Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0087

Tue 07 Dec 2021

15:00 - 15:20

Not Visible but Exposed: The Lived Experience of Disabled Academics

Gayle Brewer[1]

[1]*University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: Disabled academics are at risk of marginalization and discrimination. Relatively few studies have, however, considered the experiences of disabled faculty. For the present study, interviews were conducted with ten female academics. All academics self-disclosed long-term energy limiting conditions or conditions that impact on cognitive function. Such conditions are particularly inconsistent with the current neoliberal ideology that privileges long working hours and performativity and are not easily addressed by institutional policy or accommodations.

Academics discussed the impact of their condition, disclosure experience, coping strategies, and the consequences of COVID-19. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis identified six themes: Identity and the Concept of Disability; Dependence and Vulnerability; Legitimacy, Convention, and Conformity; Workload, Intensification, and Marketisation; Insecurity, Competition, and Comparison; and Perceptions, Othering, and Isolation. A number of recommendations are made directed at individuals, institutions, and policy makers in order to reduce stigma and address academic ableism.

Paper: In the neoliberal academic environment, the 'ideal academic' is expected to work long hours and dedicate themselves to their academic career. Though the gendered nature of the 'ideal academic' is well-established, there is relatively little discussion of this ideal in the context of other protected characteristics such as disability. Indeed, research focusing on disability in academia typically focuses on disabled students, with little consideration of disabled faculty who are often marginalized and poorly accommodated. For the present study, ten female academics were interviewed. All academics reported a long-term condition that impacted on their energy levels or cognitive function (e.g., arthritis, depression, multiple sclerosis). These conditions may be especially inconsistent with the neoliberal academic culture, are not easily addressed by institutional accommodations, and are less likely to be visible raising additional issues such as whether to disclose.

Academics were employed at British Higher Education Institutions, though institution type (e.g., Russell Group or pre-92), role (e.g., Professor, Lecturer) and subject discipline (e.g., STEM, social

sciences) varied. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted online via the Zoom platform. Average length of interview was 55 minutes, ranging from 45 minutes to 69 minutes. Academics discussed the impact of their condition, disclosure experience, and coping strategies. The consequences of COVID-19 were also discussed. For example "*I know, people are talking about going back and whatever. But I'm like, I just don't want to have to go back to what it was, I want the flexibility, I want to be able to say, you know, come in for a day or two days a week or, you know, whatever suits. On that side, I really wish we would have gotten there, though, without the pandemic. I don't know why it took this, you know, I mean, the disabled community has been talking about this for ages, like why can't there be more flexibility and more adapting*".

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith 1996) was employed to analyse the interviews and six themes were identified. *Identity and the Concept of Disability* indicated that academics are often reluctant to describe themselves as disabled, with important consequences for the reporting and disclosure process. For example, "*I do have imposter syndrome, about saying I'm disabled. Because it's like this idea of I'm not disabled enough*". *Dependence and Vulnerability* highlighted a lack of institutional support and frequent dependence on individual Managers for access to appropriate accommodations. For example, "*Occupational Health have been excellent, but it's down to the management team in our school to decide whether or not the reasonable adjustments that Occupational Health have recommended, are acceptable*".

Legitimacy, Convention, and Conformity described the 'hierarchy' of health conditions that influences the acceptability of specific health issues, the importance of diagnosis, and the privileging of specific forms of academic practice that may disadvantage those with disabilities. For example, "*It's like people who are depressed but haven't been clinically diagnosed with depression aren't good enough, like they've not been good enough at being depressed yet*". *Workload, Intensification, and Marketisation* focused on excessive academic workloads, the intensification of academic work, and the impact of this on academic health and well-being. For example, "*I think the reason things came to a head and I had to take sick leave was because there was no longer enough slack in my schedule that I could wake up one morning and go, 'okay, today's a write off.' Um and I needed that. And I still do*".

Insecurity, Competition, and Comparison highlighted the precarious and competitive nature of academic posts and the impact of this (e.g., well-being, willingness to disclose), particularly when disabled academics are compared to those without disabilities. For example, "*It's not like a regular job is where it's like 'oh well I've signed the contract' and that's it and I'm here now. It's like you're constantly fighting for your position*". *Perception, Othering, and Isolation* described a lack of understanding of energy limiting conditions or those that impact on cognitive function and the extent to which the actions of individual colleagues were exacerbated by ableist policies and practice. For example, "*It was just a thoroughly miserable, incredibly isolating place to be*". Leininger's (1994) six criteria (credibility, confirmability, meaning in context, recurrent patterning, saturation, and transferability) were applied to evaluate research quality. Findings are discussed with reference to existing education and disability-oriented literature and specific recommendations for education practice and policy are made in response to each theme. These issues will be discussed further in a forthcoming book entitled '*Disability in Higher Education: Investigating Identity, Stigma, and Disclosure Amongst Academics*'.

References: