
Putting the “Ability” Back Into “Disability”

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Invisible disabilities have been severely understudied in the industrial–organizational literature, likely because of the complex, challenging nature of the topic. However, Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, and Rupp (2014) tackle this formidable subject with finesse. In this commentary, I seek to elaborate on their discussion of challenges faced by individuals with invisible disabilities in the workplace by relating the issue to overarching societal systems of privilege and oppression.

Privilege and Oppression

In part, the issue of invisible disabilities at work is about combating stereotypical beliefs, reducing prejudicial attitudes, and

lessening discriminatory behaviors, with the ultimate intention of alleviating individuals’ quiet suffering. However, all of these goals are just individual-level pieces of the larger fight against systems of injustice—privilege and oppression—that are deeply ingrained in American cultural practices and institutional procedures. Privilege is the systemic favoring experienced by some social groups and, complementarily, oppression is the systemic injustice experienced by other social groups. Privilege and oppression function to structure social norms, practices, and rules, and result in privileged groups being systematically advantaged at the expense of oppressed groups, which are systematically disadvantaged (Young, 1990).

Ableism is “the belief in the natural physical and mental superiority of nondisabled people and the prejudice and discriminatory behavior that arise as a result of this belief” (Groch, 1998, p. 151). Ableism functions to uphold systems

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of disability oppression; people *without* disabilities are a privileged social group, benefiting—oftentimes unbeknownst to them—at the expense of the oppressed group, people with disabilities. Like all oppressed groups, people with disabilities have historically been marginalized, meaning they have been socially excluded from useful participation in society (Young, 2000). The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, an early disability rights group based in the UK, asserted that marginalization is definitional to the experience of the disabled; the group defined disability as “something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (1975). Consequently, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) exists largely to prevent people with disabilities from being marginal. However, as Santuzzi et al. state, people with invisible disabilities face unique challenges in harnessing the legal power provided to them by the ADA because of the lack of visual saliency of their stigmatized identities. Stigmatized social identities are associated with certain characteristics that are considered to be disadvantageous or even abhorrent (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). However, the characteristics that define stigmatization aren’t necessarily visually apparent, and people with invisible stigmas face unique, internal discord. As Santuzzi et al. allude to, people with invisible disabilities have to decide whether to withdraw from social interaction and experience social isolation; drain physical, mental, and emotional resources by attempting to pass as nonstigmatized individuals without disabilities; or gamble and disclose their identities in hope of gaining support at the risk of stigmatization.

Capitalizing on Abilities

Santuzzi et al. mention how organizational performance may be negatively impacted by the inclusion of people with invisible

disabilities (e.g., pp. 207–208); unfortunately, this perspective—a cultural artifact of living in a capitalist society—is as misconceived as it is prevalent. Disability oppression theory (Castañeda & Peters, 2000) suggests that having a disability is not an inherently negative attribute of a person. Rather, rigid, inflexible societal structures force people with invisible disabilities into powerless roles. These societal structures disproportionately value economic output over alternative, social contributions, resulting in increased prejudice against the disabled. Indeed, research has shown that Americans are hesitant to accept coworkers with invisible disabilities because of performance-related concerns (McLaughlin, Bell, & Stringer, 2004).

The prevalence of ableism in American society has led to a general lack of awareness of the fact that people with invisible disabilities (as well as people with disabilities, in general) are a diverse group with lots of *abilities* to offer the workforce. American culture emphasizes individuality and self-actualization to a fault, when in actuality dependence is no more inherently negative than independence is inherently positive. In the contemporary United States, where systems of privilege and oppression are upheld by everyday compliance with common institutional standards and cultural practices, the potential performance and social benefits that might result from promoting organizational inclusion of people with invisible disabilities are often overlooked.

The Way Forward

Santuzzi et al. suggest that employers should “[keep] a regular check on” (p. 217) organizational climates and cultures of fairness. Although this is a fundamental step in creating a psychologically safe work environment and prompting employee disclosure of invisible disabilities, it does not fully address the spirals of silence that often occur in organizations when—oftentimes invisibly—oppressed group members feel

unable to fully express their true identities (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Thus, in order to circumvent organizational silence, institutions should redistribute the onus of disclosure from the invisibly stigmatized group to the institution by *actively* challenging the current systematic flow of ableism. For instance, organizations should take responsibility for broaching the subject of invisible disabilities with all employees; framing the discussion in a positive light, clearly communicating supportive policies and procedures, and encouraging dialogue between all employees at all organizational levels will help to establish a workplace culture oriented toward social justice.

The Center for Disease Control’s “Let’s Stop HIV Together” campaign presents images of individuals with HIV and their loved ones alongside captions such as, “I am a best friend, a poet, and a cook. And I’m living with HIV.” This campaign illustrates a bold attempt to humanize HIV and is a prime example of an organization emphasizing the diverse, positive qualities of a typically pigeonholed population of invisibly disabled individuals. In the quest to further social justice, contemporary organizations should follow in the CDC’s footsteps and promote dialogue-laden, positive work environments that specifically cater to individuals with invisible disabilities. Furthermore—especially in today’s political climate, where the civil liberties of many invisibly oppressed groups are up for heated debate—it is critical for the scholarly literature to pave the way for systemic change via a paradigm shift; although it is suitable and even necessary to discuss disparities between privileged and oppressed groups,

it is of critical importance that scholars reframe the discussion of invisible disabilities in a more positive light.

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