

Book Review

Brown, N. & Leigh, J. (eds.) 2020. *Ableism in Academia. Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education*. London: UCL Press.

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As the title suggests, the premise of the book is underpinned by a theoretical framework of Ableism (Goodley, 2014). According to Goodley (2014), ableism privileges the ideal image of an autonomous, independent, fully able-bodied, and productive individual while 'othering' people or groups that do not conform to those exacting standards. This book is a collection of deeply personal insights into ableist culture and practices in higher education. It brings together academics with long-term illnesses, disabilities, and neurodiverse characteristics, and their experiences of working in the context of the performative culture of neoliberal universities. This is an unusual and important perspective at a time of the massification of higher education and widening participation. Massification and widening participation agendas specifically target marginalised student groups in their search for potential consumers, whilst, as the book points out, expecting extra and often unfair and unpaid labour from academics that are assumed to be 'normative' or fully physically and mentally able to keep up with increasing demands. The book makes an important contribution to social justice debates in higher education because, although important staff and student initiatives, such as decolonizing the curriculum and gender equality seem to be gaining traction, the injustices around disability issues are less prominent and risk being neglected.

A particular and distinctive focus in the book is that it includes perspectives from many academics with chronic non-visible illnesses. An issue of interest is the complexity of navigating an academic career with a condition often acquired during academic employment and with misunderstood and fluctuating symptoms, such as fibromyalgia or autoimmune disease. This is the issue explored in chapters three, four, seven and eight. Brown, in Chapter 3, highlights the themes of identity and disclosure from the findings of a research project involving twenty-eight academic participants with fibromyalgia. She describes their difficulties with forging an academic identity and navigating ablism in the academy with a condition that is invisible and constantly changing. Drawing on the work around identity and stigma by Erving Goffman, Brown identified participants as protective of their academic identity and more reluctant to disclose their condition to colleagues than to the institution, due to the risk of appearing weak in the department and for fear it would be assumed that they were unable to meet productivity expectations. Disclosure is therefore highlighted as a perceived risk to career prospects in an environment where job insecurity is endemic, particularly for early career academics. Disabled academics are described



as making a 'risk-benefit analysis' (Brown, 2020: 62) where the benefits of accessing support through disclosure are weighed against the risks of stigmatisation and discrimination.

Finesilver, et al. (2020: 146), in Chapter 8, add to contemporary critiques of both the medical and social models of disability by reminding us that disability is a 'multifactor' concept or fluctuating entity with blurred boundaries that cannot be explained simply by a medical diagnosis or social barriers. They emphasise that ableism in the academy is reinforced by misunderstandings arising from assuming a binary condition of able or disabled, well or ill, and suggest that the condition, once established, is mistakenly thought of as constant. This is an important point when we consider the apparent current popularity of the social model in inclusion policies in academic institutions. The authors argue that contrary to perspectives underpinning current policy trends, a focus on either the medical, individual, or social model risks reinforcing an ablest environment by identifying disability only as a deficit. The chapter reminds us that disability, particularly non-visible chronic illness, is a fluid individual experience, often emotionally charged, is not static, or obvious and requires varying levels of energy depending on the personal response of a single body on a particular day. This is contrasted with the ableist structures in society and particularly in the academy, where timetables, meetings and deadlines, are mostly rigid.

Gillberg, in Chapter 1, draws on feminist studies, in particular Fraser's theory of social justice to highlight ableism in the academy as being embedded at the structural level in such a way that it refuses to recognise the necessity of the agency of disabled academics to transform, for example, knowledge production. Referring to research seminars in non-disability related subjects, she uses an example that highlights how disability is not recognised as relevant for discussion outside of specific themes such as 'special education' and recalls that when trying to raise issues involving disabled perspectives and illustrating how they need to be implicit to topics under discussion, she was met with 'the vacant non-stares, the polite murmurs or dismissal ("that is not what is being discussed")' (Gillberg, 2020: 20). The lack of recognition highlighted by Gillberg also links to Campbell's views in Chapter 12 on ableism and the construction of knowledge around what is generally recognised as a normal, perfect body. While the dominant theme of the book is the unconscious bias towards the 'able-bodied' and discrimination against academic staff with a disability/neurodiversity or chronic illness, Campbell (2020: 207) takes this further by claiming that it goes to the heart of 'what it means to be fully human'. This view reflects Goodley's (2021: loc. 478) claim that 'disabled people struggle to be recognised as human in contemporary society'. Indeed, the ableist premise of academia, according to Campbell (2020: 207) is to strive for 'superhuman status'.

I have necessarily selected a few chapters to illustrate the issues discussed in this valuable collection. *Ableism in the Academy* highlights the personal choices and individual risks navigated by academics with non-visible disability, chronic illness, and neurodiversity such as when and how to disclose and how to build a sustainable academic identity with a fluctuating and misunderstood condition. All this is within a competitive institutional structure that privileges a normative able-bodied workforce. The book includes three poems which, while a welcome addition, would have been more impactful as a collection in a single chapter. However, these

small issues do not detract from the impact of the book, which has the potential to resonate with a wider audience, including other minority staff groups looking for an alternative range of theoretical perspectives within which to reflect on their experiences. The book could also be an important reference for colleagues who do not identify in any minority group except one that is silently struggling to reach the 'superhuman' (Campbell, 2020: 207) expectations of the academy.

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References

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