Silenced and Invisible:
Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Researchers examined stigma attached to people with disabilities, focusing specifically on stigma regarding individuals with intellectual disabilities. The study involved focus groups with undergraduate college students in a major South Florida University, who did not self-identify as having any disabilities. We performed content analysis to understand perceptions and presumptions towards individuals with intellectual disabilities on campus. Our study addresses the question of how universities could act as a point of social justice. Our specific goal is to help reduce stigma towards individuals with intellectual and other disabilities to promote inclusion and integration to advance broader higher education and community equity goals.

Keywords: stigma, disabilities, diversity, communication, integration, higher education, muted group theory

Introduction

In this study, researchers examined stigma attached to people with intellectual and other disabilities on a university campus. Our study contributes to literature by offering an approach from the communication discipline. Communication is a process enacted and constructed through social interactions and intimately related to how we use stigmatized language to influence perceptions and representations of "the Other", perpetuating marginalization on university campuses. Our communication focus comes from the need to address the question of how the university could help advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice regarding people with intellectual and other disabilities.

People with disabilities have faced rejection and stigma throughout history, with their disabilities sometimes being associated with ignorance, negligence, or inferiority for past deeds (Corrigan, 2014; Eddey & Robey, 2005). Stigma is perpetuated through words and actions. Through the use of language, we cultivate ideas, influence perception building, and empower notions of discrimination, stereotyping, and stigma, which contribute to the shaping of social identity of "the Other" (Smith, 2007). In other words,

through language we communicate representations of "the Other." Thus, the links between language and stigma as well as between stigma and prejudice have been clearly established (Smith et al., 2019).

When stigma messages are consistently communicated, they become social facts which operate at various social levels and powerfully impact people's beliefs and actions (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015; Smith et al., 2019). Stigma messages evoke negative emotions which generate possible negative reactions against the stigmatized group due to the fact that these members (in this case, individuals with disabilities) are portrayed as having lower intelligence, being unproductive, and isolated. This representation increases in-group identification and bonding among the non-stigmatized members (Heath et al., 2001; Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Lawler et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2019) and differentiates members from the out-group, or the stigmatized individuals. In turn, the members of the stigmatized group are designated as a social group and are assigned a social label. Consequently, they are devalued, discredited, and shamed by the dominant group, leading to adverse life consequences (Goffman, 1963). Goffman discusses how individuals who carry stigmas might avoid socializing to conceal

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their condition to avoid marginalization and stereotyping (Goffman, 1963; Link, & Phelan, 2006). For individuals with disabilities, these social beliefs are also detrimentally impactful at a public level, resulting in poor promotion of public policies, limited support, and reduction of funding (Corrigan et al., 2014; Smith, 2007 & 2011).

Goffman's Notion of Stigma and Communication

Stigma is a social notion, which creates othering. As Goffman (1963) proposed, stigma marginalizes and dehumanizes an individual or a group of people as a result of certain labels, and their negative connotations, assigned to them through a social process. This social process establishes social expectations of "the normal and the different" (Clair et al., 2016; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). Individuals, who do not fit into the description of "normal" for any reason, are marked with a stigmatized label and are under-privileged within the society. This marginalization occurs for various reasons, such as minorities of nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender or sexual identities, or, as in the case of this paper, people with intellectual disabilities. Research demonstrates that constant marginalization leaves people with intellectual disabilities feeling excluded to the point of being invisible within society, not respected, not heard, and isolated (Clair et al., 2016; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). The isolation of individuals with disabilities only feeds back into the notion that a person with disabilities cannot be functional to society. Thus, stigma of negative social representation leads to isolation, and this isolation perpetuates the stigma, making this a cycle of marginalization.

Othering and Belonging

Othering is a consequence of establishing boundaries of a social group (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Avant-Mier, 2017). These boundaries are determined by identifying group members and outsiders. Hence, forming a group identity is accompanied by the idea of those who differ from the group itself; or simply put, each group determines who belongs within its boundaries and who the other is. However, othering coupled with social power is a process of marginalizing groups of people because of certain labels assigned to them. Othering entails exclusion of marginalized people from resources, opportunities, and socialization. As Jensen (2011) explains, othering is establishing an "us vs them" situation and marking the other as inferior. Thus, othering involves power. Those who have power within the social contract assign roles of the inferior. Those who are marginalized and othered either withdraw or fight to fit in.

To minimize the potential for being othered, some South Asian women attempted to diminish outward actions and appearances by trying to "fit in." They claimed that South Asian women should make more or an effort to fit into the mainstream health system, suggesting, for example, that it was important to learn to "be quiet" in childbirth, not demand too much. (Johnson et al., 2014, p.264).

Johnson (2014) demonstrates the lengths some members of vulnerable groups can go to be seen as "fitting in" and to be accepted and included, or to be "one of the normal." Being othered renders the marginalized persons invisible and silenced or reduces them to a single label and encapsulates them within borders of stigma. This single label may even signal positive connotations, such as being likable, exotic, or beautiful (Marzorati, 2013); yet, in the end, even the positive-sounding labels highlight the foreignness of the other.

People with intellectual disabilities, such as autism, are othered and have to live with a stigma attached to this one identity they carry. Parsloe (2015) discusses that stigma around autism depicts people living with it as either "broken people that need to be fixed" (p. 339) or the superhero who is overcoming an unthinkable challenge. Either way, the person with autism becomes the other to the point of being completely "alien" (p. 339). Thus, people with intellectual disabilities, such as those with autism, live with constant stigma and othering.

Muted Group Theory and Students with Disabilities

Muted Group Theory (MGT) is an academic term whose name may evoke ableist connotations; however, the theory itself does not have any ableist origins. The term was coined by Shirley Ardener in the 1970s to explain how women were socially muted/silenced in societies dominated by males, resulting in social and public discourses primarily constructed and dictated by males to which women must follow (Ardener, 2005; Barkman, 2018; Cubbage, 2017; Martorana, 2018; Meares, 2017; Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Later, the theory was employed to study the dynamics of other marginalized groups. For example, communication studies embraced MGT to study the intersections of culture, power, and communication as it explains the communication dynamics of social groups that are traditionally muted, specifically referring to the dynamics between the powerful or dominant and the marginalized or sub-dominant (Barkman, 2018; Cubbage, 2017; Martorana, 2018; Meares, 2017; Razzante & Orbe, 2018). Basically, MGT explains how marginalized groups have been silenced or muted as they have to adjust to dominant groups' ways of com-

munication because they are perceived and considered less respected, accepted, and unrecognized.

Cubbage (2017) applied MGT to study the dynamics between the dominant group in academia and individuals with disabilities, as these persons have to adjust and adapt to the communication rules of dominant groups to navigate in society and to communicate their needs for accommodation. Cubbage found that there is a need for university administrators to pay closer attention to the social and physical barriers that students with disabilities encounter on campus. Furthermore, there is a need to examine how the dominant group of able-bodied individuals establish and perpetuate these barriers and limitations that students with disabilities encounter.

For instance, Underhill et al. (2019) explored how the negative perception of students with intellectual disabilities, specifically students with autism, increases within the classroom. While the dominant group of non-disabled students may be comfortable sharing the overall campus space with students with intellectual disabilities, their comfort level decreases when it comes to sharing the classroom space and experience. Thus, there is a need for incorporating open, interactive, and inclusive communication in the classroom setting, the responsibility for which Underhill argues rests with the dominant student group. According to Underhill, "Peers need to learn how stigma communication isolates and stereotypes their atypical peers" (p.177); they then must lead the way to ensure a more inclusive experience for students with disabilities.

The present study aims to build on this idea to examine the role of the universities in the preparation of students as agents of change, which can ultimately contribute to inclusivity of students with disabilities. We ask the following research questions to determine the specific on-campus opportunities to improve integration and stigma reduction, and to determine specific university roles needed to generate these opportunities:

- How are students with intellectual and other disabilities perceived on the university campus by students without disability identification?
- Based on participants' perceptions, what are the implications and inferences to promote inclusion and social justice in the classroom and beyond?

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a formative research study requested by a center that provides services for adults with developmental disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities (ID), and other neurodevelopmental disorders (OND). As part of this program, students with disabilities take college courses and receive job training. Program leaders wanted to assess the attitudes of college students regarding the integration of students with disabilities in their classrooms to guide a stigma reduction messaging campaign.

This research study employed qualitative methods to explore the accounts of experiences and perceptions regarding individuals with intellectual and other disabilities. Data mainly derived from college students' testimonies from those who participated in focus groups and self-identified as not having a disability.

Data collection

The study contained contributions from 59 undergraduate college students who participated in 4 focus groups. Each group meeting lasted over an hour, were audio recorded, and transcribed. These transcriptions provided the data needed for the study.

Participants were given numbers (to ensure anonymity for transcription and coding purposes) and stated their assigned numbers every time they spoke. There was a 10-question discussion guide used in each group. These questions helped facilitate a dialogue between participants and keep the focus on our research questions. Nonetheless, the discussions in each group resulted in rich conversations, which prompted follow-up questions at the facilitator's discretion. The researchers of the study acted as the facilitators of these focus groups. Data collection through focus groups provides in-depth group discussions, through which participants can examine selected topics with the guidance of a facilitator. Individual interviews allow for more in-depth exploration, but focus groups, if the topic is appropriate, can provide a space for participants to articulate their thoughts and experiences, while being inspired by each other (Gundumogula, 2020). According to Morgan (1997), "The amount that each participant has to contribute to the group is a major factor in decisions about group size. If the participants have a low level of involvement with the topic, it may be difficult to maintain an active discussion in a smaller group" (p. 44). Thus, our groups consisted of approximately 15 participants to ensure maximum involvement.

While establishing the group sizes, we considered participants' potential lack of direct experience with people with intellectual disabilities and/or reluctance to speak openly. We determined that a larger group would allow for more willingness to share and offer opinions because participants could be inspired by each other's examples. Similarly, a level of trust and comfort between participants is recom-

mended for richer discussions (Gundumogula, 2020); hence, we selected students who were attending a discussion-based class. Since the data collection was mid-semester, the participants had an established rapport and a level of trust amongst themselves. Facilitators made conscious attempts to ensure each participant contributed to the discussions.

Data analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis. Content analysis allows researchers to build connections between the collected data and the context in which the study was performed. Patton (2002) describes content analysis as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p. 453). Transcriptions of the focus group discussions provided the data for the study. Initially, we coded the data individually. Later, we cross-checked the codes for reliability and consistency. Once the codes were established, results were analyzed through inductive reasoning in order to build conclusions from collected data by weaving together the new information into theories (Bengtsson, 2016).

For coding and analysis, we followed Tesch's (1990) eight-step coding process: (1) read transcripts carefully; (2) pick one document and write thoughts on meaning in the margin; (3) make a list of topics and cluster similar topics; (4) take the list of topics, go back to data, abbreviate the topics as codes and assign codes to the appropriate segments of the data; (5) find descriptive wording for topics and turn them into categories; (6) identify abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes; (7) assemble data belonging to each category; and (8) recode existing data, if necessary (see also Creswell, 2014). Coding refers to the process "of marking segments of data with symbols, descriptive words, or category names" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 592) with the intent of assigning units of meaning to the inferential information collected in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once the transcriptions were coded, we let the themes or categories emerge. We identified more general emerging themes and search connections between themes (Seidman, 1998). This study examined two aspects of the participants' testimonies: (1) on-campus students without disability identification perceptions and experiences from and with people with disabilities; and (2) what are the implications and inferences to promote inclusion and social justice in the classroom and beyond. Thus, we started with these two aspects as the foundational themes. Once we coded the data through these themes, we followed Tesch's (1990) process for sub-themes within each category. By coding for repeated words, sentiments, and accounts, we established the subthemes.

Several qualitative reliability procedures were considered (Creswell, 2014), including member-checking of transcripts, writing memos about emerging themes and sub-themes, and constantly comparing them (i.e., continual assessment of data). O.Nyumba et al. (2017) assert that coding involves "recurring ideas and wider themes connecting the codes" (p. 24), and it is finalized when the ideas and themes are repeated without yielding new aspects. Our coding ended when repeated themes were clarified and cross-checking did not reveal any new themes. This process resulted in four distinct themes, described below.

Analysis and Results

The study was designed to address the following questions: (1) How are students with intellectual and other disabilities perceived on the university campus by students without disability identification? and (2) What are the implications and inferences to promote inclusion and social justice in the classroom and beyond? Specifically, the study addressed the relationship among communication and language, stigma, and perceptions of students with disabilities in higher education to advance social integration and stigma reduction.

The thematic data analysis resulted in four emergent themes that were interconnected and complemented each other, while providing depth to the covered topic on this study. Below are the key themes which will be expanded upon in the following section.

- Theme 1: Lack of knowledge as source of stigma
- Theme 2: Othering people with disabilities
- Theme 3: Tokenism and lack of integration
- Theme 4: Illusion of Inclusion for Self-Gratification

Theme 1: Lack of Knowledge as Source of Stigma

When we asked participants what sort of words or phrases they might use to describe people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, participants' descriptions included negatively charged labels and mostly connected to mental disorders, even though many of the addressed disabilities were physical. The following labels were repeatedly identified by a majority of participants: "Retarded, special person, handicapped or challenged, mentally declined, persons with mental issues, stupid, dumb, mentally challenged." These labels show a conflation of terms to identify persons with different intellectual disabilities.

Moreover, the connection between negative labels as a result of lack of education was a recurrent topic addressed by participants. The following quote accurately describes the lack of information about disabilities in the educational context: "I didn't know what autism was until after high school. There is no visibility for these people. Education/awareness about these disabilities should be done" (Participant 44). The following testimony summarizes the overall sentiment about how students with disabilities are perceived and seen within society:

Participant 49: I don't think I have had a negative experience, but it's just that you need to be very patient. I work as a cashier and dealing with a blind/deaf customer might require hand gestures or whatever. It takes a lot of patience. Most people with disabilities are usually very friendly in those situations so it's not a negative experience.

Participants attributed the source of negative perceptions to lack of education. This finding connects to a great deal of research (Goffman, 1963; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015; Smith et al., 2019), which shows that stigma messages lead to prejudice because when communicated, stigma messages become social facts powerfully impacting social perceptions and actions. Moreover, these negative perceptions are connected with how students recall interactions with students with disabilities. The participants almost unanimously talked about the fact that they "do not know how to treat students with disabilities" or they "do not know how to approach them or talk to them."

Participant 25: I think it's not always negative reactions. Sometimes you try to be of help to them... sometimes it's offensive to them because you are treating them differently, more care, more attention. I think it's almost as mean to them because you are treating them differently.

According to Goffman (1963), the use of negative labels generates possible negative reactions against the stigmatized group, and consequently, they are devalued, discredited, and shamed. Participant 21 summarizes lack of education as the source of the "fear of the different" and explains how this fear of the unknown creates anxiety among "able-bodied" individuals, resulting in the need to label "the different" as a way to take control of the unknown and avoid uncertainty. The following student testimony shows the connection between lack of education, use of stigmatized messages, and impact on social actions and perceptions:

I used to work with autistic kids in a class mixed with regular kids as an aftercare teacher. The regular kids would call the autistic kid creepy or weird or crazy because they didn't understand he was different...If you integrate them in a healthier way, then they would understand that. Stress or fear of the unknown...so they react negatively by calling them certain names or giving them a title and putting them in a certain category.

Participant 16 reinforces the urgency of awareness through education:

A lot of people are unaware of how to approach them or react, so they react negatively without even trying. The best thing is to create awareness about these disabilities and how to treat people that have them.

Another participant adds:

I think in general, children should be educated on how to deal with people with disabilities so that when they grow up, they know how to deal with different situations in social settings. I think education about disability is a missing link in our society (Participant 50).

This type of communication generates interpersonal dissociation from stigmatized people, generating more isolation of stigmatized groups (Goffman, 1963; Link, & Phelan, 2006; Smith, 2007, 2011). Participant 18 reveals that the lack of knowledge and education reinforces the presence of deeply rooted negative stigma around individuals with disabilities, which even results in a conscious isolation of the group in the educational environments: "Some people react to it like it's a disease, so they don't want to go near them, they feel like they will catch it." These social perceptions towards the stigmatized person or group of people create a social distinction or separation between the stigmatized member(s) and the other members of a society (Goffman, 1963). Participant 50 explains, "In my high school, students with special needs were integrated and took classes with us, some of my peers were scared and would run away and not want to interact with them." Whereas, when the general population is better informed about people with intellectual disabilities, integration is more possible. As Participant 46 states, "I think we need to educate people and make them understand that disabled people can contribute to society and become leaders even." Biased perspectives and practices weaken inclusive practices and advancement of eq-

uity. This link is explained by researchers (Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Young et al., 2019) who provide experimental evidence that shows how implicit and explicit education on bias and contact helps to reduce ableist practices and discrimination.

Theme 2: Othering People with Disabilities

Based on Goffman's work (1963), the notion of social stigma refers to the disapproval of a person or group of people because they are perceived as holding certain characteristics that do not fulfill social expectations. Consequently, the members from the stigmatized group are usually assigned a social label, resulting in devaluation, isolation, and prejudice (see also Hawley et al., 2014; Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Participants' statements disclose another separation or disassociation: individuals with disabilities are seen as objects. There seems to be an acknowledgement of the presence and existence of individuals with disabilities in society; however, it seems participants cannot relate to them. In other words, testimonies refer to students with disabilities as individuals who they cannot relate to, count as friends, and/or connect with in a meaningful way:

> Participant 31: Some people don't understand. They think of [people with intellectual disabilities] as not being people. They don't understand they have a different perception about the world. They don't understand the way we see them, so people tend to talk to them slowly and think they are stupid. I just think it's because they don't understand.

Another participant stated:

> If a child started screaming in class, we would think of getting [them] into a special program with a special teacher. The kid gets taken out, so the other kids are aware of the fact that the kid is different and that there is something wrong with [them] , and that is why [they] need to be taken out.

Goffman (1963) states that people are stigmatized when social expectations of them are greater than they actually present. This expectation is based on a judgment of social value and on what individual social identity should be; it is also informed by participants' testimonies that call attention to the existence of ableism due to certain U.S. cultural biases. As Bogart and Dunn (2019) state, "Ableism is stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities" (p. 651). Our participants professed both mindfulness of U.S. society's ableist bias and prejudice against people with disabilities.

For example, Participant 24 acknowledges the following:

> America has the idea of a superior man. This makes us feel conditioned so we have this idea about the people we hire or put in the workplace. It can create a bias towards everyone else that is not a superior man idea of America.

Participant 46 reinforces the urgency to widen perspectives by studying other countries' models of social integration of individuals with disabilities to construct real effective change:

> I think we need to look at other countries overseas and see how they treat [individuals with disabilities]. We have to come up with something nice and better than "disabled." Even here at the university, it has advanced but it's really slow. We need more involvement. Not just the state but the government.

The testimony of Participate 49 summarizes this necessity of integration among able-bodied individuals that embraces learning from and working with different international voices that can truly advance rights, policies, and justice: "I feel the U.S. is very prideful in their own ways of opening up to new ideas, but they need to consider adapting from other systems and see how it works that could help us."

Bogart and Dunn (2019) identify the connection between ableism and "othering." According to the researchers, institutions, cultural norms, perspectives, and ideas generate marginalization and therefore invisibility to "others" by acting and presuming able-bodiedness.

Theme 3: Lack of Integration

Furthering the aforementioned ableist bias and othering within U.S. society, participants testimonies show a condescending approach to disabilities and a tokenistic understanding of interacting with students with disabilities, furthering the antagonistic view of, "I try help but they do not want to be helped," or "I try to help but they get angry," and "I try to approach them but they do not want to integrate." For example, Participant 47 noted the following:

> Usually, you have to pay a lot more for schools for students with disabilities, when students without disabilities can go to public schools for free. One might argue that there is a ramp for disabled people everywhere you go, but I don't think that completely covers inclusiveness.

This comment is an example of tokenism recognized by the participant. Communication is of great importance in perpetuating or decreasing social stigma, since the idea of "the other" is established and perpetuated through communication itself (Goffman, 1963). Minimal acts of access, such as admitting a number of students with disabilities to an educational institution or putting up a ramp for easier physical access into a building, are addressed as symbolic gestures of inclusivity and equity. A sentiment of "we need to help or deal with them," "they generate problems," or "they are a burden" that needs to be resolved, reinforces the separation of able-bodied students and disable-bodied students while addressing the marginalized group as a problem that needs to be resolved for the common good of a "functional and healthy" society. These sentiments illustrate Goffman's (1963) articulation of communication's impact on stigma. This social process of establishing and perpetuating stigma is enacted and constructed through social interactions that require language.

Tokenism places people with disabilities on campus without real integration and forces a lack of visibility on campus and lack of real opportunities, such as jobs on campus or meaningful contact/communication with out-group individuals. Students who do not identify themselves as disabled seem to accept as a norm that students with disabilities will have to deal with a great number of obstacles and effort, as demonstrated in the following quote:

> We as college students have it difficult when looking for jobs, not to mention how much more difficult it would be for people with disabilities, even if they graduate from the best college. (Participant 35)

Another participant shares similar sentiments:

> I feel it depends on the person they are interacting with. If they have experience with disabled people, they understand the struggle they go through talking to people who don't understand them, so they try to interpret what they are saying or give information in a way they can interpret it (Participant 31)

And a third expands to include the role of relationships:

> I feel the problem is with the social and emotional level, when the kids are in the class, they have the option of developing relationships with their teachers and other students, but again, it's with people that are like them. They don't have the opportunity to be with "normal" people. (Participant 25)

These data support previous research regarding exclusion of people with disabilities. For instance, Goering (2015) articulates this notion in his work:

> For many people with disabilities, the main disadvantage they experience does not stem directly from their bodies, but rather from their unwelcome reception in the world, in terms of how physical structures, institutional norms, and social attitudes exclude and/or denigrate them. (p. 134)

Theme 4: Illusion of Inclusion for Self-Gratification

Another theme that emerged was the sentiment of self-congratulation or self-gratification as a result of the slightest interaction with anyone who may be perceived to have a disability. Chouinard (1997) refers to this notion as "paternalistic ableism" (p. 659), which emerges as, "I help them," "I do for them," or "I save them," highlighting the fact that there is nothing to learn from people with disabilities or nothing to connect with. In other words, interactions with people with disabilities are portrayed as merit actions. Participant 50 exemplifies this notion through their story, as follows:

> I work at [a place] and a girl came in and asked me, "Where are the Pepsis?" I did not realize she was legally blind until I saw her cane. So, instantly I had to help her. I told everyone to wait even though I had a long line. I helped her and it really warmed my heart. I felt like I had done a good deed because I helped her with her shopping.

Furthermore, this approach seems to reinforce a culture of tokenism that is beneficial for the able-bodied individuals to feel better: "I did it and I felt good." Testimony from Participant 54 exemplify this idea:

> In high school I did an internship. I had a patient relative who was blind, [and] I was asked to escort him downstairs to the cafeteria. I went with him and he had a very good awareness of the environment. I helped him with the purchase and I gave the receipt back to his wife. She thanked me.

Even more, participants' testimonies seem to romanticize the reality of individuals with disabilities, discrediting the need for action and social justice. Participant 41 testimony represents this common view, as follows:

> You think your life is so hard but you go and talk to these people whose lives are actually hard because people think less of them. They are always happy, cheerful with something to look forward to

and it makes you realize that sometimes you are being dramatic.

Most interestingly, all the testimonies from able-bodied participants disclose a disconnect between the participant and the experience, as if the participant has nothing to do with the reality they are describing. Participants revealed a positioning as an outsider, a "them versus us/me" understanding, which emerges as the following: "I use the correct terminology, others do not," "they use offensive language, I do not have a bias," "others do it, I don't," or "they say that, I do not."

According to Jun (2018), ableism is rooted as a system that implicitly and explicitly grants advantages for individuals without disabilities over individuals with disabilities or impairment. Almost all of the testimonies we heard exemplify this notion. When participants were talking about the general population and actions/reactions of people without intellectual disabilities, the language was seldom "we,"and instead it was "they." Thus, linguistically, participants were projecting a psychological distance between the behavior and themselves.

For example, talking about reasons for stigmatized language, Participant 51 expresses the following: "I think that happens because of ignorance, and not necessarily from a bad place but because they don't know how to treat them. I don't think it's people's fault (except the people who are out of line)... If we don't know how to do something, then we are going to do it wrong." This statement is an example of the participant taking a stance as an outsider or an observer of the undesired behavior.

Finally, this use of language seems to reveal a grounded implicit bias that, according to Goering (2015), is activated automatically without people being consciously aware and despite good intentions. Researchers examine implicit and explicit attitudes and bias as the standing poles of ableism and discrimination (e.g., Goering, 2015; Young et al., 2019). Thus, there is a need to develop educational strategies and contact aiming at explicit and implicit bias reduction intervention at institutional and personal levels.

Discussion

Before discussing our findings, we want to explicitly acknowledge that all research, advocacy, and stigma reduction efforts around people with disabilities should always include people with disabilities in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of findings. This research was conducted as part of formative research commissioned by a center that provides services for adults with developmental disabilities.

The goal was to assess the attitudes of college students regarding programming for and integration of students with disabilities to inform strategic communication campaigns and training programs aimed at college students. Therefore, students with disabilities were not the target study participants, but rather their non-disabled classroom peers. Complementary research should be conducted to assess how students with disabilities feel other students perceive them and treat them.

The results of this study demonstrate a presence of ableist privilege among the participants, without their conscious awareness of it. This lack of awareness is congruent with the research presented in the literature review that reports a lack of awareness and knowledge exacerbated by the lack of visibility and representation of people with disabilities in their daily lives (Chouinard, 1997; Jun, 2018). This privileged ignorance results in othering, tokenism, and illusion of action to support inclusion (Bogart & Dunn, 2019). While some of the themes identified in this study are not new (e.g., lack of knowledge, invisibility, othering), and relate mainly to ableist privilege, others are potentially new contributions to the discussion of people with disabilities in academic environments (e.g., third person effect or symbolic gestures to simulate inclusion), which point to messaging strategies for stigma reduction targeting people without disabilities.

The common thread that runs across the four themes presented in the results is ableist privilege and the resulting inadvertent othering, as evidenced, for example, by the "them/we" language when referring to students with and without disabilities. This kind of language creates a cognitive separation from the challenges of people with disabilities (Goffman, 1963), and creates a psychological distance, acknowledging that there is a problem but not that they are a part of it.

Most participants in this study seemed to be oblivious to their privilege in this respect. According to Singer and Bacon (2020), "ableism is defined as the idea that able-bodiedness/mindedness is a preferred way of being in society" (p. 2). The students' comments reveal a culture of ableism and tokenism as noted in their superficial experiences of attempted inclusion. This finding calls attention to a need for both formal and informal education that can translate into authentic inclusion through socialization and conscious integration; in other words, education that moves beyond raising awareness and translates into application of knowledge through social action in and out the classroom.

Our findings address both physical and developmental disabilities, and are in line with previous research on developmental disabilities that are invisible

to others. This invisibility makes it harder to identify and empathize and contributes to the overall invisibility and perceived lack of representation among study participants, and the lack of substantial support for people with these kinds of disabilities. Lack of interaction translates into negative feelings of pity and guilt, and a sense of hopelessness, reducing the likelihood that non-disabled students will engage in active efforts toward equity and inclusivity.

Several participants reflected on the urgency of actually listening to the individuals with disabilities to understand their needs, and for the institution to implement policies and programs:

In terms of interpersonal interactions, we found several instances of superficial gestures more than real action or activism. This superficiality translates into a sort of tokenism through which non-disabled students engage in symbolic, often self-gratifying, actions that make them feel they are not part of the problem. Some examples of this include using the correct terminology or helping one individual who they felt was in need of assistance. As stated by Beckwith et al. (2016) "tokenism in this instance can be viewed as only symbolic gestures at inclusion, rather than genuine efforts of engagement and integration" (p. 2).

Our results reveal a disconnect between the social and individual responsibility in the construction of reality and stigma. In other words, the participants from the group of non-disabled individuals attempt to explain the behavior of their own group in the third person, separating themselves from their role in the stigma and exclusion towards individuals with disabilities. There is a recognition of the stigma, but participants did not explicitly acknowledge their own feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that may result in othering people with disabilities. This disconnect between knowledge, attitudes, and awareness of personal biases and behaviors has been documented in other studies on autism stigma. Gillespie-Lynch, et al (2015), for example, found that college students exhibited high knowledge of autism, but still held misconceptions based on stigma. Underhill et al. (2019) found that although students expressed generally positive attitudes toward classroom inclusion, open-ended feedback revealed stigmatized beliefs and desired social distance from peers with autism spectrum disorder. This separation of the social and the personal seems to ease the feeling of guilt. The acknowledgement of non-disabled people's own bias and responsibility are needed to eventually generate changes, otherwise, if others are to blame, reality does not change.

This study was conducted in a university with a large proportion of Black and Latinx students, which resulted in an interesting nuance where participants critiqued the way U.S.-culture or mainstream white culture treated people with disabilities, and a belief that their own culture was a little different, and often better. The perception of cultural and contextual ethnocentricity of other nondisabled persons was repeatedly addressed as a strong contributing cause in the building of negative perceptions of students with disabilities in higher education. For example, several participants mentioned that their home country or their family was more inclusive and less discriminatory than the dominant U.S. culture, which brings up yet another layer of distancing oneself from the responsibility of perpetuating stigma and possibly contributing to the problem. Participants' testimony reveals how people with disabilities' needs are perceived to be silenced, limited, and understood through the views of the dominant group values.

Implications for Practice: Activist Pedagogy

In order to reduce stigma on campus and achieve classroom integration, we should ask ourselves what is the role of the university in bringing equity and social justice. Universities provide the ideal environment for generating social changes and justice because they produce knowledge that helps establish and direct the social discourse. However, groups such as students with disabilities do not seem to be represented because their needs are voiced through the rules and norms established by the dominant student groups.

It is essential to provide both formal and informal educational opportunities that focus on the human experience, not solely on the understanding of the disability. Russell and Congdon (2017) state that there is a strong need for a pedagogy that journeys from the classroom to real-life commitments. Frey and Palmer (2017b), who advanced Communication Activism Pedagogy (CAP), explain that there is an urgency for a pedagogy that enriches student learning by focusing on how communication is used to empower students to become agents of change with the goal of promoting justice and equality, and a pedagogy that looks for the application of theory to practice that generates positive social impact. Peruzzo (2020) states that proactive changes in higher education should enable changes that generate interventions that are less exclusionary and more positive for disabled students.

Education as a pedagogical process of true integration, not only as a context of acquiring information, is a critical step towards true social change. Participant 19 described the desire for this kind of integration as follows:

Acknowledging [students with disabilities], not separating [students with disabilities]... acknowledging that [students with disabilities] have this condition and understanding that it's not a process of fixing but a process of developing. It's not a way of saying [students with disabilities] are different but embracing the differences.

In order to generate real change and embody social justice through diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is necessary to invigorate our education system with mindful, consistent, and diligent daily practice (Jun, 2018). Jun (2018) and Chouinard (1997) link the lack of inclusion and discrimination to the existence of implicit and explicit bias and contact to paternalistic ableism. Our study demonstrates that recent diversity, equity, and inclusion work across college campuses needs to shift their focus from increasing diversity to actual integration and inclusion. Simply putting bodies of diverse groups, such as people with disabilities, on campus is insufficient. For actual equity, inclusion, and social justice, the focus should be on effective communication and reducing, and ultimately eliminating, stigma attached to people with disabilities.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

Some of the recommendations to start working through the planning of true integration and visibility would be, first and foremost, including the voices of the students with disabilities in the designing and planning of campus policies, curriculum, and activities. This action may be a somewhat chicken-and-egg situation since the existing stigma and other barriers limit the extent to which students with disabilities are included in campus leadership and program planning. In any case, there is a need to rethink, question, and enhance diversity initiatives on campus, which often focus on race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, and to explicitly address ableism as another key component of diversity and inclusion education.

Instructors may need assistance designing curriculum activities in which students have to interact and to relate to people with disabilities at emotional and social levels, not only intellectually. This type of action may include a group activity where students have to share an exploratory experience outside campus that specifically focuses on the experience of students with different kinds of disabilities, or adding activities in the curriculum that can be led by or told by students with disabilities. Universities can be intentional in creating campus-wide opportunities for visibility and leadership positions bring the voice of these students to the forefront.

Robust, campus-wide campaigns are needed to specifically address the experiences of people with disabilities, the implicit bias that results from ableism, and "helpful but not helpful" symbolic gestures that make people feel like they are helping, and the inadvertent exclusion of people with disabilities. The same strategic communication efforts that are applied to anti-racism would be applied to anti-ableism.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first is the size of the sample and that participants were all students in the same classes in the same university, which is a minority-serving institution in the southeastern United States. Another limitation is that the three authors do not identify as having a disability, and therefore are looking at this issue as communication experts, and not disability experts or having the experience of people with disabilities. For future research, these findings should be compared with the perceptions of students with disabilities to compare their experiences with the perception of non-disabled students. Also, this qualitative study did not account for personal experience with students who have disabilities. A quantitative survey that determines previous experience would also shed light on the relative importance of exposure and perceived knowledge (Stronach et al, 2019) on stigma and awareness of privilege.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that attitudes of non-disabled students toward disabled students are often based on ableist privilege and ignorance of the experience of students with disabilities. Student participants reported that they do not see students with disabilities enough on campus, possibly due to the lack of resources that facilitate their integration. With the little presence on campus, students with disabilities are rarely considered in the larger issue of social integration and inclusion. Pihl et al. (2018) explain this issue beautifully: "Exclusion takes place at a discursive and organisational level, resulting in educational provisions intended to 'help' the excluded to be included. However, including the one defined as different and excluded has already excluded the subject" (p. 29).

Our findings also point to optimism and hope for meaningful change. As one participant stated, "the newer generation are becoming more educated, so it is becoming more inclusive." Indeed Gen Z is the most diverse generation and has been socialized to be tolerant of differences more than any generation before them (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). To effective-

ly change individual behaviors as well as policies, it is essential that the voices of students with disabilities are prioritized. This will lead to true integration which will build representation, by generating spaces to exercise their voices, be truly heard and embraced. These practices will fight ableism and start constructing a reality in which there are no "disabled groups" and "abled groups," but different individuals to whom you can truly relate at different levels.

There is a need to consciously review the current ableist and exclusionary practices and policies through which both academia and society has framed the experiences of people with disabilities (Peruzzo, 2020), and learn to live with the discomfort that will inevitably come from disrupting current ableist norms (de la Garza, 2020). We need to get out of our ableist privileged perspectives and start talking about ableist privilege the way we talk about white privilege and wealth privilege. We need to talk about how ableism perpetuates ableist privilege.

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