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Cover Page Footnote

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Professors, Disabilities, and Other Social Identities; An Intersectional Look at Higher Education

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Abstract

There is extensive research on students with disabilities but there is a research gap when it comes to faculty with disabilities. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of faculty members. This qualitative study centers the attention on participants intersectionalities (social identities) to dive deep into the impact of employee development in academia. This research will look at what type of direct and indirect discrimination exist in their world of higher education. Some of the questions asked in the interviews are: Have you faced additional difficulties as a faculty member because of your disability? What are other social identities that have had an impact on your career, do you believe that they have intersected with your disability in terms of impact?

Keywords: Faculty, Disabilities, Diversity, Higher Education, Qualitative

There is limited research on the support and the assistance that faculty with disabilities receive from their campuses and their peers. This study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of faculty with disabilities (including physical, psychiatric, and learning disabilities). The purpose of the study is to discover if faculty with disabilities--visible or invisible--are receiving the support, accommodations, and accessibility at their workplace as faculty. The focus

towards accessibility for this study was also connected to the participants intersectionalities (the term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in understanding how feminist theory and anti-racist politics impact one another (Crenshaw, 1991).

Literature Review

Many professors say a stigma around the discussion of their mental health still clings to the profession (Pettit, 2016). As long as our expected image of the normative professor remains white, male, straight, well-off, and nondisabled, professors who do not have these social identities will encounter both structural and direct discrimination (Perry, 2016). This study looks specifically into faculty who identify as disabled, to understand this stigmatized and marginalized identity and how it intersects with professors' other social identities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Public Law 101-336 enacts subtitle A of Title II which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by public entities, or all State and local governments (Gutierrez & Patten, 2002). It has been more than 20 years since the Americans with Disabilities Act took effect, but while the law has changed some things in higher education, it hasn't changed the way academic culture regards people with disabilities (Davis, 2011). Junior faculty members and adjunct instructors can be particularly vulnerable to mental-health disabilities because of the kinds of stress they face as they build their case for tenure or search for full-time work in a tough market (Pettit, 2016). Academics avoid discussing their problems because it could be interpreted as weakness (Pettit, 2016). Awareness of and advocacy for mental health on campuses has grown in recent years, especially for students; however, many faculty members feel excluded and alienated due to stigma and must deal with problems that arise due to lack of accommodations in isolation (Pettit, 2016). An accommodation is a change made to an inaccessible environment for the benefit of one individual. Thinking in terms of

broader-based access, rather than individual accommodations, can help decrease the amount of time that must be spent discussing specific disabilities, impairments, barriers, and attempts to “fix” those issues (Price & Kerschbaum, 2017).

The impact of hiring not only affects faculty themselves but also the students that they teach, hiring faculty from diverse backgrounds helps students to feel represented on campus (Farrell, 2019). Having campus administrations addressing disabilities by being proactive in hiring and recruitment as well as fostering open talks with students, staff, and faculty on campuses about their accessibility needs can make a positive impact for future generations.

Research Question

The primary goal of the study was to open a space for and understand the lived experiences of faculty members with disabilities. The research focused on how the intersectional identities of these professors affected their ability to request accommodations and if they felt supported by their peers and others on campus.

Methods

Data Collection

This research was a qualitative exploratory study, data collection was based upon interviews which were recorded and transcribed. The participants had to sign a consent form before the interview process. The interviews took anywhere from 30-45 minutes, took place in a confidential setting, and were then deidentified when they were transcribed. The participants chose the location and room where the interview would take place to make them feel comfortable. In order for the participants to feel comfortable taking part of the study they were informed that transcripts would be deidentified and they could stop the interview or skip a question at any point.

Participants

The participants in the study were faculty (adjunct, tenure track, and tenured) from a large, public university in California. The faculty participants were self-identified individuals with a disability (visible and nonvisible). The participants were contacted through a disability resource center, a disabilities affinity group, internal networks, and through snowball sampling. The participants were asked to email the first author if they were willing to participate in the research. The response that was sent to possible participants included the basis of the study and the researcher's information. A total of eight interviews were conducted from twelve people who responded to our call for participants. Unfortunately, the topic of the research is highly sensitive since there is still a stigma associated with disabilities which limited the number of participants who were willing to be interviewed.

Findings

Results indicated that faculty members with disabilities experienced three key challenges related to accessibility and support on campus: (1) Faculty experienced stress and anxiety about disclosing their disability status; (2) Faculty expressed obstacles in obtaining accommodations for accessibility; and (3) Faculty feared problems with retaining their jobs or gaining promotions and tenure.

Disclosing Disabilities

Faculty members deal with different levels of stress and anxiety when it comes to disclosing their disability. Our participants had disclosed their disabilities to various members of their campus community such as students, colleagues, and department chairs. Their intersectional identities, including race and gender, impacted whether faculty disclosed as well as the level of support they receive upon disclosure. A participant with an invisible disability shed light on this

theme: “I didn't disclose it when I first applied and I was first hired because [my disability was under control], I mean you're better off disclosing your like racial and ethnic background than disabilities ... maybe it's seen as more of a liability” (Participant 4). Another participant with an invisible disability did not feel comfortable disclosing due to feeling alienated: “I don't disclose it because I feel like I would just be put in situations where I would be treated differently or I wouldn't be invited to certain activities” (Participant 6). Both participants quoted earlier felt fearful to disclose their disability due to possible unfair treatment and indirect discrimination. Participants who were predominantly white were aware of their privilege when it came to disclosing their disability, for example one participant stated, “I am totally open about it. I mean I am writing a book about it. Here's where privilege really comes into play. Yeah, I have a visible disability, but I am also a white woman with a professional job” (Participant 2). These types of intersectional identities influenced how comfortable participants felt about disclosing their disabilities. Culture can also create an impact on how disabilities are viewed and one participant mentioned, “[Where I grew up] there is a stigma around my disability and that's made a big impression on me because it's definitely a stigma in that culture where there are no accommodations at many public places and it's very hard” (Participant 7).

One of the most common groups that some of the participants felt comfortable disclosing their disabilities to was students. One faculty member liked to remind their students the importance of remembering that having disabilities does not mean they cannot become a great professor in the future if they choose to be, they said; “I think students sometimes put us on these pedestals or they think I could never be like you. And [I remind them, we are just like you] 15, 20, 30 years down the line. Just remember that we're people and we have problems, we have

issues, we have disabilities” (Participant 2). This reminder creates a safe space for students who may feel that they cannot achieve the career they want due to their disabilities. Representation in our classrooms is important for creating a better environment for accessibility.

Accessibility

Participants in this study indicated their intersectionality such as race and gender impacted their ease or difficulty to ask for and receive accommodations for accessibility. One participant indicated that he did have a lot of privilege, “white privilege and male privilege and CIS [cisgender] privilege and straight privilege and all those things,” and he recognized how this gave him “a lot of credibility [while] people from other members of other social groups of different perspectives the stigma associated with the accommodation or the disability could be more sort of damaging and problematic” (Participant 8).

Another participant, who is a woman of color indicated that her experience was different: “I get used in a lot of pictures and promotions. I feel like people are very excited to have somebody who is fits a lot of underrepresented demographics. But when it comes to having a disability, I think it’s not that you’re fitting a quota, it’s that your liability risk, you won’t be seen as an intellectual, you’ll be on medication or you’ll need time off or you’ll need too much, you’ll be high maintenance” (Participant 4).

When it comes to intersectionality, the data indicates that availability of resources (even for accessibility) is still dependent on one’s social characteristics such as race. Accessibility is important for all faculty with disabilities, but our interviews indicated that participant’s presentation of other social identities impacted how likely they were to get accommodations.

Even when these faculty were being asked to be on promotional materials to promote the university, they were still stigmatized in relation to asking for accommodations.

Retention, Tenure, and Promotion

From the preliminary analysis some of the participants expressed fear of their retention or promotion applications being denied. Participants with tenure understandably indicated less concern for this: “I can afford to be an advocate for my community because I’m tenured, I can’t be fired. I’m at an institution that will get in trouble if they are not following the Americans with disabilities act” (Participant 2). However, even among tenured faculty there was still talks about how the impact of disabilities and intersectionalities such as age play a part in this process, for example one participant indicated that “at my age, even if the perfect job for me opened a tenure line, I wouldn’t apply, and I don’t even try anymore.” (Participant 5).

Faculty received advice that disclosing disability status could be risky for their career. One faculty member, who was open with students about their disability, said “I feel like it’s a way to create space and awareness to be open about it. But some people say, ‘don’t do that, you are not tenured yet. I’ve been discouraged by some people in academia of being open with that” (Participant 4). This advice from others reveals the stigma that they still believe to be associated with disabilities. However, following this advice also means that students with disabilities (especially invisible disabilities) will be less likely to find a role-model among their professors.

Discussion

The findings in this research illuminate issues around disclosure, accessibility, retention, and tenure for academic faculty. This research indicates that faculty with disabilities still face increased barriers to doing their jobs and feeling accepted. Participants indicated that being able

to disclose their identity and feeling supported is one of the most important things for universities to understand about how to help them. Disclosure offers multiple benefits such as comfort level, timing, institutional culture, and supportive environment (Pearson, Boskovich, 2019). Based on the outcomes of this study we need to give more open and individual support to faculty members, including listening to their needs and accommodation requests. This is especially important for faculty members who embody other those who have experienced intersectional oppression such as being a part of underrepresented communities.

Acknowledgment and creating a supportive environment throughout the campus would be a way to recognize the importance of all faculty members. Having an open and accepting campus climate would help not just current faculty members with disabilities but would also signal to those applying for jobs that they will be supported if they choose to work at that university.

Additionally, students with disabilities in higher education can face difficulty with demands in their studies and advocating for themselves (Hong, Haefner & Slekar, 2011), having faculty members who are open about their disability can cause a positive impact for students. Research has indicated that having a role model can be particularly important for development of diverse individuals (Sealy & Singh, 2008).

Study Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was the limited number of participants. A larger number of participants would be a better representation of the faculty on the studied campus whom self-identified to have a disability (and would allow us to look at the differences between those with visible or invisible disabilities). The representation for faculty in this study was limited as the topic of the study could be a sensitive conversation for some.

Future research could look into studying a large number of participants via a confidential survey. Although the research is confidential there may be reasons why the participants do not feel comfortable speaking about their experiences in person due to the stigma. Distributing online surveys that are anonymous without the need to respond in-person may be beneficial to make participants feel comfortable to participate. More research is needed specifically on what resources the faculty need and why are they not receiving them.

It is important to remember to ask the faculty for their insight on things that may not have been asked in the interview or survey. For example, in this study the last question was “Is there anything you have experienced as a faculty member with a disability that I did not ask about but should have?” We wanted to create a safe space for our participants and open the space for them to vocalize their struggles, successes, and anything else they wanted to say. Something that we must remember is to support our educators and not forget who they are; “I think it's just nice to have people remember that faculty are humans. We're allowed to be diverse and having a disability does not make you cognitively impaired” (Participant 4). The success of our students begins with our professors and the support and accessibility provided to them. **Conclusion**

Even with the protection of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), faculty still experience fear when asking for accommodations on campus due to stigma. Future investigations could focus more in depth on how resources and accommodations are discussed with potential faculty. Most of the faculty who participated in this study were open about their disabilities to their students and advocated for them. As mentors and educators, this topic should not be left for them to be the only ones doing the awareness-raising and education on the topic (Price, Salzer, O'Shea & Kerschbaum, 2017). Faculty members deserve to be acknowledged for their

dedication to the job and betterment of their students but also must be given the necessary accommodations and support.

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