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DISABLED WOMEN ACADEMICS RESHAPING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE ACADEMY

Nancy Hansen

Introduction

As a human geographer with cerebral palsy who uses crutches to aid my mobility, I am highly accustomed to and comfortable with the physical uniqueness of my non-conformist body (Hansen and Philo 2007). I have always been keenly aware of the peaks and valleys of my workplace landscape. I routinely work my way around, through and over the workspace environment, all the time trying to make my activities appear seamless in the academy, where my presence is, in many ways, unexpected (Titchkosky 2011). Although some progress has been made in addressing the needs of disabled students in post-secondary education, the same cannot be said for those of disabled academics (Butler and Parr 1999; Chouinard 1996, 2010). In many ways, the academy has yet to understand that disability and impairment can be found on both sides of the desk (Hansen 2010). To date, comparatively little is known or has been written about disabled academics in the academy (Chouinard 1996, 2018; Kosanic et al. 2018). Far less has been written about disabled academics who are women (Chouinard 1996; Foster 2017). Indeed, while writing this chapter I have spoken with numerous disabled women academics in various educational institutions who said they would not write about life in the academy for fear of jeopardizing their career prospects.

Established academy practices often fail to account for the possibility that members of that elite group may themselves have disabilities (Chouinard 1996; Grigely 2017; Stannett 2006). With the increasing corporate focus within universities, the nature of the academy is changing (Berg and Seeber 2016). The business of education is coming to the forefront (Foster 2017). The presence of ‘otherness’ in any form is often regarded as unsettling to the ‘regular’, ‘natural’ ebb and flow of established patterns and practices of daily living (Jones and Calafell 2012). The academy is an institution built on long-established traditions and, in the main, a reflection of majority beliefs and values of usually those who are White, male, hetero-normative and non-disabled (Eased 2004). There is a certain level of comfort in dealing with the known (Hansen and Philo 2007), what Eased (2004) refers to as ‘cultural cloning’, replicating what has gone before. Indeed, the academy, as an institution with institutionalized practices, has functioned in such a way for decades. The majority of academic posts still reflect this (Berg and Seeber 2016).
Although some incremental gains have been made in recent years, most full professorships still belong to White, straight men (Berg and Seeber 2016). To talk simply in terms of singular identities negates the complexity of what is actually happening here (Foster 2017). We are not simply one block identity; there is a constant intersection of two or more identities at any given time. I am not simply a disabled person, although disability does impact my life: I am also a White, straight, upper-middle-class woman and, at one time or another, two or more of these identities intersect (Butler 1990; Butler and Bowlby 1997; Peters 1996; Vernon 1996, 1998). Policies and practices – although modified with regard to language – remain largely unchanged, imbued with privileged majority understandings of the academy and the world around it (Vellani 2013). For those of us who have been marginalized or ‘othered’, for whatever reason, by that ever-present but invisible binary against which we are measured (in ability, gender, sexuality and race), the academy can be an elusive and isolating place (Chouinard 1996, 2010). While some degree of understanding has been achieved in relation to gender, sexuality and race (Kobayashi 1994), as yet the concept of ableism – or disableism (disability discrimination), as it is known in some regions – is not readily recognized or well understood (Foster 2017; Vellani 2013). Indeed, established academy policies and practices are often imbued with ableism (Foster 2017).

While a social citizenship rights-based approach to disabled students in the academy has gradually moved forward, with improved physical access and policy accommodation in recent years – fuelled to some degree by advancements in human rights legislation – this is not the case for disabled academics (Grigely 2017). We have as yet to realize appreciable gains in this arena and, in many ways, we remain exotic, disruptive strangers, constantly adapting to an alien landscape. What follows is an ongoing chronicle of personal adaptation.

Navigating the neo-liberal landscape

The neo-liberal academy is a strange place: rarefied, elite, individualized and isolating, all at the same time (Berg and Seeber 2016). The academic community is fast becoming an industrialized complex, meaning that corporate business practices are being adopted (Berg and Seeber 2016). As the academy is modernized, underscoring the necessity for resourcefulness, office support personnel are being removed and academics are required to undertake increasing amounts of time-consuming administration (Berg and Seeber 2016). As part of this reformation process, various types of bulk software have been adopted for everything from travel to office supplies and room bookings. The software is rarely accessible and, as a result, we are forced to develop (if possible), individualized work-around methods in order to use it, taking up yet more time and energy.

Academic ability is regularly judged in tandem with an arbitrary to exceptional level of physicality and energy, which is another manifestation of an exceptional status provision (Berg and Seeber 2016). With the presence of disabled faculty members often treated as exceptional or problematic (Dolmage 2017), I am faced with having to demonstrate everyday management skills regularly, to legitimize myself. I am always factoring in extra time (on my own private timeline) in order to manage in a workspace illustrative of hyper non-disability (Dolmage 2017). Whereas non-disabled academics are provided with access to the academy without this added hurdle, it is as if disabled academics must provide this insurance as added proof of the right to be in this rarified space (Hansen 2008).

A more troubling element is the arrogance often brought about by the unquestioned power and privilege within the academic institution itself, which effectively silences those individuals located on the margins (Berg and Seeber 2016; Sang 2017). Scholars maintain that the invisibility experienced by disabled women and other socially disadvantaged groups reflects a lack
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... of ‘space’ within the academy (Vellani 2013). They are not ‘permitted’ to become academics (Grigely 2017). As a woman academic with a disability, I am placed in an interesting situation, diminished within the academy and having a fragmented visibility in a social context (Hansen 2008; Sang 2017). On the academic’s side of the desk, disability workplace accommodation is, in large measure, non-existent. At present, very few colleges and universities provide support to their disabled faculty or staff (Chouinard 1996; Grigely 2017), unlike the rights-based options presented to faculty that are reframed as health, well-being and resilience (Berg and Seeber 2016; Foster 2017). This perspective is individualized and focused on rehabilitation (Grigely 2017). The need for disability accommodation (physical and/or attitudinal adaptations) may be confused with some form of personal weakness (Foster 2017; Sang 2017). This version of academy appears to place a premium on speed, quantification, chronic adaptability and a constant readiness to work, coupled with an unrelenting sense of urgency (Berg and Seeber 2016). This places disabled academics at a distinct disadvantage (Sang 2017). Furthermore, this widespread negative association may account for a genuine reluctance to self-identify as having a disability (Grigely 2017; Sang 2017).

The academic community is fast becoming an industrialized complex in which corporate business practices are adopted (Berg and Seeber 2016).

The work of ‘passing’ in the academy

An acceptable shape, size, colour, height, sexuality and physicality is culturally mediated (Butler 1990; Young 1997). The perception of the body as a ‘working’ machine is a fixture buried deep in the collective social consciousness (Hansen 2002). Western society’s acceptance and understanding of disability are driven by history, economics and productivity, based on dogma rather than wisdom or facts (Davis 1995). The discourse is of the ‘average’ capacity of the body as machine, in an industrial society (Hahn 1989). Our understandings of the machine would appear to be somewhat superficial, as is Western society’s understanding of disability and impairment (Foster 2017). Based on this current logic, disabled women represent extreme bodily non-conformity and non-male imperfection (Hansen 2002).

Consequently, similar to Chouinard and Grant (1997), at times I feel ‘nowhere near the project’, not because I feel out of place or that I do not belong but rather because I have to contend with an institutional environment whose policies and programmes that are aimed at disability ‘management’ are rife with embedded ableism.

Preconceptions of physical incapacity and access may be used as a convenient means to mask the deeper underlying social insecurities or objections about sharing non-disabled spaces with disabled people. It is almost as if the presence of disabled people compromises or contaminates these higher education elite ‘public’ non-disabled spaces (Hansen 2002, 2008). This unfounded belief would appear to be well entrenched, given British Chancellor Philip Hammond’s recent assertion that disabled people are responsible for Britain’s stagnant economy (Slawson 2017). The Chancellor appeared in front of the Treasury select committee to answer questions on the November budget and said that ‘high levels of engagement in the workforce, for example of disabled people’, may be one of the factors keeping down UK productivity levels (Slawson 2017, np).

Traditionally, Western society concerns itself with visible, physical bodily mechanics. Agility, mobility, dexterity, speed and spatial relations are usually considered solely in the context of the individual’s condition. Individual physicality and work activity are looked at solely within the structural confines of the public physicality of the work environment. Factors that are usually
considered include the availability of: wheelchair-accessible toilets; ramped building access; adapted workstations; and technological devices. While these elements do play a significant role in day-to-day working life, they should not be viewed in isolation from other equally important but less visible considerations, such as anxiety, fatigue or pain (Chouinard 2010; Foster 2017).

Fear of job loss or misperceptions of inability or a lack of professionalism stemming from negative social attitudes and stereotypes often lead disabled academics to minimize or conceal the reality of their disability or chronic illness in the academic arena. ‘Passing’ and resisting can be both physically and psychologically demanding:

‘I spend a lot of time – hours and hours – advocating for myself’ (William Peace). This may be one reason so few graduate students with disabilities pursue professional careers in academe: The task of having to advocate for yourself is a thankless professional obligation.

Time–space continuum

Time is a genuine concern for me, as the nature of my disability is such that any physical activity takes significantly more time and effort than it would for a non-disabled academic. As a disabled woman and an academic, I make visible what is commonly not visible, because disabled women are ‘not visible’. The planning, organizing and spacing of my daily activity are of paramount importance if I am to achieve the appearance of moving through a largely inflexible (at least, commonly perceived as such) environment with apparent ease. Frequently, it is so much a part of the process of life that it takes place at an unconscious level. Those unrecognized and/or unquestioned concepts that are accepted as intrinsic are the ones that provide the greatest difficulty for disabled people, being presented as the ‘natural’ order of things (Hansen and Philo 2007).

Timing, organization and spatial awareness gain an enhanced significance when my movements are measured and my energy levels are distinct. Curbs, steps, doors, signs and toilets assume a crucial importance. These seemingly mundane factors have a profound impact on the daily lives of disabled academics. Taken-for-granted facilities of non-disabled life experience are often unexpected premiums, for disabled people.

According to Aimee Louw, a Canadian access advocate speaking on radio (CBC Radio 2017), ableism (privileging non-disability) is pervasive in that it is present in more places than is governed by legislation. The use of legislation does not guarantee a successful outcome. Most disability within the academy, just as it is outside the academy, is invisible in that it is not readily apparent to the observer; that is, most impairments do not require assistive devices such as wheelchairs, canes or crutches.

I would argue that the current business focus of education makes it less likely that the academy will readily recruit or accommodate disabled academics and, with the steady encroachment of neo-liberal ideology on the academy, it is now increasingly unlikely to do so. Production, throughput and publication are now the markers we live by. Louw (CBC Radio 2017) argues that the speed–time focus that is now paramount in all sectors means that it is much more difficult to negotiate times and timelines for the work to be done. Laptop computers may be bolted into place on trolleys, making it imperative to adopt a standing, right-handed position, hence there are times when I need a right-handed driver (student or assistant) to use the computer during seminars.

The centralized travel-booking software at the university does not have a disability access option to book business travel, consequently I must book through a travel agent. Similarly, there
is no access option for the centrally booked classrooms, although my name is now the default for the faculty-booked classroom option. Accessible transportation on campus is through student accessibility services. This is yet another example of the lack of preparation for, or expectation of, disabled faculty and staff.

Accessing campus services is often not a straightforward process, and proximity may not solve the associated access difficulties, whether structural or bureaucratic (Grigely 2017). Hence, my non-conformist physicality (mobility disability) may be perceived as disruptive simply by being present. Access is often treated as an add-on or afterthought. The growth of metrication has meant that these creative efforts remain largely unknown in striving to ‘pass’, minimize and make it look seamless (Diaz Merced 2016).

My situation is not unique. Sally French (1994, 157–158), a university lecturer with a vision impairment, has expressed similar concerns:

Another vital issue for me is time. Equal opportunities policies never tackle this issue, even though it is so crucial to visually impaired and other disabled people. … My job involves a lot of reading and my reading speed is slow. I have never calculated the exact hours I work. Perhaps if I did I would have to acknowledge how little time there is left for me beyond my employment.

We are expected to adjust and to produce to a non-disabled timeline (not taking into account the extra time required to shoulder daily activities or to risk being labelled as somehow lacking in professional competence). Despite my best efforts, I am sometimes perceived as being ‘severely disabled’, although I do not see myself in that way.

Often it is the disabled academic who is expected to possess the necessary disability information, on the job, and this situation can create additional pressures in the workplace. Many disabled academics must contend with the embedded social practices, cultural attitudes and prejudices of non-disabled co-workers and employers. Well-meaning colleagues have said to me that watching me ‘struggle’ makes them appreciate their life experience. I think this has been meant as a compliment.

There is a false sense of security in accepted knowledge that, in itself, imposes a form of social distancing. More disturbing, however, is a fixation on the personal mechanics of disability in the workplace, which is the focus on individualized ‘difference’. There are few, if any, support systems for disabled people in the academic workplace, and often employees are alone and isolated (French 1994). Indeed, most universities remain poorly equipped to address the needs of disabled academics (Grigely 2017; Sang 2017). Consequently, disabled academics work very hard to adapt to the established academic workplace infrastructure (Kosanic et al. 2018). There is often a constant scrambling of ‘private’ and ‘public’ here that may cause unease, arising whenever there is a failure to conceal something ‘private’ in ‘public’ (Hansen and Philo 2007). The result leads some to set up boundaries against the offending person/body, while others start to treat that person/body as if they were in their intimate private circle (Hansen 2008).

My four-leggedness (use of crutches) is readily visible and almost always on public display. My colitis, however, remains for the most part outwardly invisible, yet it is always present for me. I’m reminded that ‘this is your body, you must find some way to live within all of it’ (Coates, 2015, 12). Ironically, I work in a geographic region recognized as having one of the highest incidences of ulcerative colitis in the world (Blanchard et al. 2001), yet this reality is largely unknown and rarely publicly discussed. In order to manage better the possibility of intestinal volatility, I have adapted my wardrobe and diet accordingly. Furthermore, the visible measured speed and spacing realities of cerebral palsy, which are more ‘publically understood’, can aid in maintaining the
invisibility of colitis, which is a condition that is hardly ever understood. By chance, my classroom is located near a toilet, but my body is highly visible; the heart of the matter is obviously to do with appearances and how these can be managed. I understand the necessity of ‘keeping up appearances’ or of looking as ‘normal’ as possible in order to make my way through the world on a daily basis with the least amount of difficulty. There is irony in that this kind of action may at times create a greater personal obstacle and create further complications. In some ways, it may also reflect a larger internalized social pressure to conform to what is expected and thereby to keep what is often perceived as a personal ‘problem’ private. Chronic illness sometimes involves what is conventionally defined as a ‘private’ concern (Hansen 2008).

Although some progress has been made, there appears to be a reluctance to theorize disability and gender, as though they were a lesser element of feminist studies (Erevelles 2001). Disabled feminist scholars have assumed a leadership role in this process. The task has not been an easy one, as Chouinard (1999, 146) explains:

Struggles to empower the disabled are waged largely by people who have committed themselves to the struggle for disability rights; and because of this their personal passages are out of step with those in power. Perhaps this is what struggles to make space for disabled women and men in academia and beyond are all about: disrupting spaces of power and privilege to the point where those who dominate such spaces are forced to recognise the difference that disabling differences make, and are confronted with the roles they play in sustaining such cultural oppression.

Disabled academics are restricted in the wider socialization process, and non-disabled values remain just below the surface (Sang 2017). While some disabled women academics may have found a ‘voice’, much of the disability experience remains shrouded in the community of disabled women and caught up in the public/private dichotomy of tentative social acceptance (Chouinard 1999; Wendell 1996, 1997). Certain aspects of disability are thought to be too disturbing for mainstream sensibilities. Distorted preconceptions frequently permeate discussions concerning autonomy, independence, choice and pain, often reflecting more the fears of the non-disabled than the reality experienced by disabled women (Garland-Thomson 1997; Wendell 1997).

Theoretical in-depth analysis and synthesis remain limited. To fully develop perspectives on disability requires that disablement and impairment are carefully integrated within the race, class and gender continuum in order to reflect a more inclusive intersectionality. A broader spectrum of analysis is necessary in order to achieve a complete analytical framework, incorporating the numerous factors that impact on gender and disability issues. Validation of the lived experience of disabled academics is pivotal to this process, coupled with a recognition that disability and impairment are important elements in the academy’s reality (Sang 2017).

Conclusion

The amount of ‘work’ required in order for many academics to ‘go to work’ in the academy is daunting (Berg and Seeber 2016). To do so with a disability adds yet another layer of complexity (Sang 2017). Constantly working against physical, social and emotional barriers exacts a heavy personal toll (Díaz Merced 2016). Rarely do disabled academics speak of the realities of their daily work–life experience (Kosanic et al. 2018). Indeed, I have never addressed the invisible aspects of my chronic condition before in the context of my own personal space. I have great
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privilege, by virtue of community membership. Therefore, I have a responsibility to be forthright in my disclosure.

As yet, the basic tenets and structures of academia have not been seriously examined or modified in relation to the physical, social and psychological needs of disabled people (Foster 2017; Grigely 2017). For the most part, we find ourselves in an alien academic landscape. We navigate the spaces created by incremental shifts that focus on form over a substance that we have not created (Kosanic et al. 2018). The presence of disabled women is gradually reshaping the academic landscape. Although we adopt various survival mechanisms to function in mainstream society, for the most part we do not construct the broader economic, political, social and cultural contours of the world (Chouinard 1999). Our bodies are regularly marginalized, while others are privileged.

Our work environment can often present challenges that may not necessarily be accepting or accommodating of disabled academics’ impairments and chronic conditions (Sang 2017). We spend a great deal of energy to create and maintain our physical ‘space’ in the academic workplace (Foster 2017). Small changes make a big difference. So, we take heart from small victories and we recognize that we are getting there by degrees.

Key readings


References


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