. The knowledge produced in the study emerges not from abstract neutrality but from embodied, contingent relations (cf. Liddiard et al. 2024).

Hence, painful analysis advances a crip methodological orientation. It foregrounds the material, political, and affective conditions under which disabled researchers work and insists that emotions are not incidental but constitutive of knowledge-making. By reframing fear and anxiety, painful analysis demonstrates how austerity and ableism orients the emotional toll of scholarship differently for disabled researchers. It thereby contributes to broader methodological debates in CDS, offering an approach that is at once situated, reflexive, and resistant. In my current work, I have developed practices of reflection and recuperation. Recognizing and addressing the emotional labor of CDS as a disabled researcher is not only a survival strategy but also a form of resistance to the dehumanizing effects of austerity and academic ableism (cf. Ryan 2019; Norberg 2021).

Painful analysis is a generative resource, expanding how analysis can be conducted and whose voices shape the field. However, my double orientation as a researcher marked by both vulnerability and privilege also generates ethical dilemmas.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND ORIENTATIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

If fear oriented the practice of painful analysis, then guilt and solidarity oriented the ethical terrain of my research. As a fellow disabled person and as a part of the Swedish disability rights movement, I shared experiences of bureaucratic violence in acquiring welfare state support with the interviewees. This oriented me toward interviewees as comrades rather than simply as participants (cf. Liddiard et al. 2024). At the same time, my comparatively more stable situation during doctoral studies positioned me differently, and this asymmetry produced a visceral sense of guilt that shaped how I approached both recruitment and interaction.

In navigating this tension, I confronted a broader dilemma that has shaped CDS for decades: the expectation that research by and about marginalized groups must serve not only as scholarship but also as activism (Liddiard et al. 2024). Minich (2016) describes this as 'research in pursuit of justice', and more than a decade earlier, Barnes (2002) had observed that such work is rarely regarded as motivated by intellectual curiosity alone, but rather oriented by responsibility to a collective. My sense of responsibility and guilt thus reflected not only a personal orientation toward solidarity but also a disciplinary ethos that continues to be negotiated within CDS today.

These affects oriented me toward specific methodological choices. In recruiting participants, I deliberately avoided approaching people I already knew in the disability movement, relying instead on responses to open calls circulated through rights organizations. While this limited the scope of insider ethnographic material, it preserved my orientation as a comrade and upheld principles of academic integrity, avoiding undue advantage or pressure. For many interviewees, participation was similarly shaped by the hope that research might influence public discourse, even if it could not transform their own immediate situations.

I could have avoided disclosing my disability to interviewees, adopting a non-situated stance (cf. Liddiard 2013). Instead, I made it explicit. This acknowledgement often served as an entry point for participants to share experiences of bureaucratic violence they felt unable to discuss with non-disabled researchers (Bylund 2022). In this way, my lived experience shaped the research process and consciously situated my work within CDS.

Yet solidarity also risked obscuring power differentials. Liddiard (2013, n.p.) warns that an emphasis on sameness can result in an 'eclipsing' of the researcher's position, where analytical authority is concealed behind rhetoric of shared experience. This tension became visible when trust—essential for participation—clashed with my responsibility to interrogate narratives while maintaining ethical care. For instance, most participants declined to review their transcripts, and I respected this decision as part of their autonomy. My role was to provide options, not to coerce, since any perception of pressure could have eroded the trust that underpinned our conversations.

Taken together, the orientations of fear, guilt, and solidarity demonstrate that disabled scholarship under austerity is shaped not only by methodological decisions but also by affective and ethical orientations that emerge from living within the very structures under study. In the discussion that follows, I consider how these orientations inform the practice of CDS in Swedish and Scandinavian contexts, and how they contribute to broader methodological debates in the field.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has introduced two interrelated concepts, *crip flexibility* and *painful analysis*, to capture the methodological and affective orientations of doing disability research under austerity. Where crip flexibility names how research design and methods bend in response to embodied constraints, ableist environments, and welfare retrenchment, painful analysis describes the affective and epistemic labor of engaging analytically with material that threatens one's own conditions of living. Taken together, these concepts show that methodological orientations are not only epistemological but also political, shaped by welfare retrenchment and the persistence of ableism in Scandinavian contexts.

Through a situated, reflexive account of my own research as a disabled scholar under Swedish austerity politics, I have shown how lived experience generates specific methodological orientations that contribute to debates within Scandinavian disability studies and reveal the entanglement of disability, knowledge production, and political economy.

Conceptualizing crip flexibility and painful analysis as methodological orientations highlights how research is always contingent upon political and material conditions. In Scandinavian settings, these orientations reveal tensions between universalist welfare ideals and the everyday precarity of disabled lives. Austerity politics aimed at support and services for disabled Swedes have not subsided; they remain active in the bureaucratic and legal spheres at both state and municipal levels. Recent reports document how access to escort services has declined over time (Socialstyrelsen 2023), while analyses of personal assistance reveal a ‘record low’ amount of coverage despite reforms framed as strengthening rights (HejaOlika 2025). Governmental inquiries highlight the problem of increasingly complex certification requirements and the failure of authorities to adequately heed professional expertise, pointing to systemic instability and restriction (Tuutma and Martinmäki 2023). These developments indicate that the dynamics traced in this article are not confined to the period of fieldwork but continue to shape disabled peoples’ lives and the conditions for disability research in Sweden.

As austerity continues to structure the Swedish welfare state, it must be understood not only as a political condition but also as a central field for the further development of Scandinavian CDS. Austerity is not a closed chapter but an ongoing reality that demands sustained empirical and theoretical attention. Thus, the contribution is twofold: first, to name methodological orientations in CDS, and second, to situate Scandinavian disability research within global debates on austerity.

The analysis also highlights the ethical complexity of insider scholarship. Disabled researchers occupy positions of both privilege and vulnerability. This duality generates new demands for accountability and care. Politically, the analysis points to how disability movements and disabled scholars in Sweden must navigate an increasingly austere welfare landscape. Recognizing these dynamics is essential if CDS in Scandinavia is to continue producing research relevant to the contemporary living conditions of disabled Swedes and propose constructive change in pursuit of agency and freedom.

At the same time, the practice of autoethnography and situated knowledge carries risks. Even within CDS, disabled researchers are often expected to disclose personal experience—to provide body and emotion as empirical material while normate scholars remain unmarked and objective (cf. Price and Kerschbaum 2016; Dolmage 2017). I am wary of this asymmetry. Yet my decision to situate myself through autoethnographic disclosure was guided by principles of academic integrity, transparency, and solidarity. Without this step, the empirical and methodological contributions developed here would not have been possible. Naming this tension is therefore vital: while situatedness is a methodological strength, it can also reproduce the very asymmetries of visibility and disclosure that CDS seeks to dismantle.

In conclusion, crip flexibility and painful analysis capture how austerity and ableism contour the very possibility of disability research in Sweden. These concepts foreground the epistemic and emotional labor involved in doing research as a disabled scholar, challenging the ideal of detached objectivity. By grounding these methodological innovations in a Scandinavian setting, this article contributes to international CDS while advancing the development of a specifically Scandinavian disability research agenda. It demonstrates that the production of disability knowledge is deeply entangled with welfare politics, and that attending to austerity is vital for understanding both the lives of disabled people and the future of disability research in Scandinavia.

In sum, disability research under austerity becomes a site where the orientations of disabled life, politics, and scholarship converge, and where methodology itself is a terrain for resisting and unraveling ableism.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The study received approval from the appropriate Swedish ethical review authority. All participants provided written informed consent for participation and for the use of anonymized data in research publications.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CB: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing.

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