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A comprehensive understanding of the experiences of post secondary students with diverse abilities is needed. The ways in which ‘disabled’ postsecondary students make meaning of their experiences in postsecondary education was explored. Eight participants (self-identified disabled post secondary students) were recruited from post secondary institutions in Calgary, Alberta. Five themes (hegemonic voice, voice of the body, voice of silence, voice of assertion, voice of change) were identified within a body-social-self framework. Findings demonstrate a continued need for critical examination of higher education policy and its capacity to address differences in ability. The concept of ableism (hegemonic ability preferences which inaugurate the norm) is presented and is demonstrated to be of utility as an analytical lens. Findings are highly anticipated to address existing literature gaps and to be of importance to policymakers, researchers, and ability-diverse student populations.

Keywords: ableism, higher education, policy

It is well known that disabled\textsuperscript{1} students face physical, social, and emotional barriers in their postsecondary education (Buggie-Hunt, 2007). These barriers lead to a lack of financial support (Holloway, 2001), difficulty seeking accommodations (Barnard-Brak, 2010; Olney & Kim, 2001), and outright discrimination such as lack of access to and within built structures (Holloway, 2001; Low, 1996). Some barriers represent more subtle obstructions to full participation (Olney & Kim, 2001) such as lack of faculty and peer awareness (Barnard-Brak, 2010; Holloway, 2001; Komesaroff, 2005), lack of participation in academic and lay discourse (Jung, 2001), and strain on time resources (Holloway, 2001; Low, 1996). These barriers are problematic given that postsecondary experiences (both educative and social) shape students’ beliefs, self-concept, and identity (Kraus, 2008) and impact health and further opportunities (Jung, 2001). This is especially true for underrepresented student populations (King, 2009), including those who are culturally-, linguistically-, and/or ability-diverse.

In addition to the more practical occupational advantages of completing post secondary education (e.g., more lucrative and flexible employment after the fact), experiences in postsecondary education provide a means for the disabled to participate in knowledge-production and pol-

\textsuperscript{1}The authors acknowledge the importance of language in framing our understanding of physical and cognitive diversity (understood by most to be “disability”). For some, the use of traditional language (e.g., disabled student) is seen to be inappropriate as it implies that the “disability” is that person’s most important quality. To combat this, person-first language (e.g., student with a disability) is often used. However, this is seen by the authors to a) misrepresent individuals with cognitive and physical differences as deficient, b) to deny the importance of the social construction of disability, and c) to individualize sociostructural disablement. As such, we propose a return to traditional language to reflect the belief that those who possess bodily or functioning differences are disabled by social, cultural, and economic structures and systems of meaning. Additionally, we use phrases such as ‘ability-diverse populations’ or ‘those with presumed impairments’ to describe people with differences in ability or functioning. This approach is further reflected in the authors’ choice of recruitment (described below) which aimed to avoid a medicalized understanding of difference.
icy development which reflects their own perspectives (Jung, 2001). However, disabled students are largely absent from discourse in the domains of higher education scholarship, research, and practice (Kraus, 2008) and are underrepresented in higher education faculty (Barnes, 1999). This remains the case despite a growth in inclusive policies (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Additionally, existing postsecondary services for those with perceived impairments, while usually addressing immediate concerns such as accessibility, do not provide this student group with media of positive expression, social outlets, or opportunities to embrace their identities (Kraus, 2008). This is in part a consequence of policies addressing ability diversity in higher education and the language used within them. It is widely acknowledged that language surrounding disability to-date (including the term disability itself) reflects dominant knowledge and discourse. This language has occupied a substantial role in the shaping of disability identity (Kraus, 2008). As such, a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of higher education policy on the lives of those with diverse abilities is needed. The following article is a report of research aimed at building such an understanding, primarily through an exploration of the ways in which disabled postsecondary students make meaning of their experiences.

Ableism as a Conceptual Framework

Ableism Defined

The concept of ableism, arising from the disabled people’s rights movement (Wolbring, 2008b) and further developed through the scholarship of Campbell (2009), Hughes (2007), Overboe (1999), and (Wolbring 2008a; Wolbring, 2008b; Wolbring, 2008c; Burke and Wolbring, 2010; Wolbring, 2010; Wolbring, 2011), builds on existing understandings of the sociocultural production of ability. Ableism as a concept describes, and is reflected in, individual and group perceptions of certain abilities as essential. Ableism can be treated as both a hegemony which promotes ability preference and as an analytical tool used to understand these preferences and their impact.

This concept has been applied to areas typically explored under the purview of disability studies, including cultural representations of the essentialized body and mind, and rehabilitative technology and body modifications and their impact (Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2008b). Ableism is being expanded to other domains (e.g., culturally valued abilities such as the ability to be productive) (Wolbring, 2008a, 2008b). These novel theoretical treatments shift attention from the processes that produce and maintain disablism (oppression of those with perceived impairments) to those that maintain ableism (ability preferences which inaugurate the norm) (Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2008b). This is particularly important given the pervasive and insidious impact of ableism in all domains of social life, and the ways in which ableism has been used to justify present and historic inequalities (Wolbring, 2008b) in its rejection of “different” or “peripheral” ways of being and existing (Campbell, 2009).

Ableism Linked to Policy

Ableism can be used as a conceptual tool to understand the social and cultural production of ability and ableness and the ability-preferences underlying disability policy in postsecondary institutions. The concept of ableism allows us to better understand how those with differences are characterized (e.g., as exhibiting or lacking certain abilities) and to explore the types of responses to ability-diversity proposed by policymakers in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project was to contribute to existing scholarship and practice related to ability-diversity in education.

Method

This article draws from a project which has theoretical roots in both disability studies and sociology. Critical and interpretive epistemological approaches aimed to uncover processes of meaning-making by individuals viewed as active social agents who construct their own realities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Consistent with a critical approach (Burbules & Burke, 1999), the impact of structures of meaning on the lives of ability-diverse postsecondary students was explored within an environment supportive of realization and change.
Institution/Participant Selection

Recruitment took place at the University of Calgary (located in Alberta, Canada). Criterion-based sampling was used to select a small number of information-rich cases (Dole, 1999). Flyers calling for participants who self-identified as “disabled” were posted at the Disability Resource Center at the University of Calgary, with encouragements to contact the first author. Goals to recruit participants through this self-selection process reflect (a) our commitment to refrain from imposing the label of “disabled” (as would have been imposed by, for example, seeking individuals who satisfied particular medical or diagnostic criteria); (b) our recognition that each individual constructs meaning around this term/concept in a uniquely textured way (self-selection thus provided for them an opportunity to express their own conceptualizations); and (c) an acknowledgment of participants’ right to self-define (Humphrey, 2000). This self-selection process has been successfully used in other studies (Barnard-Brak, 2010; Dole, 1999; Holloway, 2001; Olney & Brockelman, 2003). Time constraints and a low response rate ($n = 1$) impelled us to draw from personal and professional networks, in some cases asking individuals directly if they were interested in participating ($n = 7$). A diversity of differences in bodily and cognitive functioning among participants supported information richness and depth (Troiano, 2003). Participants were not prompted to state their medical diagnosis, however this was often revealed in the interview process (see Table 1 for participant demographics). Seven participants were students in their undergraduate or graduate studies at the time of recruitment. One participant had graduated two years before and provided a retrospective account of his experiences in post-secondary education.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Semistructured in-depth interviews, conducted by the first author, constituted data collection. Semistructured interviews were used primarily to ensure collection of rich information and to ensure flexibility in addressing emergent themes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Individual interviews varied in length from just under one hour to more than two hours. Data were collected over a 3-month period (from December 5th to February 11, 2010), and for participants who consented, follow-up interviews of approximately 45 minutes in length were also conducted ($n = 4$). Examples of questions posed to participants are:

1. What do the words “impaired” and “disabled” mean to you?
   a. Do you perceive yourself that way?
   b. How do you believe others perceive you?

2. What are your views of the various definitions and understandings of “disability” that you encounter in your social interactions?
   a. Would you change these definitions and understandings? If so, how?

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection was followed by thematic network analysis as outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001) and included a process of “[developing] web-like illustrations (networks) that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text” (p. 386). This method allows for the extraction of [1] Basic Themes:

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P 001</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>Recent graduate</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 002</td>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>Undergraduate, year two</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 003</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Ph.D., last year</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 004</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Undergraduate, year two</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 005</td>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>Undergraduate, last year</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 006</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Post-graduate program, year one</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 007</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Undergraduate, year two</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>P 008</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>Undergraduate, year two</td>
<td>M</td>
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</tbody>
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lowest-order themes derived from textual data; [2] Organizing Themes: themes which organize lower-order themes on the basis of similar issues, and which summarize the principal assumptions of the basic theme; [3] Global themes: superordinate themes, a concluding claim or tenet, which produces an argument or an assertion, and reveals interpretation (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This analysis of textual data generated five emergent themes, situated within a body-self-social framework (see Figure 1).

Study Rigor

Credibility (according to Lincoln and Guba [1985], the extent to which participants’ multiple constructions of reality are represented adequately) was ensured primarily through members-checking. This occurred in initial interviews, in follow-up interviews (P 001, P 002, P 004, P 005), in further in-person discussion on preliminary themes (P 003, P 006, P 008), and through feedback after presentation of preliminary findings at a public forum (P 003 and P 004). Other credibility strategies included peer debriefing and negative case analysis. Transferability (the extent to which research findings are applicable in other contexts; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was supported through a thorough documentation of coding techniques and through involving a diversity of disability experiences (see Table 1). Confirmability, defined as the extent to which intersubjective agreement has been reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and as the quality of conclusions drawn, was built through reflexive memo-ing. Memo-ing allowed the interviewer/analyst to reflect on issues of methodology, including personal positionality and emotional experiences.

Results

All eight participants provided narratives which demonstrated unique self-understandings and distinct constructions of their disability experience. Despite these differences, common themes were evident. Five primary themes (hegemonic voice, voice of the body, voice of silence, voice of assertion, and voice of change) emerged within an interactive body-self-social framework (see Figure 1). These themes are described briefly below, followed by discussion

![Figure 1. Emergent themes and sensitizing concepts within body-social-self framework.](image)
of ableism and its utility as a lens through which to view policy documents.

**Hegemonic Voice**

Ideas and structures of meaning (including taken-for-granted ideologies, or hegemonies) were seen to be impactful for participants’ lives, social interactions, and self-perception. These meaning-structures were apparent in participants’ understanding of ability and bodily preference, which often took the form of their acknowledgment of sociocultural rejection of difference:

R: But I don’t know what ideas are causing that, other than that I’m different. That’s it. That’s all I can think of. I: . . . causing the people being hesitant? R: Yeah. It does make them (emphasis) shy . . . when they see me. And other people . . . could care less, and they’re happy to approach . . . but that’s a rarity, or it’s in the minority, like there’s not many people that will do that. (P 006)

Hegemonic ableism (as stated above, defined as a set of processes which delivers sociocultural ability preferences) additionally presumes a rejection of difference and inaugurates particular understandings of valuable ways of living. An example of this is seen in Participant 008’s own understanding of his caregiver’s attitudes toward him in the context of the physical and sexual abuse she perpetrated against him. He expressed this in the form of a poem, of which an excerpt is seen below:

You should be able to do this . . . you need to improve this . . . you ask for too much help . . . you are too demanding . . . you need to be more independent . . . you should have more confidence . . . you are a burden . . . there is something wrong with you that you, and only you, need to fix. If you don’t that makes you less than human . . . if you lose control of your body, you will lose all your friends” (P 008).

This poem demonstrates a vital, yet unexplored, intersection of body-related ability-preference (e.g., the ability to walk or to control one’s body) with other forms of ableism (preferences for other culturally valued abilities which may have little to do with bodily functioning, including the ability to be independent, self-sufficient, and/or intelligent).

Notably, all participants demonstrated a tendency to internalize ableism in the various forms described above. In some cases, this internalization resulted in well-known hierarchies within the disability community:

I: What associations do you think it makes? To have that headrest? R: Hmm . . . Well I think it indicates, one, that the impairment is even higher than you think. Um that if you need a headrest, there’s some problems with your neck, there’s some problems . . . So . . . And for some reason I associate mental disabilities with that as well. I: Oh okay, and you don’t want others to make that connection. R: Nope. (P 006)

Hegemonic ableism (ability preferences related to functioning, and other culturally valued abilities) intersected with other hegemonies, including those which frame gender and sexuality expectations. This was voiced by several participants, including Participant 004:

R: Um . . . well . . . kind of actually. I kind of, um . . . be-be-before I talk, people create this image of who . . . who I am. So when I talk it kind of shatters . . . it shatters that image. And I’m kind of afraid of that too. Um, like it’s more like I’m . . . more kind of . . . vain. Like people see me . . . and of course I’m hot. Like hey, yeah (smiles). I: And you don’t want that image to be shattered. R: Yeah. Yeah, like I’m kind of . . . when it’s shattered it’s kind of like I’m more kind of like . . . ‘ugh.’ I: . . . [D]o you think that having the stutter . . . conflicts with the idea of being sexy? (pause) Because you said once you open your mouth you don’t want to shatter the image of being hot. R: Yeah. Uh . . . Well . . . kind of. Though you can make it like a . . . you could like . . . pull a Hugh . . . Hugh Grant, and like make it cute or charming. (P 004)

**Voice of the Body**

Participants’ bodies occupied an important role in their lives. This included situations where pain and functioning were of critical importance:

But yeah those [attitudinal, ecological] adversities become less. The ones that remain very real is the health issues and the serious complications that I have to face with respect to my body and its needs and that can be . . . limiting and challenging. (P 003)

Emotions and bodies were also intimately connected regardless of functioning. For example, P 004, who experiences severe stuttering, noted the intimate connection between his body and the emotions he experienced. In his case, memories of emotional pain led to feelings of physical pain:

R: I don’t try to hide [emotional pain] or push it aside, I just take it . . . um yeah. I um . . . it’s more a physical feeling. . . . [L]ike I would . . . remember what hurt me and I would get like this shooting pain. . . . [I]t just kind of happens . . . I: In your body, somewhere?

R: Yeah, I’m not sure, actually, because it’s not in my . . . kind of like mmm . . . a mental pain, I’m not sure . . . . (P 004)
Claiming the Self – Voice of Assertion and Voice of Silence

Participants claimed their self (negotiated instances of vulnerability) in two primary ways. In the first, they engaged in acts of assertion—they asserted their functional and experiential uniqueness; they “made it their own” (personalizing a wheelchair, for example); they integrated it into their sense of self; and they saw it as enhancing their existing skills or proficiencies. This was demonstrated by Participant 005’s description of his experience with bipolar disorder:

I feel crazy. I feel like I’m mad out of my mind. Yeah. It makes me feel like I’m an alpha male. It gives me pride... it gives me a sense of identity, a sense of uniqueness, among others. The fact that I am probably crazy is... motivating... because it’s not what other people are likely to be. It’s not what’s ‘normal.’ And I don’t particularly like things that curtail to normal. Because normal for me is... being the same. And I don’t believe that we should try to be the same. (P 005)

Of particular interest were the ways in which some participants “used ableism” (exploited this hegemony, or reappropriated meaning). Participant 008 explicated this most clearly, in his questioning of some of the assumptions behind ability preference:

[If they don’t convey the confidence, then... are they really going to get hired at the end of the day? Like how would they present a job interview situation? So like, I think that ability to demonstrate value, to demonstrate confidence, um, you know, just anything that you might have that is valuable, whether it’s academic ability, charm, whatever, like... the more that you have, the easier it is for your voice to be heard. (P 008)

Participants claimed their self in other ways (self-disablement, numbing the body, or doing nothing in situations of vulnerability), termed the Voice of Silence.

I: Yeah? Has that changed at all since you went... got to university? R: It’s uh... making it worse... okay yes... high school kind of made it worse because I became more isolated... isolated. Like I kind of stopped hanging out with friends and it kind of... yeah. I: So that was during high school, and would you say that since then it’s gotten a little better? R: No. (laughs) I: No. Still feel a little bit isolated? R: Yeah... except it’s more self-im... posed. I: Self-imposed... so... you feel that you’re doing it to yourself or that you choose to do it? Feel... or be sort of separate from other people? R: Yeah. I: Do you know why? R: Because it’s not hard. You don’t have to try to keep up a conversation. (P 004)

Voice of Change

Participants spoke about change in several different capacities (changes in relationships, changes in self-perception over the life span, changes in perception within a given situation, or potential changes in our understandings of disability). When asked if they wished for change in disability policy at their postsecondary institution, several participants voiced a need for change. Participant 001 reflected on his experiences with disability services:

R: [The university has]... an area of the school... disability services, where everyone with a “disability” (emphasis here) would go to write exams, to write tests. And that’s one thing that I can remember... almost feeling... not really ashamed... but like this is my... you know I didn’t feel like it necessarily affected me in my daily interactions with anybody, but it was like every time I went there... I was like well I hope people I know don’t see me in here, because I guess I just felt like... but what I’m trying to associate that with... is that now, in my regular everyday life, there’s really nothing that occurs that labels me as being disabled. I don’t have to go anywhere that says ‘oh you have to sit in the disabled seat or park in the disabled parking lot.’ Do you know what I mean? There’s nothing that society does that labels me... And I mean... frankly they can just take the sign off the door in the post secondary institution (smiles). (P 001)

Additionally, increased awareness was viewed as paramount by several participants:

R: I don’t know I definitely think that there should be more done in terms of awareness, but... it’s almost like if you were taking courses then you would learn more, that’s sort of... that’s sort of your path anyway, you’re going to be naturally more aware. I: Yeah. Mhmm. R: Whereas people who are more, I guess you could say, discriminatory or less... understanding... are naturally in a path where they’re not going to be exposed to that. I: Right. R: So maybe more interdisciplinary approaches to courses, like... the whole environment thing like if we put a whole segment on marginalized or disabled populations who may, you know, be more impacted by the environment or energy... I: Mhmm. R: Into a course where the students are going to be going into the discourse, like... just like that you’re spreading awareness. And it’s... and then with more of that it becomes less and less about spreading awareness and more about general... public, you know. I: Yeah, it’s maybe less of an odd thing that we’re trying to insert. R: Yeah. Because I don’t think it should be like a special thing... like it shouldn’t be like “okay everyone we’re going to take 15 minutes to talk about you know... being accepting of other people, or whatever.’ I: Yeah. R: It should just be, like... part of it. (P 002)
Policy Recommendations From Participants

All eight participants conveyed experiences which may be useful to policymakers. For example, participants observed that asking for disability accommodation is not always an easy process. Participant 007 notes:

I: Okay. Would you consider applying for accommodations at the Disability Resource Center? R: Um . . . I: Because they have note-takers, and people that take notes for you . . . . R: They do that? I: Oh yeah. R: Um . . . I’ve spoken with pros . . . Two, three, four times last semester, different pros . . . and different people that work with the University, and therapists at the University, in Mac Hall . . . I: Mhmm. R: And not one of them suggested it. Not one of them even said it existed. And I specifically asked the therapist and he . . . wouldn’t give me a straight answer pretty much, and didn’t recommend . . . like wouldn’t . . . I: Really? R: Yeah. I: That the DRC has accommodations? That they . . . R: Well I was saying to them about how I struggled with the amount of time that I had in tests. I said that 60 minutes really isn’t enough, and then I’ve been told that you can just, you know, you can talk to them or whatever . . . and then write your tests in the center, and then you get two hours, or whatever, you get a different time. I: Mhmm. R: And I said, you know, I asked about that, and . . . he just said, well here are some things you can try, and he gave me like personal things like . . . test yourself at home, (unheard phrase) make it so that you can meet the time requirements at school. (P 007)

Post secondary institutions use a primarily biomedical framework of disability in their policy and practice (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Participant 002 describes the impact of this:

R: I feel like disability is really a super complicated term, and it really does depend on how you define it, because um . . . well when I first started post secondary, I had to register at the Disability Resource Center, and then I wasn’t really (unheard word) a disability, like ’am I really disabled?’ Like . . . do I have to do that sort of thing? But then, I guess you . . . yeah . . . you . . . sorry. (is emotional, laughs). I: Yeah you . . . no that’s fine, so you weren’t quite . . . so yeah, disability, a complex term . . . R: Yeah so, a better way to put it would be that it was a very specific term for me . . . it was . . . I: Ah. R: So, disability, well I don’t really feel well . . . not that I don’t feel disabled, but I don’t feel like I fit that category of disabled . . . just because I didn’t have, you know mostly physical symptoms which is how I categorized it back then. . . . but I’ve progressed it’s a more expanding, um, topic, or . . . term . . . yeah disability doesn’t necessarily have to be impairment (P 002).

Participants themselves problematized the notion of “normal” in several ways. The first was the use of the term “dual disability” to describe the consequences of the internalization of ableism by the disabled and nondisabled alike. As P 003 notes:

I think when people are uncomfortable around me (laughs) . . . it’s a funny case of dual disability. It’s like . . . they’re seeing a disability, but then they become disabled by that disability . . . and they don’t know how to act, and they are uncomfortable. It’s not . . . well then sure it might translate into me being uncomfortable . . . but let’s face it if they are uncomfortable, they are the ones that have some sort of impairment and they are not able to deal with . . . whatever they’re having trouble with. (P 003)

The second form of problematizing of notion of “normal” was through the idea of ‘universal impairment.’ Participants noted that “everyone has something that they’re dealing with” (P 001, seen also in P 002, P 007, P 008), or that the nondisabled are often the ones being “accommodated” in social interactions:

But in order for me to try and get myself back in those sort of social circles . . . I felt like I really have to make an effort for people to . . . want to be around me, spend time with me . . . whether that had anything to do with my disability or not. I don’t know. But um . . . I felt like I had to really . . . accommodate them all the time. (P 001)

Though they understood that ideas of “normal” are complex and ever-changing, students voiced the need for a continued interrogation of existing cultural scripts regarding normalcy:

R: But yeah I think if our society was somehow . . . more than willing to help, and didn’t feel awkward around difference, and all that stuff . . . . I: Mhmm. R: Then suddenly, the physical differences that exist between people might not be perceived as disability and might be perceived as opportunity . . . to get a community involved in assisting something for a cause . . . you know . . . do you know what I’m saying? (P 003)

Participants voiced the importance of embracing diversity at the levels of policy, curriculum, and interpersonal interaction. In addition, they felt that students should be agents for change. Suggestions for a reframing of accommodations, for awareness-raising, and for creating an opportunity for students and others to engage in dialogue, are outlined below.

Limitations

This study was of limited scope (one institution served as our site); as such, we acknowledge that broader recruitment may have provided additional depth and richness of data, and
we will endeavor to expand recruitment in future research. It is also recognized that a different recruitment strategy (e.g., full self-selection) might have produced different results. Our direct and personal approach in recruiting participants entailed assumptions about their disability experience and impacted the researcher–participant relationship. (However, we were clear in explaining to participants that one criterion for inclusion was ‘self-identified disabled’ individuals.) Despite limitations, we obtained a diverse and rich array of data.

**Discussion**

As described by Devlin and Pothier (2006), the university’s adoption of the biomedical model is impactful in several primary ways. First, the university’s response to difference becomes individualized (thus disregarding other sources of disablement, including attitudinal barriers, barriers caused by institutional structure, and others). Further, the presumption of disability as biomedical in nature tends to shape the process such that “evidence” of disability on an individual/biomedical/psychological level (e.g., documentation of diagnosis) is required to receive services. This is problematic for individuals who cannot afford the required medical assessments, or whose ability-difference is consequential for their learning but unrecognized by the medical community (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). As evident in participants’ policy suggestions, the onus is placed on the student to initiate and maintain accommodations on their own behalf. Individualized approaches, then, are seen to preclude proactive practices on the part of the university, and to add to its reputation as rather passive and reactive (Kraus, 2008). Finally, operating within the biomedical model often places the student in an “adversarial position” (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 197), in that their educational and vocational goals could be compromised if they do not self-identify as disabled or provide the required documentation. As such, individuals are required to align with the institutionalized biomedical understanding regardless of the beliefs they hold about themselves (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Identity, then, becomes a key determinant of the nature of the balance of power between the student and the institution (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Devlin and Pothier (2006) note that these power relations are quite evident in students’ hesitancy to self-advocate, their tendency to self-regulate (to engage in particular behaviors, such as taking medications to qualify for accommodations) and to engage in complicity through self-identification. Jung (2001) elaborates in her analysis of the impact of University of Victoria policy on disabled women:

> Disability policy intends an institutional course of action that accomplishes, accountably, the university’s legal obligation not to discriminate against students with disabilities. I argue, however, that as students claim disability in order to gain access to assistance and services, they also become subjected to institutional processes that may (dis)organize their future student and graduate careers (Jung, 2001, p ii).

Postsecondary institutional policies on disability warrant reexamination given their potentially far-reaching implications. Currently, most Canadian universities provide what they term “accommodations” for students with presumed disabilities (e.g., provision of course or program modifications, extension of assignment due dates, extended exam time, alternate testing procedures) and adaptive technologies (e.g., recorders) (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). The provision of accommodations and adaptive technologies are built on the assumption that these are sufficient to ‘level the playing field’ for those with presumed disabilities (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). In addition, there exists a balance between the university’s legal obligation not to discriminate and the institution’s other interests (primarily fiscal) (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). This tension, along with the absence of considerations of justice and equity, are readily apparent in the language of policy (Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

Language within disability policy often describes accommodations as a “burden” or an “obligation” (for an example, see Committee on Issues for Students with Disabilities, 2002). In describing accommodations in this way, and often within legal and biomedical frameworks, the university creates a power-inscribed university–student relationship. This language also contributes to well-known ableist significations of ability- and functionality-diverse people. For example, stereotypes of those in wheelchairs as burdens to families, caregivers, and societies are common and become known and internalized by students in need of accommodations. We
would like to bring to attention differences in the language used in higher education policy for the ability-diverse (where principles of ability equity are noticeably absent in policy) from the policy language of other equity-seeking groups (where principles of equity, are embedded in the language of policy). The University of Arizona, for example, refers to the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as to the concepts of “undue hardship” (see Arizona Board of Regents, 2011a) to describe, and to ensure, the equity of those with presumed disabilities. In contrast, legal language (e.g., “hardship” and “duty”), and what this implies about those it describes, is absent in this university’s gender equity policy. To ensure washroom accessibility for males, females, families with children, and transgender individuals, language such as “inclusion” and “supportive” is used, and these accommodations are to be provided “to the extent [deemed] feasible” (please see Arizona Board of Regents, 2011b).

Attention to language is about far more than political correctness—it addresses “… [language’s] normalizing tendencies and the politicisation of the process of definition” (Barnes, 1999, p. 579). This is especially important because, in part, the use of the language noted above misrepresents members of equity-seeking groups as special interest groups, thus implying that they are required to lobby for rights that are actually guaranteed them under law (Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

**Ableism as an Analytical Tool**

Ableism as a concept is a useful tool in two distinct but related ways: it allows us to better understand the experiences of the ability-diverse, and it allows us to better interrogate policy and policy impacts. In terms of understanding individual experiences, it was apparent that individuals with ability-differences had explored and tested the boundaries of “normal” and “disabled” as they reappropriated meaning and identity within their disability experience. Still, they understood that a need existed for new understandings of difference.

Second, it is evident that existing policies presume not only a biomedical understanding of ‘disability,’ but also an *ableist* one. In other words, they presume a homosocial worldview that rejects difference (Campbell, 2009). Devlin and Pothier (2006), in their analysis of disability policy at the University of Victoria, state that “limitations” are often conceptualized in relation to what is typical, and students are expected to conform to this normative standard. Importantly, current policy “is not based on questioning of what is regular or typical, or of the privilege attached to what is regular or typical” (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 204). In the interest of equity, it would be valuable to deconstruct this convention (particularly evident in the language of most policy documents as described above), with the goal of problematizing notions of ‘typical’ or ‘normal.’ The concept of ableism, understood as a set of ideas which inaugurates body- and ability-norms, is a particularly well-suited lens for galvanizing such deconstruction.

Disabled university students experience various kinds of barriers (Barnard-Brak, 2010; Holloway, 2001; Kraus, 2008; Low, 1996; Olney & Brockelman, 2003; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Disability policy which disempowers students (albeit inadvertently) may act as an additional barrier. Policies may disempower students through the following: the assumptions which underlie them (e.g., disability as a biomedical deficit) and the resulting labeling process (Bentley-Townlin, 2002); their tendency to deepen the disjuncture between dominant and peripheral understandings of disability; and their promotion of institution-student power differentials. Given that experiences in post secondary education are impactful for the student population as a whole, and are potentially a fruitful avenue for resilience, empowerment, and knowledge-creation in the disabled population, these negative policy-related impacts are especially troubling.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

How can ideas of “normal” and “typical” be deconstructed in a practical way? How can this deconstruction be used to better the experience of disabled students in higher education?

In light of the emergent findings presented here, it is incumbent on policymakers, educators, and students, both disabled and nondisabled, to critically examine their own assumptions regarding difference. Policymakers and those working in disability services may engage in this examination within existing initiatives, which are currently structured to reactively ad-
dress the accessibility needs of students (Kraus, 2008). Postsecondary students, who are the most informed as to their own needs, should be involved in these initiatives. Initiatives explored below include revisiting processes which underlie reasonable accommodation, awareness-raising, changes in delivery of curriculum content, legitimizing different ways of learning, and changing the language of policy.

The first of these initiatives (seen by participants of this study to be positive) is that of reasonable accommodation. (Note that in the case of postsecondary students entails the provision of course or program modifications, extension of assignment due dates, alternate testing procedures, access to adaptive technologies.) Given that students are currently obligated to initiate and maintain their own accommodations, it has been suggested by Devlin and colleagues (2006) that “accommodation” be more flexible in theory and practice. In other words, the authors suggest that accommodation be built into the academic standard, in essence lessening its individualized delivery. This, they say, would shift our gaze away from delivering accommodations relative to a given “typical” or “normal” standard (Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

Another of these initiatives, awareness-raising (traditionally understood as the act of informing professors of the various functioning needs of those with differences), is suggested by study participants. This may take the form of blogs, newsletters, and presentations created and run by both students and staff in diversity services. In addition to ensuring that students’ accessibility needs are met through awareness, efforts should be made to integrate other educational components (which may, for example, bring to awareness the multiple conceptualizations of disability to which students may align, and ways in which difference is often rejected). These educational components, made available to both students and faculty, may provide space in which difference can be embraced.

The third of these initiatives, also suggested by participants, aims to change the process by which academic information is delivered in the classroom. Barnes (1999) notes that “... the current presentation of ‘disability’ in universities fosters the notion that disability is an individual or a family ‘problem’; that the ‘disabled voice’ is absent from the curriculum; that disabled people are objectified as a result; that there is a lack of critical analysis, and that this is due to the absence of disabled scholars and researchers within universities” (p. 567). Students, staff, and policymakers should act collaboratively to design course material which integrates a diversity-conscious perspective.

Additionally, there is little acknowledgment of peripheral ways of learning (e.g., the use of American Sign Language, Auslan, or Braille), and little interrogation of dominant methods of learning. Devlin and Pothier (2006) suggest that a legitimization of these peripheral ways of learning would provide another avenue in re-shaping policy.

Finally, the language of policy which addresses the needs of the ability-diverse population should be changed to reflect nonableist and inclusive sentiments.

Existing postsecondary services for those with perceived impairments, while usually addressing immediate concerns such as accessibility, do not provide this student group with media of expression, social outlets, or opportunities to embrace their identities (Kraus, 2008). We submit that this is, in part, a consequence of policies which address ability difference in higher education and the choice of language used within these policies. We have demonstrated the utility of the ableism lens in reconsidering policy language and implementation and further suggest changes in existing initiatives (accommodations, awareness, and changes in course design and delivery) as practical first steps.

References


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