

ABLEISM IN ACADEMIA

January 2021



WELCOME TO THE MONTHLY NGSO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION NEWSLETTER

Each month a newsletter on a different topic addressing inclusivity in STEM and Higher Education will be circulating via the NGSO Diversity and Inclusion Committee. We invite you to open yourself and your mind to new educational opportunities and perspectives.

ABLEISM IS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As academics, there are few things we love more than some solid peer-reviewed literature. The first section of each month's newsletter will feature literature analyzing the month's topic. This month the focus is on **ableism**.

[Transformative anti-ableist pedagogy for social justice: Charting a critical agenda for inclusive education](#)

Dr. Dušana Podlucká, PhD

“Higher education institutions are legally bound to provide equal educational opportunities for diverse learners, traditionally materialized as individualized accommodations. This paper contends that despite the growing interest and scholarship in implementing more inclusive pedagogy enabling access to education for all students (e.g. Universal Design for Learning), those efforts still fall short of systematically addressing intersecting, oppressive, and anti-ableist practices in the classroom. I argue that in order to develop a truly inclusive, equitable, socially just and transformative pedagogy, we need a theory that frames disability in the context of learning and development in a manner that overcomes dichotomized and reductionist perspectives of disability and individualistic notions of learning. Drawing on

my research on the dis/abling impact of teaching and institutional practices for a community college student diagnosed with autism, analyzed through the lens of Critical Disability Studies in conjunction with Vygotsky's theory of defectology and recent advances in cultural-historical activity theory, especially the Transformative Activist Stance (Stetsenko, 2016), this paper offers steps toward integrating these approaches into a transformative pedagogy framework for inclusive, equitable, and anti-ableist pedagogy for all learners.”

[The Access and Equity for Students with Disabilities \(SWD\) in STEM Higher Education](#)

Dr. Sherli Koshy Chenthittayil and Nikeetha Dsouza

“A diverse student body is one that includes students with disabilities (SWDs). A lack of institutional support often marginalizes SWDs from actively participating in the STEM community thus removing a large talent pool from the STEM field. Currently there are several reactive higher education policies that begin to support SWD, and therefore not effective in fully supporting SWD. Mostly accommodations are provided to SWD on request. These accommodations are limited modifications that often do not prioritize the student. By making higher education more proactive and empathetic to SWD, we can truly make the student body diverse.”

[Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?](#)

Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh

“Recent coverage in higher education newspapers and social media platforms implies that chronic conditions, illnesses and disabilities are becoming more prominent amongst academics. Changes to funding structures, increased globalisation, marketisation and bureaucratisation of higher education have resulted in a performance-driven working environment where teaching workload and pressures to publish are further intensified due to excellence exercises in teaching and research. The result is low morale and an ever-rising number of reported mental health issues, burnout and stress-related illnesses within academia. This article explores some of these issues in the context of higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. We draw on our research and our experiences as speakers regarding ableism in academia to provide food for thought, stimulate a debate and raise awareness of those academics experiencing chronic illness, disability or neurodiversity, whose voices are not heard.”

MORE READING

In addition to peer reviewed papers, there are some great resources to be found in the form of think pieces, blog posts, and online reports.

["Textbook case" of disability discrimination in grant applications](#)

Jon Brock; nature index

[The COVID-safe university is an opportunity to end the default ableism of academia](#)

Dr. Stuart Read, Dr. Anne Parfitt, and Dr. Tanvir Bush; LSE Impact Blog

[STEM Climate for Students with Disabilities](#)

Rachel Friedensen; Higher Education Today, an American Council on Education blog

ANECDOTES

In this section, both established academics as well as trainees will share stories of their experiences with ableism during their studies/careers. All identifying information has been removed as many accounts come from Graduate Students and Postdocs who currently attend The Ohio State University across many departments. Identifiable information will only be kept in tact in future months if the anecdote is taken from the internet (a.k.a Science Twitter/Academic Twitter).

“I TA’ed a course, which is required for my degree, and the professor casually stated in a Zoom conversation they believed that students utilizing disability accommodations cheat on tests. They did not know that I am disabled and registered to use said services. After that comment, we discussed some example exam questions and one pertained to how the peaks of action potentials do not usually change, “unless there is some horrible neuronal disease.” My disability is neuronal. After we signed off, I felt numb and exhausted from keeping a straight face and calm exterior. Experiences such as this are why I usually do not seek additional services provided by disability centers. Able-bodied people assume you are taking the easy way out and look down on you. I now refuse accommodations at the risk of my own physical and mental wellbeing, so I do not wear myself down defending my needs to every able-bodied person that acts as though my illness is an inconvenience to them.”

“I took a genetics course at my undergraduate institution and told the professor I wanted to do my (required) presentation on a genetic disease that has impacted my family. When I revealed I wanted to research that disease for my

career, the professor complained about how he had worked with a scientist in a similar circumstance and dubbed them a “bad scientist.” He claimed that when there are personal ties to what you are investigating, you are biased and will always try to cure the disease with whatever aspect of it you are studying, ultimately “wasting everyone’s time.” My ears started ringing sometime during his rant. Mentors and colleagues had always encouraged me on this journey, but one person’s condemnation illegitimized what I have been working towards. I am judged before I can prove myself, which is a persistent theme in my graduate experience as well.”

“One graduate level course detailed reconstruction and rehab after surgery and I pointed out an issue in the presented methodology. I explained I had personally experienced this process to establish credibility. The following discussion amongst the class ran long and the professor made to transition us back to their lesson by saying “this wasn’t the time to discuss our own personal injuries.” That statement felt belittling and invalidating, as though I was an uneducated patient that did not know what I was talking about (I later verified my original correction to the methodology).”

“I struggled with academics for a while and everyone had their own explanation as to why, which included a set of limitations for myself. My doctor diagnosed me with ADD and it was validating; ADD explained why I would get distracted so easily and revealed I was not as limited as everyone previously informed me. I confided in my PI that I had ADD in one of our meetings and I regret it. They frequently brought up how my ADD made their job harder because they would have to work on my organization (I was organized, just not their version of organized) and I would not make it far in my career. Their condemnation negated my intelligence and work ethic, making me believe that graduate school was hard because I was not good enough to be here, and not that graduate school is just hard.”

“The most disheartening aspect of graduate school are the ingrained expectations that the hardest working and most accomplished people work 60-80 hours a week and my body physically cannot do that. It’s hard when other people see that I’m not putting in those hours and I can also see that I’m not putting in those hours, and I feel myself not meeting expectations and like I’m not succeeding. If I were to try to work those hours, I would get super sick because my body needs rest. I think it’s these ableist expectations in academia that people don’t realize are hard for disabled people to contend with. Many of my online friends who have disabilities left academia, and I get it.”

“There was a group project involving animal care in one of my courses. I notified the professor and group members that I have an “invisible” disability that causes unpredictable, unavoidable absences that could affect my ability to participate in the actual animal care. The professor instructed me to disclose what my exact disability is to the group. After the project was completed, I received the lowest grade in the group. I went to the professor to dispute my grade and he said the other group members had informed them that they saw me up and about on campus on days I called out sick (I lived on campus and needed to go to the cafeterias to eat) or I had been partying (I never went to a single party). Not only did I go out to the animals extra times to make up for when I missed my shifts, I also wrote the majority of the final paper and did all of the editing. Because I have a disability people cannot see but am still “high-functioning,” people assume that I am faking it and have even gone so far as to undermine its validity.”

“In my experience, there are a lot of professors out there who do not understand mental illness and how it affects different people in different ways. For context: I was having mental health problems before this incident occurred, but my sophomore year of undergrad I was hit by a car. I sustained a minor concussion, which healed quickly, but worsened my anxiety and depression. About 9 months later, I took a computer class, where I gave my professor a statement from the disability resource office at my university stating that I have a disability that allows me to take extra time on tests and push

back deadlines when necessary. This professor refused to understand my situation, piled a ton of work onto the entire class, berated all of us for doing a horrible job of keeping up — even though this was a recurring problem across all sections of the class — and when I asked for an extension, their response was “it’s not that hard, buck up, buttercup; my partner is a therapist, so I know what you’re going through.” This response, regardless of the situation, was the type of response I received in every other course I took through the end of my undergraduate career and is continuing post-graduation at this institution.”

“Academia has always been an uphill battle for me. I was never officially diagnosed until last year with ADHD, so all this time my “disorder” never had a name. One professor called it a mental lapse when I could not function during exams and other high stress situations. I almost gave up science in college because of complications with my mental illness, but a mentor encouraged me to continue and stated my brain “just works differently.” He knew I understood the material, but my test was riddled with “careless” mistakes. This trend continued throughout my masters and PhD programs. As a postdoc, there is even more pressure that leads to more mistakes and my PI is unforgiving. They have accused me of being lazy, not knowing the material, etc. even though they know my diagnosis.”

INTERSECTIONALITY

It is paramount to recognize no form of negative discrimination exists in a vacuum. There are intimate ties between all topics that will be covered in this newsletter, and this last section is a space to tie things together. As each new topic is introduced throughout the year, we will be discussing the ways they inform one another. Since this is the first month, this section will kick off with a quick introduction to some important concepts and terminology that will be used moving forward.

Intersectionality. Established by lawyer/professor of critical race theory, constitutional law, and gender studies at UCLA Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw the theory of intersectionality is “a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face ([YW Boston Blog](#)).” In 2020 Dr. Crenshaw has commented on the modern utilization of intersectionality, “These days, I start with what it’s not, because there has been distortion. It’s not identity politics on steroids. It is not a mechanism to turn white men into the new pariahs. It’s basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts. ([TIME](#)).”

The Other/ “Otherness”. “...the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us,” the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (“Them,” Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination ([Staszak 2008](#)).”

Double Consciousness. “...a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets. As a theoretical tool, “double consciousness” reveals the psycho-social divisions in American society and allows for a full understanding of those divisions. Du Bois’ focus on the specificity of black experience allows for challenging injustice in national and world systems.

The term was first used in an Atlantic Monthly article titled “Strivings of the Negro People” in 1897. It was later republished with minor edits under the title “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois describes “double consciousness” as follows: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize

America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face" ([UMass Library](#))"

Equity. "The difference between equality and equity must be emphasised. Although both promote fairness, equality achieves this through treating everyone the same regardless of need, while equity achieves this through treating people differently dependent on need. ([Social Change UK](#))"

CONTACT US

If you have any feedback, suggestions for topics, or anecdotes to submit in the future please feel free to contact some point people with NGSO. Also feel free to reach out and find out how you can get involved with future Diversity and Inclusion initiatives with NGSO.

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