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An Exploration of the Experiences of Faculty with Disabilities in a Research University in the South

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An Exploration of the Experiences of Faculty with Disabilities in a Research University in the South

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Abstract

While diversity and inclusion has become a benchmark for universities all around the country, faculty with disabilities remain in the margins of higher education discourse and are a neglected population across the spectrum of academia. This thesis aims at exploring the experiences of faculty with disabilities at a specific research 1 university in the South. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five faculty members who self-identify as having a disability. Four themes emerged from this study: able-bodied lens, fear, social isolation, and coping mechanisms. Building on the existing literature, these findings offer new information to expand the knowledge on the challenges and strengths of this community. The implications section provides practical tools for social workers to engage on this arena. Further research is needed to identify generalizability of results.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Awakening academia to the injustices faced by faculty with disabilities (FWD) poses a challenge that will require a shift from the prevailing able-bodied paradigm. While diversity and inclusion has become a benchmark for universities all around the country, faculty with disabilities remain in the margins of higher education discourse and are a neglected population across the spectrum of academia (Dali, 2018; Lau et al., 2017). Research and other literature regarding this population is scarce (Chang, Asting & Kim, 2005). Thus, exploration and disclosure are necessary in order to achieve the goal of equal access and opportunity envisioned by the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA, 2019).

The World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (WHO, 2002) defines disability as "dysfunctioning at a level of body or body part, the whole person, and the whole person in a social context" (p. 11). Furthermore, disability entails some sort of ailment that "prevents someone from engaging in gainful employment" ("Disability", n.d., para. 1). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) estimates that one in four adults are living with a disability, while the United States Census Bureau (USCB, 2019) pronounces there are approximately 57 million disabled people, making it the largest minority group in the country.

In the last few years, there has been a growing trend focused on diversifying higher education campus life. The diversification resulted in an increase after the Supreme Court reached a decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003). The case findings stated that diversity within college campuses promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce. As such, the body of literature supporting an increase in diversity and inclusion has continued to grow but there remains a need for sustained research in this area (Chang, Asting & Kim, 2005). However, disability as a measure of diversity and inclusion falls

behind other diversity categories such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and other aspects of intersectionality (Davis, 2011; Holmes, 2016; Lau et al., 2017).

As a result, this study explores the experiences of faculty with disabilities working at a research 1, land-grant university in the South. Gaining a better understanding of the unique challenges faculty with disabilities face during the hiring process and subsequently retaining them is essential to increase the diversity efforts within academic settings. Furthermore, the study examines the experiences when faculty disclose a disability and the ensuing effects, their support networks, and representation of this demographic in academia. Inclusion of these voices and life experiences can create a sense of belonging, and greater equality for those living and working with a disability.

Literature Review

Faculty with Disabilities in University Programs

In the last few years, institutions of higher education have set in place practices to ensure the diversification of faculty, but disability still lacks representation. According to Grigerly (2017), faculty with disabilities are still marginalized on university campuses and are a neglected demographic. In fact, Davis (2011) states that the academic culture has been minimally transformed regardless of the growth of this population around the United States. This invisibility extends even to diversity courses, as disability often lacks recognition as a valid human identity (Davis, 2011; Sang, 2017). Moreover, Grigerly (2017) highlights the lack of information, publications and research that explores the representation of faculty with disabilities in universities around the country. Currently, there is no documentation on the number of faculty with disabilities in academia, the nature of their disabilities, or even their experiences of academic life. Dali (2018) states "faculty with disabilities chart their unique paths in academia, and some are incredibly lucky to find a supportive environment, with policies that make sense and well-informed and understanding supervisors and colleagues" (p.495). In addition, some faculty members with disabilities believe that lenient institutional enforcement of ADA requirements—including physical access—demonstrates a weak commitment to disabled staff (Steinberg, 2002).

Additionally, there is scant literature regarding faculty with disabilities sharing their stories at conferences, on panels, or even in publications. Much like other forms of diversity, for faculty to be open about their disability and enjoy certain freedoms, people in this population need to feel recognized and appreciated by their academic colleagues and institutions. If the above occurs, faculty with disabilities can "come out," feel comfortable sharing their personal challenges, and will be able to advocate for themselves and others (Dali, 2018). Wilkerson

(2019) emphasizes that disclosing a disability in an academic context presents a wide variety of challenges and difficulties. According to Wilkerson (2019), many faculty members with disabilities make the conscious decision to never disclose because the academia is an able-bodied realm: "being smooth and continually productive is the basic requirement for survival" (p. 115), and someone experiencing a disability is mostly perceived as unproductive.

Churgat et al. (2015) surveyed family medicine department chairs using an electronically 10-item survey. Questions documented the amount and type of disability encountered, subsequent accommodations and associated costs, and attitudes toward family medicine faculty with disabilities. The study surveyed 31 department chairs who reported having 50 faculty members with disabilities, and only seven disclosed their disability before being hired. According to the authors, the most common impairments were mobility, hearing, and mental health problems. Findings reported that these faculty performed: 1) similarly to their peers without disabilities (42.2%); 2) adequately but not at the level of peers (40%); and only one reported inadequate job performance. However, there was not a clear connection made between performance and disability. Regarding social inclusion, this study showed that faculty members with disabilities felt accepted by their peers, patients, and staff. Additionally, this study emphasized a lack of representation and knowledge about this community.

Overall, this lack of representation or invisibility is problematic. According to Pain (2017), change can only happen if academics with disabilities feel confident about sharing their impairments, start disclosing, and consequently foster academic cultures where all staff and students can flourish. Wilkerson (2019) shared that professors have begun to tell their stories and have exposed some of the consequences experienced after disclosing. Moreover, she posited that faculty in contingent positions "particularly fear the consequences of disclosure" (p. 116).

According to Steinberg (2002), the inclusion of faculty with disabilities brings intellectual and academic benefits, and moreover, this population might offer special insights into how chronic illness and impairments affect daily, professional, and academic life.

Accommodations

Regarding accommodations for people with disabilities, the American with Disabilities Act sets the standards for any type of employer across the nation. The ADA requires employers of the disabled to ensure reasonable accommodation for the disabled employee where his disability impedes his job performance, unless doing so would impose undue hardships on the employer (Abrams, 2003). As the congress was not explicit in its definition of "reasonable accommodations," its precise extent has become the subject of much discussion and discomfort. As such, some faculty members with disabilities believe that lenient institutional enforcement of ADA requirements—including physical access—demonstrates a weak commitment to disabled staff (Steinberg, 2002).

A study published by Steinberg (2002) explored the representation of faculty with disabilities in medical schools. The study revealed that their experiences have generally escaped notice and scrutiny. Most schools who have faculty members with disabilities lack clear policies to address necessary accommodations. Steinberg further explains that due to the fear of being judged or reprisals, or even harming their careers, many faculty members avoid requesting accommodations, even if receiving them would provide a major improvement to their working conditions.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Model of Disability

Most universities are not ready to accommodate faculty with disabilities, regardless of what disability group they belong to (Grigerly, 2017). It is crucial to understand how impairment has been understood and how it is still perceived in our society. Traditionally, when approaching the issue of disability from a health and medical perspective the focus is placed on the person's impairment or illness. Consequently, the individual's disability is the problem and a solution must be found. As a result, the person needs to take care of its disability, overcome it, and join society. According to Beckett and Campbell (2015), while the model serves the purpose for diagnosing, assessing and finding potential treatment, it also "acted to individualize responsibility for disablement" (p. 280). This becomes crucial in social care settings that promote self-determination and choice. The greatest criticism of this model is the emphasis is almost exclusively placed on the disability and the person's shortcomings, or things they cannot do. It fails to look at the person as a whole (Beckett and Campbell, 2015). Moreover, "disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society" (UPIAS, 1976, p. 14)

The UPIAS publication paved the way for the social model of disability. UPIAS states that people are not disabled because of their impairments but by the barriers faced in society (Oliver, 2013). This model shifts the focus from the person with a disability to the context, structures and barriers people experience. Thus, limitations stem from negative attitudes and responses, inaccessible services, and lacking support systems. Society is suffering from a disability, as Jones (2019) passionately states:

I can't remember a time when I wanted healing because of my disability. But I can quickly recall times I wished our society were healed of its attitudes toward disability. If society were healed, people with disabilities could more easily find jobs and housing. We could go places on the subway and when we arrived, we could enter through the front door. We would be expected to participate in typical social and work activities. We could live our own lives making good or bad choices, just like everybody else. (p. 76)

It is not the impairment that disables the person but society. It is the neglect created by society toward people with disabilities that stops them from moving forward (Oliver, 2013). In many ways, "all of us, even the so-called normal, move in and out of states of ability and disability every day" (Mooney, 2019). The social model of disability acknowledges the value of medical interventions and treatments and at the same time calls for equality and inclusion as it is embedded in a framework of personalization and person-centered care (Carr, 2010).

The social model of disability was a catalyst of the disability rights movement. It brought a shift from medical subjects to people with rights and recognition—from private to public, from medical to political. It led to the creation of a series of policies and laws, that cover human rights declarations, equal education, removal of physical barriers, and the ADA of 1990. As society started to transform; schools, public transportation and spaces, and even work environments began to reinvent themselves so that people with disabilities could come out of seclusion and join a changing and evolving world. **Multi-Systems Life Course Perspective**

The Multi-Systems Life Course Perspective (MSLC) is a framework grounded in three theoretical models and one perspective—ecological systems theory, symbolic interactionism theory, life course theory, and social change perspective. Implementing MSLC provides a holistic and comprehensive understanding of clients, communities, organizations, and society

itself (Murphy-Erby, Christy-McMullin, Stauss, and Schriver, 2010). This framework combines micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level social work practice—with special regards to the interdependence of well-being and social change—and how their interaction can lead to enhancements in social functioning and social conditions (Christy & Valandra, 2017).

For this study, the ecological perspective sheds light on how disabilities and societies interact, and how the changes in one bring about changes in the other. For example, the publication of the American Disabilities Act—a product of years of advocacy of the community of people with disabilities—brought about enormous changes for society. The symbolic interactionism theory helps shape this study's research question through consideration of the meanings ascribed to disabilities, productivity, diversity, and inclusion of faculty with disabilities. In connection with faculty with disabilities, life course theory guides the researcher to understand the complexities of the intersections of history, socioeconomic factors, and the individuals interviewed for this research and the factor that led to their current situation. For this thesis, the social change perspective provides a framework to understand the progress achieved by this group of people in the last few years, and an opportunity to suggest interventions and practices aimed at enhancing opportunities for faculty with disabilities that would help them thrive in academia.

Methodology

Research design

Due to the scant research completed on faculty with disabilities, a qualitative methodology was warranted. According to Hurley (1999), qualitative research excels at describing novel, poorly understood phenomena and it serves the purpose of engaging in causal inference, and it is useful when building new theories. This exploratory study collected primary data to better understand the experiences of faculty with disabilities in university programs. Being qualitative in nature, the study aims to provide rich descriptions of phenomena and generating hypotheses about them (Sofaer, 1999).

Recruitment and Sampling. Participants of this study included faculty with disabilities in academic departments located in a research 1 university in the South ($n = 5$). A purposive and snow-balling sample technique was used to recruit participants. A recruitment letter was posted through social media and university newswires to reach potential participants. The recruitment process initially implemented proved difficult. Finally, I was linked with two faculty members who self-identified as having a disability. They, in turn, referred me to the other participants who make up the sample of this study. The interviews were held at locations that were mutually agreeable for the participant and the researcher.

Names and identifying information were not used to protect the participants' identities. The quotes used in the findings section avoid using any specific references to people, offices, or institutions to avoid any potentially identifying information and to protect the identities of the participants further. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the procedures for recruitment, participation, and consent used in the current study.

Data collection. The questionnaire was developed by a four-person research team. The questionnaire was subsequently reviewed by faculty members with a disability to ensure that the questions—though personal in nature—did not create any foreseeable risk to the participants and were worded in a sensitive manner. The interview consisted of eight questions (see Appendix A) and explored demographics, work history, support systems, disclosure of disability, recruitment of people with disabilities in academia, and suggestions for retention of such faculty. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour and were conducted from October to December of 2019. The primary researcher recorded all interviews and then transcribed the data. The recordings were kept in a password-protected laptop. Materials were destroyed after analysis to ensure participants' protection.

Analysis of data. Grounded theory (GT) was used to analyze the data. According to Bernard, Ryan and Wutich (2017), GT is an interpretative process in which the researcher becomes grounded in the data and develops deep and rich concepts while creating models to explain how the phenomenon being analyzed. The data analysis process allowed the research team to code the data and subsequently interpret the findings. All the transcripts were analyzed by the primary researcher and three co-researchers. The process involved reviewing each transcript, line by line and subsequently pulling out emerging themes. Following individual analysis by each of the researchers, team meetings were held to review the themes and subthemes. The themes were usually consistent across the team, but the team meetings allowed the findings to be discussed and compared.

Validity and trustworthiness. Analysis of the interviews incorporated a variety of tools to maximize findings' validity and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Some of these methods included using multiple coders, a peer research team, and member checking. Moreover, triangulation was used to enhance the rigor of the research (Berg, 2001). Members independently coded the transcripts to determine emerging themes. As seen above, these findings were later compared by the team members to corroborate the developed themes. This process occurred over the course of several weeks when themes were rearranged, quotes were reanalyzed, and subthemes began to emerge. Additionally, theory-based triangulation was used to connect this study to findings from previous research, and literature to make connections with the experiences of the participant group.

Additionally, the primary researcher used a method called autoethnography to review and present one's personal biases and feelings regarding the research demography. This transparency and process encourages the researcher to disclose their personal understanding of the population to be researched before data analysis to facilitate the researchers' self-reflection and consequently enhances the data validity. This process heightens data rigor so the research participants' voice can be better understood and explored once the researcher is clear on their own experiences and biases (Jones & Adams, 2016). The primary researcher's initial and ending self-reflection and can be found in Appendix B.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describes the member check or member validation as a phase where the findings are sent back to the persons who provided the information to determine the accuracy of the developed themes. For this study, the findings section was sent to the interviewees to request feedback on the accuracy of the report: participants reflected on the experiences, emotions, and thoughts shared by all the people interviewed and provided feedback

on the emerging themes. The main purpose of this study is to understand as accurately as possible the participants' worldview. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a member check provides an optimal means of assessing the validity of a qualitative study. Moreover, Cho and Trent (2006) have stated that this process is used when the purpose of a research project is seeking the truth and producing change.

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the descriptive findings from the individuals interviewed and to present the developed themes. As such, the individual stories of the participants—which are more descriptive in nature—provide a deeper contextual understanding. The research questions focused on larger collective questions while also addressing the individual experience.

Demographics

The interviews were conducted from October to December of 2019. There were 5 participants from this university in the South who self-identified as a faculty member with a disability and participated. As the number of participants is limited, demographic details will not be disclosed in this section to protect their identities. There are two details that are crucial in this study: all of participants are tenured professors and they all disclosed a different disability.

The perspective of faculty with disabilities

The five professors expressed much interest in sharing their stories and experiences. They believed it would help others in similar or more vulnerable situations. Moreover, they expressed excitement in the study and the prospective findings. Unanimously, they consider the issue an unexplored arena, and their community a neglected demographic.

During the exploration of the interviewees' experiences, four primary themes emerged in the data: an able-bodied lens campus, fear, social isolation, and coping strategies. These were integrated to paint a picture of the ways faculty with disability navigate academic life. There was very little dissent in the stories told and the perceptions of the interviewees usually coincided regarding their beliefs, attitudes, and journeys.

Able-body lens

All interviewed participants have been working in academia for more than a decade. They reported vast experience in navigating academic life in their departments, first as students, then as assistant professors, and currently as tenured professors. They consistently reflected that academic life was perceived from an able-bodied lens, creating a series of challenges for those in this arena who have a disability. Within this able-bodied theme, three subthemes emerged. These included: lack of representation, barriers, and accommodations. All five faculty members had several experiences to disclose regarding this topic.

Lack of representation. While diversity has become a buzzword when describing inclusivity and campus life, the current able-bodied paradigm present in higher education excludes disability from its discourse. According to all the participants, there was a lack of representation of people with disabilities in academia, as well as the absence of information regarding this minority group. One professor stated

> I strongly believe disability should be considered when talking about diversity, we have many aspects of intersectionality present in faculty, such as gender, race, etc., but disability is missing, and not only in the utterly small number of faculty with disabilities but also from our university rhetoric.

To emphasize this point, another participant claimed, "I am not even sure the number of those faculty/staff who have a form of disability in relation to the greater faculty/staff employment numbers." Not only are faculty with disabilities missing from the campus life, they are not mentioned in university demographics as part of the community.

The professors also shared consistently the importance of the incorporating faculty members with a variety of diversity markers and how this leads to a more supportive and inclusive learning community. The following quote illustrates this subtheme:

For the same reason you recruit black professors, transgender folks, for the same reason you recruit anyone that's diverse, the campus should have an inclusive student body. Black folks need to see other black folks, transgender folks need to see other transgender folks, you should be able to see yourself in the faculty. We are hopefully doing a better job in recruiting a broader array of students from all over the place. That broader array should be able to see their identity markers in the faculty. And if we recruit folks in chairs, folks who are deaf, folks who are blind. They ought to be able to see those things. That's why you recruit people with disabilities. You have to have that perspective.

Additionally, the participants perceived that FWD create a more dynamic and creative working environment as new perspectives and worldviews need to be considered and implemented. To this regard, two participants made similar comments: "Having disabled people, having any kind of marginalized group in the workplace, actually enhances it because you have to deal with creativity all the time," and "I further believe that the seeing of individuals with disabilities is one of the many aspects of a population and that ability is far more important when framed within disability."

The dearth of this group in academia heralds the emergence of challenges for this population as their needs are often not considered. One participant stated, "Because there's no one with a disability in the school of architecture, the barriers to everyone's access doesn't even cross their mind." The benefits of having faculty with disabilities extend to students, staff, faculty, and the community. Creating an environment that reflects the real world makes it possible for anyone with similar life experiences to perceive they belong and thrive in this learning context.

Barriers. An aspect of academic life that all interviewees referenced were the barriers faced when applying for their current positions and the challenges faced in order to continue working productively. According to the participants, academia is built around an able-bodied lens. One participant stated, "You are dealing with an environment that never expects you to be there." While ADA requires the employers to provide all the necessary resources to help their employees do their jobs, the regulations concerning academics are lacking or extremely vague. One of the professors passionately responded:

> There's still no real policy for disabled academics as there's for disabled students. For disabled students, there's sort of an awareness of social justice and accommodations. Where for faculty it's more connected with health and wellness sort of thing. No real policy around disabled academics.

> The barriers do not only affect attitudes or policy, but they also extend to physical aspects therefore blocking accessibility. For instance, one participant expressed, "I don't require a lot of accommodations but at my University there are still buildings I can't teach in. When I show up there, even after having been here for more than 15 years, it is still a surprise." One professor pointed out that the lack of representation of faculty with disabilities contributes to their needs not being considered when creating new spaces on campus. He stated

> In 2017, the university couldn't figure out how to design an accessible building. I saw the plans and I raised a ruckus and they didn't pay attention. When it was finished and they saw my filming, at least they put a push button on the outside so that anyone with a disability could come in and go to class. They designed that room inaccessible to people with disabilities. Because there's no one with a disability in the school of architecture, so it doesn't even cross their minds.

In a similar vein, another participant claimed:

> There are many buildings on our campus that are not accessible, even in the architecture building. ARCHITECTURE! There's that great classroom on the second floor with stadium seats, there are two missing for wheelchairs. You can't access it from the second floor. You need to get to it from the first floor.

Accommodations. When encountering barriers, FWD must find ways to continue their work proficiently in new ways. During the interviews, all participants shared struggles faced when requesting accommodations. It also was not always clear who they should make the request to in order to procure these accommodations. One of the participants stated:

> The employer is required by law to provide all reasonable accommodations for the person who is working there. At the University, I was told that the responsibility for providing these accommodations is at the level of the department as opposed to the college of the University.

While it is sometimes the program itself who provides the accommodations, when they require more involvement or a bigger scope, it remains unclear for the interviewees how to proceed. For instance, "The decision was made with the support of the chair that I would get whatever accommodations I needed. However, there was no office for staff or faculty, only for students." Another commented "At the University—and not all the time—but frequently, and especially anything outside of my program, it was, you know, good luck with that."

Added to the uncertainty of finding support, all the interviewees agreed that whenever they needed the environment to change to meet their needs, the university resisted their requests. They consistently espoused that there were unclear processes in place, vague references to ADA guidelines, and often just crude refusal. Getting accommodations represented for the participants

an actual struggle. Examples of this subtheme include: "All the accommodations that I've gotten have been hard fought," "I still fight for accommodations. There are fights I still need to fight," and "The university either resists accommodation or they do zero forethought. If you want to retain faculty first don't fight them for accommodations, and even better, think ahead, a tiny little bit."

Even before securing their positions, the five participants concurred that the hiring process was geared toward non-disabled people. The participants confirmed that almost all job postings were disablist, and that disability was not part of the equation. One participant stated, "Disability should be discussed as a natural part of the hiring process. Universities should ask what kind of accommodations you need, they should share that they are willing to do it, promote what's available on campus, that would be a great start." Similarly, another commented, "There should be all kinds of accommodation. I guess you just need to expect disability."

Fear

An examination of participants' stories revealed that disclosing their disability resulted in a lot of fear. This included a fear of losing their job or being judged. These subthemes surrounding fear played a crucial role in the academic life of these participants.

Losing their job. All the academics who participated expressed that being tenured provided them a sense of security and therefore perceived they did not need to hide their disability. They also shared that before becoming tenured, they believed their positions might be at risk if they disclosed their disability. For example, one participant pointed out, "I was told by the people at work that if I couldn't do that part of the job, I would not be able to work there. They didn't say they would fire me that day, but it was like, the day you can't do it is the day you don't have a job." It was only when securing tenure position that they felt safe to open up to the broader academic community:

I'm very open now with my disability, I don't care what people's responses are but I'm a

full professor now. Before I became a full professor, I kept it to myself and for my

confidants. Because, you know, it's hard enough being a woman in academia, I didn't

want another strike against me, at that time it was psychiatric disabilities, and you know,

there's so much stigma with having psychiatric disabilities.

 Moreover, participants expressed that many colleagues with disabilities who are untenured prefer not to share their disability so to not jeopardize their jobs. Comments confirming this subtheme include: "Another reason why people don't self-identify, if you are a contract faculty, a lot of them think they won't be taken seriously for tenure track positions," "When you have a disability, you always feel that your position is so much tenuous," and "There's always the fear of losing one's position, being casted out after disclosure. Particularly for untenured faculty." It was consistently perceived that disclosing a disability might lead to a negative impact on one's academic career. For this reason, they prefer secrecy.

Being judged. This subtheme reflected the experiences faced by the participants of being judged by their disability. From the able-bodied academic lens, disability had mainly a negative connotation and was associated with unproductivity. Thus it was believed that disclosing a disability could result in severe judgements from non-disabled people. For instance, one of the participants expressed:

I believe there are so many myths and misconceptions surrounding disabilities and a fear

that if you disclose, then your professionalism could be called into question, your ability

could be called into question. And many times, disability is being framed as being a

defective worker.

Other participants emphasized the fact that disabilities were perceived as a deficit and not a potential. One participant conveyed, "Disabled people are inherently passive and incapable of advocating for themselves." Academia is competitive and adding a disability into the mix makes it even harder. This perception can be seen in the following quote:

I knew enough about this field to know that disclosure almost always does you harm. I knew enough to know that you get the job first and, though I don't like ambushing people—and I don't necessarily conceptualize this as being the case—disclosure never works that well.

Even when their job was secured as a tenured professor, all participants described situations where their ability to perform their duties was called into question. Some of their colleagues went so far as to question their decision to remain in academia once their disability was exposed. "Many of my colleagues asked why I would want to continue, there were many other things I could be doing. If I succumbed to that, that would allow the perceptions to be greater than realities." Unfortunately, the university human resources office was no more accommodating. According to the participants, these individuals often questioned their ability to continue their jobs, instead of asking them about their needs. For example, one participant stated, "I was asked 'Are you gonna be able to do the job?' The question they didn't ask was 'What accommodations do you need?' So I disclosed my disability later and again I got, 'Will you be able to do your job?' not 'How can we help you? What can we do for you?'" Another interviewee shared that after he had a second condition arise which limited his performance even more, he attended a faculty meeting and was repeatedly harassed about the consequences of this last event and how it would affect his work. He stated that he felt utterly humiliated but in his passionate response he stated, "Many of my colleagues asked why I would want to continue.

There were many other things I could be doing. If I succumbed to that, that would allow the perceptions to be greater than realities."

Social Isolation

Asking the participants about work experiences involved a sharing of how they were socially perceived and welcomed (or unwelcomed). Two subthemes emerged under this category and includes: how faculty, staff, and students relate to FWD; and the interaction with administration. The lack of understanding of disability as part of diversity integrates these two subthemes.

Faculty, staff, and students. The fact that higher education is governed by rules created for non-disabled individuals creates the notion that everything that falls outside of this realm is an exception. All participants viewed their able-bodied colleagues as having difficulty integrating disability under diversity. They included a vast number of categories under diversity, but disability was neglected:

> Recognizing that disability is part of intersectionality. My colleagues do not think about disability when talking about diversity. It's appalling that we are the world's largest minority and we are still overlooked and treated as some kind of exceptionality when we do show up. Your presence is seen as exceptional as opposed to natural.

Even when discussing accommodations, some of their peers viewed these as privileges. The participants perceived that their colleagues did not comprehend the needs of their disabled workmates, but they just dismissed the issue and sometimes protested against them. Two of the participants reported: "There are still times when accommodations are resisted or viewed as a privilege or advantage. Most folks in academe do not understand there is equity and there is equality. It is hard to understand the difference between equity, equality and parity," and "There are some faculty, that because they don't see you in the office that much, they make the

assumption that you're not working. They don't realize that you are probably working the same amount as they are, but from home."

One of the participants also shared that when she returned from a vacation after revealing her disability, there was tension in the room during a meeting. She stated that everyone could feel it and that no one asked her directly about her disability and its consequences. She continued, "They never asked me, but the saying of 'the elephant in the room' was necessary for me to say something to frame how it would impact them." She confessed during the interview she did not even know at the time how things were going to develop but felt the need to give them some answers, trying to appease her colleagues. She stated that she needed to ensure she could continue working and that her disability would not affect her colleagues' workload.

Conversely, one of the interviewees shared a completely different perspective on this matter. He stated, "on this campus, faculty and staff are incredibly supportive. You don't feel stigmatized from faculty, staff and students." It is possible to theorize that their interaction with their specific department was extremely positive and that the nature of their disability might not cause as much impairment as the rest of the interviewees.

Administration. As mentioned before, some accommodations exceeded the scope of professors' departments and they needed to reach out to human resources for support. Consistently, every academic interviewed expressed their discontent with these subsequent interactions. Administration employees, even those who belong to offices that deal with diversity and inclusion, or equal opportunity and compliance, were not well versed on disability issues. Four of the academics declared that the office for equal opportunity fought them for the accommodations. Even though they understood their needs, they were not willing to easily provide them. One of the participants reflected:

>There's a lot of work to be done. Administrators need to know about disability law. In one of the researches I conducted a few years ago, one of my participants stated that "disability harassment should be treated with the same seriousness as sexual harassment". Unfortunately, it is not, and the way people are treated is very subtle and I don't think that top managers and administrators get adequate training on disability legislation, how to work with someone who's been hospitalized for a semester and has to return, so they can help them make a smooth transition back into their workplace.

Two participants shared interactions with the equal opportunity office when asking for accommodations:

>The woman I worked with at the equal opportunity office treated me as if I were a criminal, so that was not pleasant. When I presented the accommodations to my supervisors, he kinda argued with all of them, but it was still, like 'look, these are reasonable no cost accommodations.' So no, it was not pleasant. And also, there's a real lack of knowledge of disability law on the part of administrators here which can make processes like that really unpleasant.

and,

>No willingness, no thought, blind resistance. And they only let me do it because I threw fits at the provost's office, I got banned from the provost's office for that one. They begrudge it and they fight you on it and it just maddening. That's the resistance.

Another explained how self-advocacy led to confrontation with upper level administration:

>You feel neglect from upper administration. And most of us who have advocated and demanded change, the upper levels have acted horribly: provost, the dean's office. They almost always reacted horribly. Self-advocacy gets you in trouble with upper

administration. Most people have had terrible experiences, and their concern might be 'If I tell you my experiences, it never goes well.'

Another point of agreement of all the interviewees was that upper level administrators lack training on what diversity stands for and—as was the case with the previous subtheme—they fail to include disability when thinking of diversity. For example, one of the participants said:

> This university does not consider disability within diversity. They talk about gender, sexual orientation, all these other things, but if you like any single metric at the university, disability is not considered part of diversity. It's not just, they don't even, they just dismiss the concept that disability is diversity. Period. It is not even recognized.

In addition, all participants agreed that administration had no retention practices in place to ensure that the workplace was supportive of diversity. According to two interviewees, the university might be open to hiring faculty with disabilities, but the campus did not feel inclusive or welcoming. This person stated, "You can recruit people easily, but if they are in a hostile work environment or in an environment where they are bullied or treated with incivility or whatever that they're not gonna stay," and "In my program I see a large disproportionate number of people with disabilities. People in administration don't see them. And I use the word "see" as an existential recognition, broader than sight."

Coping Mechanisms

Even though the questions did not address this topic specifically, the theme of coping mechanisms emerged in every single interaction. Belonging to this minority group put people with disabilities in a different position with regards to the rest of academia. As such, they needed to find creative ways of adapting to a world and an environment that did not expect them to be

there. Two main processes were described in the interviews that shaped this theme: coming out and self-management.

Coming out. The five faculty members interviewed had an acquired disability, they were not born with it, but different circumstances led them to their current situations. Consequently, there came a time when they felt the need to disclose their disability to close colleagues of directors. All of them referred to the disclosure process as a "coming out" process, using the same expression used by the LGBTQ+ community. Sharing their disability entails, as the second theme discussed in this paper, dealing with fear. Two of the participants clearly communicated this process, "People are really afraid to disclose, coming out is not easy at all," and "It is important for universities to create a space that is safe for people to self-identify, that 'coming out', if you will, will not have negative consequences for people's hiring or promotion."

Those who have an invisible disability have the option of not openly disclosing their disability. According to one of the participants, this was a good choice in an environment as "I also wonder whether academia is a welcoming space for people with disabilities." This person went on to say that if they have the chance to postpone their coming out, some FWD do, "Most disabilities are invisible. So if people don't have to disclose, they don't." Furthermore, some of the professors perceived that some situations force them to out themselves so as not to be wrongly judged. Fear—once again—plays a critical role in this situation:

Sometimes people with disabilities don't want to disclose to everyone. So then some colleagues see they are getting accommodations and think they are getting some sort of special treatment, which is an issue. I think we should have environments where nobody is afraid to disclose a disability. Talking about disability should be no different than talking about any other aspect of who you are as a person.

As was mentioned before, some wait until they feel safe to open up. This was the case of one of the professors who boldly stated her choice and gave voice to the silence of others: "I waited until I reached the pinnacle of my career to be open about it. For a lot of people that could be a reason why. They worry about 'being outed.'"

Self-management. The inadequacy of resources available for faculty with disabilities on campus often forced them to take charge of their own needs and create the necessary solutions that would help them stay productive and thrive in a hostile environment. For instance, one participant commented, "many times, we have to create our own accommodations, as no one will do it for us." Another explained how the responsibility shifts from the upper level administration to the individual with the need, even when they agreed to help. This person confirmed, "The responsibility falls on the person asking and I experienced no resistance, but you know it's a little bit of effort on the part of the person placing the request." Additionally, creativity was a word all participants used to describe their solution-seeking endeavors. One interviewee claimed, "You have to be chronically creative at a moment's notice. I always have to be very creative, because most people don't think creatively about disabilities."

Finally, one crucial topic that resonated across all the participants was the need for self-advocacy. While other minority groups have strong representation across campus, disability—the largest minority in the country, and potentially on campus too—does not. Unanimously, the participants reflected that people with disabilities become outstanding advocates and representatives of their own cause. One professor claimed, "By recruiting faculty with disabilities, we would have faculty willing to be even stronger advocates, much more willing to demand change, to put themselves out there, to affect some sort of positive course correction." Another one preferred a much more confrontational stance to express his point. He stated, "In

my case, I'm a tenured professor, I got over millions of dollars in cash, I just don't give a fuck.

I'm a fifty-plus year-old man with this hair. And it's good, and when I see something, I'm gonna

say something, I'm gonna speak my mind."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of faculty with disabilities in university programs. The findings shed light on the challenges and struggles this group faces in an environment that is highly competitive and built around an able-bodied schema. The emerging themes highlight some of the aspects of this population's perceptions of academic life inclusion, support, and retention. Findings are relatively novel given that faculty with disabilities have received little attention in research. Additionally, the current study contributes to existing literature that portray the extent of the challenges faced by people with disabilities in general— and faculty in particular—face in academic settings (Davis, 2011; Sang, 2017). Also, participants' responses mirrored the ideas posed by the social model of disability (Jones, 2019) by showing that the limitations experienced by the interviewees stem mainly from negative attitudes and responses, inaccessible services, and lacking support systems in their university.

The emerging themes provided deeper understanding of ways needed to address the needs of faculty with disabilities. The concept of higher education building policies and procedures from an able-bodied perspective is certainly revealing and provides insight on necessary changes and adjustments. The particular experiences discovered when exploring FWDs' fears increases the understanding of the interaction between this community and the rest of the educational community, the resources they can rely on and those still missing. Thus, the theme of social isolation covers another important aspect of campus life and—once again— participants responses enhanced the understanding of some of the daily life complexities of handling disability in an unwelcoming able-bodied arena. Though in every section of this thesis it is possible to find strengths and positive aspects of FWD, the Coping Mechanism sections presented some of the ingenious and creative ways this group has created to blend in and thrive in their working environment.

The act of interviewing the participants illuminated the magnitude of the need to further explore this topic. At the end of the interviews, all participants were grateful for this research and emphasized the need to continue delving deeper into the issue and finding more representatives to share their stories. There is a strong urgency to give voice via serious and trustworthy research to this underrepresented population.

The intersection between participant's private and professional experiences was palpable in their narratives. They have faced discrimination, fear, biases, and isolation in both realms, several times throughout their lives. Consequently, any endeavor to bring awareness on the needs of this population should not limit itself to educational settings but must seek to be all-encompassing and far reaching.

Limitations and Implications

Methodological Limitations

The qualitative nature of this study design called for a relatively small sample. Consequently, due to the characteristics of this community and the focus on just one university campus the number of participants reached was small. Creswell (1998) recommends for phenomenological a range of 5 to 25 participants. Therefore, the sample is small but acceptable. The snowball sampling recruitment process limited the diversity of the sample. Thus, the lack of diversity and the small sample size reduce the generalizability of the study findings to the population that participated in the study.

As the data analysis of this qualitative process mainly relies on the life experiences and worldview of the researcher, several attempts were made to reduce researcher bias when creating and operationalizing themes. The results are limited by geographical, cultural, and personal experiences shared among the research team. The same limitations apply to the faculty with disabilities interviewed for the study. Moreover, the symbolic connotations attached by participants as well as their emotional responses could have influenced the way the researchers interpreted the data. A mixed-methods design could produce findings that are more generalizable.

Three other professionals participated in the coding to improve reliability of the developed themes. To enhance reliability even more, it would be necessary to recruit professionals from outside the study to add a more objective view of the interview scripts and a more diverse perspective on the theme creation process.

Implications for Future Research

To support the findings more robustly, future research should consider a larger sample size and include a more diverse group of participants. A mixed-methods study design which

includes statistical survey information interwoven with personal narrative would also strengthen the results. This study could also be replicated on other campuses with a different demographic to discover whether the results of this study are supported or not. There are cultural differences in contexts, meaning and symbols related to faculty with disabilities across the United States. Replication in different colleges could shed light on how these differences affect results, and consequently the experiences of this community. Another aspect to explore in future studies is how a specific disability molds the academic experiences. This study explored 5 different participants' narratives with different disabilities. It is possible that people with the other disabilities share different stories and provide completely different results.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Advocacy. Considering the findings of this study from an MLSC perspective, it is crucial to create interventions that help shift the current able-bodied social paradigm to one that integrates people with disability as valuable and recognized members of society. Particularly in higher education, universities should aim at expecting disability, i.e. incorporate this community as part of the diverse campus this field has been trying to embrace. On one hand, the social change perspective challenges social workers to consider issues of power and oppression so as to create processes that bring about social change and equality. This community needs the passion and drive of the higher education community to further their cause and spread the impact of those individuals who are already advocating for change and providing their voices to similar studies to this one. On the other hand, from a symbolic interactionism perspective, agents from our field need to consider the meanings ascribed to disabilities, productivity, diversity, and inclusion of faculty with disabilities so as to educate university administrators in the changes that are necessary for the creation of safe spaces for this neglected community. Some of these

endeavors might include: the inclusion of specific wording on recruitment material that include disability as part of diversity—not targeting disability but recognizing it; the creation of disability resource groups that provide a sense of belonging, guide, and support for faculty with disabilities; the implementation of educational workshops on disability issues for staff and other faculty members on campus; among others.

Education. As shown by the literature review, the theoretical framework, and the findings of this study, FWD needs stronger research and exploration across the spectrum of higher education. In the case of Social Work curriculums across the country—both at the bachelor's and master's level—include sections on diversity. However, according to Matich-Maroney, Bogenschutz, & Ogden (2019), disability related content in social work programs is either limited or nonexistent. Consequently, in order to provide adequate support to this community, it is crucial to incorporate this topic into curriculums across the nation. This will raise more awareness on the strengths and needs of this population and will allow social workers to be better equipped to create relevant and positive practices, interventions, and advocacy programs to advance social justice for the biggest minority population in the US.

Finally, it is important for social work professionals and students to have common language and terminology that respects the idiosyncrasy of people with disabilities. Therefore, disability content education should strive to use common language in order to promote greater confidence and trust. Finally, all curricular endeavors should aim at educating social workers on the skills to confront organizational and social barriers that may prevent people with disabilities from enjoying their rightful place in society.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interviews Questionnaire

1) Demographics

    a) Gender

    b) Age

    c) Race

    d) Degree

    e) Position

    f) School

    g) Location

    h) Disability

2) How did you find your current position? Did anything in the job posting or description lead you to believe they were actively recruiting faculty with disabilities?

3) Why did you seek this position, specifically with THIS college or university? Did you decision have anything to do with the support system for people with disabilities?

4) Can you share previous work/interview experiences? Where they equally positive/negative? How?

5) When and how did you disclose your disability to your university, college, or department? What was that like? (This last question is too vague. Can you clarify?)

6) Do you think recruiters should actively recruit people with disabilities to this vocation? Why or why not?

7) What can recruiters include in job postings to make it clear they are seeking diverse faculty, specifically those with disabilities?

8) Can you suggest any improvements departments/programs can make to retain faculty with

disabilities?

Appendix B

Use of Self

Qualitative studies are often motivated by personal experience or previously observed phenomena. This project was based on the latter. I am an able-bodied person; with all the privileges and limitations this brings about. I was first exposed to disabilities when I was nine years old. My brother's mother-in-law had polio and, when she came into our lives, she introduced us to the world of living with a disability. Not only this, but she was also very involved in advocacy projects and community endeavors to raise awareness on the strengths of the population with disabilities together with the creation of opportunities for their integration in different aspects of society. At the time, Argentina struggled to integrate people with disabilities. In the last few years, a lot of advances were achieved, very similar to what happens in the United States, there are still a lot of accomplishments to pursue.

In my final year of training as a clinical psychologist, I joined an internship in a mental institution. Most of my patients were chronically mentally ill who had spent—and would spend even more—years in the institution. My stay lasted three years, six months as an intern and the rest as a volunteer. I have since worked extensively with patients with invisible disabilities, and here was born my interest for this population: their virtues, achievements, shortcomings, and challenges. In this way, I felt that the use of my own self in this study allowed me to bring a unique perspective to this field of research, while it granted me the chance to develop a rich, meaningful experience for myself as well.

This experience has broadened my understanding and knowledge of people with disabilities. My means of research, reading, and personal connection I have become immersed in the fascinating world of living with a disability. I became more empathetic toward this community's unrelenting strength and passion as well as their struggles and challenges.

Engaging in meaningful qualitative research implies a personal journey, and in my case, I

emerged stronger, wiser, and with a sense of compassion and gratitude I had not experienced

before.

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS.

To:	Kelly Elizabeth Dundon
From:	Douglas James Adams, Chair
	IRB Committee
Date:	10/07/2019
Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Action Date:	10/04/2019
Protocol #:	1906203233A001
Study Title:	An Exploration of the Experiences of Faculty with Disabilities in University Programs
Expiration Date:	07/21/2020
Last Approval Date:	10/04/2019

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Gonzalo Camp, Investigator
        Kim Stauss, Investigator