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Cripping kindness and care: A disability perspective on building a compassionate and collegiate higher education sector

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Abstract

This presentation, created by two disabled academics, describes our research into the role of compassion as a means of tackling taken-for-granted ableist practices of the academy. We present research data from a series of creative arts workshops with disabled people and non-disabled allies. At these workshops, we shared our mutual and potentially difficult experiences of academic ableism through the creation of artefacts, and supported each other's vulnerability through collective compassion. Findings revealed participants' experiences of encountering potentially myriad barriers within universities, which at times, led them to question their role and place within the sector. However, participants also discussed how being understood and receiving supportive acts by individuals who shared their experiences provided an important and welcome space for care and relief. We conclude our presentation by highlighting the importance of promoting compassionate norms as a mechanism for addressing ableism and encouraging an inclusive higher education sector.

Full paper

Research highlighting the exclusionary nature of academia is well known. Concerning the exclusion of disabled students and staff in particular, extant research consistently highlights how 'academic ableism' is endemic within the sector (Brown, 2021; Dolmage, 2017). This academic ableism refers to the overt valuing of the 'able-body' and 'able-mind' by the academy, and the subsequent devaluing of bodies that do not fit this ideology, including but not limited to, disabled people (Dolmage, 2017). Normative higher education practices afford privileges to being 'able-bodied' and 'able-minded' to such an extent that these advantages become invisible. Examples of the design of university buildings, the times and place of lectures, or methods of assessment, while seemingly insignificant in isolation, together evidence an entrenched academic culture in which only select (non-disabled) individuals are desirable (Taylor & Shallish, 2019).

In this conference paper, we challenge taken-for-granted ableist assumptions of normativity within higher education using insights from 'crip' theory and 'cripistemology' (Johnson & McRuer, 2014; McRuer, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2014). These ideals focus on reclaiming the value of disabled people's bodies and contributions through exposing and destabilising how academic structures act to define and cement increasingly unrealistic expectations of 'normal' working and studying: norms in which bodies not deemed 'able' are eradicated (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). We contest these ableist norms through providing an alternative way of thinking about the higher education sector, whereby practices of collegiate kindness, compassion, and care are placed at the fore. While such terms are difficult to define, within a higher education context, definitions typically emphasise the importance of understanding the needs and potential suffering of others within the academy, as well as a sense of duty to act to alleviate such suffering (e.g., Andrew et al., 2023). Our previous research in this field (Parfitt et al., 2021) highlights how compassion can provide an important lifeline in supporting disabled people and allies through the potentially harsh landscape of higher education.

This conference paper shares ongoing research exploring the experiences of disabled people and allies as they navigate ableist practices of the higher education sector, through the lens of compassion. In particular, we share the coming together of disabled staff and non-disabled allies, all with a collective interest in disability representation within academia, for focus group-style 'creative play' workshops. At the workshops, participants were provided with a range of creative arts/malleable materials, such as pens, pencils, and plasticine, and asked to create an artefact(s) that reflected their personal, and potentially emotive and raw, experiences and insights of navigating academia. Participants were also asked to share the subjective meaning of their created artefact, and to invite compassionate discussion from others in the workshops about how they perceive these pieces. The intention behind inviting subjective perspectives of others was to collectively introduce and hold a safe space where the potential suffering of participants could be alleviated through the shared understanding, knowledge, and vulnerability of the groups. Through the mutual sharing of, and listening to, participants' artefacts and experiences of higher education, the groups discussed their ideas for positive change within the sector. The authors of this paper, as disabled academics, fulfilled dual roles as facilitators and participants.

Findings reveal participants' awareness of how 'relentless' ableist practices permeate the higher education sector in numerous ways, including buildings being inaccessible and lack of provision of reasonable adjustments, coupled with increasing demands on improving

the student experience while simultaneously being expected to publish and bring in research income. Indeed, select individuals in the workshops reported experiencing disabling barriers potentially multiple times a day, which subsequently led to them questioning whether a university career is for them. However, participants also expressed the importance of being able to share their vulnerabilities and concerns in a trusted space of like-minded others, where their experiences could be understood without question, and where they could receive compassionate support and solutions. Through this compassionate sharing, participants expressed a desire for universities to learn from the cripistemological insights and wisdom of disabled people in terms of designing an inclusive academic sector that is fit for purpose, and which values diversity and differing forms of working. Such insights and wisdom allow for the entrenched ableist structures that disable all bodies, whether they be disabled or not, to be made visible and challenged in ways through compassion. Said differently, taken-for-granted academic practices whereby vulnerability, compassion, and care are viewed as 'undesirable', can instead be encouraged as positive and valued, and in turn, provide an alternative academy which is supportive and inclusive for students and staff alike.