**Confronting Ableism: The experiences of disabled employees in the workplace**

Kehinde Olowookere, Coventry University

**Abstract**

Work is often considered the foundation of political, economic and social order (Newton et al., 2007). It influences the conference of status on individuals, with prestige given based on the type of work people do, and how successful they are at it. As vital as it is, however, work and employment remain an area of disadvantage for individuals who are constructed as ‘different’. Literature presents a wealth of evidence pointing to considerable gaps between the employment experiences of disabled employees and non-disabled employees. Debates on the reasons for the gap have evolved overtime but remain somewhat restricted to the field of disability studies. Beyond the focus on the evident measures of exclusion demonstrated in the labour market characteristics of disabled individuals, the disadvantages they face is also often a function of unaccommodative work contexts. Less attention has however been paid to querying the perception of organisations as neutral and investigating the normative notions of non‐disability in the workplace. Williams and Mavin (2012) note the lack of engagement in disability literature with the manner in which disabled people are constructed as the ‘others’ in relation to non-disabled people. This paper applies the social constructionist perspective for analyzing the role played by ableist work contexts in the lived experiences of disabled employees. The emphasis on problematizing work contexts differentiates the paper from previous research on disability. It is informed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with individuals who have an impairment. The findings call for the modification of work to comprise inclusive organisational and HR strategies which are suited to the individualities of diverse employees.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Disability, Normative, Ableism, Work

**INTRODUCTION**

Certain undocumented, invisible, and informal organisational patterns and practices produce restrictions for, and systematically disadvantage individuals with any form of ‘impairment’ (Harpur, 2014). The increased pace of work, expertise, expectations that employees be able to rotate jobs, application of teamwork, and varying access to resources, amongst other factors, create ‘pressure’ in contemporary workplaces, and demands some form of employee flexibility, particularly in specialized or managerial positions (Lysaghta et al., 2012). These factors inadvertently create structural concerns or barriers for employees who think or work at a different pace, or have different levels of energy. This paper investigates the degree to which the contemporary nature of work becomes a site for the constructions of difference as ‘disability’. The paper makes two major contributions to literature. First, it positions non-disability as the constructed norm in the workplace, the aim being to contribute to understanding why disability is regarded as ‘difference’ within normative organisational contexts. This is achieved by centring on the ableist and non-inclusive nature of work. Second, the paper re-emphasizes the need to develop current conceptualizations of disability. The social realities of people with impairments remain concealed in the absence of such theorization.

The paper is structured as follows, the first section situates the research within the context of theoretical attempts for understanding the experiences of disability in the labour market. This is followed by a discussion of the research methods adopted and the findings of the research.

**DISABILITY AND WORK**

Unemployment has been identified as one of the major barriers facing disabled individuals, with several experiencing high levels of exclusion and poverty. The growing fiscal pressure on social security systems has become a concern for governments (Moore et al., 2017). Contemporary resolutions for this issue have been underlined by the notions of ‘work over welfare’ (Thomas, 2014). This is evidenced in the introduction of several policies designed to reduce the number of individuals on benefits and increase employment rates. Policies have, however, been over-reliant on systematic medical assessments which has resulted in reduced rights for disabled individuals (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013). Beyond the focus on the evident measures of exclusion demonstrated in the labour market characteristics of disabled individuals, evidence suggests that the disadvantages result from unaccommodative work contexts (Sturm, 2001).

Certain undocumented, invisible, and informal organisational patterns and practices produce restrictions for, and systematically disadvantage individuals with any form of ‘impairment’ (Harpur, 2014). The increased pace of work, expertise, expectations that employees be able to rotate jobs, application of teamwork, and varying access to resources, amongst other factors, creates ‘pressure’ in contemporary workplaces, and demands some form of employee flexibility, particularly in specialized or managerial positions (Lysaghta et al., 2012). These factors inadvertently create structural concerns or barriers for employees who think or work at a different pace, or have different levels of energy (Wendell, 1996). Physical restrictions in the workplace can also prove disabling (Wendell, 1996). Restrictions can range from constricted doorways and top-layer shelves for individuals with physical ‘impairments’, to issues with noise or acoustics for individuals with mental health conditions (Braddock and Bachelder, 1994).

Work is therefore organized around roles that preclude any form of difference, and consists largely of restrictions of different sorts with suppositions of capability (Hall and Wilton, 2011). Contemporary workplaces are rife with ableist practices, where delineations are made between individuals who fit the ‘norm’ and those who do not (Acker, 2006). The workplace is, thus, a key site for the construction of disability as ‘difference’. One means for reducing these effects and improving accessibility for disabled employees in the workplace is through the availability of workplace accommodations. Equality legislation necessitates the provision of workplace accommodations where necessary. The ‘status quo’ systems for organizing work, nevertheless, remain untouched (Tatli, 2010). Disabled employees also often face difficulties securing the needed adjustments to their work provisions. Accommodations have been considered to constitute a variation to the standard approach to work, and have been perceived as being disruptive to organisational processes (Foster and Wass, 2012). This underscores the disabling effects of the inflexible nature of work on disabled individuals.

The conventional techniques for organizing and regularizing work restrict human reasoning, constituting subjectivity to the influence of power. Normalization in the workplace demands conformity to norms and homogeneity (Gabriel, 2008). Under the influence of normalization, employees internalize expectations with resultant effects on lived experiences. Employees’ understanding of themselves inadvertently becomes moulded by these normative ideologies that underpin workplace processes (Gilling, 2012).

**METHODOLOGY**

The nature of the research lends itself to a qualitative approach, and would be incongruous with numerical analysis. The paper is informed by qualitative semi-structured interviews and applies the social constructionist perspective for analyzing the role played by ableist work contexts in the lived experiences of disabled employees.

Twenty-four repeat interviews were conducted with eight individuals who have mental health conditions, specifically bipolar disorder (BPD) over the period of a year. Each interview examined participants’ experiences of diagnosis and work. There were *a priori* questions to suit the major themes of the paper, offering adequate flexibility and opportunity to explore and secure comprehensive accounts from participants (Bryman, 2012). Data was analyzed inductively, using thematic analysis.

**FINDINGS**

The findings of the research suggest that the social interpretations of disability influence the degree to which disabled people are able to secure and retain work. Participants of the research had experienced some level of exclusion within and outside the workplace. The physicality of impairment seemed to be a factor in determining the degree of exclusion experienced. One of the participants who has a physical impairmentmentions facing reduced employment prospects:

*I went to university, which was fabulous. Four years complete, left. And I really thought the world was opened to me. Then, I got a shock, because there was no work for someone who was disabled, with all kinds of problems…* (Participant C).

The participant mentions how individuals with an impairment are either considered suitable only for particular jobs due to the assumptions of incapability or excluded altogether from the labour market:

*It almost seemed like in the days where if you were disabled, you worked ‘that lot’, irrespective of what your qualifications or knowledge base was. And I guess to a certain extent, it still is today.* (Participant C).

The normative expectations and requirements attached to the recruitment process seemed to solidify patterns of exclusion for individuals who are unable to meet them (Harpur, 2014). Participants’ narratives highlight that workplaces inherently have expectations of non-disability from employees, regardless of difference, resulting in the disablement of employees with an impairment:

*It is kind of, well, if you can’t do it in the time [given], then that’s your problem, you’re obviously not working fast enough or hard enough, so there is a degree of pressure in getting stuff done.* (Participant B).

Work can naturally be challenging for employees but seemed to have a disproportionate effect on participants:

*I’ve had a workload that was unmanageable, and that was one of the reasons that tipped me over the edge [into a manic episode].* (Participant D).

The increased pressure resulted in stress, particularly where participants had not disclosed their impairment. Participants noted how organisational demands/expectations proved disabling:

*I was working 72 hours a week and that wasn’t sustainable, so I said to them, look my contract says a total of 35 hours, and that’s all I’m doing.*  *[Because* *there were] managers that would do more, and we get brownie points for that.* (Participant B).

When asked if they were paid for working overtime, the participant states: ‘*Oh no, it was just expected’.*

Working long hours proved restrictive for the participant as it eventually triggered a manic episode. Disability, thus, occurred due to the application of similar standards for all employees. The need for accommodations was brought on in several cases due to such expectations of performance and productivity, demonstrating how the contemporary constructions of work may be of less benefit for disabled employees:

*I needed assistance, and I wasn’t given any, so that’s one of the reasons why I became so frustrated, that I disclosed my condition.* (Participant D).

Disclosure had positive effects for some participants, there were, however, participants for whom disclosure had adverse effects. Organizational response was indicative of an immediate relegation to the role of ‘incapable’:

*I disclosed to my line manager and HR manager who deals with mental health at work. During this meeting, I was handed a document on BPD that I was expected to read… I found this laughable really, and a bit insulting. I was also told to ask for more help when under too much strain, I did and didn’t get it, and to take time off work if need be.* (Participant D).

Employees with an impairment may ultimately become disabled at work due to such managerial response. Managerial response is often a function of the organizational preparedness for supporting disability. Some participants noted the absence of such preparedness:

*I actually helped set up a group [where I worked], to look at how people should be reacted to when they behave in this sort of way, and I said well, what’s your current policy, and they said ‘oh, we call the police’. And I said well, have you thought how provocative that is, if someone is absolutely, you know, in a state, the arrival of people in uniform doesn’t actually calm them down.* (Participant B).

This suggests the possible lack of preparedness in contemporary workplaces for managing employees during BPD episodes. Within such contexts, even if managers were supportive, they may be restricted due to the absence of formal arrangements for supporting employees.

The findings highlight how delineations may occur in the workplace due to the nature and structure of work. It points tothe inherently ableist processes found in organisations, which may not recognize the legality of providing adjustments for disabled individuals. The majority of the participants sought to avoid such ‘perceived’ deviations. Where this was impossible due to the vital need for accommodations, some experienced the guilt and frustration evidenced in the narrative above.

**DISCUSSION**

The research findings point to the inherently ableist processes found in organisations which do not recognize the legality of providing adjustments for disabled individuals. Several participants described the fast-paced nature of work, and the expectations of performance in their workplaces (Lysaghta et al., 2012). This naturally presented added challenges for participants due to the need to retain some form of ‘balance’ for the sake of well-being. As Wendell (1996) suggests, the mental and physical differences of individuals unable to meet ‘standard’ expectations become visible and disabling, where they might have been unobtrusive and unrelated to full involvement within slower-paced contexts. The pace of work resulted in structural concerns and was disabling for participants, at times contributing to manic episodes.

Participants’ narratives also point to how disabled employees are expected to work optimally within the margins of the restrictions that exist in the workplace. The inflexible and narrow approach to work proved challenging for some. Existing literature supports this emphasis on the disabling effects of restrictive work contexts (Corlett and Williams, 2011; Williams and Mavin, 2012).

In the absence of formal workplace support, the organisation comes to have standard expectations of disabled employees, which could place demands on such individuals (Amsterdam et al., 2015). In cases where disabled employees are managed the same way as non-disabled colleagues, with specific suppositions of ability, impairment becomes imperceptible, and the validity of accommodative work settings is denied, which inadvertently encourages ableist practices in the workplace (Williams, 2011). Even where adjustments are made to the structure of work, Kulkarni and Valk (2010) argue that these only partly assuage the restrictions disabled workers experience, and may not contest ableism in the workplace. More importantly, the provision of accommodations is itself, reflective of medicalized/positivistic perspectives of impairment, given that restrictions are not eradicated before the disclosure of an impairment (Kulkarni and Valk, 2010).

**CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Disability has become an important subject area for policymakers. Disabled individuals make up one of the major underused sources of labour pools and can aid in addressing the projected labour shortage as baby boomers approach retirement. The paper underlines how differentiation occurs in the workplace due to the lack of accommodations and the ableist nature of work (Williams-Whitt and Taras, 2010). The contemporary nature of work remains a key site for the constructions of impairment as ‘difference’ in contemporary organisations (Williams and Mavin, 2012). The wider implications of the findings are likely to have value for the way work is structured. Organisations, in practice, need to pay more attention to the ableism found in the workplace and the disabling effects of work.

As such, work may be more accommodating if reconstructed or redesigned to comprise inclusive strategies, strategies which acknowledge the existence of norms and, thus, accept the reality of the notions of ‘difference’. These would be strategies that are well-suited to diverse individualities, without necessarily supporting the organisation of work in ways which benefit a particular group.

The paper contributes to achieving a merge between the fields of disability and organisation studies, and underscores the significance of empirical research on disability in the workplace. It adds to an emerging body of work that employs disability literature for informing and influencing debates in organisation studies. The in-depth consideration of participants’ experiences of work also aids in developing a conceptual understanding of the elements of social limitations, and offers insight into the particular means through which disabled employees are impacted by such limitations. From an empirical angle, there has been less research investigating the disadvantages experienced by disabled individuals in relation to subject areas such as organisation studies, sociology or the social sciences.

The selected research design and limited sample size restricts the generalizability of the research. The research, however, does not aim to making umbrella conclusions. Rather, it aims to contribute to existing knowledge of how disabled individuals experience work. Several avenues exist for future research. As an extension to the focus in this research on the normative nature of work, future research could investigate the experiences of disability, particularly with regards to the level of preparedness and acceptance within contemporary organisations, and the impact this has on social and managerial response. Future studies may also consider the impact of disability awareness systems targeted at developing acceptance in the workplace on prevalent ableist discourse. This can be with regards to less researched mental health conditions such as schizophrenia or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

**References**

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class and Race in Organizations. *Gender and Society*, 20(4), 441-464.

Amsterdam, N., Knoppers, A. and Jongmans, M. (2015). It's actually very normal that I'm different. How physically disabled youth discursively construct and position their body/self. Sport, Education and Society, 20(2), 152-170.

Braddock, D. and Bachelder, L. (1994). *The Glass Ceiling and persons with Disabilities.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labour, Glass Ceiling Commission.

Coleman-Fountain, E. and McLaughlin, J. (2013). The interactions of Disability and Impairment. *Social Theory and Health,* 11(2), 133–150.

Corlett, S. and Williams, J. (2011). *The effects of Discourse and local Organizing Practices on Disabled Academics’ identities.*The 7th International Critical Management Studies Conference.

Foster, D. and Wass, V. (2012). Disability in the Labour Market: An Exploration of Concepts of the Ideal Worker and Organisational Fit that Disadvantage Employees with Impairments. Sociology, 47(4), 705–721.

Gabriel, Y. (2008). *Organizing Words: A Critical Thesaurus for Social and Organization Studies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilling, J. (2012). When the Powerfulness isn’t so helpful: Callum’s relationship with Autism. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 29(2), 32-40.

Hall, E. and Wilton, R. (2011). Alternative spaces of Work and Inclusion for Disabled people. *Disability and Society*, 26(7), 867-880.

Harpur, P. (2014). Combating Prejudice in the Workplace with Contact Theory: The Lived Experiences of Professionals with Disabilities. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 34(1), 14-17.

Kulkarni, M. and Valk, R. (2010). Don’t ask, Don’t tell: Two views on Human Resource practices for Disabled People. *IIMB Management Review,* 22(4), 137–146. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iimb.2010.08.001

Lysaght, R., Ouellette-Kuntz, H. and Lin, C. (2012). Untapped Potential: Perspectives on the employment of People with Intellectual Disability. *Work*, 41(4), 409-422.

Moore, K., McDonald, P. and Bartlett, J. (2017). The social legitimacy of disability inclusive human resource practices: The case of a large retail organisation. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 27(4), 514–529.

Newton, R., Ormerod, M. and Thomas, P. (2007). Disabled People’s Experiences in the Workplace Environment in England. *Equal Opportunities International,* 26(6), 610-623.

Sturm, S. (2001). Second Generation Employment Discrimination: A Structural Approach. *Columbia Law Review,* 101(1), 458.

Tatli, A. (2010). Discourses and Practices of Diversity Management in the UK. In: Klarsfeld, A. (ed.). *International Handbook on Diversity Management at Work Country Perspectives on Diversity and Equal Treatment.* Glos: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 283-303.

Thomas, C. (2014). *Disability and Diversity.* Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies.

Wendell, S. (1996). *The Rejected Body.* New York: Routledge.

Williams-Whitt, K. and Taras, D. (2010). Disability and the Performance Paradox: Can Social Capital Bridge the Divide? British Journal Industrial Relation, 48(3), 534–559.

Williams, J. (2011). What can Disabled Academics' Career experiences offer to Studies of Organization? PhD Thesis: Northumbria University.

Williams, J. and Mavin, S. (2012). Disability as Constructed Difference: A Literature Review and Research Agenda for Management and Organization Studies. *International Journal of Management Reviews,* 14(2), 159–179.