Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

In the neoliberal academy, professors who disclose any form of impairment risk raising concerns about their fitness to perform their jobs. Academics are expected to deliver highly measurable outcomes from their work in order to build a positive reputation among their peers. But given the negativity that typically characterizes the disability discourse in Western cultures, it is all too easy for the scholarly community to infer that differentness equates to ineptness. Thus, individualist and ableist discourses are central to the discussion of power relations and care of the self in the contemporary academy. The focus of this doctoral thesis is “diversable” professors performing under neoliberal academic regimes. The term “diversability” is used to designate people with disabilities—particularly of an invisible nature—while debunking the fallacious connotation of incompetence habitually attached to their differentness. Combining self-narrative and postmodern-grounded theory, this study derives valuable insights from the stories of 16 professors, both tenured and untenured, who reveal how they navigate disability, as well as the intersecting dimensions of differentness attached to their self-identities. The findings suggest that diversable professors, in spite of an academic environment embedded in disability avoidance—and the usual structural contingencies that can prevent scholars from fully demonstrating their value—can present counter-narratives that include
positive constructions of self-identity as good teachers, researchers and advocates for social justice. This research also uncovers inadequacies in the academy itself—but not without a message of hope for remedial change.

*Keywords*: diversability, neoliberalism, performativity, disability avoidance
Dedication

To my father, “the invalid.” How unfortunate that he believed what they said! And how I would have loved to be able to show him the beauty of his diversability!
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Background for this Research

My interest in the lives of academics with invisible disabilities was sparked by a fortuitous encounter with a professor at a social function. After we had introduced ourselves and launched into an animated conversation, mainly on topics of scholarly interest, I began to notice that my interlocutor, even though everything she said made complete sense, would rarely finish her sentences. I noticed her hesitations and unfinished thoughts because they were very familiar: she sounded a lot like me. I too have a tendency to skip quickly from one partial sentence to another, as if I am in a constant race with my brain to see who can get to the point first. I have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), accompanied by anxiety disorder.

The speech pattern of the professor at the party intrigued me: Could she actually be like me? Nonsense—of course not! How could she? After all, she was a scholar! Nevertheless, I could not stop myself (impulsivity being another “symptom” of my affliction) from blurting out: “You have ADHD, don’t you?” The change in her expression appeared to be a mix of indignation, bemusement and, I sensed, a hint of relief. After a brief pause, she responded: “Indeed, I do have ADHD. But if you ever repeat that, I’ll deny we ever met.”

It was a pivotal moment in my academic journey. This professor seemed to be telling me that, in order to function in the academy, she had to keep her differentness invisible. But what, I wondered, drove her to have such a visceral reaction to my “accusation”? Why was it so critical to conspicuously shut me down? And what was behind her apparently deep-rooted fear of disclosure?

At the point when that party conversation took place, I lacked any appreciation for the impact of ableism on the lives of academics—particularly those with disabilities. The incredulity I felt on learning that an established scholar shared my disability was rooted in the common discursive construction of faculty members in higher education: they must be intellectually flawless, as surely no “diseased” mind (Maté, 2012) would be allowed to remain in academe. Yet even in my moment of disbelief, the seed was planted for this thesis.
Why Should the Academy Care? (Purpose and Significance of this Research)

In support of this task, I sought out scholarly studies that might shed light on the issues raised. However, after a thorough investigation of the literature examining the experiences of academics with invisible disabilities, I resurfaced virtually empty-handed. Other than a few noteworthy studies—for example, the work of U.S.-based scholars Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum on the mental health of faculty—I have been unable to find any research on faculty that resembles the study I present in this dissertation.

In contrast to the scarcity of information on the experiences of faculty members, there is an abundance of academic research focusing on university students (i.e., “paying customers”) with invisible disabilities. This makes sense when we consider students’ keen interest in gaining the necessary skills to engage with the labour market. Postsecondary institutions, in the rush to stay ahead of their global competitors, aim to please students (Frankham, 2017) by catering to their consumerist needs—and thus gain the additional revenue that comes with increased enrolments. Indeed, as Frankham puts it, “higher education has, over the previous three decades in particular, responded to calls to attend to the employability of graduates” (p. 630). Lynch (2015) observes that the neoliberal university has assumed the moral role of educating citizens who will help to build a healthy economy for their countries.

Given the apparent lack of attention to the needs of faculty members with invisible disabilities, might there be a connection between what I heard from the professor in our party conversation and the fact that this topic of concern is so little explored in the scholarly literature? Might the notable lack of research reflect the fact that few professors are willing to discuss their academic experiences with disabilities? Could it be that disclosure of any impairment threatens to hurt a professor’s reputation or prospects for staying employed?

An attempt to answer such questions seemed opportune—and indeed of crucial importance—in yielding suggestions for making the lives of faculty members less stressful and more productive. And it could point the way toward the creation of an academic milieu that is more fully embedded in the values of social justice (Freire, 1977)—if such a transformation is possible, and I believe it is.
Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical approaches provided the foundation on which this postmodern thesis was developed. The works of Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman were especially strong influences, as will be explained in due course. My understanding of the social aspect of disabilities in general—both visible and non-visible—gained an immeasurable boost as I became more deeply acquainted with the ideas of L. J. Davis, Garland-Thomson, Charmaz, Shakespeare and Price, to name just a few. Even more emphatically, the views of Bolt (2016)—which were brought to my attention by Dr. Kathryn Church, a member of my thesis committee—shaped my perspective on how strongly disability avoidance is promoted in the realm of higher education. But most important, the concept of ableist performativity, inspired by Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, helped me considerably in focusing my study. Finally, my analysis pointed to the argument that neoliberal discourses, given their ubiquity in today’s universities, set the context for how the competence of invisibly disabled professors is assessed.

A key assumption in my research is that the neoliberal university holds its key stakeholders accountable for their performances. The following is a thumbnail sketch of how neoliberalism sets the stage for academia (with a more detailed discussion to follow in the next two chapters). Students, faculty members and staff must all meet high standards of excellence in order to remain in the institution’s “good graces.” Power (1994) describes how members of the university community have become “subjects of audit” (p. 5), adding:

The audit explosion is only in part a quantitative story of human and financial resources committed to audit and its extension into new fields. It also concerns a qualitative shift: the spread of a distinct mentality of administrative control, a pervasive logic, which has a life over and above specific practices (p. 5).

According to Lolich (2011), “people are considered of value when their work can be measured in economic terms” (p. 274). Moreover, the “success or failure [of people] is entirely up to them” (p. 279). In the case of professors, performance must meet high standards, particularly when it comes to serving the needs of students. Faculty members also have a critical responsibility to help their institutions remain competitive and “worthy” of student enrolments, and to obtain financial support from the public and private sectors. As these professors accede to discourses of
power, their self-identities become enmeshed with the demands of subjectification, or the shaping of compliance with discourses of neoliberalism. This means faculty members understand that “whatever trust and respect is accorded, the professional [high status] now has to be earned through their ability to perform to an externally given set of performance indicators” (Dent & Whitehead, 2002, p. 2). Moreover, “it is through emersion in these [neoliberal] discursive regimes that the individual is enabled into existence and by which the individual comes to (re)present certain truths about the world” (p. 9).

Critical theories of disability question any perspective that treats disability as a personal tragedy, instead suggesting that it is a social phenomenon (Hiranandani, 2005), consistent with how I have framed it within the neoliberal context. Coogan and Cluley (2016) argue that persons with disabilities endure social disadvantages caused by the biased views and patronizing treatment by a predominantly ableist mainstream population. In the context of the neoliberal academy, individuals who disclose any non-visible motor and cognitive difficulties can become targets of prejudiced conduct. L. J. Davis (2013), in discussing depression and disability, describes a socio-cultural environment in which there are deep political and economic interests driving the medicalization of any postures, attitudes and behaviours that contradict the prevalent (American) belief that happiness should be humans’ ultimate goal in life. “Sorrow, when it comes, will be seen as an abnormal state” (p. 46)—one that gives pharmaceutical companies and other powerful entities justification to treat depression, or what I would call “other ailments of the soul,” as diseases.

Fiona: Reframing My Perspective on “What Matters”

As I explained in the previous section, illuminating the issue of disability avoidance in the academy is one of the theoretical goals of my research. When I began my doctoral work, I had no idea I was about to embark on a life-changing spiritual and emotional journey. Before I could analyze the collective experiences of professors with invisible disabilities, I would first have to encounter my faculty participants, at the most basic level, as human beings of flesh, bones and feeling. In short, I became aware I was about to plunge into a world of self-discovery—thanks to the professor I have named Fiona. As we made our initial contact, this professor described what she deals with on a daily basis:
Chronic fatigue and pain; neck stiffness, jaw pain, lower back pain, [and] sore joints; hypersensitivity to light and smells; short-term memory loss; anxiety; brain fog; vertigo; [and] reduced focus/attention. . . . [My] symptoms vary greatly depending on events. Increased stress can cause an acute decline in cognitive capacity, as well as horrible vertigo—so that driving or walking is impaired.

Fiona seemed unconvinced that I would honour the unique story of each person who agreed to take part in my research, even though my chosen method of grounded theory requires looking for meanings in the narratives of study participants. From her perspective, this was precisely the “problem” with the type of research I had chosen: I would be the one attributing meanings to other human beings’ life experiences. How would I ever be able to do that if I could not live inside their bodies? Clearly I had to take extra care never to forget I was speaking, first and foremost, to individual people, each with something unique that set them apart. But I believed I was capable of honouring the uniqueness of each person’s existence—including Fiona’s, which was her number one fear.

I ended up respecting Fiona’s wish to be heard but promised that her words would not appear in my data chapters. That is, I will present the common discourses that surfaced in my conversations with the 15 other participants, in keeping with my postmodern variety of grounded theory. However, Fiona’s thoughts resonated with me so deeply that I will share some of them here (with her blessing):

I respect different paradigms, but my concern is that you will not really be able to understand mine. You’ll attempt to understand it intellectually, but you will not be able to step into it. That’s really my concern. I don’t believe in identity! I know it’s a construct; but that to me is a modern and postmodern paradigm. Identity is nothing but an ego construct. For me, to hear your story about what that professor said—“If you tell people I have ADHD, I’ll deny it!”—That’s totally her ego construct and persona. I don’t even give a fuck about my persona anymore. [My persona] was stripped out of my illness and I think it’s a farce. I think that’s part of the problem in academe for professors to maintain and even research the support that people need to maintain their professorial persona. That elitist circle of some/many academics—many are ego-driven or persona-propped. As long as we continue to uphold this professorial façade, then we will continue to have difficulties in being who we are because it’s not recognised and it’s not
researched. If you compare my life to someone else’s in a grounded study, it will piss me off immensely. If somebody really wants to understand the fucking hell that I live in academe it is not to be theorised. It is something that you have to get the particularity of the life of the person you’re interviewing. You need to empathise with an individual and honour the particularities, not objectify them. How can you theorise an individual’s story? I am intentionally trying to disrupt your paradigm. You might feel the call of an enlivened cosmos—one that has intelligence, imagination, functions/unfolds via creativity, and beckons us into our being and becoming. If you listen here, close your eyes and feel. You will find your way.

I believe I did find my way in paying close attention to how my account of participants’ stories might not do justice to their reality—the nuances of what they have gone through in the course of their lives. Fiona’s insights kept coming back to me as I considered and interpreted their narratives and the contextual circumstances surrounding them. Thanks to her, I made peace with my soul by doing my best to represent their uniqueness as human beings.

**Organization of this Thesis**

This thesis comprises nine chapters, followed by References and Appendices. In the current chapter, I introduce readers to the background of this research and its purpose and significance, as well as its theoretical foundations. I conclude with a brief narrative of the paradigmatic transformation I experienced, largely thanks to one particular research participant, Fiona. In chapter 2, I define the key discursive terms that appear throughout the thesis, aiming to better situate readers contextually. In chapter 3, I present a thorough review of the literature relevant to the thesis topic. In chapter 4, I describe the methodology I have employed and explain the strategy I chose to conduct my work. I also explain my role in the study, providing a rationale for my presence in the narrative, as well as my procedures for data collection and analysis.

The data chapters in this thesis are organized around several key arguments derived from my analysis. In the first, chapter 5, I examine the evidence for what Oswal (2016) calls “the ableist assumptions and biases of institutional policies” (p. 30). In chapter 6, I argue that the challenges of disclosure with regard to invisible disabilities are tied to job precarity in the neoliberal academy. My focus is on how the ableist discourses and practices prevalent in both formal and kairotic spaces play out in academic life. In Chapter 7, I discuss the powerful and ready
internalized stigma of disability and how it affects the identities, self-disclosure and intended images of professors. In Chapter 8, I show how diversable professors devote considerable effort, creativity and patience to developing individual strategies for meeting ableist academic demands. In Chapter 9, I summarize the key findings of this research in the context of the current scholarly literature and share my reflections on the significance of this research not only for my own growth as a scholar, but for future inquiry.
Chapter 2
Discourse and Terminology

Introduction

When I began this work, I did not know much of the terminology I would come to employ as I began to investigate the largely unmapped area of academics with invisible disabilities. While this is not a thesis in disability studies (DS), because of the topic it explores—the experience of academics who have what are considered to be invisible disabilities—I inevitably make reference to many terms used by DS scholars, including some that are contested. I also have adopted words used regularly by higher education theorists to explain how universities have changed in parallel with macro-level transformations in the global economy in recent decades. Consequently, I find it is necessary to insert a brief introductory chapter reviewing discourse and terminology (indicated by italics) before proceeding. Because the meanings of vernacular language can vary according to who is using it and other contextual contingencies, to avoid any confusion, it is important to discuss some of the key terms that appear in the following pages within the broader context of my work.

The first section of this chapter explores the problems presented by the term disability and proposes the alternative term “diversability.” The second section discusses the term “normal” and what Foucault meant by “normalization” and “subjectification.” The third section discusses the relationships among neoliberalism, performativity and ableism as I apply the concepts in this thesis. I end the chapter with notes on “disability avoidance” and “intersectionality,” and the utility—in specific contexts—of medical labels associated with disability.

Disability versus Diversability

*Disability*, to take the most obvious example of a controversial term, can have different connotations depending on the context. The meaning commonly attributed to the term is medical and is applied to individuals who are deemed to have “a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions” (Webster
English dictionary, n.d., ¶ 1). This standard dictionary definition demonstrates the use of the term “typical;” it refers to the assumed common characteristics shared by members of the mainstream population—in other words, the normals. But as many DS scholars point out, the “issue” of disability exists mainly because anyone with a physical, mental, cognitive or developmental differentness (not “condition,” a term suggesting some illness that must be eradicated or ameliorated) faces daily obstacles in a world designed only with presumed normals in mind.

My use of the term disability in this thesis reflects the British model of disability. In my view, disability is a passive phenomenon in which individuals with impairments become disabled by a semiotic-material context that fails to give them a fair chance to participate in mainstream life activities. This is not to say, for example, that the only reason a person without legs cannot run a marathon is because of social cultural obstacles. His or her impairment is real. However, the error lies in disabling the person because of the impairment, as if not having legs makes him or her an inferior being. Disability is a social term that indicates oppression and exclusion, whereas impairment means an attribute of differentness of an individual. Impairment does not mean social inferiority, while often disability carries such a connotation. In this thesis I therefore do not use the word disability in a neutral sense, inasmuch as my aim is to bring attention to the potential for oppression in the face of impairment. When I refer to “faculty with disabilities,” I mean academics with differentnesses who may become oppressed by mainstream powers. At the same time, I do use the word “disabled” whenever I attempt to put the situation of the oppressed under a spotlight.

My research is mainly focused on issues related to invisible disabilities, which, according to the Invisible Disabilities Association (2016), reflect any “physical, mental or neurological condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities that is invisible to the onlooker” (What is an invisible section, ¶ 1). More specifically within the context of this study, an invisible disability refers to a mental, cognitive or physical impairment that is not easily detectable. Barnes (1999) astutely points out that “all physical conditions have psychological implications and that all intellectual impairments have physiological consequences” (p. 578); this is a crucial insight when analyzing the impact of disability in a profession that considers a person’s brain to be his or her most valuable asset.
Most important, I have embraced the term *diversability* in response to, and as a rejection of, the traditional label *disability*. Instead of using the term *disabled* in referring to unconventional thinkers and performers, I would rather speak of them as *diversable*. I believe this avoids the ablenormative meanings attributed to physical and non-physical impairments while disrupting the arbitrary duality of ability/disability. As Clair, Beatty and Maclean (2005) put it, “people have a variety of opinions about which terms are appropriate or inappropriate when referring to certain social identity groups. [One can] choose to draw from popular usages . . . to refer to particular social identity groups” (p. 78). Diversability, as a slight change in discourse, reflects what Clair et al. (2005) call *differentiating*—that is, “highlighting invisible social identity [of the diversables] and [demonstrating] how it differentiates them from others” (p. 83), without suggesting any preconceived notion that their differentness makes them worse or better than those who do not immediately present as diversable. The term diversability also connotes a greater sense of agency within contexts defined by performativity. In the scholarly environment, the word disability may be indiscriminately applied to the unconventional cognitive processing and executive functioning of academics who can nevertheless perform tasks and achieve goals comparable to their “normal” peers. I believe strongly that if diversable individuals can still get from point A to point B, albeit by a less “logical” or predictable route, then referring to them as having a disability, in its most pejorative sense, is simply unjustified and immoral. The fact that the diversable strive to conform in order to be accepted does not mean they are impostors pretending to perform accordingly. Rather, when they are understood to be diversable, it becomes possible to visualize them/us as being able to meet and surpass neoliberal standards of quality (should they even wish to), despite the difficulties imposed by an environment steeped in disability avoidance (a phenomenon discussed at length in my literature review). Moreover, by being encouraged to "come out,” they might, as Church (2013) suggests, be able to use their “personal stor[ies] to pursue social change—reinforcing the emphasis on political autobiography (‘situate yourself!’)” (p. 183). My research participants provide ample evidence that intellect-related differentness does not necessarily have a negative impact on the ability of academics to perform on the job and help their institutions remain productive. The stories I have collected represent strong *counter-narratives*—alternatives to the mainstream discourse that contain thought-provoking ideas and challenge everyday interpretations of the world.
Normalcy and Otherness

In this thesis, I try to avoid the vernacular word *normal* in describing individuals who look, speak, move, behave and act in what are deemed to be conventional ways. While this term can be convenient shorthand, its limitations are clear. The concept of *normalcy* enshrines the idea that most humans are born with a similar potential to see, hear, touch, communicate and think. Similarity equals normalcy. As Foucault (1977) pointed out, the inherent abilities and aptitudes that are common to the majority of the species shape the accepted parameters of good health and *normalcy*—or whatever is generally accepted and expected from members of a majority group. This vast (or assumed to be vast) “healthy” majority eclipses the relatively few individuals who, as they perform life activities, present physical and mental attributes, appearances, behaviours or approaches that diverge from the authenticated conventions of normal human existence. Normals do not stand out from the crowd, because they supposedly do not exhibit any *differentness* that would otherwise makes them targets of oppressive treatment by mainstream members of a community. I follow the DS convention by embracing the “Goffman-esque” term *differentness* (1959) to denote a lack of compliance with the conventional discourse of being, appearing or behaving. Differentness is a digression from what is visibly and invisibly expected from members of any given social group.

Contrary to the common assumption that only a few members of the mainstream population diverge from the norm, the IDA has concluded that 74 percent of Americans have some kind of impairment that does not require tangible devices or prosthetics. Moreover, because of their “normal” appearance, individuals with these impairments are generally perceived to be healthy (“What is an invisible disability,” IDA, n.d.). If we focus solely on people with learning disabilities, recent studies suggest they comprise 15 to 20 percent of the overall population (“How many people are affected/at risk for learning disabilities,” 2014). As for those who contend with what Price (2014) calls “impairments of the mind” (p. 9), the World Health Organization (2015) states that there are at least 350 million individuals on the planet who have been diagnosed with depression—and suicides occur about every 40 seconds. Ironically, all of these numbers lead to an inevitable question: “What is normal, after all? While my research is not quantitative in focus, this brief selection of data nevertheless permits the inference that invisible disability presumably has a higher than negligible level of incidence within academe as in the general population. However, data to support this conjecture is not available. The
literature instead suggests that university and college faculty members rarely report having invisible disabilities, particularly those that relate to mental health (Price, 2014).

Any departure from conventional norms transforms individuals into what Edward Saïd (1978) called “The Other.” The so-called disabled may be subject to discrimination because they are observed to be unconventional in appearance and behaviour. They too are *othered* and denied access to certain social environments and events because they are identified as a minority group that—to put it bluntly—does not matter enough. To avoid being othered, individuals with differentnesses may try to conceal their disability. They may hide—to the extent this can be accomplished—differences in gender, sexual orientation, age, race, social class and/or disability status, among other stigmatizable identities. In order to guarantee acceptance by a group they value, they prefer to pass (Goffman, 1959)—that is, they engage in *impression management* by speaking, acting and/or behaving according to how they wish to be perceived. They “perform” the role of a person “who belongs” (Titchkosky, 2011) in order to have their goals and needs satisfied.

**Subjectification and Power**

In practicing impression management, individuals are theorized by Goffman (1959) to acquiesce before the demands of an ableist environment. In Foucauldian terms, they yield to an environment of subjectification in which they lose agency, and find themselves oppressed by powers that determine how they should act, speak, behave and live. Theorists use the term subjectification to indicate subjection to a discourse (Bergstrom & Knights, 2006). The power that subjectifies these individuals is evident every day, even in ordinary interactions among people. Stuart Hall (2006), in discussing cultural identity, argues that an individual may retain sufficient agency to decide which rules to follow, in accordance with his or her own goals. Subjection to the rules does not necessarily imply passivity. For Foucault (1977), subjectification cannot exist without the concept of power relations—and vice versa. Moreover, power carries intention. In this respect, we can say that neoliberal universities use systems of surveillance to ensure that faculty, staff and students perform their “roles” according to the objectives of their institutions. In order to be embraced by the higher education system, individuals subject themselves to the prevailing discourses and conform to institutional purposes.
Individuals are constantly judged through social connections in what Price (n.d.) calls *kairotic spaces*. *Kairos*, the Greek word for opportunity, is the root for this description of informal situations in which institutional culture and knowledge are disseminated and reinforced—and in which power asserts itself. According to Price, “attention to relations of power is of great importance in understanding kairotic space, as is recognition that different participants in kairotic spaces will perceive those relations differently” (¶ 6).

As previously mentioned, the social model of disability that has evolved in Great Britain makes a clear distinction between disability and impairment. The former term refers to the social barriers imposed—mainly in kairotic spaces—on individuals who, faced with environments that are not designed to reflect universal principles, are prevented from accessing the privileges granted to normals. The concept of *access* in disability studies, according to Titchkosky (2011), can be captured in a fundamental question: “Who belongs?” Access is in turn directly related to the notion of *inclusionism*, which Mitchell (2016) critiques in analyzing neoliberal university policy, equating it to “an embrace of diversity-based practices through which we include those who look, act, function, and feel different” (p. 9). Inclusionism is the counterpart of “colour blindness” in policy directed at racially minoritized faculty (Henry & Tator, 2009). In Hodkinson’s view (2016), for inclusion to be effective, institutions must take into account societal relations of power and dominance in the realm of diversity.

**Neoliberalism, Performativity and Ableism**

In a context of *neoliberalism*, disability is considered a disruption at the institutional level. According to Swarts (2013), *neoliberalism* is a pro-free-market paradigm that has emerged globally over the past 40 years. Neoliberalism promotes managerialism through capitalism as a more efficient and profitable policy orientation than previous management ideologies; it “is a painful medicine, but one that ultimately result[s] in a more competitive, efficient and prosperous economy and society—with all its attendant long-term benefits” (Swarts, 2013, p. 198). Many contemporary scholars critique neoliberalism in the university. Ball (2012), for instance, states that it is a “very real economic and political dynamic to the reform of Higher Education, a business dynamic which seeks profit from the buying and selling of education ‘services’” (p. 18). Today’s neoliberal universities focus on *performativity*. As Ball explains:
In regimes of performativity, experience is nothing, productivity is everything. Last year’s efforts are a benchmark for improvement—more publications, more research grants, more students. We must keep up; strive to achieve the new and very more diverse targets which we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive (p. 19).

Elsewhere, Ball describes his scholarly “duty” to conform to performativity rather poignantly: Neoliberalism has “required me to make myself calculable rather than memorable” (p. 17). Similarly, Warren (2017), in his auto-ethnography, offers a snapshot of the experiences of an academic in a performativity-focused scholarly environment:

We see ourselves engaged in struggles for and over visibility—to be visible but also to define the terms on which we become visible. To become visible within our institutions we are faced with the way the political economy of higher education imposes only certain ways of being legitimately visible as an academic. To be a legitimately recognised academic can often mean being visible, where visibility is determined by the extent to which academic subjectivities are made amenable to measurement—that is, neoliberalism “out there” (p. 138).

When it comes to job performance, the neoliberal academy, as Mitchell (2016) suggests, seems to accept only those behaviours that match its ableist and performativity-centered policies, procedures and institutional culture. Professors today can no longer dedicate themselves solely to research and teaching; they are expected to take on responsibilities that go far beyond traditional scholarly tasks. Not surprisingly, those who live with physical or mental impairments, given the extra energy they must devote to looking after their own wellbeing, seem to face an even harsher job environment. Indeed, this is where the academy itself shows signs of having a learning disability (Oswal, 2016). Universities appear to ignore the warning signs that ableism could ultimately put their institutional health in jeopardy—and as a consequence, a large number of professors regretfully appear to live with the fear of being perceived as incompetent. As Oswal (2016) observes:

In higher education, when an aging faculty member [or at any age, I would add] can no longer mold her or his body or mind to the humdrum of academic life unrelated to
research and teaching, the typical paraphernalia of today’s digital campus, and in many places the demands of the publish-or-perish clock, in spite of the stereotypical accommodations, then the faculty member is bound to be fired in the name of inaptitude or incapacity. . . . Such an institutional attitude reflects disregard for different forms of participation and points toward the ruthless rigidity of academic policies and procedures designed for an ableist community (p. 26).

Neoliberal universities, with their primary focus on productivity, also typically cultivate ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness—DS terms that illuminate prejudiced behaviour and attitudes toward persons with disabilities. From an ableist point of view, the disabled are regarded either as inferior beings or as creating unwarranted and even absurd levels of concern among members of mainstream society. Cherney (2011) articulates this sense of absurdity:

Within the space allowed by these rhetorical premises, ableism appears natural, necessary, and ultimately moral discrimination required for the normal functioning of civilization. Consider a set of stairs. An ableist culture thinks little of stairs, or even sees them as elegant architectural devices—especially those grand marble masterpieces that elevate buildings of state. But disability rights activists see stairs as a discriminatory apparatus—a ‘no crips allowed’ sign that only those aware of ableism can read—that makes their inevitable presence around government buildings a not-so-subtle statement about who belongs in our most important public spaces. But the device has become so accepted in our culture that the idea of stairs as oppressive technology will strike many as ludicrous” (Ideology and Rhetoric section, ¶ 7).

Ableism thus embodies the preoccupation with “the normal” discussed in the beginning of this chapter—that is, the prevailing view reflected in a cluster of terms: normal, normalcy, normality and norms.

Disability Avoidance

Given the neoliberal focus on productivity and the inflexible discourses of performativity that typify the modern academy, it is not surprising that universities typically foster a culture of disability avoidance. Mitchell (2016) contends that most universities do not know how best to take advantage of diversable faculty members—that is, how to recognize them as true
intellectual assets and partners in promoting the construction of relevant knowledge. According to Bolt (2016), the academy, in mirroring society, fails to treat diversability as a natural phenomenon that deserves to be fully understood. Any attempt to comprehend it conjures up a tacit concern—even horror—that all of us face the same fate. “This epistemological problem becomes demonstrable in the academy on a critical level, for disability is relevant to most if not all disciplines yet frequently dismissed as someone else’s domain” (p. 2). But discourses of disability and diversability demand work on the part of those who are mere “spectators.” The so-called able-bodied must think, if not about why the disabled state makes them so uncomfortable, then about pragmatic matters such as how to treat the “victims” of disability and or what to do for them.

The provision of accommodations for differentness is not encouraged. Clear standards do exist. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (n.d.) describes accommodation as an employer’s duty to “modify the terms and conditions of employment or by making adjustments in the workplace” (The principle of accommodation section, ¶ 9). And scholars such as Price and Kerschbaum (2017) make a clear distinction between accommodation and access, terms that are often confused:

An accommodation is a change made to an inaccessible environment for the benefit of one individual. Accommodations are important because many faculty members have needs that are specific to their situation and which may not require large-scale environmental or cultural change. However, arranging accommodations on a case-by-case basis may also mean that the ‘problem’ is seen as an individual one, so that the inaccessible environment does not change, or at best, is only “retrofitted” (p. 8).

Access, on the other hand, reflects the effort to create an environment that is universally fit for all needs.

The scholarly literature on disability reveals a lack of disclosure by faculty members of their invisible impairments. Consequently, they do not seek job accommodations, and as a result, disability is taken to be such an unusual occurrence in the academic workplace that it is not deemed an important concern for administrators. The minimal demand for attention and accommodations from professors with disabilities is theorized as a state of avoidance on the part of academic leaders and peers. Stone, Crooks and Owen (2013) observe that some disabled
faculty members feel obliged to create their own strategies for dealing with the pressures of academic life. Their reluctance to discuss the issue is linked to the negative social meaning attributed to disability, and to the consequent fear of becoming stigmatized.

**Intersectionality**

In recent years, scholars have turned away from examination of single bases of oppression to take into account the intersection of multiple dimensions of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). In the case of disability, in addition to their disability-related differentness individuals are minoritized in other ways, then the potential for being othered gains strength. (The concept of minoritization emphasizes that when someone is othered on the basis of a specific attribute—such as race—there is in fact no deficit in the individual being oppressed.) For the purposes of this thesis, *intersectionality* refers to the relationship and overlap between invisible disabilities and various other kinds of minoritization. In this regard, Omansky Gordon and Rosenblum (2001) ask a pertinent question: “What does disability look like when its context is the social construction of race, sex and gender, and sexual orientation categories?” (p. 6). Yuval-Davis (2015) sees intersectionality “as a theoretical framework that can encompass different kinds of inequalities, simultaneously (ontologically), but enmeshed (concretely)” (p. 91). In the same vein, Crenshaw (1989) underlines the importance of paying attention to how a combination of minoritized identities delineates some people’s experiences. Her work focuses on the experiences of Black women, who “are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (p. 140). As a clear result of the fear of being othered, faculty members’ perceived need to be resourceful and self-reliant “can itself be taken as evidence that the university is not set up to routinely accommodate their needs” (p. 166) with respect to disability. Bolt (2016) sums this up: “There is a tendency for many academics to remain rather aloof to disability” (p. 2). Such aloofness is evidence of the scant efforts of higher education institutions to include disability in their efforts toward *diversity*. Mitchell (2016) offers a critique of prevalent diversity discourses by arguing that “diversity is an increasingly weakened concept emerging from neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism, [which has] failed to achieve a meaningful degree of inclusion for members of historically excluded, marginalized and underrepresented populations” (p. 9). Moreover, it has tended to “diffuse the threat of minority activism in the academy by offering it a meager form of incorporation” (p. 9).
The Utility of Medical Labels and References

Finally—to make clear what is implicit throughout the foregoing—I would like to present my rationale for not omitting the medical terms that my research participants regularly use to describe themselves. First and foremost, while I have tried to avoid unnecessarily using modifiers that highlight the medicalized view of their diversability, this is nevertheless how many of these academics self-identified upon our initial contact. In many cases, I understood this choice to be an act of defiance or resistance toward prevailing views of disability. And for all of my interviewees, the nomenclature they use in their individual narratives helps to document the degree to which they have internalized negative views of disability. We can also infer a desire to make the potential stigmatization they face in academe more evident—in contrast to individuals who resist calling themselves “persons with disabilities” or, on the other hand, those who have become advocates, expressing their differentness with pride. Had I neglected to repeat the medicalized terms I heard in my interviewees’ stories, I would have missed an important opportunity—and, in my view, a responsibility—to expose the pervasiveness of the medicalized view of differentness. I would have negated the impact of such terms on the lives of these individuals, which would undermine the ultimate goal of this work. My decision to replicate the medical terms these academics use in sharing their stories was therefore not a casual one. Indeed, it was strategic—a case of “telling it like it is” in the words of those directly affected, and leaving no doubt as to the underlying problems and contradictions that medical labels often mask.

As I observed the discourses used by my 16 research participants, I kept in mind a few questions proposed by Burstow (2013). Although she refers specifically to analyzing the discourse of psychiatric survivors, those questions may well be applied within the context of any situation involving oppression of individuals whose differentnesses are easily medicalized.

What are the subtext and context of my language? Whose discourse are we adopting? In whose interest is it? What does it make visible, and what does it remove from sight? Who does it touch and how? In the long run, does this terminology lend greater credibility to the medical model and/or institutional psychiatry? Where our words appear to support psychiatry, do we have good reason for using them regardless? A good
*enough* [original italics] reason? Does the trade-off that looked acceptable yesterday still look good today? (p. 187).

It is my hope that this brief explanation of the language I have used throughout my thesis will foster a deeper appreciation for the insights I believe my findings reveal.
Chapter 3
Literature Review

Introduction

The following literature review sheds light on several recurrent themes in disability studies. In the first section, I look at the scholarly literature examining problems in establishing standards of performance for professors pursuing tenure and promotion. I also explore the literature on how power operates in kairotic spaces to impose discipline upon diversable faculty. This leads to a discussion about the situation of precarious faculty, including those who are diversable. In the second section, I review the literature on disability discourses; social and psychological interpretations of the self with disability; the literature on power relations; and the experience of stigmatization that can potentially prevent faculty from revealing their impairments, sustaining a culture of avoidance in the academy. Next, I introduce the ideas of several thinkers on the lip service that higher education institutions pay toward issues of diversity, particularly with regard to disability policy and curriculum. Finally, I close with a review of a small number of studies on the possibilities for paradigmatic change.

The Neoliberal University

With its focus on performativity and productivity, the neoliberal university is described in the literature as an ableist environment that mainly creates negative experiences for professors with disabilities. For a clearer picture of what is behind the avoidance phenomenon discussed in chapter 1, it is helpful to look at contemporary critiques of the neoliberal university and analyses of how working as a professor in a contemporary liberal market economy—such as the US, Canada or the UK—differs from the experiences offered by earlier models of academia.

Performativity and the Tenure Stream

There is a large body of research exploring how discrimination functions with respect to gender (Acker, Webber & Smyth, 2012), race (Monture, 2009), race and gender (Rajagopal, 2002) and sexuality (Wiegman, 2000). This literature deals directly with the challenges facing women and other minoritized groups in moving from contingent faculty status to the tenure stream, as well as the subsequent steps toward tenure and the review process for achieving full professorship.
My research on disability highlights important questions to be addressed that are similar to those examined in this critical literature around gender and race.

Davies and Bansel (2005) critique global higher education today by pointing out how faculty are “regulated and controlled through technologies of management such as the assignment of numbers of hours to be allocated to teaching, research and administration” (pp. 48-49). The concept of performativity is important in this new regime. For example, in discussing Butler’s work, Puttick (2017) emphasizes the significance of “performativity as embodied, linguistic acts performed repetitively as ritual with normalising effects” (p. 50). Respectable academics are expected to be “energetic, have high concentration abilities, be alert to adapt to changing conditions, and be able to withstand physical, mental or interactive stress in good humour” (Wendell, 2001, p. 27). Irrespective of their position in the academy, scholars “must fit their effort within the allocated hours while still coming up with a performance that will be rated against others’ performances and judged against criteria through which it will be deemed to be ‘satisfactory,’ ‘excellent’ or ‘outstanding.’” (p. 49)—or else their jobs may be in jeopardy. In short:

Academic “products” are valued in dollar terms through the various technologies of institutional funding where “products” include such “measurables” as student completions of their degrees, articles and books published in designated outlets and the winning of external research grants. Neoliberal time thus ties individuals and organisations to the chaos of the market, requires never-ending flexibility in response to that market and, in the interests of driving those individuals and institutions in directions favorable to the market, it regulates, controls, standardises and pressurises (p. 49).

This relentless burden on professors reflects a Darwinian process in which only those who adapt survive: the impact of stress on their psychological and physical health is seen as anything but negligible (Berg, 2016). In such a scenario, “tenure is a refuge for a small minority. It has become an asylum for talented, hardworking individuals who are, above all, very lucky” (Berlinerblau, 2016, ¶ 8). The upper strata, according to Welch (1997), are also privileged, especially with respect to the ability to travel and do research. Ball (2015) describes the effects of a shrinking tenure stream:
The ivory tower is being flattened by neo-liberal bulldozers to make way for a fast-fact [higher education] franchise in which all knowledge has its price. . . . [Moreover,] it has become the rampant breeding ground of jobbing academics in search of the next “big idea” (p. 260).

Under far-from-ideal operational conditions, faced with global competition for student enrolments, declining government funding and increased demand for student financial aid (Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez & Muth, 2010), university administrators find they have little choice but to impose high performance demands on faculty and staff. Only by presenting evidence of measurable outcomes from their work (e.g., number of publications or top ratings in student surveys) can professors realistically expect to rise in their careers. Ball (2015) describes how the “traditional” meanings attributed to learning, teaching and conducting research have been transformed in the neoliberal era:

The practices and technologies to which I refer include annual reviews, league tables and rankings, impact narratives, CVs, performance-related pay, the granting of degree-awarding powers to commercial providers, off-shore campuses, student fees, expanding overseas recruitment, and Public-Private Partnerships of all sorts (p. 258).

In short, today’s academy creates and nurtures individualism—and even greed—amongst scholars. As Ball and Olmedo (2013) point out, “we are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and, if we do not, we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible” (p. 88).

As faculty members gain recognition among their peers for being highly productive, the hope is that they will be all the more motivated to remain immersed in performativity (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Moreover, regardless of the difficulties they face in achieving anticipated results, successfully meeting or exceeding performance standards accentuates their “sense of control over the environment” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 233), along with their sense of self-efficacy. Even if their resolutions and actions on the job conflict with their personal ethics and professional identities, faculty members are constantly obliged to embrace or reject “different [power] discourses and move through a shifting academic topography” (Martimianakis & Muzzin, 2015, p. 1456). They become the subjects of performativity practices. They feel pressured to conceal any struggles they may have related to visible and/or invisible impairments—because they operate in a scholarly environment that has little if any tolerance for
performers who are deemed incapable of meeting the institution’s quality standards. This subjectification, according to Vick and Martinez (2011) “is not abstract, or located ‘in the mind’, but embodied” (p. 181). This embodiment of scholarly performative practices (or, more simply, “academizing”) leads to “a struggle over and against what it is we have become, what it is that we do not want to be” (Ball, 2016, p. 1143).

Fox (2016) warns that “bureaucratic structures [such as tenure] that privilege normalized faculty bodies and self-perpetuating expectations of professional accomplishment . . . create academic atmospheres in which it would never occur to anyone to privilege disability as presence, let alone a critical paradigm” (p. 122). Mitchell (2016) extends Fox’s ideas in suggesting that “people with cognitive disabilities … are by default excluded from the prized capacity of hyper-rationality celebrated at all universities” (p. 15). Nevertheless, as Kroll (2013), a Forbes magazine contributor, explains, “a professor with tenure who is deemed unproductive by whatever anonymous review can certainly be made to wish they didn’t have a job” (“Tenure is no longer,” ¶ 1). Indeed, the literature suggests that tenure has ceased to bring professors a deep sense of entitlement and unconditional “supremacy”—an issue that will be discussed again later in this chapter.

Power and Kairotic Interactions in the Informal Academy

Price (2014) draws attention to the casual conversations that happen in informal settings—by the coffee machine in a campus building, for instance, or during a break between sessions at a conference. These unplanned exchanges of ideas are referred to as “kairotic” spaces—from kairos, the Greek word for opportunity. According to Price, kairotic environments promote the subjectification of individuals (Foucault, 1977) inasmuch they nurture interactions that create ideal conditions for the exertion of peer pressure through reinforcement of an ableist scholarly discourse. Kairotic spaces are dominated by leaders whose formal roles confer power, and also by influential individuals who nurture the informal performativity that most members of the institution routinely share, thus becoming “more manageable for administrative purposes” (Chia, 1995, p. 599). A group of like-minded people can exercise significant “pastoral” authority (Foucault, 2000) to ensure its members stay on course. A Foucauldian approach would argue that kairotic performativity perpetuates the elitist subjectifications of academia, which are designed to bring “salvation” to the individuals who follow them in the hope of remaining part of this singular community. In seeking to assign meaning to their own scholarly identities,
members of the academy subject themselves to discursive practices and routine “doings” (Bergström & Knights, 2006) that reflect relations of power and knowledge.

Berg (2016) argues that such fast-paced and performative culture of the neoliberal academy inevitably brings occupational stress to professors, who find themselves perpetually trying to keep up with the harsh job demands. However:

The academy as a whole has been reticent in acknowledging its stress; to talk about the body and emotion goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason. Furthermore, the long-standing perception of professors as a leisured class has produced a defensive culture of guilt and overwork. We are busy countering the widely held notion of the ivory tower (p. 2).

If scholars show evidence of being overtaxed by academic life, the kairotic space becomes crowded with disapproval, gossip and the exercise of what Boxall and Beresford (2016) call “antilocution”—that is, “negative comments about a person or group of people spoken when that person or group is not present, which creates an environment in which prejudice is seen as acceptable” (p. 93). In an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Green (2015) explains:

In academe, there’s a traffic in gossip. It gathers behind closed doors before meetings and runs through the hallways afterward. Academic gossip happens within groups and across them. Gossip is often about who said what, who liked which job candidate, who got an award or didn’t, who blocked some initiative that others wanted, or who said something negative about someone else (¶ 5).

It is easy to imagine how informal or formal groups might police these subjectifications and performances at the institutional level. From the perspective of disability scholars, the different must be ousted—even if only tacitly—from the community, lest they lower the standards and harm the public image of the “dignified” professoriate. Any differentness that contradicts the burnished image of the professoriate can be rejected, as demonstrated by the everyday disability-averse practices of the academy. Disability scholar Oswal (2016) urges us to recognize the fact that as members of the human race we academics also bring to the university a baggage of prejudices against disability—the prejudices we began to learn
from early childhood, and prejudices that effect [sic] all our conscious and subconscious thinking about the disabled people around us (p. 25).

The principles and interests that surface in the daily interactions within kairotic spaces such as blogs are related to the mainstream group’s subjectification. Identity issues are intrinsically related to academic power relations (Foucault, 1977). Molloy and Nario-Redmond (2007) point to this idea when they explain the visceral need of majority groups to reject the different:

Only when group membership is considered of central importance to the self should those who violate valued standards appear threatening. . . . Individuals react to such in-group threats by accentuating the differences between themselves and deviant others on relevant dimensions,… [so they] can effectively maintain the perception that their most valued groups are comprised of highly cohesive and similar others (pp. 257–258).

How is this discrimination manifested? According to Titchkosky (2003), “the presence of disabled people in a university environment represents, for some, the requirement of additional expense and reorganization” (p. 117). Simple routines and ways of academizing are reflective of worldviews that essentially ignore the needs of the different. Perry (2015) emphasizes how easily the informal replication of an institutional setting can make the experiences of scholars with disabilities more onerous:

The core problem . . . is that conferences involve a set of normative activities that most academics take for granted and feel are mandatory to the enterprise. We go to new spaces, whether campuses, hotels, or convention centers, and learn to navigate them quickly in order to find exhibit halls, presentation spaces, food, lodging, and restrooms. We often must move quickly from location to location. In sessions, we sit in rooms often with bad lighting (either very dim or extremely bright). We listen to talks, process information aurally, and look at images. We engage in both planned and impromptu social networking, often over food or drinks, making our way through loud and crowded reception areas (¶ 4).

Such a hastily conceived, non-inclusive and hard-to-navigate scholarly milieu normalizes ableism. The best academics are deemed to be those who display a high level of energy (Siebers, 2014), always showing their strong disposition, readiness to chat with colleagues and talent for “entertaining” their students. But
what of the teacher who has chronic fatigue? What of the teacher who is manic? What of the teacher who has agoraphobia or panic disorder? … What of the teacher who has depression? What of the teacher who has memory loss? What of the teacher who has anxiety and cannot tolerate department meetings or academic conferences? (p. xiii).

As this line of argument suggests, unwritten rules (although “everybody knows them”) can be disabling for a professor who has an invisible impairment—and the situation becomes even more exasperating if the faculty member does not wish to disclose it. This is because “normalizing performances,” as an aspect of gatekeeping, have a formidable power to ostracize, punish or even blackmail individuals who do not wish to publicly reveal a stigmatizable identity (Goffman, 1986). The literature reviewed so far on faculty members and disability mentions tenure hurdles, but not as they affect those who comprise what has come to be called the precariat within academe. These academics are the focus of a growing body of literature, but disability is notably overlooked as a topic of inquiry.

Tenure and Contingent Faculty Both Face Stress

In pursuing the neoliberal goal of reducing expenses, higher education administrators have disrupted the tenure system by increasingly using contract faculty (also referred to as adjuncts, contingents, part-timers and “just-in-time” instructors, among many pejorative labels). Hiring these “precarious knowledge workers” (Muzzin & Martimianakis, 2016) can be a compelling strategy for the leaders of universities and colleges. Stenerson et al. (2010) explain that contingent faculty usually bring up-to-date and relevant examples from their “real jobs” to the classroom, which is highly attractive to the many students who crave relevant skills and knowledge to succeed in a cutthroat job market, which itself is precarious (Vosko, 2006).

Kezar and Maxey (2013) incisively summarize the current state of North American postsecondary education from the perspective of the growing cadre of non-tenure stream faculty:

The recent recession and declining state and endowment revenues have placed substantial strains on institutions, causing governing boards to re-evaluate priorities and make difficult budgetary decisions in coordination with other leaders on their campuses.
Critiques of employing precarious faculty are anchored mainly in the view that this practice carries “serious implications for [faculty’s] working conditions, [their] compensation, and the future of collegial governance” (Pimlott, 2014, ¶ 4). Moreover, a subset of contingent faculty are “talented teachers [who] are forced to cope with low pay, working across multiple campuses and institutions (a consequence of poverty-level wages), a lack of real academic freedom, no job security, no office space, no benefits, and no pension plan” (“The threat”, ¶ 1). Arguably, the replacement of tenured and tenure-track faculty by a growing number of contingents significantly compromises professional autonomy and any strength they might have in negotiating for better work conditions (Muzzin & Martimianakis, 2016). As I noted above, in other words, the oppressive neoliberal university system supports the stratification of faculty, with only a select group occupying the highest rankings of pay, power, and prestige. For Ball (2015), neoliberalism creates a moral issue: one’s failure becomes someone else’s reason for celebration. Acquiescence to subjugated performativity as the only way to achieve one’s goals can seem to be a sensible form of practicing successful scholarship.

Within the literature on precarious faculty there are critiques by former and current contingent faculty (Muzzin, 2008; Paul, 2015; Webber, 2008) arguing that for higher education faculty members with no job security, the quest for a tenure-stream position has become more challenging. Members of this casual workforce must resign themselves to the idea of working part-time with no guarantee that they will be ever hired. For academic institutions, meanwhile, the practice of hiring adjuncts becomes increasingly appealing, given that: a) they are paid very little (which may make it necessary to take on several simultaneous teaching contracts), and b) about 80% of adjuncts do not receive any kind of health insurance (Edmonds, 2015).

Whatever the intention behind the steady increase in non-tenure-track positions, “in which [teaching] faculty are hired for one quarter or semester at a time” (p. 1), the level of stress experienced by affected faculty members is predictably higher for those who are untenured and consequently face greater risk of recurring unemployment or underemployment. These academics typically feel trapped in their jobs and forced to succumb to harsh demands (Hanna, Paul & Vethamany-Globus, 2002). They may feel firsthand effects of decisions made by administrators to restructure their schools into more research-focused institutions in order to
attract more funding (O’Connor, Greene, Good & Zhang, 2011). Contingent faculty members must also meet elevated expectations to continue renewing their contracts. Yet at the same time they face marginalization because they are not part of the research elite; they are “merely” teachers, with little (if any) control over their fates while working under precarious conditions—and with few chances of participating in university governance. According to Carey (2012), tenured professors at prominent research-oriented institutions are usually paid to put their intellectual passions into practice, whereas “the best teachers are thanked for their service (or not) and asked if they wouldn’t mind taking on a fifth course next semester” (¶ 4)—which they are likely to accept, given that they often need the additional compensation (Edmonds, 2015).

This dire scenario only becomes worse for non-tenured academics who also happen to have non-visible disabilities—which, paradoxically, may be caused by the stress of working under such precarious circumstances. Indeed, for some the problem can become unbearable. Beretz (2003) offers cause for deep concern when she points out:

Tenured and untenured faculty alike are often pressured to resign. Most cannot do so, since that could cut off access to medical care. Those who leave their jobs find it extremely difficult to get another. Those who retain their jobs experience a delay, or decrease, in productivity that affects promotion, salary, or professional reputation (¶ 3).

Clearly, this focus on the hardships imposed on contingent faculty does not mean they are the only ones who feel the effect of neoliberalism in universities. Even for a tenured faculty member, prestige alone is not enough to make academic life a professional dream come true. For all faculty members who find themselves faced with the unending pressure of academic obligations, it takes constant effort and dedication to construct a positive reputation and a confident sense of self. “Academics are confronting the pressures of competing demands, balancing teaching with research or opting for one or the other and attempting to balance traditional workloads and pressures with the new pressure of online delivery” (Briggs, 2005, p. 256).

In Canada, the literature suggests that, even though academics express satisfaction with their work experience (Gopaul, Jones, Weinrib, Metcalfe, Fisher, Gingras & Rubenson, 2016)—and in spite of any power that tenure may confer—building a solid academic reputation can be a stressful, arduous and, in many cases, demoralizing experience. Very few professors with disabilities succeed in building this kind of reputation in the eyes of the “learning-disabled
academy” (Oswal, 2016)—one that persists in nurturing the idealized image of intellectual superiority, cognitive dexterity and near-supernatural powers attributed to those who are deserving of tenure. June (2016) lists the “god-like” accomplishments that professors must master to become recognized as successful: “They have national, even international reputations for ground-breaking research and scholarship. They write lauded books, win coveted prizes, draw graduate-student disciples. Their institutions and their disciplines tap them as leaders” (¶1). Thus, it is not uncommon for those who feel “confused, daunted, overworked, or beset with post-tenure inertia” (¶6) to give up the fight, coming to terms with the unlikelihood of ever achieving full professorial status, and doubting they will be successful.

**Discourses of Disability, Subjectification, Identity and Intersectionality**

The literature that I have reviewed can be split into two genres: critiques of the academic environment and institutions, and explorations of the trauma imposed upon the human beings within them. For example, Hoffmann and Flamich (2016) express their frustration over the predominantly negative attributions to disability by asking: “How many lives does it take to make people believe we are not pathetic, sinister, laughable, nonsexual, incapable of full participation, and so on?” (p. 80). They suggest that for paradigm change to take place and society to become more inclusive, personal narratives of disability must receive attention. The views of Beattie, Dobson, Thornton and Hegge (2007) are similar; and they add that counter-narratives help to debunk stereotypes and change radical, often fallacious worldviews. Counter-narratives have value in their ability to changing societal discourses. Below I review the literature on dominant discourses of disability and counter-narratives.

**Discourses of Disability, Embodiment and Personal Counter-Narratives**

In this section, I italicize words that medicalize or suggest that faculty with disabilities have inherent defects. Dominant discourses of *disability* most often refer to physiological imperfections. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (n.d.), for instance, invokes words such as *dysfunction, infirmity, malformation, disorder and condition* in its definition of disability. Hoffmann and Flamich (2016) speak of the value our society attributes to those who “overcome
[tragedy] through superhuman effort, rather than [providing] a set of cultural conditions that could be changed to accommodate a wide range of individuals with similar impairments” (p. 84).

Most disability studies in the literature focus on the pathology and dysfunction associated with “psychiatric disability, mental illness, cognitive disability, intellectual disability, mental health service user (or consumer), neurodiversity, neuroatypical, psychiatric system survivor, crazy and mad” (Price, 2013, p. 298). The power of the traditional, authoritative medical discourse is so prevalent in Western culture that language users seem to have little choice but to assimilate it in an act of subjectification (Yazbeck, McVilly & Parmenter, 2004). Coogan and Cluley (2016) discuss the non-neutrality of language, noting how the discourses people take up in their daily interactions “reveal issues of politics, power, and resistance” (p. 107). In other words, language has the power to be disabling—a power inherent in a discourse that represents people’s impairments from a clinical, simplistic and monochromatic point of view. Regardless of what label may be applied, the salient issue, according to Garland-Thomson (2016), is that disability discourse conceptualizes the social identity and political status of persons with disabilities as individuals “for whom something has gone terribly wrong” (¶ 6). As Foucault (1967) pointed out, in this kind of discourse, disability is an unforgiving sentence for those who do not conform—physically, mentally or intellectually. Disability is a term that exposes “the merciless language of non-madness” (p. ix).

In contrast to conventionally negative discourses of disability, the social model of disability has become a counter-narrative by taking a different angle. As Williams and Mavin (2015) explain their support for shedding light on counter-narratives, from a social standpoint the problem lies not with an individual’s disability, but rather with a society that is unprepared and unreceptive to alternative ways of looking and being. Notwithstanding, such a counter-narrative is difficult to maintain for those who assert that the impairment still exists, regardless of any paradigmatic view of disability. For example, Shakespeare (2013) cautions social researchers regarding the suggestion that impairments are only problematic because of the oppressive character of society. As Anstey (2008) states:

No matter what perspective one takes on the phenomenon of disability, it must be acknowledged that some conditions may inherently produce limitations at the level of bodily functioning, social activities or participation (p. 235).
Therefore instead of focusing on the oppression inflicted upon individuals with disabilities by a toxic social environment, Williams and Mavin (2015) advance the concept of embodiment, which “moves the focus from an assumption of the body as a normal, finished and fixed entity to appreciating variances between bodies” (p. 129) and their intersubjective social interactions. This in turn allows us to understand how power relations unfold. Indeed, disability scholar L. J. Davis (2013) is emphatic in asserting that twenty-first-century discussions of human identity cannot neglect embodiment:

I want to indicate the complexity of the embodied identity. Bodies can be the sum of their biology; the signifying systems in the culture; the historical, social, political surround; the scientific defining points; the symptom pool; the technological add-ons all combined and yet differentiated (p. 7).

In discussing the ideas of Foucault, L. J. Davis (2002) produces a counter-narrative by observing that the attempt to achieve normalcy at all costs occurs in bio-cultural societies that assert control over the institutionalization of bodies, enforcing compliance to acceptable standards of both health and aesthetics. The visceral rejection suggested by the attitudes and behaviours of normals toward disability—or the mere suggestion of disability—becomes absurd, as Simon (2013) points out, particularly when counter-narratives are available. For example, one can recognize that all humans, without exception, are TABs: i.e., temporarily able-bodied. Or, in the words of Bolt (2016), “If we live long enough we all become disabled” (p. 1).

Identity, Disability and Disclosure

As noted above, in conventional disability discourse, an identity that diverges from general expectations can be “discreditable” (Goffman, 1986). Thus, many (though not all) persons with invisible disabilities, given a choice, prefer to keep their impairment to themselves, or at least far from the ears of those who might question the integrity and competence of the discloser (Williams & Mavin, 2015). The option to hide a disability is available to those who are, relatively speaking, “healthy disabled” (Wendell, 2001, p. 19)—i.e., for whom there is no evidence of any imminent reason for medical intervention. In other words, it is easier to avoid controversy by not disclosing. Titchkosky (2003) can attest to this: she has publicly revealed her dyslexia and describes having been seen as “lazy, forgetful, confusing and confused, even stupid, or … just a little quirky, original, eccentric, and easily distracted” (p. 11). N. A. Davis (2005)
adds that disclosure of an invisible disability incites the impulse in “righteous citizens . . . to play a vigilante role” (p. 211), as they caution against being bamboozled by fabricators who only want to take advantage of benefits that would otherwise not be accessible to them. Garfinkel’s writing (1956) colourfully describes how, as a matter of principle, these self-appointed judges must engage in policing the deviant.

Choosing how to interpret the experience of disability can be challenging for the person who has the impairment, inasmuch as acknowledging a disability requires an exercise in counter-narrative. Charmaz (1991), a symbolic interactionist, theorizes that, at first, our sense of self is directly connected to time and space in what we tend to see the moments of pain and discomfort brought on by an illness merely as brief interruptions in our lives—i.e., an inconvenience to our normal selves. She discusses how, at least in the beginning stages of “detecting” an impairment, individuals do not tend to self-identify as being disabled and assume they will be back to “feeling like themselves again”. According to Charmaz (1991), the perception of the severity or chronicity of our impairment is put to the test as soon as we try to resume our daily tasks. Until that moment, “one cannot know what having an altered body is like” (p. 21). Using micro-data collected from men and women, Charmaz traces a process by which the sense of who we are is redefined. Our discernment as to whether and for how long we can still perform what used to be routine tasks—as well as how far we can move from the comfort of our homes without running the risk of needing assistance from other people or even medical help—is part of this process.

Charmaz (1991) posits, from a social-psychological point of view, that to be satisfied with the image we project “out there,” we need to “control symptoms and to prevent further symptoms and problems from developing. In turn, symptom control often translates into constant effort. Frequently, social, rather than health-, reasons spur the effort” (p. 45). Mitchell (2016) adds that in the case of academe, “the university becomes a place of intellectual cosmopolitanism with diagnostic authority as the shared foundation constituted by professional identities of normalization” (p. 12); as a result, faculty feel the pressure to make any diversability-related counter-narratives evident so as to debunk the prevalent hegemonic cultures (Valentine, 2007) that exclude differentness.
Intersectionality and Institutions

Though the literature on intersectionality is still small, it is easy to imagine that constructing counter-narratives is even more daunting for a faculty member who is, for example, racialized or who fares ageism and/or sexism. As defined by Fox (2016), intersectionality is a “coalition among identities” (p. 129). As discussed in chapter 2, for the purposes of the present study, the term refers to the relationship and overlap between invisible disabilities and various other social conditions surrounding individuals who are likely to be oppressed and face discriminatory behaviour from others. Moreover, in thinking about intersectionality, researchers are addressing “the question of how multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time, for example, the inter-connectedness of race, class, gender, disability, and so on” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278). I explore these constructed identities in my research and present counter-narratives from various sources.

Contemporary studies of faculty and oppressive work conditions focus on the stress faced by minority faculty members such as women and people of colour (Hendel & Horn, 2008). June (2016) explains that “the path that scholars must follow to join [the] ranks [of the professorial elite] is hardly clear-cut, which can make it more difficult for some people—particularly women and minorities—to get there (¶ 2). In L. J. Davis’ view (2002), there is nothing worse, when it comes to oppression, than being “a disabled female, Third World, homosexual, woman of colour” (p. 29). Multiracial scholar Lightfoot (2007) asserts that “it is naïve to ignore the negative experiences that people with disabilities have in daily life, especially when disability combines with a non-majority racial status” (p. 102).

When we look at women in academe—setting aside the fact “woman” as a concept is problematic in postmodernism when it is used strategically (Weedon, 1997)—the literature reveals that female scholars are generally expected to do more work than men. If we then apply a lens of intersectionality, it appears that most women faculty members who are, for example, indigenous or people colour find themselves, unlike white male professors, spending much of their time advising and mentoring students (Muzzin, Bachynskyj, Zankowicz, Vinci & Meaghan, 2009).
Institutional Counter-Narratives

As previously noted, the body of quantitative research on the experiences of people with disabilities has grown in recent years. Statistics may seem to provide a picture of the disability experience around the world. However, when it comes to scholars with disabilities, especially those that are not easily detectable, a statistical approach is deficient, and the volume of research is sparse. Barden (2016) sees an abundance of assumptions and limitations in the deficit discourse related to disability; hence the need for a more proactive dissemination of counter-narratives. Indeed, Wiegman (2000), who gives a personal narrative of her experiences as a lesbian in the academy, remarks: “The [labour] we do in the academy is so profoundly untheorized and the complexities of the relationship between traditional departments and identity-based sites so markedly undermanaged that the project of articulating these issues does matter” (p. 80).

A major counter-narrative that has emerged in the literature is that negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities can be interpreted as a sign of an irremediable impairment in the academy itself. Indeed, Petrie (2016) describes institutions as being “crippled inside” (p. 40), given that they still remain oblivious, despite the supposed enlightenment of academics, to how the postures and decisions of leadership are usually tendentious toward conventional and narrow-minded paradigms, representing disability as a depletion of talent and competence. Moreover, there is a genuine irony in the common purblind worldview of disability that permeates the academy, which “says as much about normalizing / non-disabled society as it does about the constitution of disability” (p. 34). Petrie goes on to observe:

Disabled employees may be categorised as deeply problematic; . . . [and] the authority of people who are disabled can be profoundly challenging and disruptive for institutional policy makers who are not disabled. I propose a counter-narrative in which disability metaphors may expose organisational learning difficulties, furnish disabled employees and activists with a framework to contest disability inequality, and counter the academy’s avoidance of meaningful engagement with disabled people and equality legislation. … Dominant narratives [trap] the organisation in an impaired construction of reality (p. 33).
Utilizing counter-narratives to combat flawed views of disability should be helpful. But, as earlier suggested in the discussion about disclosure, finding academics who are willing to share their stories is not an easy task; the powerful deficit-related discourse of disability can be too damaging to one’s reputation; hence their hesitation to “come out.” Avinger, Croake and Miller (2007) shed light on a paradox within the anxiety experienced by academics who feel they should not disclose their impairments: “Despite their disabilities, they are able to do their work and often excel—publishing scholarly articles, editing books, developing new courses and course materials, and presenting at professional conferences” (p. 202).

To avoid being stigmatized and ultimately facing financial struggles (Reevy & Deason, 2014), faculty members with disabilities often use strategies intended to keep their differentness out of the spotlight: they focus on quietly adding to the construction of academic knowledge. As minoritized groups concentrate on their work—staying faithful to the reason why most decided to become scholars in the first place—they help to promote awareness that there are multiple ways of knowing the world. An example is the remarkable contributions of several marginalized faculty members to academe and society—among them the recent collection edited by David Bolt and Claire Penketh (2016), who are cited frequently in this review. These disability theorists have challenged the able-normativity of the professoriate through constructing institutional counter-narratives.

**Policy and Paradigm Issues**

Despite the call for counter-narratives, the lack of “proof” for the presence of disability in faculty members is accompanied by a seemingly unwavering institutional avoidance of acknowledging its existence. Mitchell (2016), in analyzing the literature on invisible disability and the avoidance of disability as topics of research, concludes that in the neoliberal university, the institutional commitment to equity is “largely rhetorical” (p. 13). Burdett (2016) is another scholar who points out the critical avoidance of disability in the academy, noting how it is a peripheral issue about which “no comment needs to be made, and into which no further investigation is required” (p. 143). And so, the inclusion of disability in an institution’s diversity-related activities is viewed as an unattractive proposition—a paradox, from Mitchell’s perspective (2016), given that “neoliberal universities champion practices of flexible inclusionism as a primary accomplishment of a progressive, contemporary higher education.”
Moreover, in Bolt’s view (2016), “the manifestly academic avoidance of disability studies is indicative of social prejudice” (p. 2).

The work of Bolt and Penketh (2016) highlights the shortcomings of UK disability legislation. They document the ineffectiveness of diversity and disability policies in the academy and show how accepted curricula fail to create disability awareness. According to Oswal (2016), there seems to be little or no interest among universities in creating a universally designed environment for all faculty members:

Universal design that fits all is rarely considered as an option to restructure such a faculty member’s workload so that he or she may continue to contribute to the university through a modified work regimen. Such an institutional attitude reflects disregard for different forms of participation and points toward the ruthless rigidity of academic policies and procedures designed for an ableist community. Some of these attitudes, I accept, are congruent with the elitist nature of the American university itself (p. 26).

Even as efforts to foster diversity seem to gain visibility in universities and colleges, still, for many of these professors revelation can be risky. As Bolt (2016) puts it:

In the academy we are becoming increasingly appreciative of access requirements, which are essential, but recognising the foundational achievements, ideas, knowledge, influence, experience, and/or authority of those of us who identify or are labelled as disabled proves profoundly difficult for some non-disabled colleagues, as though a fundamental order would be disrupted (p. 2).

In other words, it is not clear how we can expect the voices of faculty with disabilities to be heard without negative repercussions.

At the national policy level, in his critique of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) disability report—backed by Margaret Price’s “eight-point general-purpose, generative heuristic that allows an understanding of the policy discourse from the perspective of disability studies” (p. 22)—Oswal (2016) explains that the AAUP felt a need to update its 1968 document to bring it into line with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and other disability legislation. However, in conducting a discourse analysis from the perspective of disability studies, he notes that “AAUP was not only trying to fill a disability policy gap but also assisting
the university administrations in these times of fiscal austerity by outlining a systematic legal path for relieving this aging disabled faculty from university service” (p. 23). Citing government legislation, Oswal (2016) points out that hiring decisions fall to university administrators rather than faculty with disabilities. Furthermore, the document was produced without the input of AAUP members, particularly those with disabilities, and “seems to be the work of legal personnel” (p. 23) who made no provisions for inviting feedback. The policy, he points out, pays no heed to the situation of blind faculty in “our New Media-obsessed university” (p. 24); and while it visits and revisits mental disability issues, it never broaches the topic of intersectionality, which is so vital in contemporary equity studies.

In the critical literature on diversity, there is general agreement that, when it comes to diversity efforts at the institutional level, the chief concern of higher education institutions is apparently to avoid “rocking the boat”—either by breaking the law or not having a positive image of inclusionism in the public eye. Therefore they pay “lip service” to diversity, only devoting attention to legal requirements and the provision of physical accommodations for faculty with visible disabilities—a complaint also made by scholars facing racial discrimination (Ahmed, 2009; James, 2012). Oswal (2016) argues that there have been no significant efforts toward the social inclusion of faculty with disabilities. This is not surprising, given that the AAUP report refers to academics with disabilities as if they are not part of the general faculty population: “The disabled faculty remain objectified, as the authors explain, to the administrators, the policies and procedures to be worked upon these outsiders” (p. 26). Faculty with disabilities are not referred to as “colleagues.” Oswal (2016) also contends that in this era of “disposable” faculty, the neoliberal university allows no room for a scholar who shows signs of diversability for any cause.

Kroll (2013) links present-day neoliberalism in the academy to policies and practices affecting even “the previously untouchables”—i.e., tenured professors. Most North American universities now have more strict post-tenure job evaluations, which means “a professor with tenure who is deemed unproductive by whatever anonymous review can certainly be made to wish they didn’t have a job” ("'Tenure' is no longer," ¶ 1). Clearly, he or she is not free from the stress and anxiety that occur when performativity is fully normalized in the higher education environment. We know little about the consequences of stress on faculty with disabilities. However, to exemplify how the neoliberal university has brought an end to the “glorious” days of full
professorship, Colquhoun’s blog (2014) presents the compelling story of Professor Stefan Grimm of Imperial College, London, who committed suicide after being fired for not meeting the grant level of £200,000 per annum expected of a principal researcher. A month after his death, an email—either pre-set by Grimm himself or sent by someone he trusted—arrived in the inboxes of Imperial College community members:

On May 30th ’13 my boss, Prof Martin Wilkins, came into my office together with his PA and ask me what grants I had. After I enumerated them I was told that this was not enough and that I had to leave the College within one year—“max” as he said. He made it clear that he was acting on behalf of . . . the then head of the Department of Medicine, and told me that I would have a meeting with him [and was] soon to be sacked. Without any further comment he left my office. It was only then that I realized that he did not even have the courtesy to close the door of my office when he delivered this message. When I turned around the corner I saw a student who seems [sic] to have overheard the conversation looking at me in utter horror. . . . Why does a Professor have to be treated like that? One of my colleagues here at the College whom I told my story looked at me, there was a silence, and then said: “Yes, they treat us like sh*t.”

To strengthen Colquhoun’s argument, Berg, Huijbens and Larsen (2016) question the unnecessary death by suicide of this British scholar—which provides a fitting conclusion to this section:

Why might we care about this? Perhaps the recent death of [this professor] provides a particularly graphic example of the impact that rising levels of anxiety and stress are having in the academy. It also illustrates how that stress is linked directly to systems of performance assessment (p. 169).

Paradigm Shift, Accommodations and the Role of Key Leaders

Disability scholars insist that it will require nothing less than a paradigmatic change to address the problems raised here. N. A. Davis (2005) discusses the difficulty that most people encounter in trying to change their worldviews:
The human paradigm that we embrace underwrites our attaching so much importance to meeting able-bodied standards that many of us are willing not only to forgo but also to jeopardize the other things we value highly merely to appear to meet them (p. 60).

As Kerschbaum and Price (2014) observe, even when the formal diagnosis of a disability is disclosed, many employers are “disability illiterate” and do not know what to do with the information: “Few people will know what to do or how to respond to build greater access, accommodation, and support” (¶ 3). Oswal (2016) expands on this thought by emphasizing that there are virtually no meaningful leadership initiatives to engage individuals with disabilities in this type of conversation.

It seems ironic, at a time when universities are competing with one another for government grants and financial injections from the private sector—much of it aimed at funding research to improve the life of the overall community—that they appear to ignore the criticality of building a workplace that attracts and retains faculty with disabilities. Without question, professors’ job satisfaction must be a priority for postsecondary leaders. For Bozeman and Gaughan (2011), it is crucial for faculty members to feel they can fulfill their professional calling; it is also important for them to trust their administrators, receive due recognition and enjoy a healthy climate of collegiality with their peers.

Deaville (2012) points out that universities, despite good intentions, “have traditionally overlooked the learning and mental-health needs of graduate students and faculty, under the misguided belief that individuals who have attained a certain level of education and maturity should be able to take care of themselves” (¶ 4). In fact, universities seem unable to reconcile the idea of scholars with having any type of cognitive and/or mental diversability. The notion of a learning-disabled professor is simply an oxymoron. As Beretz (2003) asserts:

> Hidden disability presents formidable physical challenges. The heroic myth of academic stamina and the negative attitudes of one’s colleagues compound these challenges, often to an intolerable degree. Little shields an academic with a hidden disability from evaluations that perpetuate cultural prejudices. Structural impediments make the faculty member even more vulnerable (“Negative attitudes,” ¶ 5).

There continue, however, to be calls for social paradigmatic change. O’Donovan (2010) argues that postsecondary leaders need to fully embrace the intellectually diverse, to move beyond the
unidimensional view that persons with learning, mental and cognitive impairments cannot bring relevant and great value to the academy, particularly if their needs must be specially accommodated. In her view, we must find “new conceptions of how knowledge is generated” (p. 181). Petrie (2016) stresses that leadership is essential to the achievement of cultural change, particularly interpreting this leadership dynamic within recommendations to designate a senior manager with responsibility for disability equality; to encourage disabled people to be governors or trustees; and to recruit substantially more disabled staff in senior and strategic positions (p. 37).

As Beretz (2003) asserts, institutions of higher education “must be flexible enough to properly reflect the diverse challenges of hidden disabilities, but not so flexible as to leave a faculty member vulnerable to the prejudices of the people administering the guidelines” (Guidelines, Not Policy section, ¶ 9).

**Conclusion**

This literature review has examined the intersection between neoliberal practices in institutions of higher education and the presence of disability in the professoriate. In challenging economic times, the literature largely agrees that universities and colleges have come to rely more than ever on having dynamic and highly productive faculty members—or, using Butler’s perspective, faculty members who “perform.” Such individuals, through their visible capacity, talent and hard work, help their institutions be more financially sustainable by attracting substantial investment and donations. But the assessment of all faculty members’ productivity, regardless of their professorial ranking, is anchored in ableist values that often create obstacles for the disabled minority, who receive inequitable treatment and generally must work under conditions that prevent them from fully demonstrating their scholarly value.

I began this chapter by presenting the ideas of scholars who theorize about the able-performative culture of today’s university. Members of the professoriate are typically overworked owing to the harsh demands imposed by neoliberal practices in the academy. Consequently, many scholars may hesitate to convey to their peers and superiors that their work conditions could be hazardous to their health. They are concerned those in power may reach the opposite conclusion—that the discloser’s health is negatively affecting the quality of their work. This
discussion led me to the presentation of counter-narrative discourses celebrating the contributions of “intersectional” academics. Nevertheless, there still seems to be a growing need for scholarly investigations of hidden disabilities in academe that “collect more stories, analyze them, and undertake a survey of institutional policies” (Beretz, 2003, Guidelines, Not Policy section, ¶ 9)—particularly with regard to untenured faculty.

Last, I reviewed the limited literature on disability avoidance at an institutional level. Despite federal laws providing for the support of workers with health issues, any need for accommodation and/or time away from work tends to be short-circuited by able-normativity at the institutional level. Currently, any loss of time or productivity in the academy is severely frowned upon. It is time that universities and colleges took ownership of the problem and sought to create better work conditions for the academics affected. The growing effort to build disability awareness and counter-narratives represents a good beginning for the research presented here.
Chapter 4
Theoretical Considerations and Methods

Introduction

After my conversation with Fiona (discussed in chapter 1) about the importance of truly listening to and honouring people’s unique stories, I clarified my methodological strategy. I embraced what Luttrell (2000) calls a “good enough” approach to methodology, which considers “research decisions in terms of what is lost and what is gained, rather than what might be ideal. Accounting for these good enough decisions is . . . the nitty-gritty of researcher reflexivity” (p. 500). In the first section of this chapter, I explain how reflexivity inspired the postmodern-grounded theory approach adopted as the theoretical basis for this study. Then, in the next section, I describe my research methods by outlining a natural history of the insights that guided my reflections—followed by my explanation of the procedures taken prior, during and after my interviews with the 16 diversable professors. This includes details of how participants were recruited and how I dealt with issues such as confidentiality. The third section deals with the specifics of Clarke’s mapping technique as I applied it and analysis of my interview data.

Situational Analysis and Counter-Narrative

Pioneered by Adele Clarke (2005), Postmodern Grounded Theory/Situational Analysis (PGT/SA) focuses on the discourse that symbiotically creates, feeds and results from diverse social situations. Therefore social, historical, political, cultural and non-human contingencies that shape what each research participant perceives as the nature of his or her everyday existence become critical for the researcher’s analysis of data. Any piece of information collected from my research participants was deemed relevant, inasmuch as it reflected the manner in which these individuals negotiate their place within their complex surroundings. As Clarke (2005) puts it, “[i]f modernism emphasized universality, generalization, simplification, permanence, stability, wholeness, rationality, regularity, homogeneity, and sufficiency, then postmodernism has shifted emphases to partialities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation – complexities” (p. xxiv). In other words, the situation in which each actor finds himself or herself “becomes the ultimate unit of analysis, and understanding its elements [i.e., narrative, visual and
historical discourses] and their relations is the primary goal” (p. xxii). In her description of this approach, Clarke (2005) states:

Here the researcher becomes not only analyst and bricoleur but also a cartographer of sorts. Because the codes and categories of a particular analysis can be both generated and applied across the full range of possible data sources, the new mapping approaches are especially useful for what is being called multisite research (p. xxxvii).

The frequency of themes and categories represents the core of traditional grounded theory analysis. However, frequency is no longer as important from a postmodern perspective. In Clarke’s model, less attention is placed on the regularity with which certain themes come to the surface (although this is by no means ignored); instead, the focus is on how individual stories underpin the situation under scrutiny. The uniqueness of each actor is still a fundamental characteristic of PGT/SA—a point hugely important to me as a “reflexive researcher,” particularly after my conversation with Fiona. It was the messages conveyed through our conversations that became the basis for illustrating the contextual circumstances surrounding the diversable academics I interviewed. My line of thinking coincided with Luttrell’s (2000), in that I tried as much as possible to pay “close attention to the structure, coherence, and [particularly] discourse forms” (p. 503) of the professors who participated in my research. Congruent with this approach, Foucault (1967) encourages us to escape the quest for certainties and look for meanings in the use of discourse and in the subjectivities/subjectifications that accompany it. When we analyze discourse in light of the intricacies of linguistics and the articulation of thought, we begin to better understand existence within a world of power and submission (Clarke, 2005). For Thomas (2012), there is not much use in generalizing theory and practice in educational research. “For educators and their worlds, it is the culture of the present, a culture of doing, of practice, that needs to form our laboratory” (p. 35). In the case of this research, as mentioned in chapter 1, how the everyday experiences of diversable faculty members are told—or how their narratives are constructed—can bring helpful insights about forces at play within the academy. Moreover, paying close attention to predominant disability/ableist discourses is helpful in defining the forces that oppress academics with visible and invisible impairments. This foundation, coupled with a thorough examination of any nonhuman contingencies that mould the environment of those who employ a given discourse, must be considered in research and subsequent analysis. This is the main premise advocated by practitioners of PGT/SA. For
example, concepts that emerged from the content of my interviews, such as neoliberalism and the culture of disability avoidance, are critical details—nonhuman contingencies—that shape the experiences of diversable faculty members, particularly those who do not have tenure.

Departing from Strauss and Corbin’s focus on human action, Clarke (2005) insists that to fully study a situation, discourse and contextual circumstances must also be taken into account. The related experiences serve as “a particular representation given in context and understood in that context” (Thomas, 2012, p. 43). This is the basis of situational analysis in PGT/SA. And by seeking coherence in all of the interviews—which Luttrell (2000) also emphasizes—I was better able to understand how the macro-narrative affected the micro-narratives of these faculty members.

In line with the kinds of questions posed by Burstow (2013)—referenced at the conclusion of chapter 2—a researcher creates what Clarke calls situational maps through a set of fundamental interrogative steps. Clarke (2005) describes the process:

- What are the discourses in the broader situation? Who (individually and collectively) is involved (supportive, opposed, providing knowledge, materials, money, what else?) in producing these discourses? What and who do these discourses construct? How? What and whom are they in dialogue with/about? What and who do these discourses render invisible? How? What material things—nonhuman elements—are involved in the discourse? How are they constructed? How do they configure the human actors? Were there implicated/silent actors/actants? What were the important discursively constructed elements in the situation? What historical and other contemporary cultural symbologies are evoked in the discourse? What work do these discourses do in the world? What are some of the contested issues in the discourse (pp. 187-188)?

Although I was guided by these steps in mapping out each interviewee’s situation, at the same time I felt a strong urge to engage in storytelling. Seeking to avoid a search for the “single horizons” that Foucault (1972) warns against, I wanted to spotlight only the stories and anecdotes of my participants—which undoubtedly would have yielded rich and thought-provoking findings. There are significant insights to be found, as Clarke (2005) acknowledges, in the narratives of individual human actors—including my own. Like Luttrell (2000), for many months I struggled between the desire to tell each individual’s unique story and focusing on the
greater and perhaps more significant picture. In the end, I concluded, that also embracing the latter option would be more supportive of my commitment to pursue social justice and ideally instigate positive change. While I knew I would be losing the opportunity to celebrate the individuality of each academic I interviewed—and to have their stories perhaps resonate more deeply with readers—I would gain more from also “building a theory about how school structure and culture shapes [sic] identities and self-understandings” (Luttrell, 2000, p. 508).

While I would no longer have the opportunity to fully share the poignant stories I heard, I decided to insert brief passages of self-narrative and what I later came to see as strands of counter-narrative. Otherwise, I risked negating the fact that my most basic interest in conducting this study was to have the opportunity to tell my own story—not only to validate my first-hand knowledge of the situation facing diversable academics, but to expose my activism in the entire research exercise. The results included in this thesis are a faithful reflection of me in my researcher role. As Luttrell (2000) observes, as researchers, “consciously or not, we listen and make sense of what we hear according to particular theoretical, ontological, personal, and cultural frameworks and in the context of unequal power relations” (p. 499). Inevitably, some details that could have struck other academics as important may have been omitted here, solely through the power conferred on me in my role as researcher and writer. But most important, I know that self-disclosure helps to reveal how we sense the world around us. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) affirm, “education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s [sic] stories” (ibid., p. 2).

Similarly, Hough and White (2001) support the storytelling approach when they assert that one’s life story and personal anecdotes have the strength to invoke empathy in readers or listeners, stimulating them to think of related experiences in their own lives. This empathetic process enables an easier assimilation of knowledge. In my case, for example, as Fleischmann and Miller (2013) suggest:

An exposure to people who successfully manage their ADHD or their writings could reaffirm individuals who struggle with ADHD that they should not be blamed for the challenges they face or that ADHD is an all-encompassing aspect of their personality. In addition, such an exposure could illustrate additional ways in which the struggling individual could better manage his or her personal challenges (p. 58).
But once again, even though I have tried ultimately to respect, within my analysis and interpretation, the narratives of each participant in my research, I have chosen to position them as counter-narratives, as discussed in chapter 2. Their stories comprise an important piece of the puzzle I have assembled to illustrate “the situation.” The fact that I elected not to take any narrative details for granted has enabled me to gain a much better grasp of the effects of discriminatory ableist behaviours and attitudes among “disability illiterate” coworkers (Kerschbaum & Price, 2014) on diversable faculty members.

The most significant outcome of my decision to situate the narratives of my participants within a PGT/SA framework is the fact that, as my thesis work progressed, I found stories alone would not allow me to deal with the issues of power that my interviews revealed. I was continually encountering narratives focused on power relations and the subjectification of faculty members aiming to succeed in their professorial careers. In other words, I treated the story of each individual as one more brick in the construction of a collective experience. Although I would not be sharing these personal accounts in narrative form, they would still play a fundamental role in my data analysis and conclusions. Scrutinizing what I saw as the most meaningful story details would allow me to detect similarities in the experiences of other faculty members. Recurring discourses would offer significant clues for making sense of the situation potentially lived by all diversable members of the academy. Close examination of the narrative of each interviewee seemed to be the best way of bringing together all the evidence in the collection of narratives within the context of the situational analysis as a whole. And making note of any patterns would give me the opportunity me to highlight institutional policies that only pay lip service to the genuine concerns of faculty with diversabilities—and to point out the clear transgressions that occurred all too often in everyday interactions.

Summing up, while I felt that a narrative approach would enable a better appreciation of the impact of ableism on faculty with invisible impairments as individuals, I agree with Clarke (2005) that singular stories can also serve a higher purpose in helping to build maps that allow us to visualize a situation more easily and “afresh” (p. 30). The bottom line is that even if no specific entity or individuals can be blamed, let alone punished, for the inadequacies of a culture that fails to appreciate what diversable faculty are going through, there is nevertheless value in bringing these issues to light—and this would not happen using a purely narrative approach.
A Natural History of My Research

All information included in the series of conceptual maps produced for this research was gained through my total immersion in the world of neoliberal universities, ableism, performativity and, most importantly, disability, as well as the literature describing it. It is impossible to deny my presence in this research: I am the storyteller. I concur with Luttrell’s (2000) characterization of a “good enough” researcher as someone who is aware that he or she has personal stakes and investments in research relationships; who does not shy away from frustrations, anxieties, and disappointments that are part of any relationship; and who seeks to understand (and is able to appreciate) the difference between one’s self and another (p. 515).

Clarke (2005) likewise emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in research processes and products, particularly as it helps to illuminate relations of power and authority. In Clarke’s view, the researcher is directly involved in the situation he or she is studying, and therefore “we cannot help but come to almost any research project already ‘knowing’ in some ways, already inflected, already affected, already ‘infected’” (p. 12). The fork in the road where I found myself after my conversation with Fiona is evidence that my worldviews and convictions were not only being tested at each step of my journey—they would also determine the entire course of this research. Thus, it seems essential to reveal my thinking process in order to ensure that readers fully grasp how I arrived at my research conclusions. I am aware that I may have made certain errors of interpretation simply because of who I am; but revealing my thinking process is, I hope, one extra way to validate my findings, which I expose in these pages. Having said that, a far more powerful source of validation is, of course, the repeated discourses that gained significance after each interview and steadily sharpened the direction of my analysis.

As Clarke (2005) suggests, “as a researcher, you need to think through what kinds of data you want, what you can realistically obtain, and, eventually, the adequacy and trustworthiness of the materials gathered and analyzed” (p. 113). After my fatidic encounter with the professor at the party, I knew I wanted to research the experiences of academics with ADHD. After all, I too was a university faculty member with traits that, at least in the eyes of medical doctors, warranted this label. But after discussing the idea with my supervisor, I agreed that such a topic
would be too narrow; I could gain far more useful insights from exploring how faculty members with any form of invisible disability navigated the waters of academia.

At that point I was at the infancy stage in my understanding of the two predominant disability models: the biomedical and the social. With time, as I became more acquainted with the issues, I began to pay attention to everything and anything disability-related. I kept alert to any disability discourse that went beyond written or spoken language—including “visual images (e.g., art, film, family photos), symbols (e.g., logos, flags, other icons), nonhuman things/material cultural objects (e.g., chairs, coffee mugs, computers, buildings), and other modes of communication (e.g., nonverbal movements, signals, sounds, music, dance)” (Clarke, 2005, p. 148). I also paid heed to other promising areas that Titchkosky (2003) finds pertinent, such as “situation comedies, news media, donation appeals, health warnings, and many other arenas of cultural production [that] treat [disability] as tragedy” (p. 9).

To become more deeply acquainted with “the world of disabilities,” I participated in disability studies conferences. I watched movies. I read, and I read, and I read. I began to scrutinize the ableist paradigm we live within. As time went by, my life became full of “what ifs”: for almost every scenario I found myself in, I tried to imagine how the same situation would evolve were I not able to walk, talk, hear or see. Not surprisingly, I did not have to conjure up the feeling of having a cognitive/learning disability, because I had experienced that reality my whole life. I also began to realize—perhaps with even more intensity—how the world goes along without giving invisible disabilities a second thought. On one occasion I astonished myself with the eloquence I brought to a heated discussion on Facebook®, when someone tried to demoralize a “clearly healthy” man who had left his car in a disabled parking spot. In that discussion thread, the author posted a video he had made of “the culprit” exiting his vehicle. With no evidence whatsoever of the driver’s disability status, the poster expressed great bravado over heroically catching a “cheater” parking illegally. But how could this person be so vehement, declaring that the driver he was trying to shame did not have a disability? The lack of education regarding invisible disabilities, I saw, can be appalling.

By observing myself, I also noticed a certain level of discomfort in the presence of people with easy-to-detect disabilities. I recognized it as a discomfort over my own inadequacy, the awkwardness I felt in not knowing what to say to them—as if I had to say something. This self-questioning phase made me pay attention to any colonizing ableist thoughts. I was challenging
my own worldview and attempting to transform my disability paradigm into something more fitting to my recent discoveries. For example, in a conversation with someone I knew had the label *bipolar disorder* attached to his identity, I noticed myself attributing my impression of unusual and sometimes rude behaviour to his declared mental illness. The stigmatizing discourse can be quite strong. Even though I myself have been diagnostically labelled as having depression and anxiety disorders, I still took up the discourse stigmatizing this person through the process of subjectification. Hence my view that the medical labels must be explicitly examined as part of our critique of the baggage that a diversable person has to carry. In the absence of such labelling, as Titchkosky (2003) points out, someone who errs in performing a task is typically considered to have made an ordinary mistake. But when people have medicalized labels attached to their identities, such errors can become evidence that they are fundamentally and awkwardly different, and therefore do not belong.

In this thesis, I repeat the medical labels that my participants use to describe themselves because I want to underline the unfairness of the stigma associated with these labels, when my interviewees are clearly competent scholars. For academics in higher education, applying medical labels to invisible differentness can be even more alarming than would be the case for non-academics, as these are labels commonly linked with the incapacity of being sensible, if not being outright “mad” (Foucault, 1967). Unhealthy brains, as Maté (2012) puts it, are not an attribute that professors need or want. If my participants use medical labels to describe their differentness, it is clear important to them to do so, and therefore it is important to me. And repeating these labels in my thesis, as pejorative as they can be, only strengthens my plea for greater awareness and a higher standard of social justice.

In my resolve to address my own “disability illiteracy” (Kerschbaum & Price, 2014), I began pushing myself to learn more about my fears around disability. At one conference, I sat beside a young academic in a wheelchair, whom I will call John. In the initial moments of our conversation, the old me kept thinking of “safe” topics to discuss: “Have you been in this city before? Have you been outside today? It’s hot, isn’t it?” In fact, I was practicing disability avoidance. But I am happy to say that I caught myself in the act—and then immediately changed the course of the conversation, recognizing that we were, after all, attending a disability studies-related conference. Why not show a bit of courage? So I calmly asked: “Have you always been in a wheelchair?” My intention was to treat John’s differentness as a matter of fact,
in the same way that I had already begun talking about my own “ADHDness” as part of my “normal” existence. John then explained that he had not always been as I now saw him: “I was in a car accident.” And from there we had an illuminating conversation about disability, which likely never would have happened had I not been willing to reveal my curiosity and simply say what was on my mind. John went on to tell me about his fascinating academic research using photography: “I’ve decided to stop being the object of other people’s curiosity. Now I take photos of them looking at me. They have become the research subjects.” This was my introduction to counter-narrative.

To round out these few highlights from my research journey, I should note that I also had mesmerizing experiences at two “sensorial” restaurants in Toronto: Signs, now extinct, which had a largely hearing-impaired staff, and O’Noir, whose servers are visually impaired. For the sake of brevity, I will only recount my time at O’Noir. The restaurant’s patrons eat in total darkness, and its servers are all blind. Guests place their hands on servers’ shoulders at the entrance and are guided to their tables. And from that point, the dining experience is entirely based on trust; diners must have faith that the tableware is clean, and that the food will actually be what they ordered. In my case, it was this inversion of the usual dining experience that enabled me to truly understand the relativity of disability. Once seated, my companion and I realized it was in fact us—not the vision-impaired staff—who were the disabled persons in that alien environment. And as that realization intensified, I could not help feeling a twinge of identification with the staff, and a sense of exhilaration for their “vindication.”

As I continued my formal research, meanwhile, it was helpful to extend the scope of my inquiries in gathering “all the major [disability-related] extant discourses in the situation” (Clarke, 2005, p. 184). The foundational step, though, was the construction of a map summarizing situational and social worlds/arenas, as well as positional maps and analyses that allowed a clearer visualization of human elements (key people involved in the situation) and nonhuman elements (institutions, technologies, knowledge/information, material “things” and so on) influencing the situation under scrutiny. Through mapping data, it is possible to identify who or what exactly is involved, as well as the contingencies that contribute to making it a reality. Clarke (2005) emphasizes a critical point:

The process of producing the map is analytically important in itself. . . . Even crude representations are often quite adequate to grasp the limited and simplified stories that
we can actually tell in an article—or even a book. They suffice more than one would imagine at first glance as they become the conceptual infrastructure of the project at hand, undergirding many of the analytic stories later told. . . . Once you have tried to produce such a map, you often remain engaged with it, seeking to improve it, make it better represent your interpretation of your data. These kinds of engagements help sustain interest and deepen the analysis in the research process over time. They set up ongoing interrogations of the self as analyst (p. 116).

Some of the images I have included in this chapter represent my “messy” maps; these are initial sketches, as well as representations of some of the actors in the situation I was studying. Figure 1 shows the preliminary stages of bringing some order to my observations and reflections. As previously mentioned, in keeping with Clarke’s ideas (2005), I came to this study already “knowing” some relevant insights, based on my own experience with diversability. I also “knew” what readings would help to anchor my thinking process—hence my notes on several theorists’ ideas that already resonated with me. These include relevant ideas from Foucault and Goffman, as shown in the “fieldnotes.”

Figure 1. Preliminary draft showing ideas I was reflecting upon prior to the interviews

But before I move on to the analysis of all information gathered through interactions with my research participants, it is vital to provide a few linear details explaining not only my
recruitment of participants and the interview process, but also how I decided on the main focal points that became the anchors for four data chapters of this thesis.

**Recruitment of Participants, Consent Process and Confidentiality**

Despite my commitment to ensure the anonymity of all interviewees, it was nevertheless critical that they all meet two criteria: each prospective participant had to self-identify as having one or more invisible disabilities, and he or she had to work (or have worked) as a faculty member at a higher education institution. After an intensive and, unfortunately, futile web search for an organization or group focused specifically on university and college professors with invisible disabilities, I decided that participants would have to be recruited through organizations whose main interests were connected to my topic. One group clearly provided support to individuals with disabilities in higher education, but concentrated on students. Another, while not centred in the realm of postsecondary education, dealt specifically with invisible disabilities. There were also two associations that represented the interests of university professors and instructors. One organization that I consulted in order to find potential study participants was the Association on Higher Education and Disability® (AHEAD). On its website, AHEAD (2014) describes itself as “a professional membership organization for individuals involved in the development of policy and in the provision of quality services to meet the needs of persons with disabilities involved in all areas of higher education” (All About section, ¶ 1). In my status as a pre-professional member of the association, I had the opportunity to network with individuals fully engaged in disability studies. In fact, through AHEAD, I had the chance to meet scholars who seemed positively intrigued by my research interest. Many were open to the idea of helping me find potential participants by sharing my invitation to participate with faculty in their institutions. One of AHEAD’s interest groups, The Society of Disability Studies (SDS), proved most fruitful in my reaching participants. The SDS (n.d.) is described as

> an international non-profit organization that promotes the study of disability in social, cultural, and political contexts. [The society] recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that the study of disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and nondisabled people (SDS Mission section, ¶ 1.)
I submitted a research proposal explaining the purpose of my study (as shown in Appendix A) and gained the Society’s support in recruiting interviewees. Soon, a few individuals contacted me to express interest in participating. I also contacted the Invisible Disabilities Association (IDA) in a further attempt to find invisibly disabled faculty members who might be willing to participate. IDA (2016) “encourages, educates and connects people and organizations touched by illness, pain and disability around the globe” (About IDA, ¶ 1).

Likewise, I obtained support from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) in seeking professors and instructors who were willing to share their experiences in dealing with invisible (and perhaps hidden) disabilities. The CAUT (n.d.) describes itself as “an outspoken defender of academic freedom and works actively in the public interest to improve the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education in Canada” (About Us section, ¶ 1). In contacting this association, I explained that my study was a first step toward the pursuit of improved work conditions for invisibly disabled faculty members. Indeed, in an initial conversation by e-mail with CAUT’s then newly appointed executive director, David Robinson, I was reassured that, upon gaining REB approval, I would be welcome to insert an “ad” (or recruitment letter, as shown in Appendix B) in the organization’s monthly newsletter inviting professors to participate in my study.

I also sought the support of the Human Resources and Equity team at the University of Toronto, in the hope that they could guide me in sending out the invitation to participate in my study to all U of T professors, independently of their employment status—i.e., tenured, non-tenured or adjunct. Once I obtained their permission, I sent out my invitation letter. Regrettably, the University of Toronto was not able to provide me with a listserv of all U of T faculty members; I had to contact faculty “manually”—i.e., by accessing the faculty contact lists posted by each affiliated school and department on the university’s website, cutting and pasting all of the email addresses. Nevertheless, no U of T professor came forward.

Other recruitment channels were social media websites such as Facebook© and LinkedIn©. I posted my recruitment letter on the pages of these organizations in the hope of gathering eligible faculty.

Another route I chose was posting my advertisement on other academic websites. PhinisheD© (2018), for example, is an online community created for masters and doctorate students to
exchange ideas and help each other. I was lucky to find one participant via that website. Likewise, I used Methodspace© (2014), “a multidimensional online network for the community of researchers” (About this space, “What this space is” section).

All in all, I succeeded in securing agreements from 15 out of 16 research volunteers to use their interviews in my analysis. The participant whose information I did not use was Fiona, for the reasons shared in chapter 1.

Research participants were all higher education faculty members, regardless of their employment status—i.e., tenured, tenure-track, part-time, adjunct, etc.—and were from various locations in Canada and the United States. In addition to confirming their institutional email addresses, I had to ensure that all of the individuals who expressed interest in speaking with me were indeed faculty members of colleges or universities. For this reason, and also to better appreciate whether, and to what extent, the character of their employment affected how they felt about disclosing their “disabled” identity (my instinct already told me that faculty ranking might be significant in questions of disclosure), I asked each to provide the name of their institution(s) of affiliation, as well as their department(s) and employment status. All participants who responded to my ad and provided these institutional details described their diversabilities using medicalized labels without exception.

Upon receiving an e-mail or telephone call from an individual expressing his or her desire to participate in my research—and including assurances that they met the basic criteria for participation—I sent the Information/Consent letter (Appendices C and D), encouraging them to keep a copy for their own records. I informed participants that the form must be signed and either returned to me before we made arrangements for our interview or, in the case of a face-to-face meeting, handed to me immediately prior to our interview. Participants were also told in advance that the interview would last about 90 minutes. In either scenario, I reviewed the contents of the information letter orally with each participant and answered any questions. I explained that, once they returned their signed consent forms to me (either electronically as a scanned document, or by regular mail), I would keep the document in a password-protected file on my computer (or, in the case of a hard copy, in a locked drawer).

It was fundamental to constantly safeguard privacy and confidentiality. I assumed that those who had volunteered to participate might feel some apprehension regarding any possibility of
being exposed as disabled within their work communities. To further manage any risks, participants were informed upfront about the nature and purpose of the study, receiving clear assurance that participation was voluntary; and that they were free to withdraw at any time or simply decline answering any question that made them feel uncomfortable. I also assured them that they faced no risk of harm, and their answers would not be subject to judgmental and/or evaluative scrutiny. I made them aware of my commitment to keep any information related to their identities confidential and stored in a secure location. Moreover, I reassured them that their names would be replaced with pseudonyms. Neither would the names of their institutions be disclosed. I have exercised extreme caution when referring to participants’ workplaces, avoiding contextual details that might lead to their being identified. I made sure to remove any geographical references in the transcripts, further reducing the potential for inferring their identities. When giving participants the summary of my thesis and informing them of its availability on T Space (a digital thesis repository hosted by the University of Toronto), I will send the note to the email address that they have indicated as secure for confidential exchanges.

The participants who have published on the topic of invisible disabilities in academe and revealed their identities may be identifiable by the details of their stories. However, in my reporting of findings, I did separate their published material (included in my literature review) from aspects of the experience they related to me in private conversation (reported in aggregate with similar experiences of other participants).

The Interview Procedures

In preparation for my interviews, I created a few questions designed to guide my discussion of major issues with participants (Appendix E). I had no expectation of being able to tick the box beside each of those formulaic questions in my research plan. Rather, I was interested in hearing whatever participants felt was important to say—provided the conversation did not diverge from the topic under scrutiny: i.e., their experiences in the academy while having one or more invisible disabilities. (The one exception, of course, was Fiona—whom I met in person, through a welcome coincidence, at a conference many months after our phone interview.) Regardless of my “script,” participants were welcome to steer the content of the interviews as they pleased. In many cases, interviewees took the conversation effortlessly (without any probing from me) in a direction I was hoping to explore—illuminating issues I might have never have considered prior
to our meeting. My basic assumption was that if an “extra” topic was important to them, it would be relevant to my analysis. A clear example is when many conversations veered toward discussions of neoliberalism in the academy and related expectations placed upon faculty. I had not anticipated asking any questions about this topic before it was raised, for example, in my interview with Dora.

The focus of my main interview questions originated in the curiosity I experienced after my unique meeting with the professor at the dinner party. With help from my thesis supervisor, I listed the most common tasks professors must perform, so I could determine which ones typically cause concerns for faculty members. I wanted to understand how easy (or not) each participant performed those tasks, and how he or she managed to do them in spite of any pain or difficulties caused by an impairment. Additionally, I was curious to understand what aspects of the professorial experience brought pleasure to my interviewees, as well as stress.

There were only two in-person interviews; I drove relatively short distances to see Lorna and Michelle at their institutions. I spoke via Skype™ telephone interviews with Sybil, Sylvia, Fiona, Sandra and Sam, as this would be the only way I could record our interviews. These calls were not stress-free from my perspective; my own diversability prevents me from being at ease in such conversations. Nevertheless, thanks to a stress-reducing strategy of my own—meditation—I was able to conduct the interviews without significant issues. All other interviews were done via Skype™ video, which allowed an extra dimension for relating to my participants—particularly as I wanted to appreciate each person’s demeanour, both initially and during our interaction. To me, this was vital in reinforcing the humanness of each participant—a task that perhaps became even more top of mind after I spoke with Fiona.

As each interview ended, I would write a few notes in my research journal, trying to observe what Strauss calls the “subliminal mind at work” (1998, p. 142). This journal was intended to help me in reaching conclusions later in the process. It also embodied a wonderful moment in my life: the notebook I used was from l’Abbaye de Silvacane, a gorgeous abbey in the south of France. That book accompanied me everywhere, including on other travels, as I embraced the idea expressed by Strauss and Corbin (1998): “Although certainly no guarantee, [journal entries] do stimulate thinking, provide for alternative interpretations, and generate the free flow of ideas” (p. 99).
Given my inability to stay focused on a single task for extended periods of time, I hired a professional transcription service company, Way With Words, which has a legal commitment to maintain the highest degree of confidentiality in managing transcribed materials. After uploading the audio file of each interview via the company’s secure website, I would receive a transcription back within 48 to 72 hours.

As my interviews and their respective transcripts grew in number, my notes also began to accumulate. I looked constantly for connections among the patterns that invariably surfaced in the diverse responses of my interviewees—and even specific word choices, including medical labels used in self-descriptions. Figures 2 to 5 show pages from the interview transcripts, along with my initial notes as I began to look for recurring themes. For example, Figure 2, an excerpt from an interview with a tenure-stream professor at a research-focused university, shows how she identifies an intersection between her disability and the “poverty” of her social-class origins—and this adds to her fear of disclosure before a powerful department chair she perceives as a bully. A related concept, shown in the middle of the page, is the pressure she describes to “perform” in an ableist environment (i.e., one requiring “hyper-competent” performance), as discussed in my first data chapter. I transferred all of these codes from the interview transcripts to the maps in order to describe them in the next section of this chapter.

In Figure 3, another participant identifies gender—and specifically her childbearing capability—as intersecting with her performativity; she also notes the assistance of a supportive union representative in her non-disclosure and presentation of herself as “able.” I have noted at the bottom of the page that this gendered aspect of her ableist assessment was worth including as a quote in the part of my analysis dealing with intersectionality.

Figure 4 captures a participant’s commentary on the details of her strategy for getting through a typical day, and on how she has learned to “bootstrap” in facing academic demands. In her case, a department chair was instrumental in maintaining her non-disclosure; medications were also somewhat helpful, as was the discovery that she functioned better at conferences when she elected not to share a hotel room with another delegate. Lastly, Figure 5, an excerpt from the transcript of another participant, documents clear examples of differing institutional “accommodations” that could be quoted in both my chapter on the neoliberal context of postsecondary life and in my discussion of participants’ critiques of existing policies.
about 13 or 14, I knew that that was what I wanted. And then I started taking college classes... either when I was 15 or 16, I want to say 15, through the FSCC program. And then I actually met some real live professors, and decided, my God, this is everything, right?

SP1 Yes.

SP2 So, I mean, I knew from a pretty young age. And it was... for me, it was the path out of poverty.

SP1 Right.

SP2 So whatever it was... this application asked of me or demanded of me, I was going to do and I was going to deliver 150%. Because that was how I was going to get out.

SP1 That is amazing. And I see that you are pre-tenure, right?

SP2 I am.

SP1 And... so, how is that going for you now with [inaudible]? I know, but you can tell...

SP2 It's tough. It's really tough. I mean, I don't disclose an awful lot with regards to my disabilities. I...

SP1 Why don't you?

SP2 Well, you know, it's complicated. I think I have a department chair that is pretty... would say bullying. You know? Let me... I'm just going to shove my [inaudible]...before someone goes nuts. Give me just a second.

SP1 Yes, yes.

SP2 Okay.

SP1 Alright. Now you can talk.

SP2 So... there are expectations for me to be...sub-competent. I guess is how I would put it. So anything that indicates any kind of weakness or incapacity to function at a pace that has been set... which I don't think is feasible for most folks who would consider themselves able-bodied. Any time I represent myself as potentially not able to meet those pace-of-life expectations... that puts a target on my back, right? In a way where perhaps I can avoid that scrutiny if they're not aware.

However, I will say this... after I took a medical leave last year, which was my first year. It was about three weeks long. And following in the wake of that, I realized that part of what had happened was that my workload expectations were just that oppressive and that difficult. That part of the provision of my return from my medical leave was that I would be given... I'm trying to remember what the language was that they used. That my service load would be reduced in my first year because of anxiety and depression, so I went back under a reduced load.

But when I spoke with the dean of my college about it, the interesting thing was that there was to be no service load expectations for first-year faculty members. So, I

Figure 2. Transcript sample 1
again I would still get tired. I had only been on the medication for maybe 5, 6 weeks at that point I think. So, we’re chatting and I said, “I’m really terrified that I’ve already lost a couple of months” and I was just coming out of the fog from having a child right, those first two years you just lose everything right.

And I said, “I wish there was a way to stop my tenure clock” and so the more and more we’re talking she said, “Well wait a minute didn’t you stop your tenure clock for the pregnancy?” and I said, “No, because I came to Wayne State with the baby and I wasn’t pregnant at Wayne State. So, I didn’t even know I was eligible to stop my tenure clock”. She said, “Ok, when we get back to Wayne State let’s set you up with the grievance person and the union” not because I was going to grieve anything, but she was really knowledgeable about all the ins and outs we’re unionized.

So, then I would have certain things by my union contract which would entitle me. At that point, I meet with the union person and I disclosed to that person about – Heather didn’t think I was eligible to stop my tenure clock that’s right, so she says, “I think it would be worth it to find out if we can do it for the medical condition”. I met with the union person and I’m telling her about it and she said, “The only problem with this is people might find out”, I said, “Well I don’t really want people to know because I don’t want people to write me off, and say she’s never going to get tenure”. So, my concern was that once people who were tenured who would be evaluating me in my department outside my department would say, “Oh, yeah there is that assistant professor that has (MS) she’ll never be able to do it” right? Because women are judged more harshly.

Vera: Absolutely!

Figure 3. Transcript sample 2
**Figure 4. Transcript sample 3**

SP1: Who did you tell?

SP2: And I did, at one point, tell them about my disability. I had this Chair who... I will never, ever forgive him for how he treated me. It was just... Because it was weird, because his son is disabled and has serious cerebral palsy. And so he did this listening project where, supposedly, he researched disability, maybe he'd be an advocate for me in the department. Because what I wanted was recognition that I had a disability, and being considered a real person in the department. I would come to meetings and do stuff in addition to teaching. But still go [inaudible] half time and, you know... And he wasn't at all sympathetic. In fact, he was completely dismissive, completely not at all... You know, and that was just like... The brush off was so painful, having gone... Having been optimistic one moment, that I will never forgive this asshole.

SP1: Did you say anything to [inaudible]...

SP2: No.

SP1: About that or never...?

SP2: I couldn't say anything to him at the time because, you know, it was clear that I wasn't going to gain anything. I mean, you know, this guy was just... had... And he alienated everyone else in the department. In fact, he lost all friends in the department. He just had no leadership skills, no management skills, no sensitivity to people.

SP1: And he was the one who told you to go to HR?

SP2: No, this is a while ago.

SP1: Okay. So, who told you to go to HR?

SP2: I have better Chair now who I have more sympathetic to and then she's the one that told me to go to HR, and says she's, you know, kind of, gone to bat for me in a sense. But we'll see, I don't know.

SP1: So, why... Okay, I want to understand better this issue. She's going to bat for you. So, what do you hope [inaudible] are your [inaudible]... give me a summer course, because I need to be teaching, a continuous basis, like three courses out of the year, to get by economically. You know, we're kind of, struggling and so rather than two and two, I just want one and one and one. But, you know, like I said, the summer's very competitive. There's a priority list... Actually on my first... After ten years, I finally got a summer course because this... our current Chair, before they'd just been given out to whoever, you know, had the most power, as it goes in most departments. Like, in most departments, you know, instead of going to the people that are struggling at the bottom, the summer courses are like plums plucked by the most powerful, so they can, you know, pay for their kids' college education or an extra boat or something.
Figure 5. Transcript sample 4

Adding notes within the transcripts, in direct response to specific elements in each participant’s discourse that suggested macro-level issues, allowed me to experiment further with situational
and “messy” maps. As I began to notice recurring themes, particularly around policies and actions of the neoliberal university, I asked participants if they were willing to answer a few more questions via email. My interest in their answers was twofold. First, I hoped to understand more clearly whether certain contingencies—the type of institution where they taught, how much they had published, and the intersectionality of minority traits—could provide any further enlightenment about the phenomenon. At the same time, I thought these specific questions and answers would enable me to build tables that would provide quick reference for those reading my thesis. In my email to these participants, I explained my strategy:

As I finish writing up my research findings, I’m coming to you once again with what I envision as my last few questions. I’m building a table that will help readers quickly refresh their minds regarding who is who as they read my thesis. Obviously I know some of the relevant facts based on my research; however, it would be great if I could present this info based on your own words.

I made clear that answering these extra questions was entirely voluntary, given that our agreed interview had already taken place. Luckily, all of the individuals I contacted, without exception, responded promptly with their answers.

The questions were as follows: What type of institution do you work for? U.S. or Canadian university—primarily teaching or research focused? Private or public? Large, medium or small? Please add any other content you feel is relevant. How is your workload typically divided (in rough percentages) between teaching, research and other activities? How extensively have you been published? How many publications are expected of a faculty member seeking tenure at your institution? What, if any, intersectionalities would you link to your disability-related identity (i.e., gender, age, race, sexual orientation, social class, child-rearing, etc.)? With regard to this last question—for the sake of clarity, I provided participants with the definition of the term “intersectionality” as presented in chapter 2. I wanted to understand how someone who self-identified as, for example, a black female with a disability had a different experience than, say, a white female. I carefully considered the phrasing of the question, as I wanted to verify whether participants would confirm that they did indeed see themselves as having disability-related identities. No one raised any issues with my choice of words—other than Lorna, who was explicit: “I don't see myself as having a ‘disability-related identity’ though I am a person with disabilities.” Indeed, Lorna often referred to herself using the medical label ADHD.
Data Analysis

The following figures represent the evolution of my thinking after I had interviewed each of the 16 diversable professors. Although I did not strictly follow the analytical methods of traditional grounded theory, it was still important to look at the frequency with which some themes appeared in my interview scripts. As previously mentioned, I made annotations of my responses (as shown in figures 2 through 6) to ideas that caught my attention and eventually proved meaningful. Many of these ideas gained strength with each new interview, as certain key contingencies began to recur. The frequency of related ideas captured in Figure 7 was seminal for the creation of my situational maps. Often I would go back to the interview transcripts to confirm whether I had captured all elements that provided insights into “the situation.” As a new idea occurred to me, sparked by a particular thought expressed by one participant, I would consult all of the other transcripts to see if anyone else had said something that suggested a similar insight.

One helpful exercise, as I validated my findings, was forwarding the interview transcripts in their original form (i.e., without my observations) to my thesis supervisor so she could read them and make her own annotations. We would then compare notes. Our insights regularly coincided in significant ways. And when they did not, we would discuss how our respective ideas had occurred to us and agree (or not) on whether a particular insight was worthy of inclusion in my maps. All of the themes that appear in Figures 7 and 8, for example, reflect our mutual agreement.
Figure 6. Keeping track of recurring topics that surfaced in my interviews
In Figure 8, my use of Clarke’s situational analysis model becomes more evident, although it is by no means complete. As I was able to make connections among predominant contingencies, some important insights surfaced—for example, the degree to which the overall academic discourse heavily influences the idealized image of superior and flawless intellectualism tied to the concept of being a professor. My theorizing unfolded as follows: University leaders are responsible for creating and sustaining policies that help nurture the academic discourse. The internalization of medical discourse, and consequently of the stigma attached to disability, inevitably gives rise to issues related to disclosure, which happens predominantly in environments grounded in trust—trust in leadership and in the development of policies that are disability-friendly. Figure 8 captures a later moment in my thinking process, after I had met with my thesis committee. As I looked at the board, new ideas kept emerging, and my messy map began to look even messier. One theme that came up increasingly often was the influence of neoliberal administrative practices on the decision to disclose.
Throughout my research work, I kept in mind that each participant’s discourse is like a single strand within a ball of wool: it is a storyline incorporating discourse that involves both human and nonhuman constructions of meanings. It is both reflective of and a product of a discourse grounded in a specific time and space. The manner with which any given message is put together—regardless of its form, i.e., textual, visual, aural or kinetic—is a representation of a body of knowledge. “If knowledge is power in the [Foucauldian] sense, attending to the ways in which knowledges are produced, legitimated, and maintained through language/through discourses/through discursive practices becomes central in analyzing power of all kinds” (Clarke, 2005, p. 150). This is a critical insight. As I began writing up my findings, a member of my thesis committee pointed out that I was still focusing on the hardships faced by these diversable academics, while I seemed to be ignoring the bigger picture: that the academy revealed its own shortcomings by creating norms, policies and an overall culture that does not
support faculty with disabilities, let alone create the means for them to thrive in spite of their impairments. By suggesting, however inadvertently, that the source of the problem was diversable faculty members themselves, I was contradicting a fundamental point I wish to convey in this thesis: that faculty with differentnesses are not therefore incompetent or undeserving of acclaim for remarkable scholarship. Once I was aware of this issue, my writing became more fluid and I was better able to communicate my perception that the academy still has a long way to go in ending the practice of disability avoidance. That said, I retained my belief in the value of paying attention to individual narratives (i.e., micro-data) and their power to provide better clues as to where we should look for evidence of discrimination against faculty with invisible disabilities.

In conducting a meticulous review of the transcribed interviews, I examined both human and nonhuman content; an example of the latter is when faculty members talked about university policies or labour unions. As I looked for content reflecting the discourse on disability, I noted especially any messages that touched upon the experience of being an academic with an invisible disability. This mindful awareness of the disability discourse yielded many relevant examples of the general social discourse on disability as my inquiries ranged further afield, in settings beyond the context of my interviews. At the same time, I came across the “unexpected.” For instance, I had not anticipated finding what I experienced as an antagonistic type of discourse used by one disability-related community. This arose during a presentation at a disability studies conference in which the presenter asked the audience—which included many visibly disabled individuals—to tell others how they usually responded to what they perceived as patronizing remarks by normals. The adversarial tone in some of the comments that followed appeared to be triggered by a sense of resentment, as many felt they had been unfairly treated by members of the non-disabled population. Perhaps because of my initial ignorance and lack of a more intimate connection with disabled individuals (except for my father), I had never stopped to reflect on how the disabled might refer to the non-disabled. I have come to see these also as counter-narratives.
Building More Defined Situational Maps, Coding and Analysis of Data

In the case of my research, it was essential to pay close attention to any “messages,” regardless of their nature—whether abstract or concrete, written or verbalized—that invoked the self-directed and general discourses on invisible disability. Any symbolic representations of the topic of concern served as valuable sources of data because they enabled the inclusion of “understandings, interpretations, intentions, and perspectives of the people studied on their own terms as expressed through their actions as well as their words” (Clarke, 2005, p. 3).

Eventually I began using a mapping software application called TheBrain®, which helped me build more sophisticated maps by dynamically representing the context around each topic under scrutiny and providing a visual depiction of how all the thoughts interconnected. In a press release dated July 22, 2008, the company that developed this application, TheBrain® Technologies, explains that TheBrain® is designed to “make sense of the wide range of information [a researcher] need[s] to organize and assimilate on a daily basis. The software is so flexible and fluid that users can link any file or concept to anything else, creating an expansive and personalized network of information that visualizes key relationships and connections from the user’s perspective” (¶. 2). The Brain® helps to organize ideas or concepts into “thoughts.” It enables users to create abstract snapshots of their minds—or “what is inside their heads”—showing all of the connections that happen simultaneously as they reflect on and develop a particular set of ideas.

TheBrain® is a helpful and versatile application that I have used several times in my academic work. It is a useful tool for illustrating how I cope with my various academic responsibilities despite the challenges my diversability poses to linear thinking. The software visually arranges the information I input so I can take in the overall scope of my thinking while making sense of the individual puzzle pieces—their quantity as well as their shape. Only then do I feel ready to assemble the whole picture, ideally deriving insights that will be meaningful and make a contribution to academic knowledge. I believe that academics with my type of cognitive challenges would benefit significantly if this type of software were offered at no cost by their institutions. This is an example of how creating an environment that is more welcoming of differentness can improve the lives of academics, nurturing the fruits of their productivity.
Using TheBrain® tool, I started by drawing my reflection of “The Situation,” which formed the seed of my multi-screen map, representing the key question that preoccupied me: What is the situation today for academics with invisible disabilities? As I began to reflect on the circumstances affecting diversible faculty members—originating in my conversations with my research participants—three important themes took shape: a) Stigma and Disclosure, b) The Professoriate (i.e., academics in general) and c) Accommodations that ideally might enable professors with invisible disabilities to perform their jobs with a lower degree of stress. The ideas arising from this exercise are called “child thoughts”—which in turn became “parents” to other conceptual children. Regardless of their hierarchy, these thoughts reflect the predominant emerging categories discovered through my literature review, as well as the information gathered in my interviews with participants. As child thoughts were born of various parents, I began connecting them to other ideas already appearing on my map. I could drag and drop thoughts as I saw fit, indicating interconnections with lines. For example, in the map shown in Figure 9a, the child thought “Stigma” is a topic for discussion under both Stigma and Disclosure, and The Professoriate—because professors’ hesitation to disclose is mainly due to the stigma of disability. In addition to my three main themes, I also made room in the Brain® version of my maps for reflections related to Clarke’s situational analysis model. The centre of the image, for instance, shows information related to the discursive construction of disability by non-human actants—for example, in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), which includes discourses devoted to defining what is “abnormal” as part of the medicalization process. This illustrates my examination of any non-human entities that provided significant cues regarding the language adopted by academic websites and journals. Figure 9b provides a closer view of my depiction of non-human actants, which surfaced as I read extensively across a wide range of disability-related sources (including academic, mainstream media and social media), as well as my subsequent reflections on what “entities” have the power to shape our Western understanding of disability.
Figure 9a. “Seed” map showing detailed interrelations between discourses in three key categories: Stigma and Disclosure, The Professoriate and Accommodations.
Figure 9b. A closer view of my identification of non-human actants such as the DSM-V
Figure 9a is just one example of the shape my map took on as I continued inserting new thoughts and establishing connections among them based on my transcript analyses. The element I wish to make salient in this figure is the series of black lines linking thoughts. For example, as I reflected on the concept of passing and impression management, I realized I could connect this theoretically to strategies used by faculty members to conceal their diversability; on the other hand, I could see there was also a lot to discuss regarding the stress they felt in attempting to conduct their professorial affairs without disclosing any pain. One concept can lead to many different parts of the puzzle, reinforcing the idea that they are connected—and worth presenting as such in illuminating the situation in question. To further demonstrate the data analysis process, I can point to more examples of TheBrain® maps in action. The next seven figures show the expansion of a situational map as interconnected ideas continued to surface in my analysis of the interview transcripts.

Figure 9a necessarily compresses a lot of details; the following sequence (Figures 10 to 15) provides a glimpse of how data was stored under my three key categories—each of which ultimately corresponded to a data analysis chapter.
Figure 10. Early hierarchy of concepts around “Stigma and Disclosure”

When one clicks on “Stigma and Disclosure,” three concepts emerge: disclosure, personal/social identity and stigma.
Figure 11. Expansion of ideas radiating from the "Stigma" branch
Figure 12. The "Disclosure" subcategory of “Stigma and Disclosure” and its five related emergent concepts

Figure 12 exemplifies how a concept such as stress can be related to one subcategory, Disclosure, when it refers to anxiety around the decision whether to disclose—and at the same time can be associated with the Stigma (another subcategory) attached to disability.

By clicking on “The Professoriate” (Figure 13), one can see six concepts related to this category.
Figure 13. Early hierarchy of concepts around "The Professoriate"
Figure 14. Concepts related to the discourse of professorship

Figure 14 shows positive and negative associations of being a professor— for instance, the image of competence contrasted with the clash between disability and traditional concepts of the professor’s role. This figure also shows the role played by the media in helping to crystallize these associations.
Figure 15. Hierarchy of concepts around “Accommodations”

Clicking on “Accommodations” (Figure 15) reveals five categories, along with various subcategories of one of them, “Workplace Configuration.” The latter concepts suggest how professors can perform their tasks with the help of relatively simple measures, such as the ability to work from home, or access to parking spots that are closer to their offices.

As demonstrated through the various sequences discussed above, the dynamic maps generated by TheBrain® software enables users to expand and contract map sections as they please: one can choose to see only one level of child thoughts or keep on expanding the view to include the children of those child thoughts. Each time I worked on my map, I would invariably theorize new connections among existing thoughts, carefully checking each connection of the data. After
I had finished a new interview, updating the map with the new transcript was an iterative and cyclical exercise. As Neuman (2003) explains, “The purpose of grounded theory is to build a theory that is faithful to the evidence” (p. 52). Regrettably, the static screen captures presented here cannot begin to do justice to the value I gained from being able to see my own thought processes represented graphically. As I saw the broad categories analyzed and interconnected, I was able to reach meaningful insights and shape clusters of interconnected ideas. Each of chapters 5 through 8 represents one of those clusters. After meeting with my committee, I expanded upon a relatively small section of my early map on the neoliberal university and accommodations; the result was a fourth chapter on “The Ableist Institution.”
Figure 16. Final drawing

Figure 16 shows a final drawing I made while working on the thesis summary chapter. Employing the PGT/SA methodology was extremely useful, as it allowed me to go beyond focusing on the individual positions of professors with invisible disabilities. By creating visual maps representing their stories, it became possible to notice the many realities they have in common, such as working in environments that do not embrace diversability. Clarke et al. (2015) assert that “within social worlds and the substantive arenas of shared concerns and commitments in which those worlds intersect, knowledge is constructed in an ongoing fashion vis-à-vis the everyday practices of whatever the world is focused around” (p. 197). Eventually, I
began to form narratives based on my final software-based map. Aspects of the situation—such as neoliberalism, ableism, performativity, disability avoidance, and the precariat and power, among others—seemed almost to be pulsating on the screen, as if alerting me that these were the key issues to be spotlighted in my thesis. Through many back-and-forth discussions with my supervisor, I distilled down the four principal categories of data that gave birth to the four data chapters that follow. Relevant comments from my interviewees were so abundant for each of these categories (i.e., they reached the point of saturation), I had no problem illustrating them from the transcripts.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the theoretical aspects of the methods used to conduct this study. I have also provided a natural history of how the work unfolded, including figures demonstrating how I made sense of the predominant themes that emerged in my interviews—particularly those that offered a macro-level view of “the situation”. As well, I have detailed how I recruited participants, conducted interviews and interpreted the information they shared with me.

In the next four chapters, I present the data analysis derived through my interviews and my use of a PGT/SA approach.
Chapter 5
The Ableist Higher Education Institution

Introduction

This chapter has four sections. In the first, I introduce my research participants, briefly discussing their academic rank (which will be explored in more detail in chapter 6) and their personal accounts of their situations. Next, I briefly document their experiences with institutional disability avoidance. In the third section, relying on the comments of my interviewees, I bring to light the overall lack of awareness toward disabilities in the academy, as evidenced in kairotic (informal) situations. I present evidence that non-tenured faculty members, including those often called precarious in the neoliberal academy, suffer differentially serious impacts from their ableist work environments. In the fourth section, I discuss what Oswal (2016) calls “the ableist assumptions and biases of institutional policies” (p. 30), providing evidence from participants’ accounts. Table 1 provides a thumbnail summary of the topics covered in the chapter. I constructed it by grouping participants according to their professorial classification: i.e., tenured, tenure-track or contingent. Although rank may seem irrelevant to this chapter, which focuses on the nature of participants’ diversabilities (as related by them) and their experiences with disability avoidance, it indicates where each stands in his or her academic career path. I discuss the importance of rank in this and in the next chapter. Basically, I argue that it influences a professor’s decision to reveal or conceal his or her differentness. The column in Table 1 containing notations about experiences with disability avoidance serves as a foundation for the second section of this chapter. While participants were not asked specifically about “disability avoidance,” their general comments are indicative of work environments that do not cultivate values welcoming to diversability.
Table 1: *General Professorial Information, Personal Description of their Situation and Experience with Avoidance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Professorial Ranking</th>
<th>Personal Description of their Situation</th>
<th>Experience with Disability Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Strong headaches</td>
<td>Attributes overall fear and avoidance of mental illness in the academy to the perception that it is linked to aggressive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Mood swings; oscillates between sadness and low energy and optimism and high enthusiasm</td>
<td>Detects a general lack of awareness in academe, hence his decision to come out and become an activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>A sense of detachment from reality; confusion and social withdrawal</td>
<td>Colleagues have said they would not have socialized with her had they known about her medical diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Numbness, weakness and tingling of body extremities; pain; fatigue</td>
<td>Believes that disability policies are not divulged and therefore unknown to those who would benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Associate (ToI)</td>
<td>Hearing difficulties</td>
<td>Senses a general lack of awareness about invisible disabilities and is concerned that disability-related support services are not widely known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Memory problems; muscle pain; dizziness; fatigue; gastro-intestinal disturbances</td>
<td>Looks &quot;good&quot;, hence colleagues tend not to believe she has a disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorna</td>
<td>Career Associate</td>
<td>Difficulties in concentration; &quot;racing thoughts&quot;; impulsiveness; distractedness; procrastination</td>
<td>Experiences lack of belief from colleagues that ADHD actually exists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>Full time Contractual*</td>
<td>Chronic inflammation and pain in the joints; difficulties in concentration</td>
<td>Finds it easier to keep up a façade of normalcy when faced with a general lack of awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sybil</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Hearing difficulties</td>
<td>Claims that colleagues do not understand why she “makes trouble” by being averse to speaking on the phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ</td>
<td>Assistant (ToI)</td>
<td>Mood swings; oscillates between sadness and low energy and optimism and high enthusiasm</td>
<td>Was strongly advised by colleagues not to talk about his research on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Back pain; excessive uneasiness and apprehension; long periods of sadness and lack of energy</td>
<td>Believes that the university is focused on productivity; a professor who does not show results is easily replaceable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald</td>
<td>Left Academia</td>
<td>Chronic pain</td>
<td>Sees disclosure as “the end of your job”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>Skin lesions; painful joints; breathing difficulties</td>
<td>Feels that no one at her institution discusses disability openly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oswald</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>Balance, coordination and speech issues; generalized constant pain</td>
<td>Feels that disability is not taken seriously and that he is merely “damaged goods”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>Constant pain; fatigue; headaches; lack of energy; distractedness; psychological distress in response to disturbing memories; constant generalized pain</td>
<td>Observes a lack of understanding of accommodations her type of disability requires; users of motorized wheelchairs receive the same treatment as those who use conventional wheelchairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Part-Time Assistant (ToI); then Adjunct</td>
<td>Constant pain; fatigue; headaches; psychological distress in response to disturbing memories; hearing difficulties</td>
<td>Has experienced lack of understanding and pat assumptions such as the idea that mental illness means institutionalization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*At the time of the interview. †At Norma’s college her status is the equivalent to university tenured.*
Introduction to Participants

I begin by introducing participants one by one (all under pseudonyms I have chosen). I have included some pieces of information about participants’ identities, both personal and social. The brief extracts from their narratives about their situations suggest that some emphasize physical aspects of their experiences with disability, often using medical terms, whereas others centre their stories on the challenges of living a diversable life or simply “showing who they are.” Several of these scholars enmesh explanations of their diversabilities with recollections of landmarks in their careers; that is, participants contextualize their situation in terms of what they were doing at that time in their role as academics.

The three full professors in my research, although obviously diversable, have attained not only tenure but also promotion, based on recognition of their successes. They talk about experiencing “strong headaches” (Rita), “mood swings” (Sam), and episodes of detachment or “confusion” (Sylvia). Rita, a Physical Therapy professor, shares her thoughts about living with the stress caused by having chronic—“but treatable!”—migraine headaches:

Since migraines are invisible—and everyone has had at least one headache and were able to function—I feel that I can't always be upfront with how much time I spend managing my headaches. Colleagues see me functioning, but don't know of the multiple medications I take, how even small changes in my routine can bring on a headache, or how early I go to bed every night to be sure I get enough rest.

The six associate professors participating in my research, all of whom have achieved promotion from entry level in the academy, experience various issues such as “tingling” (Beth), “hearing difficulties” (Michelle and Sybil), “memory problems” (Fiona), “racing thoughts” (Lorna) and “joint pain” (Norma). Beth is an American tenure-track professor, teaching and researching health and sociology from a feminist perspective; she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, although she has assessed herself as healthy for most of her life. Michelle is a soft-spoken, determined and hardworking “woman of sciences” who was an associate professor at the time of our interview. She has proven her value in this male-dominated academic field, having recently been promoted. Her description of the first time she used her hearing aids is very positive:
The first day that I put [my hearing aid] in and had them operating, I turned my van on. I put my seatbelt on, and then there was this strange noise that I had never heard before. I was like, “What is that sound?” I thought my van was broken. And then I realized, because I had been missing a certain range for a while and not recognizing that it was the actual, put-your-seatbelt-on-dummy ping. But it sounded completely different, because there was a whole range of sound there that I had never heard before. [That is] a very good example of when I really realized what I had been missing, right? It’s like, “Wow, okay, yes, there was a problem. We’ve fixed it pretty good, apparently.”

Norma is a full-time contractual professor and department chair who lives with ankylosing spondylitis and rheumatoid arthritis—which are “not a great combo.” When asked why she has also accepted to take on the many responsibilities conferred upon chairs of departments, she says:

I am the primary wage earner in my family (my husband is semi-retired). Being a chair can be stressful, but having enough money to put some away for retirement and easily handle bills reduces my stress. I also truly enjoy the challenge and variety of chair work and like the people I work with. It's rewarding work even if it is frustrating at times.

Lorna, a “long-tenured and near retirement” Associate Professor, did not receive her ADHD diagnosis until her late forties. Because she sees “different degrees of understanding, empowerment, and prejudice persist[ing] in the academy,” she has put much effort into creating awareness regarding being in this situation, in the attempt to assist others who are diversable.

The remaining participants in my study are non-tenured. Three were in the tenure track- and four are adjunct faculty when I interviewed them. Among the tenure-track faculty, Gerald, a single parent, presents stories of living as a professor with chronic pain before he decided to leave the academy. DJ, on the other hand, has persisted (I learned subsequent to our interview that he achieved tenure). His thesis supervisor during his doctoral work had insisted he “get help,” which was not particularly helpful. Nevertheless, he integrated that experience into a research program on the topic. Dora—who, like Gerald, has chronic pain—comments that she is also “disabled by association, as every member of my family of origin struggles with a laundry of mental health diagnoses.”
Among the four adjunct, non-tenure stream faculty in my study, Sandra deals constantly with “skin lesions that itch and burn;” she feels quite strongly that she can only “stay in the game” if she receives equal treatment, “like any other non-disabled faculty member.” Oswald, experiencing pain from years of computer work, and also diagnosed with cerebral palsy, has avoided pain medication in order to monitor what he apparently perceives as ongoing damage from his medical condition—so he can avoid even more. Monica, also adjunct, relates to two medical diagnoses she has received, while Rose, who has taught for various colleges and universities since 1997, has received numerous medical diagnoses. She briefly landed a full time position at a for-profit institution, where she first worked as an adjunct instructor and then left.

### Participants’ Experiences of Disability Avoidance

My interviews reveal that all participants work in an environment that sees diversable persons through a negative lens and that avoids disability. As a minoritized group, people with disabilities become one extra “problem” to be addressed by institutional diversity and inclusion efforts. For example, DJ, who was an assistant professor at the time of my interview, discusses the advice he received from a fellow professor who chaired a hiring committee that would be interviewing him for an academic job. DJ’s colleague advised that he not talk about his research on disability, as his depression diagnosis would inevitably have to be mentioned. According to DJ, “the blatant implication [was] that they [wouldn’t] hire me if they [found] out that I have depression.” The alleged reason for the refusal to hire him would be that “I might kill myself while I am working there.” DJ ignored the advice. Later he was told that the committee members were indeed not pleased to hear his revelation; in fact, “they were offended by that.”

Michelle, an associate professor at the time of my interview, attempts to explain the “blind eye” typically turned to the presence of disability in a social environment:

> I think the core problem is people are primarily ignorant about disabilities, so there’s a lack of knowledge, which I think is a big problem. Because anything you don’t know about, I think your first thought is to be afraid of it because you don’t understand. And it’s weird; and it’s different; and it’s scary. So yes, I don’t want to go there, right? I think that’s probably more pronounced, perhaps, for faculty members who have cognitive or neurological impairments than perhaps those where it’s something more physical. And I say that because I have a couple of people in my family who suffer from long-term
I have seen the stigma first-hand when they choose to disclose it to people. Some people just write them off because they’re [thinking,] “You’re crazy!”

In the same vein, Norma, a more senior faculty member, discusses the need for invisibly disabled academics to keep up a façade of normalcy to avoid ostracism:

People don’t know how to act around disability. . . . It’s sometimes easier not to talk to my peers just because it’s so hard to make them understand. I don’t want people to feel sorry for me or that I can’t do some aspect of my job. I’m trying to be promoted. I really want people to think I’m doing a good job. I am doing a good job, but I don’t want them to know that sometimes it’s a struggle more than others.

Michelle expresses anger as she tells of the time she caught some of her colleagues expressing “out-dated views of mental illness” in talking about a faculty member who had what is medically known as bipolar disorder. She recalls: “There were very nasty comments that were said while [the professor in question] wasn’t there. And these were people who I think she would consider to be her friends.” Rita, a full professor, also expresses dismay over the impression that faculty members tend to gossip about a colleague with a so-called psychiatric disorder. In her view, the turmoil that follows a revelation of mental illness reflects a widespread fear of aggression: “People with mental illnesses are usually deemed as violent.” Consequently, individuals who have been medically diagnosed with it tend to be avoided. In fact, Sylvia, also a full professor, poignantly recalls a moment in her professorial life in which a colleague hurt her by saying that “had [she] known I had [been diagnosed with a psychiatric label] when we met, [she] would have never gone out to dinner with me.”

Michelle and other participants also try to explain the negative use of medical labels by referring to differentness as a kind of “natural attitude” embedded in institutional culture. As she puts it:

That’s often how people work. People want to categorize. It’s how they’re comfortable dealing with their world. So I’m going to put you in this box because you’re a little different than me. If something funny happens, I can blame that box for why you’re different than I am.
From DJ’s point of view, an equally important issue is that disability has not been taken seriously in the academy and is often overlooked in leadership’s diversity-related decisions. He provides an example in comparing the response to issues of race or ethnicity:

If I’m a person of colour, [I’m taken more seriously.] I’m not saying that [racial minorities] aren’t mistreated—they are. And they are mistreated in institutions, like probably the one I’m working for. But those [matters of race] are taken seriously. . . . I don’t really think anybody takes disability seriously as a diversity issue. It’s good on paper, but in terms of practice, nothing.

Michelle mentions the same lack of “seriousness” at her institution. It seems to her that there was some degree of goodwill at one time, when the administration introduced a support group for faculty members who felt they had been touched by disability in their lives, either personally or indirectly. But Michelle explains that this initiative has since appeared to evaporate: “We’ve only had sort of three or four meetings. The last one was well over six months ago. I don’t even know if the group is going to continue or if it’s been put on a shelf for a while.” Mirroring these experiences, Norma expresses indignation when she relates a previous dean’s nonchalant and inconsiderate approach to a faculty member who had a broken leg after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis:

The dean said, “We don’t have to do anything unless [the faculty member] asks.” I said, “No, the minute we know she has a disability, then we can see we have to start thinking about how to accommodate it. It’s on us to reach out.” And they said, “Well, we don’t have to do anything.” And I said, “We do.”

Offering his perspective on the perceived disregard for diversable faculty, Gerald, who left academia before my interview, voices outrage over how he was treated by one of the leaders at his institution. In his view:

I did send a message to my supervisor [mentioning] that I was very physically and emotionally depressed. You know, trying to open up this conversation such as “I want you to know I’m going through something really difficult.” There was no response. There was no offering of accommodations, or anything. Not that I necessarily needed any, but my point [is that] managers have to look for, if somebody is opening a door for a conversation, they have to jump at it. They can’t just ignore it.
The Impact of Lack of Awareness, Institutional Culture and Kairotic Spaces on Diversable Faculty

According to my participants, the day-to-day discourse within the academy reflects a general illiteracy regarding disability issues, combined with palpable prejudice and mistrust. Specifically, disability in normalcy-focused environments is seen as an inconvenience; this puts non-disabled leaders in challenging managerial situations. Sandra, an adjunct professor at a U.S. school, in explaining what she senses as the values of the academy, suggests that “mindsets and hearts cannot be legislated”. In her view, regardless of formal policies, if “caring” is not a common value of the university community, institutional culture can be detrimental to faculty morale.

The following interview extracts illustrate the power of kairotic spaces (Price, 2014), in which informal discourses reflect an ableist hegemonic culture. In my data, negative comments on the handling of disabilities far outnumber the positive ones. Some institutional responses have been traumatizing for faculty members. DJ, for example, is haunted by memories of pursuing his PhD degree and having the leaders of his institution see a video in which he documented his struggles with mental illness. According to DJ, they reacted punitively: “the institution did what was like a TV intervention, convincing me to go to an emergency room right away. They involuntarily institutionalized me.” Similarly, Rose, another adjunct professor who has yet to finish her PhD degree, was a graduate student and working as a teaching assistant when her university learned about her health issues. She was sent to an in-house psychiatrist, who guided her back to the student services department—“with a handful of medications”—to register her disability. Then her chair suggested that she perhaps consider a different career, because she might “not be suited to teaching anymore.” When I asked Rose how she feels about the culture of academe, her response was clear:

Two things make me angry. First, on my own personal case, the fact that the way that they treated me badly because of this stuff cost me years of time and concurrently, thousands and thousands of dollars in tuition that could have been avoided. I could already have my PhD in hand if they just treated me right. . . . I’m actually going to start crying if I keep talking about that. The second thing that makes me angry about all of this is knowing the effect that this had had on my self-esteem, my confidence as a
scholar, my confidence as a teacher. It makes me angry to think that no one, whether they are male or female, whatever their disability, visible and invisible, should have to go through this kind of bullshit that I went through. It’s dehumanizing, absolutely, dehumanizing.

The dehumanization Rose describes seems equally evident in the situations of two other faculty members. In the case of Monica, another adjunct faculty member, the derisory handling of disabilities goes beyond ignorance: she was told directly that “If I did not want to work ‘this much’, I shouldn’t apply for the job.” Sybil, a professor who works at a small university and who has difficulty hearing, even faces hostility from colleagues when she refuses to take part in what is deemed to be a customary event for academics: faculty phone meetings. From their incredulous tone, they seem to be saying: How could anyone be averse to talking on the telephone? Sybil’s peers seem oblivious to the fact that this type of meeting can be extremely stressful for someone who cannot hear the whole proceedings. She prefers to meet with others in person, when she can hear them better and read their body language. Sybil says: “Our faculty aren’t very comfortable with [my preference for face-to-face meetings] when they’re very used to the telephone.” Indeed, some of her colleagues complained to the dean about her aversion—at which point, Sybil recalls, “the dean was just very nasty [to me.]” Another taxing situation in this professor’s experience is the general lack of understanding as to why she brings a dog to work. Some of her peers even question the “preferential treatment” they feel she is receiving: Why is Sybil the only one allowed to bring her pet to work? She has tried many times to make them understand, usually in vain, that her companion is in fact a service dog and that they’re not allowed to pet and touch. And getting them to understand that, if they do, they’re actually putting my life at risk. Having to have those kinds of conversations are very difficult. And because they see a friendly dog, they want to pet her. . . . If you pet her, and she gets used to you petting her and she sees you in a car park, her attention is going to be on you. Petting her is wonderful for her, but she’s not going to alert me to the car that’s just coming up behind me. And [then] I get hit by that car and I’m now dead because you’ve been petting my dog.

When Gerald had to take medical leave, his colleagues manifested anger and resentment. They perceived his absence as a special privilege that the university had only granted to him. Even his department chair tried to make Gerald feel guilty that he was letting everyone else down and
saddling them with extra work. Gerald mocks the chair’s response—“After all that we did for you!”—and then adds: “As if I’m simply going on vacation.” Gerald adds that his peers gossiped constantly about him in conversations that included many false accusations.

**Differential Impacts on Precarious Diversable Faculty in the Neoliberal Academy**

As discussed in my literature review (chapter 3), a neoliberal university is one that encourages entrepreneurialism in research and programming; uses contingent faculty extensively in teaching; and caters to the student-as-client, making it difficult for untenured and tenured faculty alike to complain about their working conditions. And, as suggested by the experiences of non-tenured faculty above, the more precarious their position, the harder my study participants find it to voice their needs. In recent years, the academic literature has regularly shed light on the demeaning treatment and improper work conditions experienced by contract faculty members, to the extent that the term *precarious* seem very appropriate in describing their livelihood. But no link has been made between precarity and disability. Monica, another adjunct faculty member, uses a metaphor to describe this situation. She says the leadership of the academy appears to be “hearing impaired” in not listening to what adjunct professors have to say, or “visually impaired” in simply choosing to close its eyes to their dire work conditions. She perceives those in positions of power as making decisions on a whim, without considering the consequences for contingent faculty members. Monica sums up the situation at her school:

> [They are not] collegial; they tend to be extremely unpredictable. And I don't know if they're deliberately backstabbing or if they just can't stick to a plan. [They] keep getting excited about brand-new things and ignoring everything else that they promised two months ago. I lost one of my classes in the fall because I'm in two different departments. Computer science has been around a long time and the other department is informatics, which is brand-new. So they were created a couple of years ago and the first thing they did was hire three faculty. The next year they hired another three. But because [the programs] are so new, they’re still largely being taught by adjuncts. You can only hire so many brand-new people a year. You have to integrate them in and take some time, and then do another search. But apparently someone decided that the numbers looked bad, that they had too many adjuncts and it looked horrible. They wanted to pretend they had
more [full-time] faculty than adjuncts. They didn't want their numbers to look the way they looked. So they doubled all the class sizes [for the full-timers] and cancelled [all classes that were going to be taught by adjuncts]. I had a full class and it got cancelled.

Dora, an American tenure-track professor, likewise talks about the abuse of power in the academy, particularly when disability is disregarded:

They can exploit tenure-track faculty as much as they can because there are so many other people clamouring at the gates wanting that tenure-track position, right? The reason why it is so difficult for me to navigate this institution with the collection or handful of disabilities I have is because the pace of life is so sped-up, right? It’s almost like a factory, where there’s an assembly line and they just keep turning the speed up faster and faster and faster. And I don’t think any bodies, whether [or not] they’re disabled bodies, are going to be able to maintain the pace that’s been asked of us. So…and I mean those imperatives are coming from administrative bloats. They’re coming from increasingly running universities like businesses. They’re coming from the corporate model.

Rose has been recently demoted to the rank of adjunct. In fact, she has been encouraged to change to another career if she is uncomfortable being in the classroom due to her disability “issues.” In her view, university leaders show a general disregard for the work conditions of part-time faculty. They do not want “to do anything for us beyond signing the pay cheques.”

The work environment Rose describes is discouraging:

Being adjunct is one problem, but then being disabled in some way on top of being adjunct? No power, no job security, not even compliance with the law. They basically just treat you like you’re garbage because they can replace you. . . . They know there are no laws preventing them from doing that. And they also know it’s very hard to prove in court discrimination in terms of disability.

The idea about taking the university to court over unfair treatment of faculty with disabilities has also crossed Dora’s mind. Dora is a non-tenured associate professor at a private U.S. university. She feels that if she went to court, she would be fighting a lost battle:
To bring a lawsuit against the institution that employs you, the amount of resources that they have at their disposal just is infinitely, exponentially higher than what you personally have, fighting as a defendant. . . . Part of the strategy that institutions use is just to weigh you down with the litigation that it extends forever, forever, forever, forever, right? And then, even if, you know, that suit were to be won, what would the damages awarded be? Well, you would get your job back, right? [But] my experience here has been toxic in multiple ways. What if I don’t want to work here for the rest of my life, right? But then, at that point, I’m known as someone who has brought suits, right? And I have a reputation. Do you see what I’m saying?

Together, these participants reveal that in the neoliberal university, those who can be easily dismissed from their jobs feel powerless in the face of a reality in which the number of professors willing to take adjunct teaching jobs is far higher than the demand. Hence, when the institutional focus is on productivity at all costs, academic units do not feel obliged to spend much time dealing with a professor who presents what they see as problems or who shows any evidence of an impairment that may compromise the ability to produce. They can always find someone else who is “healthy” and eager to take the job.

Arguably, in the case of tenured professors, the situation is not much different. Their professorial status makes it much more difficult to dispose of them. Still, they are often overworked and many have to constantly show evidence that they are talented and able to attract research funding, including the interest of private investors. As DJ became a faculty member and showed strong evidence of his competence, the reactions of his colleagues gradually began to improve. However, he feels that those who do not know him are still prone to judging him accordingly:

The tenure process is very formal and detached at major research institutions. Other than people who don’t like me, who I presume refer to me as “crazy” and that sort of thing (just a guess), most of my colleagues don’t treat me negatively now that they’ve gotten to know me . . . and now that I’ve consistently proven my competence. On the other hand, I have been unsuccessful in landing a better job, even when I was more qualified than other candidates, and I’m sure that my personality disorder plays a major role in that, as does my admission of mental illness. I have no proof that I’ve been discriminated
against, but you know how things go. My disability is real and it affects my performance in interview situations. I’m not good at it.

In this comment, DJ underlines the point that judgment of competence is a key obstacle for those hoping to gain secure positions in the academy. While producing multiple publications and performing reliably over time can weaken stigma, then, his story illustrates that formal institutional processes such as tenure review, coupled with the everyday detection of disability, can be enough to limit one’s career. When “professors are fighting against each other for crumbs,” as Dora puts it, “anything that indicates any kind of weakness or incapacity to function at a [set] pace” counts against faculty members, regardless of their ranking. The work demands are not “feasible for most folks who would consider themselves able-bodied.”

Lorna, a career associate professor, offers a different perspective on these challenges, reflecting on the predominant culture in the academy that interferes with disability education by sowing and germinating professional rivalry. She theorizes that in competitive work environments empathy over one another’s struggles appears to be a rare commodity; people are mainly focused on finding ways to stay ahead of everyone else, and as a result they become oblivious to the daily battles fought by others. In the absence of any general appreciation for the impediments faced by individuals with disabilities, professors in Lorna’s situation are likely to begin the “race” already in a disadvantaged position compared to their non-disabled colleagues—particularly if they do not have tenure.

The opinions of Oswald, currently an adjunct online professor, often coincide with Lorna’s, mainly when he comments on the rivalry among academics and a “sick” culture that promotes competitiveness:

We’re elitist among ourselves. We do create these totem poles and we’re victims of that same process. And I think it’s harmful, because we all have strengths and weaknesses, and we should be cultivating each other’s strengths, and we should be working together... But instead, you get people who are really insecure in some ways, even though they seemingly have the most power [and enjoy] their powerful positions. We’ve all met other people like that, who seem to get their jollies off by putting other people down, and it’s kind of sick.
The sickness of the academy is manifested, according to Oswald, through “the egos of many scholars clashing.” He compares the world of higher education to corporate organizations. In his view, corporate norms tend to be “more transparent”, whereas in the scholarly environment, the rules seem to be obscure, with each department having “tremendous discretion . . . in terms of how it runs things.” Furthermore,

   You can go from the best of all possible worlds to the worst of all possible worlds just by changing the chair of the department, depending on their leadership style. I’ve been in departments where people can’t speak to each other. And I’ve been in departments where people feel really good about each other, and they really work together and help each other. And it’s just the luck of the draw.

Moreover, the present competitive environment leads many institutions to welcome any source of revenue that helps them remain operational. Universities have been corporatized, and for many the most obvious route to financial sustainability is to increase and maintain high enrolments. When this goal is top of mind, the university business model shifts to treat students as customers, which in turn gives students the power to rate the performance of professors—including those whose actions have led them to hold a grudge. Rose, for example, says she has grown tired of having to deal with insubordinate students or, in her words, “whiney babies.” She has had her syllabus overridden by management following complaints from students who felt she had expected too much of them in a course. The university’s leaders, she says, would “micromanage all the time just to keep the students in the seats.” Dora echoes this view: “If the customer [i.e., the student] wants to tell a story about why I’m not meeting their expectations for the product that they’ve paid for, it’s very easy for them to [make my life difficult].”

The experience of teaching online has the potential to cause even more stress for faculty. Oswald (like me) has taught online classes with 30 or even 40 students. Often, in an environment where each course can last as little as six weeks, the turnaround time for graded work must not go beyond 48 hours. Online instructors, as they review students’ weekly assignments, must be ready to spend a considerable amount of time responding to students’ emails. Faculty members are also assessed on the quality of their interactions with students. In my experience, to be considered a competent online instructor, one must be present in online discussions every day. In theory, on weekends it is permissible to let 36 hours pass without posting anything; however, all instructors know that if they disengage for this long, they will
have even less time to deal with the issues brought by their students when the new week begins. Oswald sums it up by saying that ableism is “about productivity and it’s about interactivity. It’s about how you are perceived by the students and how you connect with them.”

**Human Resources Policies and Institutional Practices and Procedures**

Despite the noble intentions of some higher education administrators, if universities and colleges do not adopt formal policies and procedures allowing for diversability in their human resources practices, they will still be unable to advance diversity. My participants suggest that human resources strategists have a key role to play in counsellng leaders who hope to transform their institutions into role models by demonstrating the rich variety of talents and abilities made available through promoting diversability. While in recent years there have ostensibly been advances in responding to the needs of students with disabilities (though my own experience as a diversable graduate student suggests this is not yet universal), it appears that universities and colleges still have a long way to go in providing diversable faculty members—all of them—with the support they need to perform their jobs effectively. As Lorna observes, “the disability services office is for students, not for faculty.” Sybil concurs: “We have [no services] for faculty. I’m the one who has to educate [my peers about disabilities].”

Even among institutions that have shown some goodwill in this direction, participants emphasize that many still fail to inform faculty members that help is possible if they are trying to manage an invisible disability. Employee assistance programs typically emphasize what they can do to support someone with a physical impairment, in contrast to those with invisible ones. An exception, perhaps, would be the scattered attempts to promote mental illness education—thanks in large part to recent, high-profile public awareness campaigns dedicated to eradicating the stigma. But based on the accounts of my research participants, few academics with invisible disabilities know where to go or whom to consult within their institutions. And even if the information is readily available, many faculty members may choose not to seek help when an institutional culture shows overwhelming signs of prejudice toward professors with cognitive or mental impairments. Michelle, for example, had many difficulties when she learned about the rapid deterioration of her hearing. First, she had no idea whether she could get financial assistance or even psychological support from her university. She subsequently learned that “the
hearing aid plan at the university really sucks.” She ended up having to spend $4,000 on hearing aids from her own pocket. By contrast, she believes that if she had a visible disability, the process of obtaining institutional assistance would have been a little easier:

[It’s] more obvious that you might need assistance. People who have physical disabilities don’t have the option of hiding that. It’s kind of in-your-face. People are confronted with it. They have to react, right? Whether that’s positively or negatively. I think we’re going to make a lot of progress because of the new legislation [in this province] to accommodate people with disabilities. [Since disability assistance] became law, [my university] has been very progressive in identifying, for example, the physical barriers on campus. So do we have all our automatic doors operating? Do we have ramps to alternative entrances in place? Are there buildings where people with a physical disability can’t get in? And so they’ve been very proactive in taking care of that.

Sybil also refers to recent disability-related legislation in Canada that obliges institutions to comply. She shows justifiable annoyance (in my view) over how her school has handled her hearing disability:

The only thing that they have done, that they’ve paid for is—because [they] had to by law anyway—was the fire alarm being a flashing light. Everything else . . . even the vibration system on the door, so the doorbell has a vibration alarm. . . . Actually to be fair, I haven’t paid for some of it, the Canadian Hearing Society has. They have a Work Wise program where, if you’re already in work [when you are diagnosed,] they will pay for the equipment to help you stay in work. They paid for my adapted telephone and my vibration system on the door and that kind of thing. But work never even considered it.

Disability avoidance is clearly a reason why so many university leaders and human resources representatives seem ill-equipped to respond to disclosure and requests for assistance. According to Norma, a full-time faculty member of an American college, her colleagues, institutional administrators and human resources staff are generally ignorant with respect to ways of helping faculty members with disabilities: “They just don’t seem to get it that we have the same rights that our students do. I think that . . . especially our college leadership . . . needs more training in these sorts of things.” Furthermore, Norma finds university and college leaders naïve in not leveraging their human resources departments to help create disability awareness.
In my training as department chair, no one ever taught me how to deal with faculty who have a disability. I know a little bit how to deal with it because I myself have a disability. I don’t think I have ever seen people less aware of what they need to do for an employee with a disability than I’ve seen with college human resources people. I think that everyone needs more training in these sorts of things. They train us not to sexually harass people, but . . . how do I deal with my colleague who has ADD, an administrative assistant who is depressed or this person who gets tired or is diabetic and has to take a break and eat? Currently, you have to learn all that on the job, or you try to figure it out as best you can. But surely there should be some more support in that.

The overall ignorance about, or lack of interest in, assisting faculty with disabilities is likewise a concern for Beth, another U.S. professor, who feels her university has failed to reveal the kind of support available to faculty members who need to take some time off due to disability. She says that critical information about faculty assistance is simply “not advertised—nobody knows,” adding:

One of the things this university has done poorly is making sure that people actually know that there are ways to support those with disabilities—and that’s not advertised anywhere. Had it not been for my casual conversation with my colleague, I wouldn’t have known my options.

Similarly, Sybil has had her share of dealing with apparent ignorance on the part of her human resources department:

When I started looking into getting the [service] dog, I went to speak to our HR director. [I asked if I] would be allowed to bring a dog in training into work. They didn’t know anything about it at all.

My data suggest that universities practice ableism and disability avoidance routinely, often creating rules and procedures that overlook any person who does not adhere to their standards of normalcy. For example, in designating parking spots for faculty—except for the obvious few reserved for the visibly impaired—there seems to be no consideration of whether anyone will be challenged in moving from parking lot to workplace. Monica has experienced much stress, and even physical pain, from having to park her car in the spot the university has provided:
Even if you give me a handicap placard, the handicap spot is still half a mile from my classroom. Like that is the closest spot, so I'm still walking half a mile. . . . Every time this happens, I get really bad and completely degenerate to the point where I cannot do any work any more. And actually it got to the point where I had to borrow a wheelchair from someone, so I could go do my job. . . . I have been in the middle of a parking lot in a snowstorm and having just to sit down smack on the ground and wait an hour until you feel like you can take a few more steps.

Moreover, the disability-related parking policies are inadequate:

[They are] basically written for people who have electric wheelchairs, who just need maybe a wider space, but who are just as fast as everybody. They are moving fast. They are able-bodied people in electric wheelchairs—paralyzed from the waist down, but [their] hands are fast and [they] can do everything fast. But if I have anything that makes me slow, then I shouldn't leave the house. These people writing the policies are able-bodied, right?

Norma has faced similar problems with managing physical distance at the institutions where she teaches. In her case, the difficulty lies in having to go to a classroom that is far from her office. She remembers one day when the challenge was especially acute:

I sat in a classroom and didn’t know if I [would be able to] walk back to my office. That was kind of embarrassing, and I don’t think I could [ever] ask anyone to carry me. I was just in so much pain! My back had completely shrunk up, and after that I said [to myself], “I really need my classes to be where my office is.”

Rita, a full professor in the US, points to situations in which disability avoidance can potentially put lives at risk. She speaks of one occasion when one of the largest buildings on campus had to be evacuated after it was reported that someone had entered the premises carrying a gun. Although this was not Rita’s building, she noticed one of her colleagues, who uses a wheelchair, expressing a high level of anxiety and she began to imagine the implications of a similar emergency situation in her own building. Rita explains that her colleague “would not be able to get out of the building quickly because, in these situations, they don't want you to use the elevator. And, so she [would be] on the third floor and nobody would necessarily know that she was up there.” In Rita’s view, this is a fundamental reason for why disability awareness must be
promoted more aggressively. “Normals can easily run outside in an emergency, but what about those who cannot move quickly?”

Usually, the majority of people coming and going through the halls of higher education institutions do so without giving much thought to the dome of ableist practices that encompasses the academy. However, as Michelle points out, small changes that would make an extraordinary difference in her life might also be welcomed by many of her able-bodied peers in the academy. For instance, because of her hearing difficulties, Michelle is always relieved when speakers use a microphone. In her view, “there are probably other people in that room who would also appreciate having [colleagues] using the microphone for a variety of reasons, potentially.”

Meetings can also pose a significant challenge for those like Lorna (and myself) who are easily distracted and have difficulty following rapid-fire discussions. She comments on how exhausting it can be to gather with a group of colleagues:

It’s very, very difficult for me to deal with a group discussion, even if it's orderly. I miss things that are being said because my brain is still here and you're moving there, and I get side-tracked very, very easily.

Rose discusses another ableist procedure adopted by higher education institutions: there seems to be little or no appreciation for the impact of tight deadlines on those who must move about; in her case, she cannot sit for too long due to chronic pain. This is a complaint voiced by many faculty members. She recalls when she had to write her doctoral comprehensive exam:

Your committee would email you five essay questions that you would not know what they were in advance. You would just know the general subject, and then you would have 72 hours to write 10 page answers to each of those questions [In other words,] 72 hours to write 50 pages, with citations and a bibliography and all of that. Now, I don’t know how I managed to do it [laughs], but I survived. The problem was that I was up for 72 hours straight. Even though I had food delivered, I couldn’t bring myself to eat it, because I was so busy typing. I had a lot of delivered food go cold. I was in my office chair for a good many hours straight. I pressed “Send” on my submission. Then I stood up and immediately collapsed. The nerves in my sciatic area were all pinched, and I had muscle damage in my butt [laughs]. Both side of my gluteus were completely atrophied from sitting for so long.
There are several other examples among my interviews illustrating ableism and blatant disregard for differentness. I conclude this section with two stories from Sybil about having her needs taken totally for granted. Sybil is allergic to any citric fruit, but, as she says, “nine times out of ten, the catering company at the university will provide something that has citrus in [it]”, even though she has warned them many times about her allergy. But a much more grave incident at the university led to her disability being seen as “the problem”. The following incident demonstrates how disability avoidance has made her institution oblivious to its own impairment:

My office is one of three offices behind a general office area, and nobody is meant to be [there] without knocking and being let in. [Mine is] a secure office because of the research we do. And we had a couple of times where the maintenance people just let themselves in while my dog was still learning to alert me if someone is at the door. That’s what she’s meant to do. When someone knocks or rings the doorbell, she’s meant to tell me and go to the door. When they were just letting themselves in, she ran at them and barked, which is not acceptable at all. I’m not arguing whether it was acceptable. However, [the maintenance people] then complained because she’s a German shepherd, and they were scared. I’m not quite sure how they were scared . . . she’s a puppy, and she didn’t touch them at all. I mean, she would always stop and come straight back when commanded. But they were scared. So they put a complaint in. When I spoke to HR, I said, “Look, forget the dog. Why are they letting themselves in my office anyway?” I said, “It’s a secure office. I have signs on the door saying ‘Service dog in training’ and signs on the door saying ‘Please knock or ring the doorbell and be patient.’ The dog is learning to tell me, and it’s not like I’m not doing everything that I can.” It was interesting, because it started with the complaint being very aggressive against me—as in “You’ve got this dog that’s out of control, and they shouldn’t let you have it at work”—[and then it evolved] to “Hold on a minute, forget the dog. You’ve got people here that are not following the regulations and the rules around security for data.”

**Conclusion**

In this first of four data chapters, I have presented evidence that the academy is ableist to an extreme, leading to inhumane treatment of all faculty members. In the next chapter, I will link the prevailing ableist and results-oriented mentality to the fact that many faculty members keep
their disabilities secret, lest there be any concerns over their fitness to remain part of the academic enterprise. In its daily discourse, practices and norms, the academy encourages a posture that sustains disability avoidance. If a professor is perceived as “disabled” in the most pejorative sense—that is, incompetent and unqualified—he or she may face significant pressure to prove otherwise. The onus is on faculty members to demonstrate that they are “worthy” of remaining part of such a select group. Moreover, as the evidence presented in this chapter illustrates, because of profound ignorance regarding how to respond to individuals with disabilities, these professors also end up shouldering the responsibility to educate other university stakeholders about their differentness. In order to do that, however, they must first disclose their impairment—a decision that may very well be detrimental to their careers.
Chapter 6
Disclosure of Disabilities, Ableism and Neoliberal Realities

Performativity, Job Precarity and Non-Disclosure

In the previous chapter, I presented evidence from my participants of what Bolt and Penketh (2016) call “disability avoidance” by the ableist postsecondary institutions where they work. Participants signalled that job precarity is important in this institutional response, which is the topic of this chapter. Table 2 reveals their positions on disclosing disability in the current neoliberal climate in postsecondary education. A glance at the table reveals a general hesitation to reveal invisible disabilities. Specifically, only three participants have completely disclosed: tenured professors Fiona, Sylvia and Sam publicly discuss their experiences as scholars with invisible illnesses. The latter pair are full professors at U.S. research universities—Sylvia at a privately funded institution, and Sam at a public one. Both decided to reveal their disabilities because the job security that comes with tenured status allows them to advocate on behalf of others. I develop the argument here that disclosure and precarity are linked in the neoliberal academy through performativity.

How are ableism, disclosure of disabilities and neoliberalism in postsecondary institutions linked? Table 2 presents evidence linking job precarity and fear of disclosure, which I argue feeds into a loop of invisibility and avoidance. As shown in Table 2, Sylvia estimates that 85 percent of her workload is research-related, while Sam says about half of his time is devoted to research. They are both in a position to do a significant amount of research and writing compared to other participants in less secure positions. They work in research-intensive universities, where they have been able to obtain the security of tenure and full professorships based on their well-established publication records. Also (again as shown in Table 2), both can be described as successful scholars, at least from the perspective of leaders in neoliberal higher education institutions. Sam has 25 publications and a book in print, and Sylvia has more than 50 publications. They are well regarded within the academy, nationally and internationally. Indeed, they could be described as “academic celebrities.”
Regardless of their achievements, it should not be assumed that the security of Sam’s and Sylvia’s position was always a given. Based on their experiences prior to reaching full professorship, both know that many of their pre-tenured and untenured peers with invisible disabilities may choose not to speak up for fear of putting their careers in jeopardy. Sylvia and Sam have also earned the security that an extensive record of publications can bring in a setting where research is valued. (Norma, by contrast, has attained equivalent to tenure status at a community college where 90 percent of her responsibilities are teaching-related—and apparently her performance as a teacher equates to job security.)

Table 2 also shows that tenured faculty at research-intensive universities with a smaller workload allocation for research and writing have fewer publications and more job precarity. For example, Rose has no formal research allocation, and her teaching responsibilities as an adjunct leave little time for original scholarship. Indeed, my interviews reveal that the competition among research-focused universities for government funding, as well as student enrolments, has a significant impact on faculty members with invisible disabilities. As participants explain, administrators of neoliberal institutions remain focused on performativity, exerting pressure on faculty—and themselves—to become more productive, which they feel will enhance the reputation and attractiveness of their institutions. Under a regime of performativity, academics compete against each other in order to remain relevant and valued by their schools of affiliation. They must constantly demonstrate through measurable means—particularly by producing a significant number of publications in the eyes of the scholarly community—that they are assets to their institutions.
Table 2: Participants' Self-Description of Workload, Number of Publications and Disclosure Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Professorial Rank</th>
<th>Institutional Size</th>
<th>Workload (Research/Teaching/Service)</th>
<th>Publications</th>
<th>Disclosure Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Mid (U.S.)</td>
<td>50/30/20</td>
<td>18+</td>
<td>Fearful of stigma if discloses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Large (U.S.)</td>
<td>50/30/20</td>
<td>25 articles and 1 book</td>
<td>Out: writes on subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Large (U.S.)</td>
<td>R: 85 / S: 15</td>
<td>50+ articles and 5 books</td>
<td>Out: writes on subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Large (U.S.)</td>
<td>30/35/35</td>
<td>12+</td>
<td>Only those she trusts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Associate; now Full</td>
<td>Mid (Canada)</td>
<td>2.6 courses/yr.</td>
<td>22+</td>
<td>Partially out: gradually disclosing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Large (Canada)</td>
<td>40/40/20</td>
<td>33+</td>
<td>Out: writes on subject; but cautious with colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorna</td>
<td>Career Associate</td>
<td>Mid (Canada)</td>
<td>20/60/20</td>
<td>7+</td>
<td>Controls who becomes aware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Large (U.S.)</td>
<td>T: 90 / S: 10</td>
<td>1+</td>
<td>Avoids disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sybil</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Small (Canada)</td>
<td>40/40/20</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Cautiously reveals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ</td>
<td>Assistant; now</td>
<td>Mid (U.S.)</td>
<td>40/40/20</td>
<td>12+</td>
<td>Teaches/Made video on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Small (U.S.)</td>
<td>Increase from 3/3 to 3/4 courses/yr.</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Does “not trust or confide in anyone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald</td>
<td>Left academia</td>
<td>Small (U.S.)</td>
<td>60/30/10</td>
<td>8+</td>
<td>Disclosure can mean “the end of our job”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>Small (U.S.)</td>
<td>60/30/10</td>
<td>8+</td>
<td>Has “not told a soul” at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oswald</td>
<td>Now Adjunct; was tenure track.</td>
<td>Large (U.S.)</td>
<td>T: 100</td>
<td>1+</td>
<td>Explains to students he is not “damaged goods”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>Small (U.S.)</td>
<td>T: 100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Disclosure forced by need for accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Now Adjunct; Previously Assistant professor</td>
<td>Mid (U.S.)</td>
<td>T: 80 / S: 20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Campus is “not safe” “Outed” by dissertation advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neoliberalism, The Tenure Stream and Disclosure

To anchor my argument that the neoliberal context exacerbates the situation of non-disclosure, I offer the views of Lorna:

The workplace is much more competitive. It has to do with the fact that so much of our teaching is done by highly qualified people who don't have tenure and who are pulling together part-time work from a number of places. The workplace becomes very exploitative. It's partly because of the economy; it's partly ideological as well, as it shifts to the right. And so that creates conditions where departments and individuals are made to compete with each other.

The importance of this neoliberal context to deciding whether to reveal a disability is also signalled by Michelle, who points out that the academic setting is anchored in relationships of power “and you don’t want to be seen as inferior in [faculty] meetings.” Rita adds that universities have an interest in nurturing competitiveness among faculty “because then people become more productive.” Lorna sees this competitiveness among professors expressed through jealousy and egos that need to be inflated. Moreover, as argued in chapter 5, neoliberal discourses also decentre equity. Lorna remembers an occasion in which she was helping educate her peers to learn how to deal with students with ADHD and one of them seemed to be dismissive of what she had to say. “She was almost laughing at me,” Lorna observes. Rita has also witnessed the occurrence of antagonistic relationships in the academic milieu, stressing the importance for university leaders to create a more collegial institutional culture. Rose, in her current adjunct position, regrets the fact that she never felt supported by anyone in her previous research-intensive institution, having no colleagues to trust. And mistrust is also what leads Dora, who is on the tenure track, to fight hard in order to never make herself vulnerable to neoliberal realities—which would happen if she disclosed her disability, she thinks. In Dora’s words:

Everyone is engaged in this process of fighting each other for crumbs. This is a direct extension of the hyper-competitive culture that we live in. There are 650 other people willing to take my place in the market.
Therefore, she refuses to come out because she does not want to give anyone a reason to doubt her ability to perform her job. Like Michelle, Dora summarizes the connection between academic competitiveness and disability:

There are a multitude of capitalist systems; but the one we’re living under right now is heightened, neoliberal, disaster capitalism [in which] everyone is in crisis. We’re in a constant condition of crisis and I think that makes us hyper-competitive, right? In ways that I don’t think would normally read as competitive either. The fact that I am not willing to make myself vulnerable and out myself and wear my disability on my sleeve . . . I mean, I think that is a direct extension of the hyper-competitive culture that we live in.

Lorna, as compared to Dora, is somewhat secure in her tenured position, has a modest number of publications, and differs from her colleagues who have been promoted to full professor in having much less of her workload—only 20 percent—protected for research and writing. She is quite senior, but has come to terms with what is called being a “career associate professor.” This is a term referring to the fact that she achieved associate status based on her promise as a researcher in a research-intensive university, but has not been in a position to move to full professorship. She believes that “the [political] game that puts one professor against another can be quite irritating,” and politics has clearly affected her career trajectory.

But those still engaged in the “competition” such as DJ must be able to “play”—that is, engage in performativity—if they want to be welcomed as an in-group member. Except for DJ (who was told to hide his disability research), opting to hide disabilities that are not easily detectable seems to be a matter of scholarly survival and, as Sandra observes, “can be very daunting.” However, participants in this study put significant effort into concealing any aspects of their academic personas that might be considered odd or unfitting. In the face of what often feels like an inhospitable environment for academics with disabilities, DJ, for instance, has even “sabotaged my medical records to make [those who are suspicious of the state of my mental health] go away.” But he obviously “played” successfully and survived the revelation of his diversability in the workplace, as he has been awarded tenure and promoted to associate professor since our interview. Presumably this recognition was based on the fact that DJ had 12 publications.
Beth, now tenured, hints that research productivity is not the only consideration for a tenure review to be successful—she also talks about the importance of having the right connections; in fact, she claims that her friendship with the chair of her department has extensively benefitted her career. On the other hand, Dora, the tenure-track professor quoted above as keeping quiet about her disability to protect her reputation as she competes for tenure, brings attention to the realities of the neoliberal academy when she says: “I don’t think tenure will afford the same job protection that it has historically because of the world economy. Productivity is what matters.”

Given that Dora and DJ have a similar number of publications, she will likely be able to achieve her goal. Nevertheless, her comment emphasizes that, in the neoliberal academy, even tenure will not ultimately shield one’s position—that is, the institution of tenure may be eroded in the face of the pressure to produce. Accordingly, she reveals that “I do not disclose to anyone.”

However, Rose, formerly in the tenure track at a small U.S. private university and now a contingent professor in that country, confirms Michelle’s assertion about the current value of tenure. She provides an anecdote that illustrates the benefits of tenure when revealing a disability by referring to the case of a tenured colleague who was “very much respected and was offered many accommodations, even beyond what the law requires.” Furthermore, she describes her new advisor at the university where she is pursuing her PhD degree (not the institution where she works) in the most admiring way: “[She] came to the department with tenure, and she was this petite thing who is a crusader, fighting sexism and discrimination.” Evidently, then, the general perception is that tenure gives one the option of “coming out” about disability, even if one decides to play it safe and not disclose in the neoliberal university.

Participants in my study who are on the tenure track and producing “acceptable” numbers of research-based publications believe tenure will enable them to relax and not worry so much about coming out as disabled. This is consistent with the declarations of a few fully tenured professors, who admit to feeling safe enough that they can reveal any sort of impairment, including those that are highly stigmatized. In attaining tenure, a faculty member has supposedly provided evidence of his or her value to the academy, despite any “imperfections” that a disability may bring. As Michelle says: “Once you’ve gained tenure, you’ve proven yourself. They know you’re competent, so you can be free to talk about your disability. I now feel more empowered to speak up about my needs.”
But she is an exception; other participants believe that even with tenure, disclosing a disability can be problematic. Sylvia laughs about the “celebrity status” she gained after publishing one of her autobiographical books, which only happened after she had received tenure. Sobering, though, is the fact that even when her professorial status had been upgraded, Sylvia still spent considerable time weighing the pros and cons of disclosure and what it would do to her reputation in the scholarly community. DJ has similar reservations. After experiencing what can only be called a chaotic early life, he describes himself as a “tenure-track professor with multiple hidden disabilities (mental illnesses and chronic pain stemming from anxiety).” After our interview, he emailed the following cautionary tale about disclosure:

I do in fact have much difficulty working because of my hidden impairment as well as the backlash and stigma I’ve received in the few instances where I’ve brought my disability to people’s attention—sometimes positive but sometimes very negative, even threatening. Some people [call] me a liar about my personality disorder [and they clearly dislike me] because of my personality—that sort of thing.

Neoliberalism and Disclosure: “Outing” in the Adjunct Stream

Interview comments from a range of professors of varying seniority suggest that those who are adjunct faculty fear they may remain stuck in contingent roles, while those in the tenure stream fear they may end up in less than full professorships. As I will show in this section, these professors often find themselves inhabiting a hostile and outwardly Darwinian “chilly climate” environment, in which ableist policies and procedures—particularly related to job performativity—place them at a disadvantage in comparison to their non-diverse peers. Participants expressed the view that a large number of precarious professors and instructors cannot possibly avoid stressful uncertainty over whether they will be able to sustain a decent living from month to month. As noted above, according to Lorna, the academic workplace has become “exploitative” and far more “competitive”; much of the teaching is done by “highly qualified people” without tenure, who must pursue part-time work for a number of schools.

The situation becomes drastically worse in the case of contract faculty who also have to cope with a disability. For example, Oswald, a U.S. contingent faculty member, says that he needs to
be teaching on a continuous basis three courses per year, “to get by economically.” The fact that, as an adjunct, he is at the mercy of more secure faculty is transparent in Oswald’s comments when he mentions with relief that he has finally, after 10 years, landed a summer job at his institution. The reason it has taken so long, in his view, is that summer courses are only awarded to the most powerful faculty by the department chair. He says: “In most departments, you know, instead of going to the people that are struggling at the bottom, the summer courses are like plums plucked by the most powerful, so they can, you know, pay for their kids’ college education or an extra boat or something.” Oswald feels resentful over the fact that he has given in and now holds no hope of ever becoming a tenured professor. Academic life has lost its romanticism—if there ever was any. Here is how he describes the effects of ableist discourse in the fight for permanent status:

I’ve given up. I had fantasies of getting tenure or getting a real job. I mean, I used to be much more nervous about revealing [my disability, so I] worked harder and I covered it up. I was on a tenure track and once let it slip to a member of my hiring committee that I was struggling with [the side effects of my disability]. Because the school was located in a remote area, they had trouble to find decent hires. Her comment in response to my revelation was, “Oh, you know, we always get the damaged goods.” That was like a knife stabbing my heart, you know.

Similarly to DJ, Oswald sees the scholarly world as a place in which people keep putting others down: “It’s sick!” He and other professors in precarious positions understand the dangers of revealing a disability that might make them vulnerable to mischievous kairotic gossip. He concludes: “The risk of revealing yourself is real. The hatred is real. When you put yourself out there, you’re going to experience oppression.”

Comments about the institutional climate experienced by participants in my study who have lost or are losing their hope of attaining tenure or a tenure-stream position are poignant. Rose learned early about the hazards of disclosing a disability, and stresses how vital it was for her to “work nicely” when she was under the tutelage of her previous PhD advisor. In response to her complaint about his approach, Rose’s advisor retaliated by alerting others that she was “incompetent as a result of [her] mental illness.” According to Rose, many lies about her were spread, including that she had “abandoned a kid and that [she] was an addict.” And Gerald paints a bitter scenario of the university environment he encountered when he refers to the
treacherous politics of neoliberal academia: “Some people share the same evil agenda.” In his view, “even with policies and structures, [a good workplace] still depends on a culture that fosters people caring for one another.” This is a feeling he did not have while working as a professor.

Interviewees who are now in more secure positions observe that the academy is still quite frigid for those with disabilities and that they still experience an environment marked by rivalries and “backstabbers.” Beth argues that even when “some people don’t have [legitimate] power, they still can make things very unpleasant for others around them [if they are influential].” Michelle is keenly aware that professors must constantly earn the respect of others. DJ sees faculty meetings as a particularly “toxic activity.” His perception is that his colleagues see him as a troublemaker due to his “personality disorder.” His negative view of the academic environment is reflected in comments such as “We’re all full of prejudices; we’re pretending we’re not, and we’re kidding ourselves.” Dora also refers to how, in the past, she went through major stress during faculty meetings as well. In her case, due to the misinterpretation by her superiors that she took a leave of absence without formally communicating it to the school, she describes how ‘they tried to single [her] out in faculty meetings whenever [she] asked a question.”

Rose, whose first dissertation advisor “outed” her, describes in detail how postsecondary institutions that treat students as consumers become part of the “chilly climate” facing contingent faculty. On the occasion of our interview in April 2015, this participant discussed a variety of situations in which she had felt antagonized by her university, being forced to start teaching at a nearby community college. “I was in debt and my adjunct salary would not make things better”, she added. Rose became a “freeway flier,” working for two different institutions to make ends meet. She also remembers a colleague who needed to have surgery, but kept postponing it because her adjunct salary would not allow her to do it. In Rose’s view, colleges seem to ignore the ADA legislation in the US, at least when it comes to adjuncts. In her words, “[The leaders of my previous institution] seemed to feel that they didn’t need to do anything for us [adjuncts] other than signing our pay cheques.” Moreover, she observes that faculty persistently receive encouragement to please “the paying customers’, i.e., students. Once there was an incident with one of her students and Rose’s chair reprimanded her for the upset she had caused the student. She dwells on the concern that those in insecure positions must face an
academy where the student-as-consumer trumps the professor-as-contingent worker: “They fought for every student to be in a classroom to keep the numbers up.” As Rose became increasingly disgruntled by the treatment that she and some colleagues received from that institution, she began to look for employment at for-profit universities. There she felt safer (at least for a short time) at a new workplace she considered collegial and supportive of faculty. She wrapped up our interview by adding that she was much happier now, saying that “If not for them, I would have never made it in traditional academia as a disabled person.” Unfortunately, however, Rose no longer feels safe. Since our interview, she has experienced a number of stressful setbacks in pursuing her doctoral degree at a university that seemingly protected her previous, abusive dissertation advisor “because he had tenure” —a behaviour ironically inconsistent with the neoliberal discourse that student-customers always come first. Moreover, Rose’s health has taken a turn for the worse. She has made some “silly mistakes” with the result that her current institution, which initially seemed willing to accommodate her disabilities—perhaps because leaders had yet to realize how unprepared, ill-equipped and biased they were to fully accept the diversability of faculty—has had to change its approach. They have felt obliged, as Rose puts it, to “relegate [me] back to part-time adjunct status [in the near future]. This means I will lose my health insurance, as well as my legal benefits—and I literally just [recently] filed for bankruptcy.” Seeing her world crashing around her, Rose feels once again that the academic world has “let me down.” In a recent note, she expressed her clear despair over the bleakness of her personal prospects:

I am so-o-o-o done, Vera. I can't fight anymore. [My current institution, in which I was so happy as a part-time assistant professor up to very recently, has now] ruined my previously blossoming career in the for-profit industry and [the other one, in which I’m pursuing my doctorate] indirectly has caused me to file bankruptcy twice in the last ten years. I have had enough. By the way, I reached out to the Disabled Student Services at [my doctoral university] for help and their response was to call them. They know very well I am hard of hearing, but they asked me to call them. I did and was hung up on by the director supposedly after I asked him to repeat himself a few too many times. They were pretty clueless anyway as the whole system is set up for undergrads. I mean, the director suggested that I schedule my defense with an exam proctor!
Rose adds: “If you’re an adjunct, you have no power, no job security, and you can expect no compliance with the law. Now . . . imagine if you’re disabled on top of that.”

For Monica, life as an adjunct has been slightly different. While many universities have chosen to employ more contingent faculty to cut costs, this hiring trend has not been evident at her U.S. institution. She presents the problem from a different angle—one in which the university does not want to allocate scarce resources into accommodations for faculty with health-related issues:

What they're proposing as a solution to the adjunct problem is to get rid of all the part-timers and replace them with full-timers who are working 60 hours a week and who will then get paid presumably a living wage. But that basically just screws people like me who are disabled and who just cannot [work all those hours.] It's unrealistic. Or anyone who is, say, the primary caregiver and they can teach two classes, while juggling, you know, caring for their kids. But they can teach four classes while doing that, so the solution is to get rid of all the jobs that disabled people can do and replace them with jobs that only able-bodied people with no life can do. That is actually really scary to me. . . . I told the union I want to get paid a living wage, but I don't want to have to work 60 hours a week to do it. And they're like, “It sounds like you're [in favour of] the status quo.” I said, “No, the status quo ends up being like a dollar an hour.” I want to actually make a living wage teaching my two classes. I don't want to have to teach four classes to make a living wage. My chair keeps going to the university and asking and saying, “Well, look, we've got this disabled person who is, by the way, way more qualified and has impressive degrees in research relative to our other teaching faculty. Can we please give her a half-time one of these?” Because even half time would be more money than I'm making right now.

The implication from Monica’s narrative, which is similar to that of Rose and Oswald, is that the combination of being a faculty member and having a disability produces side effects of catastrophic magnitude in the neoliberal academy. She speaks of universities that think like business organizations:

One of my close friends who's a graduate student—we've taught classes together where there's several sections of the same class—she has lupus and she's in the exact same situation. She doesn't look disabled, but some days she's just beat and she certainly
would not be in a situation where she could handle a 60-hour week with a very heavy teaching load. She's someone who, because of her disability, can’t handle two or maybe three classes. These jobs are [likely to be] taken off the table. And that is scary. Another one of my graduate student colleagues really wants to have work-life balance as a mother. She wants to be able to take care of her kid and still be able to teach classes and have an intellectual life, which frankly is why I am doing this... And because there's no job security and they're talking about phasing out the jobs disabled people can do in favour of the 60 hours a week job, I find that extremely scary and threatening.

Emphasizing the importance of the type of institution where a diversible faculty member works, she adds:

But someone who's a mother, she's going to be in the same boat when she goes out to the job market. [Ideally, she should get] a job at a top tier research university where she can do [most of her job] in an office at home and have her kids. Or if she ends up anywhere else, she's just screwed.

One need not become a contingent faculty member to experience the priority of the student-as-consumer in the academy, as raised in the previous chapter. Sybil, a tenure-track associate professor at a Canadian university, also makes comments on the student/customer-focused management philosophy she has witnessed in her workplace: “The usual response when students complain is that I’m wrong as faculty. Why, if I made the rules explicit from the very beginning?” She expresses outrage when discussing how old-fashioned the concept of the students’ duty to pass each assignment in order to pass the course seems to be considered these days. “It’s a big argument when I perceive my colleagues being easier on them”, she says, implying there is pressure on those professors who are hard on students and therefore are not as popular as other faculty.

In Canada, the era of neoliberal universities, as suggested by Lorna, creates a scenario in which even tenure-stream professors—with or without disabilities—are “grateful to have a job. There’s a hiring freeze so no one is going to make trouble.” In other words, no professor wants to be seen as a troublemaker, complaining about students or not being able to handle the expected workload, lest his or her competence on the job be scrutinized and interpreted by an unforgiving and unrealistic system as not pulling one’s weight. And Sybil, the Canadian tenure-track
professor cited above critiquing the student-as-consumer mentality, while being generally treated with respect and accommodated for her disabilities, also complains that these accommodations seem to be made begrudgingly, as if the university is doing her an immense favour: “I’m meant to fall down and worship their feet because they’ve accommodated me or helped me out in some way.” Moreover, the level of tolerance for the accommodation of invisible disability seems to be low, even though the institution might accommodate her. As she comments, “I had many complaints from colleagues when my dog was still in training and ‘misbehaving.’” (Sybil’s situation was described in more detail in chapter 5.)

Most of my study participants believe that tenure makes the professorial experience of individuals with disabilities less stressful financially, at least; tenured faculty who reveal their disabilities may experience a chill in the working environment, but they are unlikely to lose their jobs. As Michelle explains, tenure brought her the confidence to make her needs explicit. For example, she no longer feels self-conscious and uncomfortable speaking up “when I can’t hear my colleagues in large-group presentations. I ask them to use a microphone.” On the other hand, DJ, the recently tenured professor at a U.S. public university, has always known that “talking about my disability would limit my job possibilities. It’s not a sexy topic.” Dora also ventures to say how much harder scholarship is for untenured faculty with disabilities—a good enough reason, in her view, to maintain her determination not to disclose her health issues. She says that there are serious mental illnesses in her family background. Moreover, “It would be very easy for [my superiors] to toss me out.” Even Rita, a tenured full professor in the US, agrees that no job security makes the life of contract faculty with disabilities more onerous: “If you’ve got somebody who has a disability and they’re not productive, then that automatically gets linked.” But non-disclosure may also backfire, or at the very least, may result in almost unbearable stress. In this study, non-tenured professors acknowledge their belief that they may be more susceptible to receiving mediocre performance reviews, which they link to their disabilities. The decision to conceal their illnesses seems natural, given that they do not want to run the risk of being denied a new contract or even a tenure-track position. In recalling life before tenure, Beth shows this instinct for survival when she says, “I didn’t want people to know because I didn’t want them to write me off and say, ‘She’s never going to get tenure.’” The stress over the diagnosis of her MS is fully demonstrated when she shares thoughts she had at that moment, such as “I’ve dragged my family here, and what the hell are we going to do now if I can’t get tenure?”
Clearly, the anxiety that these professors experience over whether they should reveal their disabilities is most pronounced when they cannot count on the protection that tenure is supposed to bring. As recently tenured Michelle says, “My fear of coming out was because I still didn’t have tenure.” But again, Sylvia, the highly productive U.S. full professor introduced in chapter 5, for her part, told me something I did not expect to hear: even though she had been tenured for some time and was well regarded as a faculty member, she was still afraid of what her disclosure might do to her reputation. “The decision to come out didn’t happen overnight. It took me many months—years, actually—to disclose my illness.” As Sylvia mentioned in our telephone call, she chose to disclose her mental illness long after she felt the safety that accompanies tenure. In taking the step to disclose, Sylvia clearly lit the way for others. For DJ, the concern over what might happen to a professor’s reputation after revealing his or her disability secret to the world makes sense, particularly when he or she is clearly a well-accomplished scholar. In his words, “there’s a huge difference between writing from the comfortable position of tenure and putting yourself out there before you have the job.”

**Trust and the Pros and Cons of Disclosure vs. Non-Disclosure**

In exploring the avoidance/non-disclosure loop, I asked my study participants what it would take for them to feel comfortable—or compelled—to disclose their invisible disabilities. This prompted a wide range of answers, with the greatest contrasts being between professors who have tenure and those who do not. However, all seemed to agree that disclosure is a matter of trust. This is something Rose says she never felt, especially after being singled out for ridicule by her PhD advisor. Beth, now with tenure, emphasizes that “disclosure should happen only with people who absolutely must know, and whom you trust. It’s circumstantial.” Lorna also believes that one must choose the right moment to reveal a disability: “It’s not a question of disclosure; it’s a question of the conditions and the context.” In the same vein, Gerald believes it is of utmost importance for a professor to disclose his or her disability only to an immediate supervisor “who understands what you’re going through and can reassure you that your job is safe.”

As I have already emphasized, a true sense of safety may only arise when a professor attains tenure, which affords more favourable conditions for the revelation of a disability. Michelle
only started feeling comfortable about disclosing her hearing impairment after she became a full professor—which is a recent development in her career. Sylvia corroborates this feeling: “Of course when I disclosed my illness I had the safety that comes with tenure. Other faculty might not be so lucky.” Sam, knowing the devastating consequences of disclosing a stigmatizable attribute such as a cognitive or functional-related disability, believes that “hiding your disability means self-preservation, which comes instinctively, particularly when you’re young and still have to prove yourself.”

Given the context of competition and insecurity in the academy, it is not startling that negative stories came up more often than positive stories, as faculty members described the antagonism directed their way when other members of the university community heard about their invisible impairments. Beth, for instance, speaks about two senior colleagues “dropping me like a hot potato.” For the same reason, it appears, Lorna is wary about who becomes aware of her ADHD: “You have to use caution. You don’t know what’s going on in [other faculty and leaders’] minds.” Dora goes a little deeper, stating plainly: “I do not trust or confide in anyone here.” And DJ, even when mentioning a colleague he likes, adds that he does not think she would be “sympathetic to hearing my troubles.” This pessimistic view was no doubt reinforced when DJ’s supervisor advised him not to talk about his personal problems: “They told me other faculty members really like to know that their colleagues ‘will remain alive’. In other words, don’t tell them you have a mental illness.” DJ’s trust in others was unlikely to strengthen after he heard one faculty member calling him an “asshole.” Interestingly, though, he adds that it is still preferable to be called such names than to be labelled as “someone with a personality disorder.”

For many professors, the stress of being “caught” with having a defective mind is overwhelming. They seem adamant in emphasizing their view that coming out with a disability may put their competence into question due to obvious misconceptions etched in neoliberal academic discourse and ableist standpoints. Or, in Gerald’s words: “Once people find out, it can mean the end of your job.” And Dora completes a bleak picture in stating: “They expect me to be hyper-competent. If I disclose my invisible disability, that will make me a target.” In other words, although associating disability to incompetence is a fallacy, it does not make people’s negative responses any less real. It is very difficult to reconcile the presence of disability with a successful academic career. In Norma’s view, “showing that we’re in pain means we’re weak or
incompetent.” Or as Lorna articulates it: “There’s a sense that they will only hire competent people. And competent doesn’t equate to learning disabilities in the academic culture.” Oswald reinforces this constant worry: “I keep explaining to my students about my disability, reassuring them that I’m not ‘damaged goods.’” And Michelle alludes to the same type of stress:

Because of my having to ask students to repeat themselves due to my hearing loss, I fear being perceived as incompetent, which causes a lot of stress. . . . If I don’t hear them right, I might make assumptions that do not reflect what they are actually saying. And then there will be 36 people besides myself in the room who will witness me making an error.

Professors in my study also say they hesitate to open up about their impairments for fear of being called liars. Or they are concerned they will be thought lazy and simply looking for a way to escape some of their academic duties—giving their overworked peers even more tasks to deal with, which will make them unpopular on top of everything else. Several participants expect negative or doubtful responses upon revealing their invisible disabilities. Rita, for instance, lives in constant fear of having her department’s new chair, “who doesn’t know me well, see me as a slacker if I talk about my issue with migraines.” Monica reveals that even her doctor does not seem to believe she is “really” disabled: “Because he sees me walking, even [he] thinks I’m making up my illness . . . He won’t give me a handicap placard so I can have a shorter walk to the classroom.”

Disclosure can also come when faculty members feel they have no other choice. Michelle recalls feeling a “moral obligation to disclose my disability to a colleague who was co-teaching a course with me.” She wanted her colleague to be aware of her hearing difficulties so they could work together in providing their students with a suitable learning environment. Her comment suggests that co-teaching with a sympathetic colleague goes a long way towards accommodating disability issues. DJ also talks about his desire to create safer conditions for students who go through similar struggles, which is why he usually chooses to open up to his classes about his situation.

Despite what seems to be an atmosphere of negativity surrounding disclosure, it is refreshing to hear at least a few narratives in which professors report positive and supportive reactions from persons they trust. Sybil has been pleasantly surprised to learn that a few of her fellow faculty
members tell students with disability issues to come and speak with her; these colleagues see her as a diversable resource and “recognize that I can help those students more than they can.” DJ and Rose likewise believe that they are better equipped to support students who may be coping with disabilities, so they too have chosen to discuss their own disabilities in the classroom. They are generous in their willingness to help those who may be going through similar challenges and have few people they can confide in. This, of course, can also become a burden. But both Norma and Michelle have had a similar experience to Sybil’s, in that since they have come out, other faculty members have become more open about their own struggles. Michelle even suggests that some peer relationships have strengthened.

Conclusion

This chapter documents the experiences of my participants within what has become known as a neoliberal postsecondary landscape—competitive, precarious and characterized by heavy workloads. In such a climate, most of my participants agree that “coming out” is dangerous. Indeed, a critical topic in my interviews was the pervasiveness of the stigma attached to differentness, its nature and the specifics of how it is constructed, which will be explored in the next chapter. There seems to be a unanimous view (and evidence) that such a revelation will likely carry a high price, particularly for those who do not have tenure, including potential exclusion from the academy.

While tenure provides some sense of safety, and a few participants were able to see positive developments when they came “out,” overall a sense of distrust hangs over the academy, particularly for those in the most precarious positions. Professors also shared their views on the effects of disclosure and non-disclosure within the scholarly community. While disclosure is sometimes impossible to avoid, only a few are “out”—even though the effort to maintain non-disclosure can be extremely stressful. The stigma attached to disabilities in general, and particularly to those that could compromise the reputation of successful scholars, is the main reason both tenured and non-tenured faculty are reluctant to “come out.”

So what exactly does it mean to be an academic with a disability? In the next chapter, I turn to how my participants deal with the stigma of being labelled.
Chapter 7
Stigma, Narratives and Counter-Narratives

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have argued that, given the neoliberal environment of postsecondary institutions (as part of the societies within which they are embedded), all professors in my study agree that disclosure comes at a high risk. In this chapter I explore the observations shared by my participants regarding the stigma attached to disabilities in general, and particularly to those disabilities that could compromise successful scholars’ reputation for competence—in large part due to the neoliberal ableist environment in which they work. In the first section, the discourses taken up and rejected by participants are discussed along with some of the issues they face related to gender, parenthood, sexual orientation, cultural and ethno-racial identities and social class—which I term here “intersectionalities” (following this convention in the literature). Then I turn to the issue of stigma, looking particularly at how it affects the self-identity of professors who struggle to realize the idealized image of a “genuine” scholar—an image prompted and cultivated by the typical ableism of a clearly impaired academy.

Positive Narratives, Ableist Discourses and Identity

Table 1 (chapter 5) listed my participants, their professorial ranks and personal description of their disabilities in non-medical terms—as well as their experience of disability avoidance. I have come to see that the medicalization of diversability and other sources of difference as an assertion of power—an attempt to disenfranchise or exclude people who think and behave differently. But even after calling attention to the arbitrariness of this labelling, I have found it virtually impossible to jettison medicalization outright, for several reasons. First, this is how my participants self-identify. As I argued in chapter 4, coming to grips with the humanity of my participants by honouring their narratives is the key to advancing paradigm change around the avoidance of disability. Although it may be too dangerous for them to tell their stories, my research account of their trials provides a safe way to take the measure of the problem. For example, Lorna, a full-time career associate professor who works at an urban institution in Canada, evokes an overall sense of mistrust enshrouding the university environment and emphasizes the importance of using caution when revealing the “formality” of a disability. She considers herself more open about disclosing her ADHD than other scholars might be, while at
the same time recognizing the wisdom of those who decide to be more guarded. As she says: “We don't know what's going on in other people's minds.”

In this chapter, I look at the narratives by which these academics characterize their personal experiences of mental, cognitive and/or physical differentness and its impact here. For most, acknowledgement of the labels by which they are constrained is a necessary part of the story that needs to be told. As treacherous as it is to reproduce the disability labels applied by some institutions, I believe change will only be possible if we expose the arbitrary nature of those labels and the unfairness they encourage. Under some circumstances, they can also be helpful in engaging the discourses of power that are necessary for any enlightening effort to commence. Therefore, I believe that one may not fully abandon the nomenclature (Gunaratnam, 2003), if its shortsightedness must be brought to light. We may wish for a utopian society where racial differences, for example, do not even register and where labels like “black” and “white” and “brown” are meaningless. But as long as there is racial injustice, we need to be able to challenge the perpetrators using the language they understand: hence Black Lives Matter. And hence, in this context, Diversable Lives Matter.

Table 3 (next page) shows what a complex issue self-identification can be.
**Table 3: Intersectionalities, Medical Labels and Level of Stigmatization, Discourses and Counter-Narratives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Intersectionalities</th>
<th>Medical Label and Level of Stigmatization</th>
<th>Orientation to Discourses of Ableism and Hyper-competence, and Identity</th>
<th>Counter-Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Bipolar Disorder/Red</td>
<td>Prior to tenure, lived by his own belief: “Hide it when you still have to prove yourself”</td>
<td>Identifies as activist—helping those who must hide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Gender, age</td>
<td>Schizophrenia/Red</td>
<td>Had impostor syndrome; has regained control over her life</td>
<td>“The more I accept I have a mental illness, the less it defines me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Gender, physical appearance</td>
<td>Chronic neurological and audiological illness; Lyme disease/Red</td>
<td>“[M]y reality makes life lonely [and] further on the margins . . . more ‘freakish’, far from the norm, common experience and anything in the literature”</td>
<td>“The radical humbling makes one more real. . . . I can just attune and resonate in at body-energetic level”; more able to feel the energy of students in the classroom; no “ego-centric life”; I promote myself and . . . what will advance my career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorna</td>
<td>Gender, age</td>
<td>ADHD/Red</td>
<td>Rejects a disability identity and “hopelessness”; still worries about disability and aging</td>
<td>Strives to have skills recognized; “loves” being a professor; activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>Gender, parenthood, age</td>
<td>Ankylosing spondylitis and rheumatoid Arthritis/Yellow</td>
<td>At first worried; now proud of all she can do</td>
<td>“I’m excited to be able to help students and other faculty”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Gender, parenthood</td>
<td>Migraine Headaches/Yellow</td>
<td>Worries her new chair will see her as a “slacker”</td>
<td>“I’m tenured, which is nice. . . . I tend to be my own driving force”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Gender, parenthood, age</td>
<td>Multiple sclerosis/Yellow</td>
<td>Worried re: comments such as “Geez, not only is she a mom, she’s got this…to deal with”</td>
<td>“MS will (not) stop me”; became graduate director after tenure; “now I have to figure out the balance again”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Gender, parenthood</td>
<td>Hearing loss/Yellow</td>
<td>Dislikes medicalization, but worries about being labelled incompetent by students/peers</td>
<td>Proud of accomplishments; a “better (empathetic) person”; not judgmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ</td>
<td>Class, cultural upbringing</td>
<td>Bipolar, anxiety, personality and sleep disorders; depression, PTSD; substance use; and chronic pain/Red</td>
<td>Dislikes medical labels; forced to be institutionalized</td>
<td>Proud of his work; “I love teaching!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>Gender, class</td>
<td>Chronic pain; herniated disk; migraines, anxiety and depression/Red, yellow</td>
<td>Calls those who disclose “irrational”; fears poverty</td>
<td>“Things have been much better ever since I changed jobs; far less chronic pain and anxiety!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 Please see the main narrative for my explanation of levels of stigma using my metaphor of traffic lights (p. 172). In my assessment of the level of stigmatization, I have also considered the intersectionality of participants’ diversabilities. The third column reports each participant’s orientation to ableist discourses, while the last indicates their level of agency in replacing those discourses with counter-narratives.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Counter-Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gerald</td>
<td>Gender/parenthood</td>
<td>Chronic fatigue syndrome; fibromyalgia; Lyme disease; degenerative disc disorder (DDD) and failed back syndrome/ Yellow</td>
<td>Dislikes medical labels</td>
<td>Endorses impression management; being &quot;disabled . . . increased my empathy and my desire to help others&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sybil</td>
<td>Gender, class, parenthood, ethnicity, age</td>
<td>Hearing loss; osteogenesis imperfect (collagen deficiency); fibromyalgia; severe complex (non-combat) PTSD; anaphylaxis Meniere’s disease; IBS and severe asthma/ Yellow</td>
<td>Gradual acceptance due to negative connotation</td>
<td>Has referent power—educating others is worth the effort; loves when her classes flow well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Tenure Track</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Gender, race</td>
<td>Sarcoidosis/ Yellow</td>
<td>Fearful about being seen as an “impostor”; strives to be seen as a human being . . . not as a person with a disability</td>
<td>“I have always been very organised, task-orientated and able to effectively carry out my job responsibilities. I am a very popular professor”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oswald</td>
<td>Parenthood</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy and chronic pain/Yellow</td>
<td>Resigned to being “just a part-timer”; feels invisible, particularly teaching online</td>
<td>Adjusted classes to his own pace and realized “Wow, I can teach!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Gender, cultural upbringing</td>
<td>Fibromyalgia; chronic pain; PTSD; ADHD/Red, yellow</td>
<td>Knows “will never be . . . music faculty”</td>
<td>Proud to be “very qualified”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation</td>
<td>PTSD; fibromyalgia and hearing loss/Red, yellow</td>
<td>Dislikes medical labels of pain; stigma “has damaged . . . an ascendant professorial career”</td>
<td>Gives her best; excelled in school; links safety to “the act of learning and doing good papers and things like that”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once again, it is nearly impossible to describe the internalization of ableist postures without applying medicalized terms. My participants themselves provided me with some of the scientific labels they were “sentenced” to bear at some point in their lives, and which some have replaced with counter-narratives. However, I could not fully report on the stories of these academics without touching upon how some, over time, have taken up identifications (and reputations) that are modest professionally but nevertheless “positive” from an ableist perspective. I refer to these new discourses as counter-narratives, whether they are good researchers and writers (Norma and Rose), good teachers (DJ and Oswald), activists for equity (Sam and Lorna) or individuals in control of how they define themselves (Sylvia and Rita). Those who have found opportunities to demonstrate their academic acumen and attained their goals express a significant level of self-satisfaction in the counter-narratives they have constructed. Norma, for example, remarks,

I've had my disability long before I became 60! For some time, I was a single mother, raising a son and trying to balance single parenthood with a developing academic career. Oddly, that's when I published the most.

Participants' willingness to adopt positive discourses at all three levels of full, tenure track and adjunct professor can be related to their pride in being allowed to take up the label of “professor”, which evokes so many positive images. As Lorna observes, “I love being a university professor. It’s a vocation.”

In this section, beginning with the adjunct level, I briefly show how these positive self-identifications are woven into identity regardless of the fact that diversable faculty are often given a “red light” at particular levels of the professorial hierarchy. For example, even those who consider themselves stuck at the level of adjunct or career associate professor admit to finding joy in being able to teach while applying the labels of what can be called “ableist discourse” to their efforts. Oswald, for example, despite having given up hope of ever being anything but a part-time faculty member, takes great pride in his teaching when he sees evidence that he has “reached” his students “from a distance.” As he observes, the challenges of being an academic in his particular situation in the face of an oppressive ableist environment have led him to feel that his only choice now is to teach in the online environment. The physical distance from his students makes him feel even more “invisible,” and he experiences bursts of self-doubt. He often wonders whether he has made any positive difference in his students’ lives—an outcome by which he measures his value as a teacher. From Oswald's perspective, being a good teacher means being able to “raise the consciousness of my students, making them aware of the larger structural problems facing people in society, particularly the poor.” He strives to instill in
his students a keen desire to think critically and write about matters that are important to them. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to Oswald that he be given the means to perform effectively as a teacher. For example, at one point in his teaching career he decided to experiment with going at his own pace, not worrying about strictly following the schedule stipulated in the course syllabus. That brought an unforgettable moment of discovery: “Wow, I can [actually] teach!”

Monica—like Oswald, an adjunct professor—is evidently proud to be described as “very qualified,” although she has had to give up the idea that she will ever be a full-time faculty member. Similarly, Lorna, who has occupied the position of associate professor for most of her career, fluctuating between positive and negative self-identification, reflects on the value of being a good teacher and points out that she has tenure. However, she claims she does not aspire to be a full professor; instead, Lorna “focuses on awareness,” adopting the positive discourse of activism to raise public consciousness about disability. Gerald, who achieved the tenure track but not tenure while in academia, came to believe that he would never attain this “holy grail.” But he was pleased that “through actions and patience” he became a role model of professionalism and respect—which, in his view, is “just as educational as what students learn from their textbooks.” Finally, Rita, at the level of full professor, is still bothered when a new administrator appears; she becomes anxious that this individual might judge her negatively due to the common prejudice against or avoidance of engaging with disabilities. At the same time, because she has achieved full professorship, Rita asserts, “I tend to be my own driving force.”

Prevailing ableist discourses, as they are echoed by my participants—who lack support groups and have faced institutional avoidance over time—depict disabilities as inferior traits; proof that these academics do not “deserve” to progress in their careers; or, in the extreme, do not even belong in the academy. I found it disturbing when a demonstrably talented professor like Michelle who has hearing loss mentioned that, during her pre-tenure phase of scholarship, she was terrified of appearing not to be “the perfect academic”. Her constant mantra is: “What if I don’t hear [my students] right?” Similarly, Rita explains that even her fellow healthcare professionals perpetuate the stigma of disability, despite the fact that they encounter differentness on a routine basis. This has led Rita to view her own difference with dismay. As she says: “The negative discourse is very powerful and deep-seated.” Indeed, there is recognition by participants that “buying in” to such ableist discourse is so “natural” that it trumps their insights into its insidious nature. For example, Lorna, in discussing the case of an academic who has published an account of her experience with schizophrenia, says that as much as she can see how that form of mental illness “could be something that generates poetry”, and
how hearing voices could even be seen as a gift, she would rather not work with a person “like that.”

Meanwhile Sylvia, who has lived with this particular medical diagnosis for many years, speaks of the trauma generated by a conversation she once had with a member of her university’s leadership:

There was an administrator here who, after my book came out, said she was glad she hadn’t read it . . . before we went to dinner together. [She said that otherwise] she would have never gone to dinner with [me]. I mean, [I’m talking about] a kind, smart and well-meaning person, literally, who had such fantasies about schizophrenia that she wouldn’t have gone out to dinner with me. I mean, I felt glad that she felt able to tell me, but it was really painful that she told me.

In the same vein, Dora illustrates how difficult these ableist discourses are to avoid when she divulges her own kneejerk reaction to anyone in the academy who opens up about an invisible disability: “When any of my colleagues disclose, I think, ‘Oh, man, you’re verging on the irrational right now.’” For my participants, these fears and sources of stress can be directly connected to the fact that all societal members have a tendency to reproduce dominant discourses, if only due to their sheer ubiquity. In adopting dominant discourses, we reproduce a model of the labelled person as “deficient.” DJ, for example, acknowledges his own internalized bias, stating: “Despite having known a lot of people with mental disabilities, I still had a typical ableist kind of viewpoint on what sanity was, and what insanity was.”

One serious consequence of the adoption of ableist discourses (or even discourses of hyper-competence) among academics with hidden disabilities is a tendency toward the impostor syndrome—the sense of being a fraud who only gains respect or acceptance from others by perpetuating a form of deception. Oswald knows this feeling well, revealing that he has “to memorize the textbook before heading to a class so I really know what I am doing.” Moreover, what has been called “impostor syndrome” is associated with one’s constant fear of being caught in “a lie” at any moment and living each day in suspense, wondering if one’s “real” self will finally be unmasked. As Sylvia sums it up: “I used to think, ‘I’ve fooled everybody this far, but inevitably it will come out.’”
In my interviews, there was the occasional celebration of the conscious refusal to take up ableist discourses. For example, Michelle alludes to the common collective aversion to the discourse of being “disabled,” citing the example of her husband, when he first learned of her hearing loss: “He didn’t want me to describe my problem as such.” A similar reaction was given by Lorna when I asked, “what, if any, intersectionalities would you link to your disability-related identity (i.e., gender, age, race, sexual orientation, social class, child-rearing, etc.)?” She responded, “I don't see myself as having a ‘disability-related identity’ though I am a person with disabilities.” She prefers to emphasize that ADHD is not who she is, but what she has. The way I framed the question allowed me to examine the extent to which participants avoid, problematize or refuse to use discourses of disability. Except for Lorna, no one explicitly theorized a strategy for resistance to the idea of having a disability identity in exactly the way she did; this can be interpreted as reflecting the ubiquity of both ableist discourse in academic settings as well as professors taking up ableist discourse in self-identification.

As pointed out in chapter 3, there is a debate in the disability literature about whether medical labels (italicized in this section) are helpful. For example, when Sybil stresses (by using anti-ableist discourse) that “I only consider myself hard of hearing,” she is aware that the academy’s response can be alarming if others label her condition using an antiquated medical label. As she puts it: “It’s hard when people realize I’m deaf and start treating me as if I’m [also] dumb.” Similarly, when Rita started having migraines, she never thought of them as a disability or an ailment that needed to be accommodated: “It was just something that I had.” Yet she sees that her terrible headaches can be termed “disabling.” And medical labels are so pervasive that even Monica, who actively avoids self-medicalization, catches herself casually defining her own physician’s inadequacy in medical terms: “My doctor went from being really great to psychotic.” The stigma of specific medical labels is reflected in several other examples from my interviews (to which I will apply a traffic lights metaphor in the final section of this chapter). Norma questions the assumption that we know everything about a medical label with this observation: “People tend to think ADHD only happens to kids and arthritis only to old people.” Still—and quite incongruously—Norma often feels the need to explain her disability by comparing it to a familiar medical ailment that people know and understand—“something like a herniated disk or bone spur.” As Michelle suggests, “people’s lack of knowledge makes disability a very scary thing.” She extends this idea by saying that, like her, “some of the older faculty will soon experience hearing loss, too,” which is to be expected with natural aging. Nevertheless, when
some of her peers show irritation after she asks them to repeat what they have just said, it is as if they are sure they will never have to make such a request later in their own lives. In contrast to the stigma of medical labels that is prevalent elsewhere, Rose reminisces about the refreshing attitude toward unconventionality that she witnessed while studying abroad. In her words, “[It was so nice] being treated like any other person in Uganda, because they had no idea about all these illnesses.”

The ubiquity of biomedical discourses as a subset of disability discourses is noticeable in the descriptions by several research participants of labels they may hide, but refer to in the private interaction of our interview as a medical diagnosis—which may or may not deviate from the construction of their own personal narratives and counter-narratives. Even though these professors, like other academics, understand intellectually that the concept of disability can also be studied in relation to a social paradigm, all but four repeat the societal usage of biomedical labels and terms (italicized in this section) in referring to their disabilities. The theorizing of those who reject biomedical labels is helpful in imagining counter-narratives. Once again, Sibyl says, “Why would I tell people I’m deaf if I only consider myself hard of hearing?” She reacts strongly against the historical medical label “deaf and dumb.” DJ similarly problematizes the overlap in the highly stigmatizing biomedical terms—which he rejects—he must cope with on a daily basis: “I have personality disorder, Cluster B, Access 2 and ADHD.” Rose, in describing vividly what a typical day is like for a person who has what is medically labelled fibromyalgia, critiques the biomedical discourse; rather, she prefers to emphasize her pain and soreness—terms that are extremely difficult to measure in biomedical terms:

[It is] essentially a condition that is poorly understood by the traditional western medical system. What they think is neurological damage that has come about because the reasons range from having whiplash from a car accident to it being completely psychological. So the symptoms are just this widespread vague sense of pain and aches, sort of like you’ve had a really tough workout, and that soreness that you feel afterwards. . . . It does not go away for “fibro people” – it’s a constant state of pain.

But perhaps reflecting how closely associated biomedical and disability discourses and narratives are related, Lorna talks about how important it was to have “the proper diagnosis and therefore I asked to be tested.” She personally explains ADHD as “racing thoughts.” That’s what they [my emphasis] call it.” Norma, too, uses many medical terms to describe herself: “My
invisible disability is physical, but it becomes psychological and emotional very easily. I have very severe rheumatoid arthritis and a disease called ankylosing spondylitis.” Monica offers a good example of how a physical impairment with a biomedical narrative can easily be translated as a scholar’s compromised ability to think clearly when she comments that “chronic pain causes some cognitive issues and also mobility issues. Walking a distance is very hard for me. . . . What I have is a syndrome. It’s a diagnosis of exclusion.” Similarly, Dora explains that she has had “chronic pain since I ripped and herniated a disc in my back.”

Intersectionalities with Disability: Self-Identification in Relation to Gender, Parenthood, Age, Ethnicity/Race, Cultural Upbringing, Sexual Orientation and Social Class

As indicated in chapter 3, the literature on self-identity is becoming increasingly sophisticated at the theoretical level by critiquing the essentialism in grouping individuals into broad social categories and assuming they are all alike. The alternative is to acknowledge the complexity of self-identification by recognizing the intersectionality of several identities. Revealing a disability already puts significant strain on a professor’s ability to demonstrate competence on the job; in addition to struggling with disability discourses, my study participants also feel frustrated to self-identify as members of groups that are likely to be stigmatized. Except for Sam, all professors see themselves as members of at least one group that may be subject to oppression in the academy. In this section, I deal with how discourses of gender, parenthood, age, social class, and ethno-racial/cultural and sexual orientation intersect with disability discourses. Several times during my interviews, female faculty members commented on what they have experienced as pervasive prejudicial behaviour toward women academics. As argued above, a key insight is Lorna’s view of tenure as an employment safety net: “Even with tenure, women are still marginalized. With a disability you give them one more reason to be cliquish and exclude you.” Beth captures this thought in saying that “women are judged more harshly”—specifically referring to her sense of women being at disadvantage while “coming out of the fog after having a child.” Clearly frustrated, she adds:

You just lose everything, right? You have a bunch of old men running the joint. F--ing men! Women hesitate to stop the tenure clock because that might be seen as weakness.
We are judged five times harder because we’ve had a kid and we are on “mommy track.” And I’m lucky because I have my husband’s support, but other women are not so lucky.

Michelle also mentions feeling apprehensive when she weighed the pros and cons of revealing her disability as a female academic: “It was harder for me to disclose my disability because I’m a woman in science. I had a baby in the beginning of my PhD, which is something you don’t do, right?” Yet Michelle feels it is important to represent diversity within the academy, even if that is not an easy counter-narrative to promote. A passing comment from Norma also demonstrates how traditional gender expectations intersect with family identities and roles: “Sometimes I think that all my paperwork is done, but my house is a mess and my husband has had to take over the cooking.”

Although parenthood is most closely linked to women academics (Baker, 2012), among the participants in my study, two men and four women mentioned parental self-identity as both important and uniquely challenging when they also have a disability. A particularly enlightening moment in this research came when I heard one professor’s point of view on parenthood, which made me realize I had preconceived notions about the tension between scholarly pursuits and child rearing. Naively, I used to attribute childcare problems exclusively to females in the workplace. Gerald’s story definitely changed my understanding:

Managers have to look at the family situation and understand what the person is going through in general. Because this isn’t related to my—well, it’s sort of related to my chronic pain, but I’m a widower, and I have a daughter. There were many times when daycare was a real struggle, conflicting with my career, so I think that it would have made it a lot easier on me if my supervisor was aware of the struggles I was having with daycare and managing those other aspects of my life. I’m not saying managers should pry into people’s relationships or anything like that. But if somebody is willing to talk to them about the factors that . . . truly influence their performance, like if there’s family issues like daycare, transportation or things like that, [they should respond.] A good supervisor should want to know about [it] and try to facilitate. But in my case I had to commute in from [another U.S. state] when I was teaching at [X University]. And my daughter’s daycare, after the second year, they stopped picking her up at school to take her to the daycare—they didn’t have a daycare at her school. So the university really
does have to look at the whole situation surrounding their faculty members’ work, because there are things that could make their life a lot easier.

Having children was discussed as putting particular stress on professors with disabilities. As suggested by a few participants, professors with invisible disabilities either focus on the execution of academic tasks and lack the time to fully enjoy their life partners and children, or they work fewer hours on professorial duties so they can be with their families—albeit with a perpetual sense of feeling they are falling behind in the advancement of their careers, given the highly competitive scholarly environment. This is well illustrated by Norma’s comments:

I was trying to be a single mom and raise my son—he’s thankfully an adult now—and teach and do all the things [life required]. You feel like you’re juggling flaming chains off. You’re always behind with something. And then you think about the impact of not being able to do stuff with a child, and I’m thinking, “Oh, if I don’t get this report in on time” or “If I don’t get to my son’s soccer game, he’s going to remember that for the rest of his life.”

Norma tumbles between positive counter-narratives and the occasional uptake of narratives of ableism and hyper-competence. In her words:

Sometimes I think of myself, “Oh, what a failure I am because my kitchen floor is dirty” as opposed to . . . “I have one of the best student success rates around. I’ve learned how to do new things like [teaching] new classes and all that.” I don’t appreciate [how good a teacher I am] much because I beat myself up over things I can’t do.

Beth expresses similar feelings to Norma’s. The need to reconcile her disability, her current stage of life and her responsibilities as a parent has become increasingly relevant. As she puts it: “I’m 48. I’ve got a seven-year old, and I’m trying to get tenure. I don’t know whether I’m tired because of the MS, because of looking after my seven-year old, because of my age or because of tenure.” Lorna’s reality is clearly different than Beth’s, although she has given a great deal of thought to how her life as a professor would have been if she were also a mother. As she says, “I don’t think I could have done this and have children.” The hardships of parenthood, disability and academic demands are also explicit in Monica’s comment: “It’s unrealistic to expect people to work 60 hours a week when they are caring for kids.”
Sexism, ableism and ageism are ubiquitous discourses affecting the construction of academic identity. Managing them in combination can be frustrating, as is the case for Lorna. She fears that adding an ageist narrative to her situation will conjure up impressions of incompetence and decrepitude. As she says, “disclosure is harder for women of a certain age.” Ageism is defined as the widespread perception that older adults inevitably lose the very mental and physical faculties that build a life worth living. When the stigma associated with the disability discourse is linked with sexism and ageism, it seems all the more likely that a professor will be seen as growing less capable and become a target of condescending behaviour. As Norma puts it, “the disease process is worsening as I age, which makes it more visible.” But Gerald presents a counter-narrative: “Disability is so common that having discussions about disabilities and accommodations should be more a matter of course and not an exception.” He is clearly annoyed by the lack of consideration shown toward persons with disabilities. In his words, “[w]hen people [construct] the disabled person as if [he or she is] getting something for nothing, that’s not only disrespectful but unfair, because eventually everybody is going to need to take time off because of physical problems.”

Oswald describes the process of finally realizing he was a professor with a disability, explaining that “[a]pparently it did happen when I was born, which is when [the damage of] cerebral palsy occurred. Of course, it wasn’t discovered until I was five.” Despite the medical label, Oswald has been able to maintain self counter-narratives because he grew up “in a very physically athletic house, and I was very engaged and I . . . you know, in sports and stuff. Instead of being excellent, like my parents were, I was just good, because I could compensate for my difficulties.” At the same time, he notes, wavering between disability discourse and a positive counter-narrative: “I was klutzy in some ways and very skilled in others, in this kind of weird mix. But it wasn’t such a huge problem, especially since I never expected to be a sports star or anything of that kind.”

Still, speaking of the physical decline that comes with age, Oswald comments:

They told me that I would have problems when I got older, and I didn’t really know what that meant. If hindsight were clear, I would have gone back and told my younger self, “Hey, quick, get a career before your body gives out.” I didn’t know that. I took the slow route to getting a career, in some sense, until I finally settled on what I wanted to do. And then it was finally in that critical time period, when I was about to really establish
my career, that of course the physical problems started kicking in—in fairly complicated ways. And I just always felt the sense of being on the threshold of making it, and yet every time I turned around, finding one more obstacle to get in my way. I guess, it was the early thirties when it really kicked in.

Although there is a continuing counter-narrative of coping in his story (which links neck and back pain to spending unnatural amounts of time at a computer), he describes his situation as one of “timing”:

I woke up one day and I couldn’t move my head at all. And it was sort of locked into place and, you know, it turns out I was just overdoing the amount of sitting and typing on the keyboard. I went from being a computer programmer, which I think was a huge mistake. I should have gone right into being an academic, but I took this detour, going into computer programming. I did a lot of sitting. I had some lower back problems, but they went away—well, sort of. And then I started getting some upper back problems and neck problems. And that’s really where it started becoming a real juggling act of trying to get my way through graduate school. I broke up with my first wife, and I was a part-time father, and I was still doing computer consulting to pay my way through graduate school. And then it was all just an insane kind of time period in which, somehow, I tried to keep that all together.

Oswald also locates the problem within a contingent teaching environment that precluded the need to publish in order to advance academically:

My problem is I always wanted to do research and be a research sociologist, which means you’ve got to get published and you’ve got to get your research out there. And yet I was also having to constantly do new preparations and teaching. . . . I wasn’t that good . . . at teaching. And so I had this weird thing, like I was being judged on my teaching, but I really wanted to do research. I couldn’t do research because of my back problems and neck problems.

Dora attempts to turn ageist discourse back on itself with her comment that “the world does not exist in binary blocks. . . . If you fancy yourself abled-bodied, you’re temporarily able-bodied.” And Lorna further reminds us: “The only difference is that you haven’t needed a cane yet.” But while she claims never to worry about meeting standards of normalcy, she worries about the
long-term effects of the medication she takes for her ADHD, wondering whether they might prompt ableist discourse in her future career.

Like gender and age, ethno-racial identification is also an important aspect of one’s identity. Sandra, an adjunct faculty member, does not make any overt connection between race and disability, yet she describes herself as “a woman of colour.” This was how she chose to identify herself in our interview, emphasizing the importance of having a peer group she can trust. While she has “not told a soul” in her work environment, she belongs to “a group of women of colour who meet once a month for brunch to discuss issues for people like us in academia.” Disability is an issue they discuss while exploring racial and gender-related concerns in the academy. Sybil self-identifies as an “immigrant,” which is reminiscent of Ng’s (1981) contention that ‘once an immigrant, always an immigrant’ when she points out that a person born in Canada can still be considered an immigrant. [There are] a lot of cultural differences, which are much less obvious and acknowledged than the more overt race, social class, and child-rearing differences. Pretty much all but sexuality and sexual identity.

A similar cultural othering in the academy becomes evident when Monica discussed the significant role her upbringing has played in her scholarly career:

I’m not sure how to distinguish between religious and gender intersectionality. I know it bugs the heck out of me when people conflate white privilege with class privilege because they're not the same. And lack of gender privilege in our society at large doesn't come with all the baggage that being a biological woman comes with in a fundamentalist subculture. It's not like it's even on most people's radar that forced arranged marriages happen in the US, but it has happened to friends of mine (who I have never heard from again). There's also cultural-background privilege. Being raised in the dominant culture and being permitted to engage with it (watch TV, listen to popular music, etc.) is huge. Not being raised in the dominant culture means not understanding references people make all the time. I've spent the last several years doing significant amounts of research just to try to keep up. I have a list, just like Captain America (which I know about now on account of all my research), in which I have to keep track of things that I'm supposed to be culturally aware of, so I can watch/listen/etcetera when I have the chance to avoid
missing references in the future. You have to choose between being socially awkward forever or putting the time in to do the research at the expense of something else.

Although only three of the professors I interviewed specifically raised issues of socioeconomic status, class is nevertheless relevant in considering the impact of marginalized positions of intersectionality in the academy, as the literature suggests (Haney, 2015). DJ raises his concern over the convergence of his disability with his blue-collar background: “In academia, there’s rare representation of the working class. There is no respect for working-class behaviour, let alone lower class.” A working-class narrative supposedly indicates lack of education—and this thought is coupled with the belief that an educated person will always have the necessary intelligence and talent to be professionally successful. In a merit-based society with competition in merit-based institutions, there are longstanding elitist discourses conveying the message that only those who are not bright will remain in the lower economic strata of our society. Dora, who also grew up poor, says she is “terrified of poverty because I know exactly how damaging it is.” She attributes the challenges that accompany her disability in part to “having lived hard for a long time.” Referring to her class background, she goes on to explain that she is hesitant to disclose her disability “and make myself vulnerable in additional ways, because there are already so many ways in which I’m vulnerable.” It is important that both Dora and DJ were tenure-track professors facing reviews at the time they made these class-related comments. Rose, now an adjunct, also mentions how coming from a humble social background has had an impact on her academic identity in the US, which does not have universal health care:

When I first went to [a university in the US], I had no financial or familial support and this was a real disadvantage to me. They expected, for example, that I would travel to multiple annual conferences, but they didn’t provide funding for that. Peers regularly relied on their parents to make up the shortfall, but I could not. They then held that against me during annual evaluations. It's been a nightmare, really, because I never had consistent health insurance the entire time I was in grad school and I was going broke (and went into bankruptcy) just trying to get a proper diagnosis. I was sick all the time and unable to afford care . . . while many of my peers had no problems like this at all. Again, it was held against me as faculty and other grad peers would ask me why I didn’t see a specialist.
In the last section of this chapter, I revisit how participants deal with the reactions of others to their identities—embraced, hidden and suspected—by using a rough metaphor of what I call a “traffic light” process that occurs in the academy. But before I explain the relevance of this metaphor, I explore how participants see discourses of elitism and ableism working within the broader context of the neoliberal academy.

Reproducing Narratives of Hyper-Competence, Elitism and Ableism

Participants in my study often refer to discourses of elitism and ableism or hyper-competence as central aspects of the academy. For example, Rita speaks of the exaggerated self-confidence that many professors seem to gain from their knowledge, reinforcing the stereotype of intellectual superiority that is so embedded in academic culture. As she puts it: “We are experts in a particular field, but consider ourselves experts in any context” and, in order to be valued members of the professoriate, faculty must signal that they are faultless and sharp-thinking scholars, capable of standing out from other members of the academy. Michelle agrees, arguing that “[p]eople tend to think professors are the ultimate judge of knowledge. . . . They are infallible.” Making this discourse her own, she declares: “As a scientist, I want a definitive, firm answer . . . and then come up with a solution.” Lorna also expresses her view that academics as a group are very demanding of themselves, with everyone monitoring their own and each other’s performativity to confirm that they still belong among the elite. Lorna also feels that a cultural belief in professors’ perfection may be what impairs her institution as a whole, as the administration does not “even acknowledge that staff and faculty may in fact have learning disabilities”, which would most likely be interpreted as incompetence in the academic culture.

Rose refers to the centrality of elitist discourses in the academy by pointing out that getting a college education is the ultimate goal of many families for their children. The dominant academic narrative carries the promise of “a good life,” so she was encouraged by her great aunt to pursue an academic career in order to secure a solid future for herself. But once Rose entered the academy, she became caught up in power relations involving elitist and ableist tenured professors who, in her experience, could behave unethically without being accountable. When she experienced abusive treatment from her dissertation advisor, Rose was told to “suck it up and deal with it.” Beth also had to endure a “tough” professor, and she speaks now as if she can
rationalize subjecting herself to the harsh treatment, almost thanking this individual for giving her the incentive to succeed in her academic career despite her disability. In Beth’s words:

I knew she liked me, but she was hard, oh my God, she was cruel. . . . She said that one of the things that she liked [about me] was that in the worst moments, when she was mean to me, I would turn around and say, “F--- you, let me show you that I can do this.”

Her comment suggests that good professors may have a justifiable reason for abusing their power, as if this attitude, mixed with arrogance, is the only sensible way to develop students to their full potential. Oswald’s comments about professors give life to a counter-narrative:

Our job should be raising consciousness; teaching people to think critically and helping them gain skills and abilities. And we should just stamp them on their forehead when they get those things.

At the same time, the dominant narrative remains:

What we do is we’re the gatekeepers. We choose who makes it and who doesn’t. In a sense, we pick the elite. So we’re selling that. That’s kind of what we’re selling, is the process of being elitist. And so, of course, we’re elitist among ourselves. We do create these totem poles and we find ourselves . . . victims of that same process. And I think it’s harmful. Because I mean, really, we all have strengths and weaknesses, and we should be cultivating each other’s strengths, and we should be working together. . . . But instead, of course, you get people who are just . . . I don’t know what, they’re really insecure in some ways, even though they seemingly have the most power . . . We’ve all met other people like that who seem to get their jollies off by putting other people down, and it’s kind of sick.

Gerald makes a comment aligned with Oswald’s interpretation of dominant discourses when he says: “Something that I learned from my experience is that universities are very cultural, and they want to attract people like themselves.” And people like themselves know what needs to be done in order to remain part of the in-group and be considered a valuable academic. Rules of performativity must be followed—one of them being the criticality of publishing. As Beth says, “You’re moving in the right direction as a professor if you’re being published.” And Oswald points to this dominant narrative when he says: “I always wanted to do research and be a
research sociologist, which means you’ve got to get published, and you’ve got to get your research out there.” The dominant narrative is that if an academic is not getting many publications, he or she is less talented and not deserving of recognition. Many professors who enjoy teaching understand that this aspect of their vocation will not matter much if they have a limited list of published work. There is little room for counter-narratives in this “publish-or-perish” narrative.

Academic discourse exhales a need for flawlessness, competence, confidence, superiority and selectiveness, alienating anything or anyone who does not wish to abide by rules and normative discourses of perfection and idealistic aspiration. Rose had many counter-narratives and tried to push against those discourses, questioning the ethical values of her dissertation advisor when he did not seem to have any regard for the wishes of the tribe in Uganda she was researching. All she heard from him in return was that “this is how archaeology goes, and if you want to graduate, you’re going to have to do what your advisor says.” And she thought: “I’m sorry, did I suddenly move to England or Australia, where advisors can just tell you what you can’t and can do? Diversable faculty feel they have an uphill battle in maintaining counter-narratives. As my interviews unfolded, it became very evident that disability and the idealized image of a respectable scholar do not align. This puts interviewees like Dora at an extreme disadvantage. As she explains, the biggest problem in academia as what might be called ableist performativity linked to the neoliberal imperative:

The expectation is of us faculty being hyper-competent. Anything that indicates any kind of weakness or incapacity to function at a pace that has been set—which I don’t think is feasible for most folks who would consider themselves able-bodied—any time I represent myself as potentially not able to meet those pace-of-life expectations [I put] a target on my back, right? [And] perhaps I can avoid that scrutiny if they’re not aware [of my disability]. I don’t want to open a Pandora’s box because the academy is so consumer-driven, right? The minute they have a reason to be dissatisfied and express that dissatisfaction, then I have no power.

In chapter 1, I referred to an incident in which I had confronted a faculty member with the possibility that she had ADHD, like me. The significance of questioning the professorial image of hyper-competence can be seen in how the description of my candour made some interviewees respond. They made comments such as “Foot in the mouth!” (Rose), or “Oh, wow!” (Dora) or
even “Oh, my God!” (Norma). The fact that I seemed to be directly questioning a scholar’s supposed cognitive precision was perceived as a direct assault on this professor’s competence. As Norma, a full-time professor in the US, puts it, “We need to project this image that we’re totally in control of the situation.” And Michelle explains, “There’s going to be [negative] consequences if you challenge [professors].” Rita, in describing how disability avoidance is the norm and how “perfect” academics in her area must be seen, comments: “Us physical therapists don’t want to believe there’s anything wrong with us.”

There are many more examples of the operation of elitism, ableism and hyper-competence in my data. For my purposes, the main point is that the fixation with high performativity and the resulting benefits for the scholarly community is the dominant narrative prevalent in academic culture, and so professors often find themselves faced with constant pressure and vigilance to demonstrate that they are worth keeping through counter-narratives of various kinds.

Red, Yellow and Green: How Disabilities Are Stigmatized in the Academy

My example of questioning a faculty member about ADHD is a good starting point for theorizing how colleagues in the academy respond to a faculty member’s specific disability news. Participants suggested that there are “better” and “worse” disabilities to contend with, considered in terms of the diverse and sometimes devastating ways in which the academy reacts. Depending on the disclosed impairment—and obviously on the cultural views of the people who become aware of the revelation—an individual may have to endure expressions of disdain, repulsion or scepticism, along with attitudes and behaviours that lead to overt disrespect, condescension, exclusion and even public ridicule. The professors in my study find themselves perpetually struggling to harmonize everyday aspects of a disability with the idealized image (and dominant narrative stereotype) that avoids diversability and supposedly promotes their value as respectable scholars. Diversability does not go hand in hand within the dominant ableist discourse of the academy. Ableist discourse stirs negative emotions in these individuals as they try to manage the conflict between the fact that they have invisible impairments—of any type—and the overall disability-phobic academic culture, including the professional selves they present to others.
I propose a traffic light metaphor as a heuristic for understanding the level of stigmatization faced by my participants who are in different specific situations. As shown in Table 3, I have categorized the level (or gravity) of stigma faced by participants using the metaphor of traffic lights. The colours red, yellow and green represent the reactions of colleagues or other members of the scholarly community on learning of a participant’s labelled disability (or disabilities), or on witnessing any unconventional narratives of “academizing.” Given that all participants in my study have invisible disabilities, it is impossible—at least for the time being—to give any of them the green designation reserved for visible disabilities, a few of which arguably do not result in interpersonal issues with colleagues. Green in this metaphor indicates a participant’s successful “passing” as stereotypically competent, suggesting no evidence of tainted intellectual capabilities. Given that the “problem” is manifestly physical and not the individual’s “fault,” it can presumably be ignored.

A professor in a red (or untenable) situation may be one who eventually, after achieving tenure in the academy based on productivity, claims a hidden disability, which is then met with disbelief by colleagues. At this point, consistent with ableist narratives, the professor might be perceived as a liar—and hence have his or her integrity jeopardized—because the “abstractness” of the claimed impairment means it may be deemed not really to exist. Moreover, this professor may become unpopular among colleagues, who could interpret the news to mean they must assume a greater workload in providing support. It is important to stress that the four full professors of eight participants whom I have identified as being labelled with a red disability, while having to protect their images through performativity or impression management, seem willing to become activists and fight against the stigma with counter-narratives of invisible diversability—particularly of the type they live with. In fact, because they have attained tenure, they have obviously shown their compliance with the dominant discourse of the productive scholar; this makes it less likely that their reputations will suffer even with the disclosure of a stigmatizable diagnosis. This situation is familiar from the academic literature, where taking up discourses of activism has been a long-time practice among academics and those who engage the public and who, in this way, may even attain fame as public intellectuals.

If, on the other hand, there is no doubt about the veracity of the disability claim, the scenario is still not favourable for the professor who discloses. For example, the negative discourse linked to mental illness or cognitive disorders such as ADHD can easily bring associations of
incompetence, if not “insanity” and even avoidance based on hypothesized threats of violent behaviour. Thus, as indicated in Table 3, I have classified the level of stigmatization faced by Sam, Sylvia, Lorna, Fiona, DJ, Dora, Oswald and Monica as red. The last three faculty members in this list, who all have multiple disabilities, also have yellow-level disabilities (or those that prompt cautionary treatment). Monica illustrates the varying degrees of stigmatization attached to different specific conditions when she mentions that “colleagues know I have fibro and ADHD; but only one knows I have PTSD.” She hesitates to divulge this last label, as it stirs up the stigma of perhaps untreatable mental illness. Rita adds a further insight when she comments that “the stigma with mental illness is so much more than migraines or so much more than physical. . . . There’s a lot of fear and association with violence.”

Further, as Gerald suggests, faculty may associate a person who has a specific disability with the idea that he or she must have done something to “get” that way, or with the possibility that he or she is using this diagnosis in order to gain some advantage. Oswald admits candidly that he can understand how easy it is to take up this discourse because he himself has problems dealing with what he calls “people with real disabilities.” In fact, he says that he has “almost an aversion to thinking about it.” He goes on to explain: “I find myself almost jealous of people who have obvious disabilities . . . because they don’t have the problem of convincing others that they have a disability.” In the case of Fiona, regardless of the fact that she does not have a diagnosis of any mental or cognitive-related disabilities, still, the experiences she describes seem to warrant giving her the red tag in my categorization. In her words,

I've been seen as a liar; my integrity is (has been) openly questioned; my colleagues do not invite me to serve as advisor, etc.; they have commented that if one cannot carry a full load, then one should leave. I've had colleagues ask my chair for recognition for the work they do as I do not carry the same load, etc. I would say there is no legitimacy to my illness because most know nothing about [it]—[Canadian] doctors [usually] deny that it exits and there is no medical coverage. I have even had a formal complaint with my university.

Rita recounts a similar, almost humorous story about the advantages of being labelled visibly disabled, as opposed to facing a challenge that no one can see:
I thought that having the cane was an advantage when I went to the Society for Disability Studies meetings, because it was almost like, if you didn’t have a visible disability, then the assumption was that you didn’t really know what other people went through.

Michelle is in agreement when she states that the “stigma is worse for professors who have cognitive or neurological impairments as opposed to physical. If I were in a wheelchair, it would be more obvious that I need assistance.” My point here is that not all stigmatization is the same; what seems to attract the greatest stigma is the conflict of the person’s diagnosis with cognitive ableism.

But even the yellow level of stigmatization, which I have interpreted as being faced by about half of my participants, is risky to one’s career in the neoliberal academy. In my classification, yellow indicates cases in which the claimed invisible impairment is considered by colleagues to be “legitimate” and, at least for the present, tenable. However, merely acknowledging the disability threatens to increase the number of tasks that fall to colleagues (who are already overworked), even if the disability does not overtly put the professor’s competence in question. As reviewed in chapter 3, it has long been known that visible disabilities or those that are considered “authentic” are met with a greater level of acceptance than invisible disabilities.

There are two important points here. First, it is clear from my participants that when a specific hidden disability that is deemed to affect one’s mind or competence becomes evident to others—regardless of how “benign” the reason, whether manifest pain, difficulty with mobility or side effects from medication—it will be considered problematic in an academic setting. And second, an invisible disability, even when the individual maintains a stellar level of performativity, still prompts a warning bell. For example, as noted above, Norma, who has ankylosing spondylitis and rheumatoid arthritis, speaks positively about her place in the academy. However, these conditions involve specific progressive physical challenges, and she fears that “the disease process becomes [worse] with aging, which will make it more visible.” In summary, I theorize that, as an individual’s health begins to deteriorate, such a change may start to be seen as an inconvenience if it requires accommodations and possibly extra responsibilities for other faculty members. And finally, mental diversabilities are considered problematic by their very existence in an able-normative environment.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have theorized the observations shared by my participants regarding issues of identity in the face of ubiquitous ableist discourse in the academy, also pointing to the gendered, ageist, racist and classist discourses that intersect with them. Not only must my participants come into contact with the stigma attached to their specific disabilities, but they also must provide ongoing evidence or counter-narratives that there is no reason for their level of competence to be called into question. Given their suggestions that there are “better” and “worse” disabilities for an academic to be identified with, especially depending on his or her professorial status, I prefaced this chapter with a table that categorizes—using my traffic lights metaphor—the level of animosity that professors who reveal their specific invisible disabilities must typically endure from colleagues and other staff members. Participants are unanimous that revealing a disability that is not easily detectable will likely carry a high price, including potential exclusion from the academy—particularly if the individual who discloses is also labelled with other stigmatizable intersectionalities. Further, once disability is manifest, there is no safe place, or time out. In addition to always maintaining a “cloak of competence,” participants worry that their conditions will change over time and “out” them or provoke further stigmatization. In the conclusion of this chapter, I have theorized that the level of stigmatization is specific to the way a disability is labelled, and that the extent to which a faculty member’s “condition” interferes with performativity will correlate to the intensity of the negativity he or she experiences. My overall goal here has not been to produce a theory of causation, but rather to reveal, through the narratives and counter-narratives of participating faculty, how able-normativity operates in particular cases.
Chapter 8
Diversable Faculty Leading the Way:
Addressing Academic Life and Disability Avoidance

Introduction

Diversable faculty can lead the way in addressing disability avoidance. This is the conclusion shared by many contributors to the Bolt and Penketh (2016) collection reviewed in chapter 3. And it is implicitly reinforced by many of my interviewees as they describe how they have circumvented obstacles imposed by the academy’s neoliberal culture of ableism and disability avoidance.

In this chapter, I document how they demonstrate their competence as scholars and safeguard their reputations whether by complying with the pressures for disability avoidance or by insisting on their diversability. While each interviewee shared his or her unique experiences with disability in academe, I have identified a few common strategies they use, including collaboration with and support from others; selective use of technology; “taking charge;” and striving for life balance by centring what is important in their work and lives. These approaches, I would argue, can benefit all faculty members. Table 4 (page 148) summarizes the data in this chapter.

Personal and Logistical Support

It is not uncommon for professors, regardless of their disabilities, to feel overwhelmed by the amount and scope of tasks they must perform on a daily basis. But in the case of diversable faculty, this requires accommodation. Beth articulates this problem:

[If I say] to Joe Schmo, who has no disability, just suck it up get on with [all your tasks, he might say,] “You’re right, you’re right, you’re right, I got it.” But it takes on an added degree of something when somebody is dealing with a disability—whether it’s mentally, emotionally or physically. Then that person can often say, “I just can’t do it” . . . [especially] if they have no resources and no support network.

Based on the physical challenges they have faced, about half of my interviewees raise the importance of personal or logistical assistance. Beth, Norma, Sandra, Monica and Rose emphasize the substantial value they take from being able to collaborate with people they trust—or at least those they believe should be trusted. Welcoming moral and practical collaboration with family members, peers, friends and academic leaders is a strategy employed by these
professors to circumvent obstacles in environments that are hostile to people with disabilities. Others mention their reliance on ableist technologies such as medication, hearing aids, surgery, and online teaching.

At the untenured end of the professorial spectrum, Monica—who occupies the untenable position of being an adjunct professor with a disability—has always felt fortunate in also being able to rely on her husband. As quoted in an earlier chapter, she emphasizes his important role as a source of financial support. Norma’s case illustrates how personal physical support works at the more secure end of the professorial scale. As she explains, “There are a few days where I literally just can’t get out of bed, and there are days my husband has to help me to the bathroom.” Hers is one of many examples of the trust that some professors with disabilities must invest in receiving support from the people closest to them—considering that help is unlikely to come from an academy that often avoids dealing with their differentness. Having said that, the narratives of my participants did provide a few examples of engagement with disability by members of the academic community. Norma, for example, although she cannot explain the exact reason, feels she can count on her dean’s support. As she puts it: “I don’t know if she understands exactly or empathizes, but she’s been super helpful and co-operative.”

Alternatively, those without personal support have relied on medications or assistive technology. Reactions to technology are mixed, with some participants commenting that it has been helpful; however, these solutions might also present new problems. The excessive use of the computer in academic work was also mentioned as a source of disability. For example, Norma, in explaining her managerial duties, pinpoints computer work as part of the problem:

I spend a lot of time at the computer because I have to schedule classes, do book orders, do class observations for other faculty, and do evaluations, answer emails, and I have to meet with students and faculty who are struggling or aren’t happy with something. Sometimes I just have to smile at people and nod and sometimes I have to spend a lot of time on the computer, which is also very difficult for me.

On the other hand, the opportunity to teach from a distance through the use of sophisticated computer technology has been a welcome solution in the case of Oswald, who has recurring back problems. As he describes it,

[I have] muscle pain caused by knots and damage in various places in my upper and lower back, [the result of sitting] and later standing for years at a computer. [The state of my health can be] aggravated by what normally would be minor accidents, plus my cerebral palsy. I have had a loss of motor control on the right side of my body [which
affects] my right arm and leg. I don’t really take any pain medication on a regular basis. Sometimes ibuprofen when it gets bad. Doctors always offer it to me, but my reply is this: “pain is my friend.” The kind of pain I experience is a symptom of past and ongoing damage, so the best thing is to be aware of it and not to cause more. I can basically no longer sit at all without being in pain. . . . And for years I stood up at the keyboard and typed. And then I used voice recognition to overcome some of the upper back problems [and] I no longer had to stand there. . . . I was, not long ago, in a position that I had to lie down all the time. I couldn’t sit up at all in a conventional chair and that was really scary.

Oswald explains that government funding “paid for me to have expensive chairs, computers and voice recognition, and that helped somewhat.” But he is often unable to sit, which means he has “maybe four, five hours of productive time. And after that, I can’t do it anymore, or I risk further damage.” He says that he “did eventually figure out how to teach in the classroom in a way that works for me” and even “enjoy it.” On the other hand, because he teaches online—a learning environment that predominantly relies on using a computer keyboard—he knows he would not be able to do it without a voice recognition system (VRS). Sitting for long periods of time is not an option for Oswald and arguably is not a healthy pattern for any professor. VRS is not a flawless type of technology, with the potential to embarrass the user. Oswald is understandably uncomfortable with the possibility of giving his (student) readers the impression that he is being careless, or worse, that he is choosing inappropriate words to communicate. He is always careful to inform his students of his “writing system” so that they will have confirmation that he is not “damaged goods.” For every new class he teaches, Oswald makes sure his students understand that they are “getting a good professor.” This is a good example of insisting on diversability and challenging disability avoidance as well as an academic culture that can be unforgiving.

The situation of Beth, now tenured, illustrates how personal and logistical support may be intertwined when faculty with disabilities negotiate which combination of technologies and support works for them. Beth’s MS symptoms involve tingling in her hands, which began at the time she was first diagnosed. When working on her research tasks at home, she has also been frustrated by the everyday academic necessity of typing at the computer:

[When I was diagnosed.] I couldn’t do anything with this hand. I was typing with one finger. It was crazy, and I had a deadline. I also had an R & R [“revise and resubmit” publication] deadline. I had all these deadlines. I [would be] typing with one finger and then my husband [would be] typing for me as well. . . . [I consider it a bad day when] I’m not typing or I’m not typing fast enough, and not revising fast enough, and not
making enough progress on a paper…in the past five years. . . . [My colleagues are also grumpy, but] when I’m home, it’s research, right?

Over time, Beth has counted on help from several members of her family. In narrating the evolution of her illness, she describes the long medical journey before arriving at the MS diagnosis. When she was prescribed Avonex®, a medication frequently given to individuals affected by MS, Beth relied on her husband to give her the intramuscular injections weekly, as she did not feel comfortable injecting herself despite encouragement from medical staff that she could learn to do it. The problem with relying on her husband for that task was that Beth found it “kind of annoying, because it meant that I was tethered to [him].” Whenever he needed to travel, she either had to recruit her firefighter brother-in-law to do it or travel a long distance to get the injection from an MS nurse. With time, her mother, who wanted to help, “hooked me up with alternative therapies people in [city X].” Beth believes the new treatment this group recommends has helped to significantly minimize her symptoms, which allowed her to regain her freedom. Within the work environment, Beth has also been able to collaborate with a colleague, Karen, who has become a good friend. Once, during a car trip with Karen, Beth mentioned how terrific it would be if she could stop her tenure clock. Karen, who is “really knowledgeable about all the ins and outs of being unionized,” put Beth in touch with the union representative responsible for grievances. During this consultation, Beth was told that the only problem with requesting a pause in her progress toward tenure was that “people might find out” about her health issues, which was something she did not want to happen. In her words, “My concern was that people who were tenured and who would be evaluating me . . . would say, ‘Oh, yeah there’s that assistant professor that has MS, she’ll never be able to do it,’ right? Because women are judged more harshly.” Beth had her baby only three months prior to the meeting with the union representative—who explained that she would be entitled to stop her tenure clock any time within the first two years after giving birth. This came as a huge relief to Beth, who, like all unionized faculty, pays for the assistance of her union.
Table 4: *Personal and Institutional Support, Use of Technology, "Taking Charge," and Self Care*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Reliance on Significant Others/Selective Use of Technology</th>
<th>Taking Charge/Performativity/ Mind/Body Awareness/Self-Care and Life Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth (Tenured)</td>
<td>Counts on support from husband, university friend and union</td>
<td>Promotes interactive teaching; focuses on research; keeps herself hydrated; works at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita (Tenured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Eats regular meals; does weekly therapy; follows medical regimen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle (Tenured)</td>
<td>Uses hearing aids, particularly in class or at large meetings</td>
<td>Asks for clarification; sits near others at meetings; blogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sybil (Tenured)</td>
<td>Avoids telephone and teleconferencing; uses a service dog</td>
<td>Will meet face to face with familiar colleagues—and not otherwise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorna (Tenured)</td>
<td>Asks for clarification if necessary; has a quiet office.</td>
<td>Exercises; practices “flex time”; sets boundaries; employs humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma (Permanent)</td>
<td>Relies on husband and dean; takes pain medication</td>
<td>Does one thing at a time; does positive self-talk; apologizes for errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona (Tenured)</td>
<td>Self-injects medication</td>
<td>Practices self-advocacy; is honest when not feeling well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam (Tenured)</td>
<td>Does weekly therapy; follows medical regimen.</td>
<td>Believes in having a good treatment plan and following it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia (Tenured)</td>
<td>Does weekly therapy; follows medical regimen.</td>
<td>Believes in the importance of cultivating good friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ (Now tenured)</td>
<td>Takes time to enjoy his pet</td>
<td>“Make[s] it happen” for his enjoyment of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora (Non-tenured)</td>
<td>Uses small inflatable cushion during long meetings</td>
<td>Sleeps longer if stressed; sets psychological and physical boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald (Non-tenured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Practiced impression management until needed surgery; then exited academia for new career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra (Non-tenured)</td>
<td>Attends meetings with community support group</td>
<td>Passes at work; plans ahead; watches comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oswald (Non-tenured)</td>
<td>Lies down while doing online teaching; originally helped by assistive technology</td>
<td>Enjoys creating sci-fi-based courses; does stretching exercises; informs students of his situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica (Non-tenured)</td>
<td>Depends on husband’s financial help; has husband review teaching evaluations to avoid trauma.</td>
<td>Husband screens her student course evaluations in order to avoid upsets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose (Non-tenured)</td>
<td>Teaches online; uses Skype™; relied on departmental support (until recently); uses hearing aid</td>
<td>Self-discloses/shares with students her situation; edits journal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both Michelle (tenured) and Sandra (non-tenured) have found support groups to be valuable, although Michelle opted for trusting a university group while Sandra looked outside the university for support. As Michelle came to realize that her hearing impairment would be a permanent reality in her life, she decided to join a support community advertised as being for both faculty and staff at her institution. The group’s aim is to identify barriers that members with disabilities are likely to face and create “mechanisms or a way of potentially addressing or ameliorating some of those challenges” in the university environment. Recognizing the importance of creating a support system for faculty with disabilities, their member recruitment drive addressed anyone interested in disability-related matters. In Michelle’s words:

It was either you yourself have a disability, or you have experience in the past or currently with a person who has a disability, and you have assisted them in some way. So it was, you know, you have a family member or a very close personal friend who you’re advocating for or providing assistance to. Or, I think the other option was you could [also participate if] you work in some kind of service sector that is providing assistance to persons with disabilities. So you didn’t have to have one yourself, but you had to have a pretty good understanding of what some of the challenges and concerns might be for persons with disabilities.

Sandra, on the other hand, decided to look for a group that had no connections to her institution, given that she has “not told a soul” at work, as mentioned in an earlier chapter. In fact, this group is what led Sandra to me as a research participant. Here is how she describes it:

We are a group of women of colour who meet once a month for brunch. We share information about conferences, about job opportunities . . . [and when] you were requesting people to participate in your study . . . Someone got your email and it went out to everyone in our group.

And last, in the category of collaboration and support, it was refreshing at the time of our first interview to hear the excitement in Rose’s voice in describing how supportive her new employers seemed to be, if only for a short time:

They have been nothing but amazing—the kind of department that I dreamed of being part of. It’s extremely supportive, very collegial, if I can use that word. [Laughs.] They’re just wonderful. I mean, I can’t even begin to describe the department chair: that person is a consummate professional, and always follows policy, and always is there with a helping hand. I’ve never had a single problem at this university, at all.
Taking Charge

Much of what I heard about daily negotiations of faculty work points to a fierce determination among some professors to take disability matters into their own hands, given the overall negligent attitude toward “unwanted” differentness in the neoliberal academy. Faculty members looking after their own needs seems a highly appropriate response in the face of an academy that avoids involving those with disabilities in the process of making disability policy that will benefit all faculty (Bolt and Penketh, 2016). These professors refuse to be and/or remain passive; they do not want to be merely waiting for changes in institutional policies, particularly those that involve the provision of suitable accommodations to disability needs. In the view of some participants, bureaucrats may not even understand what these accommodations might be when impairments are invisible. Along these lines, these professors have developed a range of strategies designed to make their work less strenuous such as exercising impression management and taking advantage of flexible work arrangements.

Passing/Impression Management

Among the faculty members I interviewed, upon hearing the news of their medical diagnosis, most decided that revealing it would be too risky. Their narratives unveil how they have chosen to keep their secret identities away from the spotlight, while highlighting their diversability. Sandra, for example, a non-tenured faculty member, while acknowledging that maintaining her illness as a secret is “very daunting,” still believes that she must do all she can to ensure no one ever finds out about her sarcoidosis. She endeavours never to “stand out” from other faculty members and to be treated like everyone else in the ableist academy with regard to both duties and rights. Gerald, similarly, shared this comment as he began to describe how he managed in everyday academic life:

Have you ever heard of the Cinderella effect? When, yeah, so like when I’m getting my epidural shots, injections, people don’t know what I had to go through to get there that day. But you know, I just put on a smile, and get through the day, and when I get home, I just crash on the bed.

And Dora, also untenured, uses an inflatable cushion, which in her words, “kind of outs me—however, that cannot be identified as ‘required accommodation.’” And even if she is in pain, she always finds a way “to manage it and sit through an hour-and-a-half meeting.” Dora adds that she felt “lucky” in her first year at her university because “there were no service load expectations, [so] I didn’t have to out myself in requiring accommodations.”
Even with a more secure position, Norma has a similar wish to be treated like any other faculty member, remaining alert so as not to give any signs that she takes powerful drugs to curb the symptoms of ankylosing spondylitis and rheumatoid arthritis. Clearly these efforts are geared towards avoiding provoking the yellow or red light “verdict” to flicker on in her colleagues’ minds. In her words:

It’s sometimes easier not to talk to my peers, just because it’s so hard to make them understand. I don’t want people to feel sorry for me, or that I can’t do some aspect of my job. I’m trying to be promoted. I really want people to think I’m doing a good job. . . . I am doing a good job, but I don’t want them to know that sometimes it’s a struggle more than others. . . . The other day I wore boots just to hide my swollen ankles. I keep trying to hide all my struggles.

Before receiving tenure, Michelle made use of two impression management strategies in the classroom in order to be sure she could hear what students were saying without ambiguity. First, she “tried to make it work—as if asking them to repeat what they were saying simply [meant] asking for clarification.” In addition, she made quick adjustments to the volume of her hearing aid: “a couple clicks behind my ear so I could just look like I was fixing my earring.” Beth is another professor who goes to great lengths “to [not] give them reason to speculate about my performance.” Fortunately she still has full mobility, which allows her to hide her illness. As she began not feeling well, she told a few colleagues that her MS was “just a pinched nerve.” Nevertheless, when she anticipates having a bad day, she tries to work from home as much as possible, “so no one sees my struggles.”

And finally, Lorna offers an insight on the lasting benefits of impression management that is worth noting: “Being able to keep secrets can also be a burst of power. We choose whether to disclose it.”

Counter-Narratives: Enjoying Academic Work

Poignantly, the very fact that so many professors with invisible disabilities are able to pass, avoiding suspicion, seems evidence enough that they can in fact be accomplished faculty members in spite of their differentness. Indeed, regardless of the understandable nervousness surrounding disclosure and stigma, several professors challenge the academy’s disability avoidance and claim power from colleagues and administrators. For example, they are in charge of their own classes, and this gives them control over their own work conditions. Lorna likes the fact that she can structure her classes in ways that suit her needs. She is also not afraid of asking...
her peers and leaders to clarify their thoughts in case her diagnosed ADHD prevents her from grasping the whole volume of information flowing during faculty meetings. Sybil has realized that she is responsible for educating her colleagues about how to handle her service dog. She will not wait for her university to promote an awareness campaign because “time is of the essence.”

These academics also understand that possession of relevant knowledge and key information—or having access to those who do—can work in their favour. As previously noted, Beth acknowledges that having a union ally has helped her understand her rights, and therefore she feels more in control of her career. She realizes that opting for this kind of support feeds into disability avoidance but mentions how critical it is for diversable faculty to become educated about their entitlements in order to lead the way. When disability is finally addressed, earlier disclosure will presumably make the lives of these faculty members easier.

When I asked my participants to describe what they like the most about their jobs or to describe a good day, one common thread among their answers was a fierce passion for teaching and interacting with students. One participant also referred to how painful it is to let go of students when they graduate. The ties between dedicated teachers and students are undeniably very strong. Lorna mentions the joy she experiences in helping students realize their potential. DJ talks about how teaching is what kept him going even at the lowest points in his life: “The only thing I looked forward to when I was a TA was teaching!” To make teaching a worthwhile experience for both professors and students, Oswald talks about the importance of having solid social skills and exercising empathy. He emphasizes that to create good classes a professor must be able to read his or her students and then make decisions as to what the best approach should be in order to keep students engaged. Here’s an example of what he means by “being empathetic”:

I could tell by [my students’] body language [when a class was not going well]. There’s nothing more painful than being in a room when you’re sensing it’s not working. And I went through way too much of that when I was younger. I almost gave up [teaching] entirely. Then I learned how to be entertainer. In fact, I didn’t really even learn how to be an entertainer until my career crashed and burned or, at least, I gave up on being full-time . . . I gave up my tenure-track job and I, kind of, learned. But, the thing is, in my first tenure-track job, I learned a little bit about being an entertainer from a chair of my department who was a total clown. He was an entertainer and that was his shtick. I kind of learned some tricks from him and that helped. And I got the okay to do it. I started
getting better and then . . . when I finally crashed and burned, I went back to [a U.S. city] and I was teaching part-time again, at my old school. And I just didn’t care anymore. It was weird how I gave up caring about [covering all the materials I was supposed to cover]. I used to try to do a lot in the classroom. I used to go too fast. That was my biggest problem—I’d just go too fast.

These kinds of insights are also embedded in a new advocacy movement focused on “the slow professor” (Berg & Seeber, 2016). As Oswald describes this:

I thought the amount of material was important and learned the hard way that that’s not at all true. It’s better to go slow and go carefully. And, you know, I learned this when I had a three-hour class and I didn’t have enough material. I took the opposite approach, [by] slowing down and going . . . you know, going [slowly], because I wanted to stretch it. And I had these students in the palm of my hand. It was so weird to have the opposite experience then. I had [many] older women, the non-trads, and they were entranced by the presentation. And it was, like . . . Wow! And I got these evaluations that were completely opposite of what I usually got (which were mediocre).

For Beth, DJ, Sybil and Norma, teaching embodies the true meaning and importance of being a professor in spite of the challenges imposed by the neoliberal academy. Sybil articulates a recent class experience that translated into a good day:

A class like I had yesterday, with phenomenal presentations from students and a nice discussion [is a good example]. The feeling was that I was productive, without interruptions, doing my administrative work. Also, feeling that I was helping students progress when they came to me for help later . . . I love it when I see the penny drop for them!

Not surprisingly, a few participants focus on the absence of pain or discomfort to describe a positive day—i.e., a day in which they feel “normal.” For Rita, that means being migraine free, whereas for Monica, a good day can be the simple result of flying out to a conference and being able to carry a heavy bag all across the airport. The stories are all touching, making me appreciate body and mental capacities that I usually take for granted in my life. For instance, Norma gives a vivid description of the symbiotic connection between her personal and professional experiences on a feel-good day:
On a good day I have a lot of energy. . . . I walk into the classroom and I know what I’m talking about. I answer your question and I’m moving around the room and I’m excited to be there and the students are excited to be there. There is that moment when you’re teaching and you know you’ve reached them with a new idea and they are responding. They come to your office and ask questions and come and talk to you about things. I’m talking with them and sharing with them. I’m the department chair, so a good day is when I can mentor the faculty and I can work as late as I think I need to and go home and have dinner with my husband and spend time with him. Talk to my family on the phone and just basically have the energy I need to do what I need to do, and feel on top of my game . . . That my mind is working, my body is working, and everything is working together. . . . Some days I feel energetic and active. I want to go shopping and dance around the room when I teach.

The postmodern concept of performativity and Goffman’s metaphor of social life as a performance can be seen in the comments by Oswald, Sybil and Rita and is specifically named in DJ’s highly pragmatic, “slow professor” approach to teaching and diversability. When I asked how he copes on a day when he is not feeling well, he replied matter-of-factly: “Coming from a K-12 background, you have to teach every day, and you don’t get to choose when your life is easy or when it’s hard. For me, teaching is kind of a performance. I never have to make that happen; it just does.” He adds:

If I were doing something like making pizza or working in a factory or something like that, I might be prone to sit there and think about it. But teaching demands so much of a presence that it’s never been difficult for me to shift gears and ignore that stuff and just make it happen. When I went through a severe [crisis], teaching was one of the few things I enjoyed. So the act of being in the classroom is generally an enjoyable thing for me. It’s never hard for me to be attentive in class. It’s sort of a reprieve, actually.

Like me, Rose has also found great pleasure teaching in the more flexible online academic environment. Her tasks as an assistant professor include advising students and supervising their research work. She takes full advantage of technology, logging on to Skype™ to “make it happen.” Teaching from a distance is also the route Oswald has taken as a professor. As his chronic pain worsens, sometimes he even needs to lie down and teach using a computer tablet—an approach that would not be possible in the traditional bricks-and-mortar university environment.
Several professors—acutely aware of the necessity not to “rock the boat” and give their many hetero-normative peers, students or administrators reasons to see them as a problem—speak about taking the initiative in creating solutions to inventively mesh their own needs with those of students. Encouraging students to talk is one route that Beth takes, particularly as her classes tend to be relatively small. She usually teaches seminar-style, pairing students with one another. This way she feels less pressure “to be on all the time.” Michelle likewise prefers teaching smaller classes, which to her means less stress from trying to hear what students are saying. Still, whenever she is heading to a classroom, Michelle turns up the volume of her hearing aid with a few discreet clicks. Beth also tries to focus on her research when she is not feeling well. Staying at home can make her symptoms more manageable. However, on those days in which exhaustion takes over her body and she happens to be in the classroom teaching, she has learned to ignore symptoms such as tingling in her hands. Also, she encourages a class environment in which students are more interactive and do much of the talking, demanding less of a sage-on-the-stage performance for her. She claims that staying hydrated is also vital to keeping her focus. The nerve tingling might persist, but because Beth still moves freely, she can hide her discomfort from students. In fact, as we had a video-based interview, I did not see anything unusual in Beth’s demeanour and body language, although she later revealed that her hands had been tingling the whole time we chatted.

As indicated in the previous chapter, Norma recognizes that she can be extremely demanding of herself and even unforgiving of the fact that she cannot do the best job in all aspects of her life. She shared snippets of her inner voice, which reminded me of my tendency to be my own worst tyrant. Having said that, it was uplifting and downright funny to hear the positive self-talk she tries to use in coping with the academic demands on her life:

At church dinners, because either my husband has made something, or there is some potluck, or we’ve purchased something, [I’ve felt a bit sheepish]. It used to really bother me that everyone else has been making these wonderful homemade dishes. I tried telling myself, “You know, a lot of these people aren’t working full-time and they’re not dealing with what you’re dealing with, and the fact that you’ve actually turned up, and you’ve bought ‘Kentucky Fried Chicken’ . . . they should be grateful!” [Laughs]

Norma also celebrates her ability to perform as a manager:

Sometimes a crying student, angry professor [or] irate parent shows up at my door; I get to calm everybody down, and see if I can get people to work together. I’m naturally good at that and enjoy that, but if I’m exhausted or stressed it’s really difficult to pull out what is needed for me to be the kind of person who can handle it.
She keeps in mind, as do DJ, Rose and Oswald, that she is able to effectively teach and perform her other academic duties in spite of her institution’s shortcomings with regard to disability.

Planning Ahead and Taking Advantage of Flexible Work Arrangements

A significant portion of my interviews was devoted to professors describing their efforts to create work conditions that are more conducive to focusing on their professorial activities. Rather than dwell on the unwelcome obstacles in an environment not designed to accommodate different needs, they attempt to make as many adaptations as possible in their work routines, using a variety of resources to flourish as scholars. For example, Lorna, one of the professors who shares my disability—ADHD—understands the importance of creating the best conditions for focusing on her work. She explains her strategy:

Normally I go to the university half-days, and I work evenings and weekends. I’m on my own flextime. I used to berate myself for that and then I realized, ‘Well, that works for me.’ So I put in, you know, a certain work pattern when my partner is here and a different work pattern when he is not here. And academic work lends itself to that. It works beautifully for me.

Others, such as Sandra, put significant effort into forward planning. Following her own version of “Murphy’s law,” believing that when things will go wrong when they could possibly go wrong, she argues that it is essential to be prepared so as to “avoid disaster.” For instance, she will aim to catch a bus that comes prior to the one she actually needs to take, even though it arrives an hour earlier. Her rationale is clear: If the train she is supposed to catch after the bus is approaching the station and she is still far from the platform, she will be unable to run down the stairs. So if there is a problem with her bus, she will inevitably miss the train. Therefore she feels it makes sense to head to the bus stop earlier. As she says, “I don’t want to be in a rush and have stress.”

With respect to teaching, as noted, Oswald finds it helpful to tell his online students upfront about the spelling and grammar errors they may see from time to time in his writing, given that the voice recognition system does not work flawlessly. On the other hand, he says:

The joy of teaching online is it’s entirely flexible, so I can pretty much do it whenever I want. So the trick for me is that I sit in multiple different chairs. I sit for a limited amount of time at the computer, and I sit for some period at the dining room table or I sit in a comfy chair or I lie down with the iPad™ on top of me and I have stretching
exercises. And I sometimes joke that if I spend all my life just doing stretching exercises, everything will be fine.

Similar to Oswald, Lorna understands that, in order to be a good professor for her students, she must first decide what is good for her before she can be a good teacher:

I will create boundaries . . . set limits . . . establish rules and conditions for working with them . . . all in a compassionate way. If I attempt too much, I lose that compassion and it's not fair to the student to be at the receiving end of that.

**Employing Mind and Body Awareness**

Diversable professors have an impressive array of strategies for safeguarding, often quite meticulously, their physical and mental health. They underline the importance of taking time to be introspective—to consider their own needs first, so they can then function well in their jobs. For example, Lorna, like Michelle and Sybil, has become more assertive in asking colleagues to repeat what they have just said—albeit for a different reason: her ADHD can prevent her from absorbing everything “when five people are talking simultaneously” within a meeting. I asked Lorna if she, like me, sometimes feels totally lost in a discussion. Being acutely aware that she regularly finds herself “gapping out,” she explains: “It's like I can’t process what is going on, but also I'm impatient with what's going on. The game that they play irritates me, you know? I'm impatient. Let's get on with it.” She elaborates:

Sometimes I act out. Sometimes I will interrupt. I will behave in counter-productive ways. I will get out and go to the washroom and walk back. [However,] when I'm more effective, I will say: “I’m sorry. I'm having difficulty concentrating today and I know you said this already but would you mind repeating it?” Or “let me write that down.” Because sometimes writing things down or behaving as if I’m taking notes or actually taking notes helps me concentrate . . . helps me focus. But even with the [ADHD medication], concentrating and focusing, especially if I have several meetings back-to-back that require a great deal of concentration, then it's that much harder.

Norma also believes in listening to her body as she copes with chronic pain: “Some days I might be having a great day and moving; [other days] I might be teaching sitting down and needing to leave early.” Moving beyond ego—a concern shared by Fiona, whom I introduced in chapter 1 —Norma also tries to recognize when she has been unfair to her students and is not afraid or too proud to correct the inadequacy:
I think there have been times that I’ve been shorter with students or forgotten to answer an email. . . . I’m just so exhausted. . . . I usually become the queen of good apologies. . . . I send them an email saying something like, “Your question deserved more time than I gave it today, so here is a better answer.” Or to someone that I have been neglecting, I say, “Sorry, it’s not been a good week.” . . . I just try to remedy it and try to acknowledge other people’s feelings along the way.

Rose, for her part, not in as secure a position as these more senior academics, still keeps students constantly informed of her progress while grading, when any delays caused by her disability might make them nervous; in this way, as she puts it, she “neutralizes” students who are impatient to see her feedback.

**Physical and Mental Self-Respect and Self-Care**

Self-awareness also leads to self-care and self-respect. Senior academic Rita always tries to “make sure that I eat right, get enough sleep, make sure that things are just smooth and my headaches are much better when I do that.” She finds it surprising that other people tend to associate stress with a negative event—whereas in her case, positive stress can also trigger migraines. At some point in her career, Monica began receiving end-of-course survey results in which students used “hilarious comments,” referring to her as “the craziest professor ever . . . always running back and forth.” Eventually, she grew tired of the negative impressions. As she puts it: “All they [do is] make snide remarks about what I have to do to function in the classroom as a disabled person.” In order to avoid being discouraged by negative or pejorative comments, Monica now has her husband peruse the evaluations and only tell her what can be perceived as constructive feedback.

Sam stresses how important it is to have “a good treatment plan and follow it.” He attributes his academic success to having fully acknowledged that he needs to be in charge of cultivating his own job satisfaction; therefore he embraces medication and weekly psychiatric therapy. This can be compared to the position taken by another senior academic, Sylvia, who tries to do the same. As Sam sums it up:

People who take care of themselves, just like anybody with any other chronic illness, by and large, do okay [although] you may still have exacerbations of symptoms, sometimes. But you will do well, as opposed to the person who does not follow a medical regime and does have problems. It’s easier to hide, as it were, when you seem to be okay, [are] not missing a large amount of work and . . . having difficulties. Or whatever difficulties that you [are] having [are] not bad enough to make anybody make any [disability-
related] inferences. . . . I know perfectly well that there’s no way I would be able to do what I do if I didn’t follow doctors’ advice and take the meds every day. I think if you talk to people who are successful professionals with mental illness, they’re all going to tell you the same thing: there [are] very few people who are successful professionals who don’t follow [a] . . . regimen. Even if they do, they have problems, but they are able to cope because they’re doing what they’re recommended to do.

Like Sam, balance is what Norma strives for every day, measuring out a precise dosage of medications that produce the fewest side effects so she can “be up and around, and intelligent for my classes.” When a prescription drug is not appropriate for her needs, she feels it can “really mess up my thinking ability,” making her forgetful and absent-minded. She describes how this feels:

I just can’t do this. I’ve got “chemo brain” [which is] not something I can talk about to other people, saying, “Hey, I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention; I just took my pain medication.” People will think I’m a drug addict. If I take pain medication before I listen to my students’ speeches, I’ll be less attentive; but I’ll also be in a much better mood, [while maybe still] in pain. I’m scowling during my presentations, but it’s worth it, so it’s a constant balance of, “Well, if I take this . . . well, I can’t take that.”

Norma has found that she has to explain the requirements of her job and the effects of medication to her physician in order to optimize her medication. As she puts it, “I also have to keep going back to my doctor and say, ‘I can’t do this or that. I can’t take these two things together. I can’t take this because I don’t wake up until noon and I have to be in class at eight.’” In the spirit of “one day at a time,” she takes one academic task at a time. As she puts it,

I think one of my best coping strategies is doing one thing at a time. All I have to do is get these quizzes graded. I just kind of compartmentalize tasks one at a time because if I looked at everything I have to do or am supposed to do, I would be overwhelmed. But I can [always] do one more thing. . . . I can give [my students] an assignment and let them out early. . . . I can do it in 15 minutes or another 15 minutes, and then it’s the end of class. I kind of set myself breaking it into manageable chunks.

Compartmentalizing home and work also works for Dora. Whenever she feels that she may become overwhelmed by gloomy feelings, she has a clear strategy:

I try to set aside more time for sleep. I make a very conscientious effort to leave work at work. And I try to . . . leave my briefcase [in my office]. Because when I go home, then that is where I’m safe, right? So not only do I have to create a psychological separation, but there has to be a physical separation, too. I try to be more conscientious about setting
boundaries. I try to be more conscientious about saying no to things. And I mean I still find it difficult to do this now, and I’m in a space right now where I really need to be putting that wall up. I mean, my compulsion with this job is to just give and give and give and give, until I have nothing left. . . . Then I really start to feel the impact of my disabilities. . . . I don’t usually even speak in these terms. I don’t normally refer to myself as disabled [because I’ll become] more depressed. And I’m also more anxious, right? Because I’m actively trying to manage it. I’m trying to sit through an hour-and-a-half meeting, etcetera, etcetera. So what that means is that my body’s screaming at me and saying, “Whoa, you better pump the brakes,” right? Like, hang on, we need some time. So I try to be very deliberate about creating that separation and getting a good night’s sleep, or at least trying.

As mentioned in chapter 5, Sybil avoids telephones in general “because I can’t hear very well unless I set the environment up.” She also chooses not to answer the telephone at home. As she puts it, “if you phone me in the middle of the day and I’m in the middle of something, I’m not going to answer the phone. It’s going to go to voicemail.” She also knows that simply anticipating a long phone conversation can bring on a migraine [and] so she tries wherever possible to see people face to face. Lorna also recognizes that sometimes she needs a time-out and provides them for herself:

I need total silence in my house. I need to go for a walk. I can only be on task for a few hours, and [then] I need to take a break, go away and come back. I don’t do very well if I teach more than three hours back-to-back, but the university teaching scenario is such that there’s a variety in the day. We have a certain measure of control over our working conditions, and I can structure it in ways that work for me. But very busy days I don't do well, you know, and if I have a lot happening on the home front, in my personal life, with my partner, at work—and if there's more than one thing happening in more than one area of my life that's excessive—I find it hard to cope.

The Benefits of Hobbies and Humour

Participants believe in finding balance in doing physical activity and grouping professorial tasks so as not to feel overwhelmed by the great amount of work on their academic to-do lists. Lorna comments:

Physical activity helps. If I don't have time to go to the gym, [then I go on] a good long walk with the dog. Oxygenating. Silence. For me going for a long walk in the woods by myself and listening to the birds singing is [helpful.]
Beth has also enjoyed the benefits of a good walk. Whenever she feels that she has had enough, she heads to the streets of her neighbourhood. She always brings water with her, particularly during warm weather, as she finds it critical to feel hydrated. The walks, however, are often accompanied by guilt over not having put in a long enough day.

Quite surprisingly, writing is an attractive activity for several professors in my research. Lately Michelle has enjoyed writing a blog “from the perspective of a woman in science.” Since embarking on this hobby, she has been “wrestling” with an important question: “When do I do the ‘I am disabled’ post?” Now that she has been promoted, Michelle feels a responsibility to reveal more about her situation, explaining that “I didn’t do it before because I felt there could be very serious fall out.” Likewise, Rose realizes that being the design and layout editor for a literary journal may not fit the definition of a hobby, given that it is still an academic activity at her university—but she conveys a sense of genuine enjoyment over her new role, exclaiming: “Now that’s something!” Finally, Oswald’s first passion has always been writing science fiction, or what he calls “fantasy-type things,” even though he claims to be “not very good at it.” He considers himself better at analytical thinking than creative fiction. Nevertheless, he describes himself as “a real science fiction nut” to the extent that he has created a favourite course relating the topic to his field. He adds: “I find that doing creative stuff is how I keep myself mentally from going crazy or sinking into depression and stuff like that.”

Lorna adds a note on the importance of laughter in the academy: “Humour is important. [We need] humour that challenges the perfectionist ideal.” Indeed, several participants mentioned or demonstrated humour in their interviews with me. Rose, for example, has a delightful sense of humour. As with my other interviewees, to set the context for our conversation, I opened with a quick inventory of the disabilities I had noted in her file, based on our initial email exchanges. Then, as I began asking for a more detailed history, I said: “Obviously you were not born with PTSD.” That was the first time I heard Rose’s contagious laugh. And it soon became clear that even when she has gone through periods of hardship involving her health, she still finds humour in her situation. Once she said to a class of students:

As part of my ADA accommodations, everyone here at the campus has to abide by this: I do my best, I have my hearing aid, but there are times when I may ask you to repeat your question. If you get frustrated by that, write your question down on a piece of paper, and pass it up. Not a big deal, right? Because you guys are passing notes all the damn time, so what’s one more piece of paper?

She adds another example of an amusing classroom situation:
I once had a student raise a hand and ask me . . . I thought he said, “Can I go take a whiz?” I looked at him and I said, “We’re grown adults here in the room, you don’t need to ask me my permission to go to the bathroom.” And he said, “No, not, no!” And everybody started laughing. And he said, “I asked you if I could take the quiz?”

Beth explains that relapses she has experienced in her MS typically necessitate “heavy duty steroids.” Even then, she has spent periods of several months without being able to move the fingers on one hand. And at one point, just as she was about to see her neurologist, she began to experience the classic tingling sensation of MS in her other hand. But instead of feeling sorry for herself, she asked her doctor: “Can we just even [everything] out?” In our interview, Beth showed this same ability to see the humour in her situation. When I asked what she would change at her institution if she suddenly assumed a leadership role and could help make the lives of diversable faculty less stressful, she responded without hesitation: “Can I fire some of my colleagues?”

And finally, Sandra puts into perspective the vital role humour plays in facing the adversity that accompanies disability in the neoliberal academy. She began by telling me that she obviously gets sad from time to time, not necessarily because of her disability, but over whatever challenges life places in her path. And then she said matter-of-factly: “So one of the ways that I cope is I get drunk on the weekends.” As I started to laugh, she quickly added, “I’m just kidding! I’m just kidding!” I can understand why she was nervous: obviously, she did not know me well and was not sure how I might react to her joke—or worse, what I might write in response to it. But after I reassured her that I fully understood and empathized with her sarcastic humour, Sandra explained:

What I do is I use comedy; I love laughter, and I’ll watch comedy, stand-up comedy routines. I’ll watch comedy movies, because it’s very therapeutic. And [we know that laughter] releases endorphins, [which] basically changes your outlook. So that’s what I do. Comedy is therapy for me.

**Conclusion**

When faced with a disability, my participants have developed various strategies that involve tapping into help from family and support groups. This ranges from financial support to physical assistance and psychological empowerment. Technology related to the disability is also found to be helpful, including hearing aids, guide dogs and medications, although getting this right might involve negotiation with physicians and academic authorities. There is also a striking preference for online teaching by several participants who have chronic pain, the inability to sit, or ADHD.
But “taking charge” by slowing down and enjoying academic tasks, along when, if possible, in various ways by practicing impression management are most important, as are self-care, compartmentalization of tasks, striving for life balance and partaking of life’s pleasures through hobbies, humour and enjoying what they have done well. In this chapter I have presented these strategies as “leading”, inasmuch as they model how to be diversable in a diversable-unfriendly place. My participants often see these useful strategies and self-accommodations as simply helping them stay afloat and avoid stigma in academic environments that are hostile to disability. However, as many interviewees make clear, they are not entirely successful in avoiding negative judgments by their colleagues in the ableist, neoliberal academy. It is this very avoidance that is at the heart of the problem, according to Bolt and Penketh (2016). And it is therefore the challenge that all members of the academy must address, whether working to change policy or to enhance everyday life.
Chapter 9
Summary, Contributions of the Research and Future Directions

Introduction

In this final chapter, I present a brief summary of my findings and assess their significance. I explain how the conclusions I have drawn from contextualizing my study participants’ interviews add to current knowledge about the experiences of faculty with invisible di(ver)sabilities. I also present my ideas regarding what lies ahead, given that there is much more research work to be done before paradigmatic change can happen.

The field of disability studies has significantly expanded the body of scholarly knowledge around an issue that touches all areas of society. Clearly, the works of academics such as Mitchell, L. J. Davies, Garland-Thomsom, and Siebers, among many others, have substantially advanced our understanding of the intricacies of living in a world that thwarts people with diversabilities. In addition, scholars such as Titchkosky, Price and Kerschbaum have made important contributions to our grasp of disabilities in the realm of higher education. I owe many of the insights that illuminated my research to the work of these highly regarded academics.

In pursuing my research, I have also drawn inspiration from the scholarly literature of feminism, which is filled with stories of oppressive majorities that decide who should be valued and respected, and therefore who can keep their human dignity intact. It is important to reveal the value of academics with diversabilities to the academy, and to identify the discourses that support a paradigm of emancipation as a counter-narrative to an uncaring and competitive neoliberal environment. We, the diversable, cannot bow to an oppressive, control-seeking paradigmatic view of how academic postures and discourse must be sustained (Freire, 1977).

The three insights from this research that I will highlight in this summary are: (a) the consequences of neoliberal management practices for diversable faculty; (b) the importance of listening to the counter-narratives—and following the lead—of diversable academics; and (c) the richness of counter-narratives as guides to negotiating truly universal access for the whole academic community. I conclude with my personal view of the way forward in transitioning to paradigms honouring diversability.
Disability, Ableism and Neoliberalism

Many authors have pointed to links between the discourses of able-normativity and disability. For example, Price and Kershbaum (2017) point out that one reason for negative reactions within academe is that professors with invisible disabilities are a slap in the face for their peers and leaders, if only because they provide living proof that the unexpected can happen. When something occurs that was not in the script (Goffman, 1959), an institution may make individual accommodations; but changing an informal and kairotic culture embedded in ableist thinking is much more challenging. The irony is that even for those faculty members who do not have disabilities as defined by the standards of normalcy, subjugation to the demanding expectations of the neoliberal academy could sooner or later disable them.

My study highlights the fundamental link, on the part of all faculty, between ableist discourse and impression management. Diversable academics are constantly challenged to provide evidence or counter-narratives proving there is no reason for their competence to be called into question. Therefore, professors, depending on the level of negativity their specific impairments connote, may choose not to reveal their differentness. My participants’ experiences show that varying types of diversability incite more or less empathy and willingness to accommodate diverse needs—a phenomenon I explored in chapter 7 with my metaphor of the traffic lights. Participants’ narratives also reveal that the impact of exposing a disability is complicated by its combination with intersectionalities such as race, gender, sexuality, age, parental status and social class.

Another contextual contingency in the careers of my participants was revealed by my inclusion of faculty who are neither tenured nor in the tenure stream. Participant careers suggest a link between ableism and the “neoliberal turn” in higher education. In analyzing my interviews with 16 faculty members, I have provided, through the words of my participants, the neoliberal context within which their careers have unfolded. My research looks at diversable faculty in light of recent scholarship exploring work contingencies under neoliberal administrations—that is, in environments where academics are increasingly forced to promote the reputation of their institutions, attract more students and boost revenues (Ball, 2015). Amidst ferocious competition for academic jobs, the situation of diversable professors—as my study participants Lorna and Oswald so eloquently discuss—becomes dramatically more challenging than for their peers.
Even when these professors know their disabilities do not impede execution of their scholarly duties, there is no assurance that their communities will think the same—and so it makes sense that they keep sharpening their impression-management skills (Goffman, 1986).

Although there is a growing body of literature on the characteristics of neoliberal postsecondary education—including an explosive growth in the use of contingent faculty members (Brownlee, 2015)—to my knowledge no study has yet theorized how neoliberalism makes life difficult for diversable contingent professors. When an institution decides to offer fewer teaching opportunities, as in the case of research participant Monica—it can do so without consultation, which is not at all helpful for those who are invisibly disabled. Without input from the interested parties, proposed “improvements” in the conditions of non-tenured faculty may simply pay lip service to the problem—at least for those with invisible impairments.

When the values cultivated in higher education foster a uniform view of what constitutes normalcy, it can be a genuine challenge to performing “normally”—especially if the mind and/or body of an individual with an impairment is seen as anything but “normal.” And when a collective culture promotes ableism and performativity, to the exclusion of other discourses such as those used in everyday kairotic situations, this attitude of anti-diversability may ironically end up harming all members of the collective personally. My conversations with the professors in my study are consistent with the arguments of researchers who have demonstrated the unreasonable contingencies affecting academics under the influence of neoliberal regimes (e.g., Davies & Bansel, 2005; Martimianakis & Muzzin, 2015).

In their everyday lives, professors with disabilities who do not have tenure practice impression management (Goffman, 1986) in the hope that their competence will be more fairly assessed. They do so not necessarily to mask a “deficit” that could put their jobs and reputations at risk. Instead, they may merely be exercising self-care so as not to create “noise” that will unfairly interfere with how their competence is measured in the neoliberal academy. These professors know that their disabilities do not taint their professorial talent. But saying so aloud, as my participants did, will not easily change the neoliberal academy—unless the counter-narratives accumulate, making it impossible not to take them seriously. The stories of academics like Dora, who refuses to discuss her impairments with anyone in her workplace for fear of losing her job, must be brought to the surface without harming her. This is one of the contributions of my study.
Within this current reality, most of my participants agree that “coming out” as diversable is dangerous. Indeed, a critical topic in the interviews was the pervasiveness of the stigma attached to differentness, both in its essential nature and the specifics of how it is constructed. Opinion was unanimous that revealing a disability may compromise a professor’s reputation, particularly for those who do not have tenure. While precarious employment among adjunct and tenure-track professors is certainly a serious obstacle to requesting any kind of accommodation, the stigma attached to disability in general also drives a hesitancy to “come out” among tenured faculty members. The price of revelation may be too high, despite a professor’s relative job security. Nevertheless, in the careers of senior diversable academics, tenure seems to have brought more confidence to speak up and advocate against the unfounded stigma associated with invisible diversabilities.

Invisibly diversable faculty without tenure, on the other hand, may find themselves stuck in toxic environments and lacking any realistic possibility of career advancement. If they reveal a disability, it could easily lead their managers to refrain from renewing their contracts, instead favouring candidates who are perceived to be “more capable of doing the job.” One significant example is that of Monica’s colleague, who insisted on maintaining the impression of good health even when she clearly needed surgery; she could not afford to let someone else teach her courses if she risked being dismissed as unfit for the job. On the other hand, if these academics do not disclose, receiving a lukewarm job evaluation risks their chances of being offered future work. And here again, neither are tenured professors necessarily unscathed by disclosure; the consequences can still be devastating for their reputations as competent thinkers, damaging their careers.

Indeed, these observations suggest that for any faculty members who disclose impairment in order to have their needs accommodated, the social response within the academy may be inimical regardless of what policy or employment law requires of institutional administrators. This is clearly the reason why so many of my participants say they only disclose if it seems absolutely necessary—either because they have determined that the benefits of disclosure outweigh the potential hazards (such as compromising their positive image in the eyes of others in academe) or, as in the case of Michelle, because they feel they “owe” it to a colleague to be transparent about their diversability, in case they need some additional support while working in collaboration.
Listening to Diversable Faculty

In my literature review (discussed in chapter 3), I uncovered very few studies directly relevant to the topic of my thesis. An important exception is the research of Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum on the experience of Mad academics, which clearly helped to open up this entire field of inquiry. But while I am indebted to their work, a key aspect of my research that sets it apart is my focus on the unique narratives and counter-narratives of diversable academics, and the firsthand insights they provide on what it means to be a professor with an invisible disability. Indeed, many of the disabilities revealed by my interviewees, and the impacts of living with them, had never crossed my mind before I began my research. Where Price and Kerschbaum focus mainly on faculty with mental health issues, the scope of my research has allowed me to explore the spectrum of potential invisible disabilities affecting the work and lives of diversable academics. By digging deeper into their personal narratives and counter-narratives, I have been able to showcase the achievements and leadership of diversable faculty, and in doing so I have presented a more nuanced understanding of their experience and possible counter-narratives to able-normativity. My research participants, through their first-person accounts, demonstrate that the energy colleges and universities spend on avoiding the unwelcome fact of disability would be put to better use in creating optimal conditions for diversable academics to thrive. I believe this will be the most fundamental contribution of my study to current research on the professoriate in higher education.

My interviewees, in speaking about the strategies they have developed to circumvent barriers imposed by the ableist cultures of their institutions, reinforce the point that adopting more inclusive, universally designed work environments can only help organizations reach their strategic goals. Diversable faculty will finally be able to focus on the tasks they must accomplish, rather than constantly looking for ways to overcome obstacles—obstacles created by intolerant policies and the failure to cultivate empathy and a deeper understanding of diversity. The counter-narratives shared by my participants show that, particularly with support from non-judgmental individuals and enabling technologies, they thrive as performers just as well as their counterparts, albeit in ways that would be usefully practiced by the professoriate as a whole.
For a contemporary example of what can be accomplished in this regard, I would point to the Ed Roberts Campus of the University of California, Berkeley. Conceptually, the building reflects the philosophy that access should be provided to all persons and welcome the widest possible range of diversability. The design of the building focuses mainly on ease of physical access—by providing, for instance, elevators whose buttons are accessible even to the feet of someone in a wheelchair. At the same time, it was built to meet demanding environmental standards.

Applying a similar design imperative for a Canadian university building might, for example, allow individuals who are affected by reduced sunlight during the winter months to benefit from the natural illumination provided by large skylights and windows.

A fundamental insight I gained from my conversations with academics who were also administrators—or who critiqued the administrators they had interacted with—was that higher education leaders, if they do not seek input from diversable faculty, risk making ineffective and costly decisions. This was certainly evident from Monica’s account of being asked to work about 60 hours a week, when it clearly was not possible for her to do so. And it underlines Norma’s conviction that academic leaders must listen to the views and needs of those they manage.

I would suggest that a goal for future research should be to continue weaving together counter-narratives and encouraging diversable faculty to point out their accomplishments in advancing positive change. To successfully counter able-normativity, it is essential to know what the oppressed have said and achieved with respect to “what is done, the rules imposed, the reasons given for those rules, plans formally documented and rules/plans taken for granted” (Church, 1995, p. 29). Of course, sympathetic members of mainstream groups can lend valuable support to advocacy movements that defend and promote social justice for oppressed minorities. But positive outcomes are more likely when advocates have firsthand, in-depth knowledge of the dominant views, attitudes and practices that promote ableism, sexism, racism, ageism and other prejudice-filled “isms”. Those who have lived through oppressive situations are well positioned to assess, criticize and offer counter-narratives to what they see as the shortcomings of their environment.

It was through listening to the narratives of 16 invisibly disabled academics that I was able to see the vital connection between precarity and a professor’s willingness to disclose an otherwise concealable disability. When I began my interviews, I did not foresee that the tendency and/or
willingness to disclose would be so heavily connected to job security. But once aware of that
dimension, I could understand more fully how neoliberalism and the focus on performativity
affect the experiences of diversable faculty. This is, I believe, an element of new knowledge—
one that should change the perspective of any institutional administration considering the
experiences of faculty with disabilities. And it is knowledge that could only be uncovered by
engaging in meaningful conversations with individuals like my participants, as well as through
promotion of their counter-narratives.

Rich Counter-Narratives and the Transition to a
Diversable Paradigm

The ideas and perspectives brought together in Bolt and Penketh’s *Disability, Avoidance and the
Academy: Challenging Resistance* (2016) point to the inevitable and poignant realization that
contemporary academe is immersed in disability avoidance. The various chapter authors
theorize at length about the reluctance of the academy to provide an environment that is
grounded in social justice and supported by a sincere willingness to provide all faculty members
with equal means to flourish as scholars. But in reading this landmark book—and indeed all of
the studies I reviewed illuminating the reality of disability avoidance in higher education—I
found myself craving profiles of “real” professors and the specific problems they face. Although
the existing scholarly literature included several first-person works, I see a need for additional
micro-data that unveil the phenomenon even more dramatically, bringing theory to life and
enriching it with personal details.

Institutional diversity initiatives that focus on disability are typically insufficient, as they are
blind to the difficulties imposed on diversable faculty in their day-to-day roles. Policymakers
ought to learn from the counter-narratives of faculty with disabilities—by looking to academics
like DJ, for instance, whose diversability clearly has not prevented him from showing his talent
and receiving a promotion. As participants make clear, diversable faculty, leveraging their
professional autonomy, networks and technical support, can thrive in accommodating
environments. Norma, for instance, enjoys working at a teaching-focused institution where she
is seen as an excellent instructor and a talented administrator. In more research-intensive
settings, diversable professors such as Beth, Sylvia and Sam have the freedom to concentrate on
areas of inquiry where they excel. Sybil, after disclosing her diversability during a recruiting
interview, was hired without hesitation by her university—although she acknowledges there is still considerable work to be done in raising the consciousness of her faculty peers. Similarly, Michelle has a position at an institution where paradigm change had begun before she arrived—notably in the founding of a support group for faculty members with disabilities, as well as those caring for disabled family or friends. And last but not least is the example of Oswald, who decided not to follow an established course syllabus and instead taught at a slower pace—achieving positive results with his students while successfully adjusting expectations to fit his diversability.

In many cases, however, the narratives of diversable professors show that they have no choice but to manage cognitive fuzziness (for instance, from medical drugs) and even the challenge of physical pain as they execute their tasks—especially when forced to sit for hours at their computers. These academics know they may also experience the professional “pain” that can come from expressing a need for accommodation to their superiors and peers.

Regardless of how much evidence diversable faculty members gather to debunk false assumptions and construct counter-narratives to the negative discourse around disability, it is still helpful to find allies who accept and support them. When these academics are able to count on a few key people in their lives, both at home and in the workplace, they are more likely to build professional contributions and effective counter-narratives. And sharing stories that can replace the discourses of ableism and neoliberalism may eventually help open the eyes of academic leaders and institutional stakeholders. The ultimate goal is to raise consciousness of the fact that diversable faculty members, under the right circumstances and in the absence of hostility, ignorance and gossip, can be as productive as their peers, if not more so—and to make clear that the toxicity of the neoliberal academy harms all of its members.

My contextualization of the data in this thesis reflects the work of theorists such as McRuer (2006). He explains his theory of “compulsory able-bodiedness” by arguing that ableism, neoliberalism, race and social-economic status all fundamentally influence our understanding of disability. Harnish (2017) builds on this idea: “Compulsory able-bodiedness elevates ‘normative’ bodily performances and stigmatizes every performance that fails to conform to this standard” (p. 424). Palmer (2011), similarly inspired by McRuer, notes that the discourse of the “normal” and “able-bodied” is taken up by everyone, without exception. And to understand what constitutes able-bodiedness, one also needs to understand disability. Moreover, these theorists
argue that able-normativity is a binary model of ability and disability, which presents the two constructs as opposites, judging one as positive and the other as negative. The lives and counter-narratives of participants in my study challenge this binary model. I also suggest in my analysis and interpretation of my data that postmodern concepts (Foucault, 1977), married to carefully applied grounded theory, can provide a way to use the micro-data of everyday achievements of diversable faculty as a guide to replacing this binary model—leading to the realization that all faculty members have meaningful contributions to make.

Acceptance of differentness in the higher education milieu may transform the academy into an environment that is more reflective of the “real world” in the sheer variety of people who inhabit it. This is an argument made by many equity theorists (Shiva, 1993; bell hooks, 1984; Sedgwick, 1995; Tripp & Muzzin, 2005). Indeed, many of the issues raised in this thesis transcend the higher education environment and can be applied generally. It seems clear that a deeper awareness of the impacts of ableism, as revealed in the lives of diversable faculty, and the need for a paradigm shift could benefit every member of society. Efforts to accommodate physical, mental and spiritual differences imply a deep and welcome respect for all humans, regardless of who they are and where they live, work or travel.

Studies examining the experiences of disabled professors and the reality of disability avoidance in the academy, while relatively scarce, converge in the assertion that change is necessary. There is a unanimous conclusion among disability scholars that the academy must rethink any policies or practices that perpetuate ableist and performative discourse in the day-to-day conduct of teaching and research. Higher education leaders often seem oblivious to the fundamental role they could be playing in effecting positive change in the face of oppressive discourses repeated in kairotic spaces—both by advocating for faculty members with disabilities and by nurturing a more collaborative organizational culture. In the view of many leading thinkers in this area (Bolt, 2016; Oswal, 2016; L. J. Davis, 2002; Frankham, 2017), both policymaking and leadership strategies require a wakeup call recognizing the presence of ableism in academe.

If the academy were to become more reflective of the diversable faculty within it, it would no longer be necessary to beg for accommodation of differentness, or to argue for greater emphasis on disability in institutional diversity policies. But achieving this shift in perspective—recognizing that an inhospitable academic environment invariably hurts everyone—will require administrators to effect change with persistence and determination. As long as the discourses of
ableism and neoliberalism prevail, disability will only be considered a nuisance. And if the needs of the diversable are accommodated merely because of a legal obligation, talented diversable academics will continue to be unfairly associated with an unwelcome expenditure of time, energy and money by academic elites. Oswal (2016) talks about the tendency of the academy, expressed particularly in its ableist policies, to compartmentalize disability as a deficit. The first step—as a wealth of scholarship (to which this thesis contributes) has tried to demonstrate—is the realization that disability cannot be equated with incompetence. If we consider the problem through this lens, it appears that many scholarly and institutional leaders fail to recognize that the strategies of neoliberalism, while perhaps appearing sensible from an administrative point of view, are in effect counter-intuitive. A hyper-focus on performativity blinds the academy to the fact that its demands are ultimately disabling for all faculty members. The disabling academy is disabling itself.

There is an urgent need to recognize the prevalent ideas, values, norms and beliefs embodied in able-normative and neoliberal discourses that shape a professor’s decision to reveal or conceal an otherwise undetectable disability. Armed with this kind of understanding, institutional leaders will be in a position to introduce policies and procedures in support of more inclusive and universally designed educational communities. And this acknowledgement of differentness should in turn bring a greater degree of acceptance of how we all understand our vulnerability to some form of disability—if only in our shared path toward mortality.

Conclusion

To some readers, these closing thoughts may suggest a grand narrative evoking images of some unattainable utopia. Rather, they should be seen as a counter-narrative drawing attention to the fact that while the university is a microcosm of society, the institution and its scholars also have the privilege of influencing their social context by weaving together their own counter-narratives. The connection is symbiotic. Moreover, it is in the university that great minds congregate with the purpose of making the world a better place for all.

It may be that the issue of disability in the academy does not receive the attention it should because busy academics are constantly trying to “keep their heads above water.” And arguably, the managers who oversee their work are similarly busy keeping up with the neoliberal agenda—and improving the bottom line. Putting energy into assessing how we deal with
“imperfections” of body and mind may seem unprofitable, and therefore not part of the everyday reality of today’s academic mainstream. However, as my participants’ narratives and counter-narratives make clear, embracing diversability may indeed help institutions realize a higher purpose. More than ever, given the complex social, political and environmental issues facing the world, higher education institutions must set an example for society, showing that by accepting one another as we are, and understanding our differentness, we can find ways to better sustain our existence. It is time for the visionaries in colleges and universities to question the promotion of materialism and personal gain to the exclusion of nurturing the quest for self-realization.

In summary, in seeking the “truth” behind the reluctance of invisibly disabled academics to make their “secret” known, I arrived at a personal revelation. I finally realized that, as a diversable person, I am not the problem. Neither are the professors who spoke about their lifework to me so candidly. The notion that persons with disabilities, in order to be valued, must change and “put a little effort” into meeting arbitrary standards of normalcy now ultimately strikes me as ludicrous. Titchkosky’s (2003) reflections capture my own train of thought while drawing this thesis to a conclusion:

We can study disability as a stigmatized identity, and we can try to fight our stigmatization; we can study disability as societal oppression, and we can fight for our liberation; we can do the same with the medical version of disability. But alongside this fight there is still one more possibility: one which lies between the recognition of what is born out of the relation between disabled people and what culture gives to us, and what meaning is born in the midst of our fight against the power of these “cultural gifts” (p. 238).

The insights revealed by my research point to a clear conclusion: in the ways argued by my participants, disability must finally stop being a taboo that leads to equivocal institutional decisions and the oppression of the diversable. Replacing the dominant discourses in the neoliberal academy, I would argue, will bring further positive outcomes for society as a whole. This is extremely significant for neoliberal institutions working to stay ahead of their competitors—whether in seeking higher student enrolments, government grants or interest from investors. For institutions to truly distinguish themselves, it is vital that administrators and their
academic colleagues create and support hospitable environments in which all faculty members can thrive.
References


E2%80%9CFew%20people%20will%20know%20what%20to%20do%20or%20how%20to%
respond%20to%20build%20greater%20access%20accommodation%20and%20support%E2%
%80%9D-disability-identity-in-higher-education/


university-professor-is-a-stressful-job/#660a272a563e


meetings of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education Carleton University, Ottawa.


January 2015

Dear Sir/Madam:

I am currently pursuing a PhD degree in Higher Education at the University of Toronto (OISE). My thesis research is entitled: *Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work*. In this study, I intend to better understand the experiences of faculty with invisible disabilities (i.e., any illness, not easily noticed, that might regularly affect their ability to cope with scholarly demands). My motivation is to explore their coping strategies and uncover possible ways to make their efforts to meet academic demands less stressful.

I am writing to request your support in sharing my research goals with your members. My hope is that you will post the attached information letter on my behalf and that a few members will meet the criteria for participation in my study (i.e., as university or college faculty members with invisible disabilities) and will be interested in talking to me about their experiences. I have attached a copy of the message I plan to use to recruit these individuals, as well as all the information specifying the nature of my study, its purpose and what will be required of participants.

If you choose to support me in this request, please send me a reply stating the following:

> On behalf of [name of your association], I, [your name and job position], agree to facilitate the publication of Vera Dolan’s invitation to participate in her doctoral thesis research entitled *Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work* on our website/social media page.

Thanks very much in advance.
Appendix B – Invitation to Participate in Research Project (Advertisement)

Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work

Toronto, January 2015

Dear XXX member,

I am currently pursuing a PhD degree in Higher Education at the University of Toronto (OISE). In my doctoral work, I seek to better understand the experiences of faculty with invisible disabilities (i.e., any illness, not easily noticed, that might regularly affect the ability to cope with scholarly demands). My motivation is to explore faculty coping strategies and uncover possible ways they can recommend to make their efforts to meet academic demands less stressful.

If you are a college and/or university faculty member and believe that you face greater levels of stress than your colleagues when trying to perform your scholarly duties because of an invisible illness, I would encourage you to participate in my study of approximately 20 individuals, entitled Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work. My passion for the topic springs from my own experience in coping with an invisible disability, both as a faculty member of two higher education institutions and as a graduate student. A great deal of research has been conducted on higher education students with disabilities, especially those with impairments related to learning. In contrast, very little attention has been paid to university and college professors who struggle with cognitive and other hidden difficulties. There is a critical need to pursue this line of inquiry. It is my hope that the stories we share will lead to findings that faithfully represent the experiences of postsecondary faculty members who cope with cognitive and other inconspicuous difficulties.

Participation is voluntary. As a participant you have the right to withdraw from the study without consequences at any time. You are at no risk of harm, and your answers will not be subject to judgmental and/or evaluative scrutiny. I will be keeping any information related to your identity confidential and will store it in a secure location. Moreover, your name will never be publicly disclosed. The interviews will happen outside of your workplace and at a time to which we both agree. I will facilitate access to any resources (e.g., a list of the organizations
related to my study) should you wish to gain more knowledge regarding the nature of my work.

Once I defend my dissertation successfully, you will receive an email in which I present a summary of the study and also inform you about the opportunity to see a copy of the entire thesis as soon as the findings become available electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository (T Space) at https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944. For the sake of confidentiality, I will be contacting you using only the email address you include in your signed consent letter. Your contact information will ALWAYS be kept separate from the data.

Should you have an interest in becoming a participant and talking to me for about 90 minutes, please read the information letter that follows this and send me an e-mail (vera.dolan@mail.utoronto.ca) expressing your willingness to participate. I will then contact you and request, in confidence, the name of the postsecondary institution where you are employed, and your department and job status. (As stated in the opening of this message, being a university or college faculty member is the basic criterion for your eligibility to participate in this project.) Once I receive your emailed expression of interest, I will then forward a consent form for you to sign and return to me prior to or at the beginning of our interview.

Thank you so much for your time. I look forward to talking to you!
Appendix C – Information Letter

Project Title:

*Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work.*

**Brief description of the research including objectives and timeline:**

The focus of this research, conducted under the supervision of Dr. Linda Muzzin, is university and college faculty members who, as they fulfill their scholarly responsibilities, may have physical or mental difficulties that cause them to function in ways that deviate from traditional expectations of intelligence and competence. Today faculty members find themselves coping with the incessant pressure of activities such as teaching, research, publication, supervising graduate students and applying for grants. These academics must be resilient in order to deal with a significant amount of stress – stress that can further exacerbate any problems in cognition they may be experiencing. However, university faculty members with invisible disabilities who voice this type of discomfort are not easy to find. Their hesitation to reveal any intellectual difficulties seems justifiable, given that the values of mainstream society equate keen intelligence and the ability to reason with an “undiseased” mind (Maté, 2012). Disclosing a disability, particularly related to their functioning as thinkers, might put their reputation and potential for self-fulfillment at risk. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to listen and make sense of the narratives of Canadian and international faculty with disabilities that are not easily detectable. This type of inquiry is important because the results may yield valuable suggestions for those seeking to effect organizational change that will support an education environment embedded in social justice (Freire, 1977) – thus embracing, respecting and benefiting from what these academics have to offer. More generally, exploring the stigma of incompetence associated with mental illness or cognitive challenges in highly functioning individuals may help create a deeper awareness of the fallacy of casually labelling such people “disabled”. We must fully embrace diversity in the academic workplace. As Welton (2005) alerts, “as long as

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individuals act as if they accept the system, the system will continue to be confirmed” (p. 161). Faculty with disabilities must be given opportunities to express their views regarding choices they make with respect to the disclosure of any intellectual/cognitive/mental difficulties they may experience (or have experienced).

The faculty interviews are planned to happen during the winter months of 2015.

**Details of sampling methodology for research**

Potential research participants are all faculty members, independently of their employment status – i.e., tenured, non-tenured or adjunct – who find themselves coping with chronic or acute intellectual, cognitive or mental difficulties, as well as any hard-to detect physical ailment that has the potential to compromise their ability to execute cognitive-related tasks according to the expectations of the scholarly community.

It is fundamental to constantly safeguard privacy and confidentiality. Therefore, extreme caution in handling any data that might be linked to the identities of participants is imperative. I will be handling issues of confidentiality with all the seriousness and respect for privacy that is warranted in this type of research.

Participation is voluntary, and there will be no monetary compensation. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study without consequences at any time. Should a withdrawal be requested, any recorded information about the participant will be immediately destroyed.

**Methodology**

Grounded theory methods (GTM) account for part of the chosen method of this study. Those who use GTM do not seek any absolute truth; the understanding of a phenomenon is the result of meticulous, thought-inducing empirical research. Traditional grounded theory sheds light on human action. The data are generated in interviews with those who play protagonist roles in the specific arena under investigation. In contrast, the approach in this study embraces a further postmodern perspective introduced by Adele E. Clarke, Professor of Sociology and Adjunct Professor of History of Health Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco. Clarke (2005)\(^4\) names her research method “situational analysis”. A particularly vital source of data lies

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in the words of those individuals who have experienced the phenomenon firsthand. The ideas and concerns expressed by the faculty with disabilities I interview will anchor this proposed study. I will present faculty narratives and the subsequent analysis of their stories of coping will be that basis of the creation of conceptual analytical maps. Finding inspiration in humanist and post-structuralist traditions of narrative research, I will look at the human storytelling elements as carriers of messages that bring up valuable information that can be used in the growth of academic knowledge, possibly with the advent of suggestions for any necessary improvements in the work conditions surrounding these individuals.

It is important that nothing I include in the presentation of my research work can be linked to the identities of the professors and instructors who choose to exchange ideas with me. Obviously the identities of those who have already published materials that explore their disabilities are in the public domain; however, in my reporting of findings, I will separate their published material (e.g., information included in my literature review) from aspects of the experience they relate to me in our private conversation (i.e., reported in aggregate with similar experiences of other participants).

Interviews may be in person, via Skype or by whatever means is viable depending on a participant’s level of comfort, available time and the physical distance between us. Our conversation will be recorded for my future reference while writing the dissertation. However, all of my raw data will be destroyed upon successful publication of my doctoral research, or after five years following my defence, whichever comes first. The real identities of the faculty members with whom I speak will be protected. When it is time to narrate their stories and divulge my findings, I will refer to each one of them using a pseudonym, as well as anonymizing any other identifiable information such as place names.

Any traceable email message exchange with a study participant will be kept in a file secured by a password that only I know. I will be using a digital recorder in our talks for the sake of making the retrieval of information easier and more reliable. Whenever I am not using the recorder, I will keep it in a locked drawer in my home office. As for my personal computer, in which I will keep encrypted digital copies and transcripts of all the interviews, access to any of my research-related files will be password-protected.
Permission to conduct the study has been gained from the U of T Research Ethics Board, and its guidelines will be followed. Because the University of Toronto is a Canadian educational institution, I will adhere to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*\(^5\). In compliance with U of T REB guidelines, a summary of the research will be made available to you, should you request it.

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of the Research Ethics at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or call 416-946-3273.

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

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\(^5\) The *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* describes the policies of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* does not conflict in any way with the Belmont Report regarding ethical conduct in research that involves humans. Both American and Canadian legislation regarding freedom of information and research conducted on human subjects will not be contravened.
Appendix D – Informed Consent Letter

I have read the attached information letter and I consent to participate in Vera Dolan’s dissertation research project, entitled *Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work* (speaking in person, via email and/or phone interviews). I understand that I may refuse to answer any question or withdraw entirely from the study at any time without any consequences. It is also my understanding that any information I release to the researcher during a digitally recorded interview will be kept strictly confidential, and only shared with the research supervisor; my identity will never be revealed to anyone other than the researcher. The researcher will be referring to me using a pseudonym. In addition, I acknowledge that all the records used in this PhD research project will be destroyed within five years of the researcher successfully completing her dissertation defence.

[ ] I agree to have my interview digitally recorded.

[ ] I understand I will be given a summary of the study and will be informed when the thesis is available in the OISE/UT thesis collection, which will be accessed electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository (T Space) ([https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944))

________________________________________________________________________

Full name (print letters)

________________________________________________________________________

Signature

________________________________________________________________________

Preferred e-mail address (Please use an address that you consider to be secure and confidential.)

________________________________________________________________________

Date

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E – Interview Questions

Interview guide: Faculty Narratives of Disability in Academic Work

• Tell me about your experiences when performing the following academic activities: a) classroom teaching; b) student advising; c) supervision of student research; d) professional development; e) applications for research funding; f) conduct of research; g) writing up research; h) publishing research; i) participation in committees; j) administration of programs; and k) development initiatives.

• How would you describe a good day in your work life? How about a bad day?

• Can you describe a few coping strategies that you have developed over the years to succeed in your academic endeavours? How do you try to make your work less stressful?

• In an ideal world, how would academic work be structured in each of the areas listed above?