



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
FACULTY OF LAW

MARY AND PHILIP SEEMAN HEALTH LAW, POLICY & ETHICS SEMINAR SERIES

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for Health and Social Policy McGill University

## What is Disability? Theoretical Strategies to Define a Contested Concept

Commentator: Michael Bach,  
Managing Director, IRIS-Institute for Research and  
Development on Inclusion and Society  
Adjunct Professor, Disability Studies, Ryerson University

Thursday, January 28, 2019 12:30 - 2:00  
Solarium (room FA2), Falconer Hall 84  
Queen's Park

The concept of disability is used across a variety of contexts (e.g. medical, legal, artistic) to describe different phenomena and prescribe distinct behaviours or norms. The definitional challenge is not only that the category of “disabled people” is heterogenous, but also that what “disability” should denote, primarily or exclusively, is controversial amongst both theorists and practitioners. This conceptual breadth is far from innocuous: disability models have the potential to influence public policies, culture and interactions, by suggesting what rights, duties and social expectations disability entails. They can both benefit and harm people categorized as “disabled”.

Instead of examining those various definitions and arguing in favour of one of them, this essay considers the unavoidable cultural polysemy of disability and contrasts the appeal and limitations of the main theoretical strategies to manage it. Some disability models deny that competing understandings of disability are valid, while others seek to determine procedures through which disabilities will be defined and assessed and still others conceptualize disability in a more culturally malleable way.

Jonas-Sébastien Beaudry is an Assistant Professor of Law at McGill University (joint appointment with the Institute for Health and Social Policy) and a member of the Quebec Bar. His publications include a book on freedom of expression in Latin America and articles in the areas of legal history, human rights, ethics and disability law. He collaborates with disability organizations on public policy issues and is an Advisor to the Vulnerable Persons Standard.

**A light lunch will be provided**

For more information about this workshop, please send an e-mail to  
[events.law@utoronto.ca](mailto:events.law@utoronto.ca)