

I've disclosed, now what? Exploring how racialized women with invisible disabilities navigate stigma and disclosure in the workplace

My research examines how racialized Asian women with invisible disabilities navigate stigma and workplace culture in relation to managers and supervisors after disclosing their disability in public work sectors. When I began my research, I requested race, gender, disability, and employment data from Statistics Canada; I was told, “Unfortunately, there is no standard cross-tabulation between visible minorities, disability, and income/education/employment” (personal communication, November 29, 2018). This shows how the lack of data limits the research on the intersections of ethnicity, disability, gender, and employment in Canada. While research exists on disability and disclosure at work, more research is needed to understand whether workplace culture and trust play a role in how, when, and why a person with invisible disabilities discloses (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Invisible disabilities are disabilities that are not easily identifiable (such as cognitive, learning, and pain disabilities). Invisible disabilities also include mental health. The prevalence of mental health-related disabilities is high, as one in five Canadians report experiencing mental distress each year (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, n.d.).

UNSEEN, UNSTUDIED

The findings in the only national survey conducted on Canadian attitudes on disability show that Canadians are more likely to think of disability as visible or physical rather than invisible, and more than half of respondents said that they would hide an invisible disability (Prince, 2009). This is important because, arguably, nine of the ten disability categories (pain, flexibility, mobility, mental health, seeing, hearing, dexterity, learning, mem-

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ory, and developmental disabilities) listed on the Canadian Disability Survey could be invisible. This shows the deep-seated pervasiveness of self and social stigmas that persists and how it affects disclosure. In Canada there is both a large population who self-report having

a disability and a large, racialized population. Stigma and cultural understandings of disability influence how people identify with disability, and research also shows that self and social stigmas associated with invisible disabilities (such as mental health) manifest differently among Asian populations (Livingston et al., 2018; Morrow et al., 2019). These are important factors related to racialization and disclosure that may correlate with the wide discrepancies in the self-reported rates of disability among racialized populations (Statistics Canada, 2018). Yet there are few studies that explore how the intersections of gender, race, disability, and ethnicity are negotiated, particularly in the context of work.

Despite the existence of laws and policies (e.g., *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, *Canadian Human Rights Act*, *Employment Equity Act*, the duty to accommodate, and *Accessible Canada Act*) to protect people with disabilities from discrimination, there is no formal or rigorous standard by which these rights are supported and made accessible for all. People with disabilities continue to experience stigma when trying to find employment; they have higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and precarious employment; and they are paid less than their peers (Bonaccio et al., 2019). These figures are compounded by racial and gendered inequities in which racialized women earn less and are less likely to be promoted. A large study conducted in Toronto and Montreal found that people with “ethnic” names, particularly Asian names, received fewer job interviews than people with “non-ethnic” names

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(Banerjee et al., 2018). Such inequities affect how organizations hire and promote from racialized populations.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DISCLOSURE?

The many formal and informal ways in which disability rights are communicated, perceived, and received through personal narratives and daily conversations influence workplace culture and ultimately impact people's choice to disclose or not. For example, ableist, racist, or discriminatory rhetoric in the workplace can negatively affect a person's sense of whether it would be safe to disclose. While disclosure is not required, disabilities can impact all facets of individuals' lives and cannot be easily dissociated from their workplace identity. Furthermore, disclosure is just one snapshot in time. What happens after a person discloses? What does support look like, and what further conversations will be had between employees, supervisors, and work teams, if any? Workplace cultures often value and provide professional development for efficient project management and successful leadership skills. However, there are very few, if any, training sessions to help with skilling up in terms of inclusivity and accessibility related to invisible disabilities from a disability-centred perspective.

Research that addresses disability and other intersections is rare and usually only makes passing reference to race, ethnicity, and disability (Withers, 2012; Erevelles, 2013). Yet race, ethnicity, disability, and gender are intrinsically intertwined, not mutually exclusive, social markers that have a profound impact on one's identity, sense of self, and social interactions (Withers, 2012). People with disabilities who can "pass" as abled are also afforded different privileges (Bonaccio, 2019; Withers, 2012) and can negotiate and decide when, where, and why they disclose. While a racialized person with an invisible disability can "pass" as non-disabled, they will never pass as someone who is not a racialized person

of colour. When ethnicity, gender, and disability are layered in, there are multiple yet simultaneous identity negotiations. There is the continual negotiation of being from a racialized ethnic group *and* a person with a disability *and* self-identifying as a woman *and* feeling the stigmatizing effects of these oppressions. This is also my daily lived experience.

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

Using the concept of "nothing about us without us" and self-reflexivity, I will provide insight into stigma, disclosure, and navigating disability workplace policy. My research will use an intersectionality framework and will draw from critical disability theory, critical race theory and feminist theory, and dis/ability critical race studies. These theories are helpful in understanding intersecting identities of disability, gender, race, and ethnicity and how these identities interact with social positions, relations, roles, and power. My research will impact workplace policy by directly providing insight into the nuances of how disability and disclosure are enacted from a racialized, invisible disability perspective. These insights will be pivotal in transforming the dynamics of privilege and marginalization among racialized populations with invisible disabilities to foster a more inclusive workplace culture. 🍁

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