"We're Human, Unfortunately:"
Identities and Experiences of Higher Education
Disability Resource Professionals

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Abstract

While higher education disability resource professionals are required to use considerable professional judgment to make accommodation-related decisions, there is a lack of guidance on how to make these decisions. Because disability resource professionals commonly ascribe to a *common-sense standard* when making accommodation-related decisions, the purpose of this study was to investigate disability resource professionals' perceptions of the influence of their identities and experiences in accommodation-related decision-making. Using a qualitative approach, researchers engaged in semi-structured interviews with a total of 13 disability resource professionals across the United States. Participants described identities and experiences as influential in their work, discussed the impact of holding both convergent and divergent identities with students, and shared strategies in response to the influence of these identities and experiences. The authors conclude with implications for the disability resources field as well as directions for future research.

Keywords: disability, identity, decision-making, accommodations, college

All students experience a tremendous number of changes as they transition from high school to college, including managing increasingly challenging academic and social experiences, assuming greater control over their daily schedules, and adjusting to independent living (Francis et al., 2017). Students with disabilities (SWDs), however, experience an additional shift during this transition as the laws governing access to accommodations differ between these two academic settings. In K-12 settings, for example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) both apply, requiring schools to identify and provide services and accommodations to SWDs, as appropriate. In contrast, IDEA (2004) does not extend to college. As a result, SWDs primarily look to the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) for accessibility (e.g., ramps, elevators, dorm rooms) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) for ac-

commodations, such as extensions on assignments, note-taking assistance, and flexible class attendance. Further, college SWDs must self-disclose their disabilities to access accommodations in higher education (Lymen et al., 2016).

Institutions of higher education host Disability Resource Centers (DRCs), which are employed by Disability Resources Professionals (DRPs) to guide SWDs through the process of determining and accessing accommodations (de Vries & Schmitt, 2012). To access accommodations, SWDs must first self-identify with their college or university by meeting with a DRP and providing documentation of their disability and/or diagnoses (Lymen et al., 2016). To facilitate this process, some institutions of higher education follow the guidelines established by The Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), which allow for the provision of accommodations without formal documentation, at the discretion of a

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DRP (Littlepage, 2018). In most cases, though, once DRPs meet with students and review disability-related documentation, DRPs reach a decision regarding eligibility for services (e.g., academic, housing, or dining-related) and, if appropriate, work with SWDs to determine what accommodations are needed in these settings (e.g., extra time on tests, single room, meal plan waiver).

Specifically, in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), institutions of higher education are legally required to provide accommodations "that are necessary to afford an individual with a disability an equal opportunity to participate in a school's program" (United States Department of Education, 2021) while not "fundamentally altering the curriculum" of a higher education course (Meeks & Jain, 2018, p.11). Further, although the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) states that institutions of higher education must provide "reasonable accommodations" to SWDs, the lack of a clear definition of this term leaves room to debate what is and is not "reasonable" (Brown, 2017). For example, many SWDs benefit from extended time on exams and assignments, note-takers, and alternate testing locations, all of which are generally considered "reasonable accommodations." An accommodation request of a single room with an attached bathroom, however, would likely be considered "unreasonable" if that housing option does not already exist on campus, as building a new room with a bathroom would present an "undue hardship" to the institution (Krebs, 2019).

The task of determining "reasonableness," then, falls on DRPs who must review all information provided to them (e.g., relevant medical documentation, students' self-reports, medical providers' recommendations) and make difficult accommodation-related decisions. To do this with integrity, DRPs make final decisions on an individual basis by examining each SWD's unique needs and requests, as opposed to globally assigning arbitrary accommodations based on a disability label (Hatzes et al., 2002). Despite professional guidelines from AHEAD on documentation requirements (e.g., reviewing any and all documentation for helpful information, use of a common-sense standard), many of these decisions are "a subjective judgment call" due to a lack of documentation or data (Banerjee et al., 2015, p. 27). AHEAD (2012) also recommends that DRPs use a "commonsense standard" when considering accommodation requests by asking themselves, "would an informed and reasonable person conclude from the available evidence that a disability is likely, and the requested accommodation is warranted?" This guidance encourages DRPs to consider students' self-reports and histories, even in the absence of formal documentation, as they make accommodations decisions.

In instances when information is sparse (e.g., minimal self-report, missing documentation), DRPs may rely on professional and personal experience, input from colleagues, and professional judgment to make a final determination (de Vries & Schmidt, 2012).

This is because, unlike several other professions, higher education disability resources as a field does not benefit from the existence of professional preparation programs that prepare individuals to become DRPs and impart the intricacies of the role (Dukes & Shaw, 2004). Consequently, DRPs typically come to higher education from previous careers or college degree programs, such as special education or other branches of student support services (Guzman & Balcazar, 2010; Ofiesh et al., 2004). Once in the profession, DRPs generally report that they develop their skills and practice (e.g., how to interpret medical documentation) from attending conferences and professional development workshops (Banerjee et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2010).

Although the role of DRPs is critically important in how SWDs navigate institutions of higher education, little is known of the influence of DRPs' identities and experiences on their decision-making practices, or the extent to which professional training (e.g., conferences, degree programs) addresses their influence in the accommodation decision-making process when the use of professional judgment is required. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate DRPs' perceptions of the influence of their identities and experiences in accommodation-related decision-making.

Method

The researcher team included one special education doctoral student (and former DRP) and two special education faculty members. The team used convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to recruit participants for this study. The team recruited DRPs through a researcher-developed survey distributed via the Association on Higher Education and Disability, and College Autism Network's member listservs, and a flyer with a link to the survey shared on two of the researchers' Twitter accounts. The survey included 22 questions (e.g., Likert-scale, multiple-choice, open-ended) related to (a) basic demographic information (e.g., race, age, gender identity), (b) processes used for accommodation decision-making (e.g., "When meeting with students to discuss accommodations, do you follow a consistent process that you could describe to another

person?"), and (c) perceptions of identities and experiences in relation to this process (e.g., "To what degree do you feel that your own experiences impact your decision-making when considering a student's accommodation request?"). Survey findings and specific accommodation decision-making processes are presented in separate manuscripts (citation omitted). This paper reports on findings related to perceptions of identities and experiences in relation to accommodation decision-making.

The survey also gave participants the option to provide their contact information if they wanted to participate in a 1-hour follow-up interview about their decision-making processes and their perceptions of their influential identities and experiences. Of the 51 participants who completed the survey, 21 provided their contact information and were contacted to schedule an interview. During this process, one email was undeliverable, six individuals did not respond despite two email contacts, and one did not attend a scheduled interview. In total, 13 individuals participated in interviews.

Participants

All interview participants (*n*=13) completed the demographic portion of the survey. According to their responses, over 90% of participants identified as White/Caucasian (*n*=12), and over 75% identified as female (*n*=10). Participants' ages varied, and the most frequent age range was between "41-50 years old" (*n*=4). All participants indicated that English is the primary language spoken in their home (*n*=13) and over 50% identified as having a disability (*n*=7). Five participants reported working in the disability resources field for 5-10 years, and six reported 10 or more years. Over 75% of participants held a master's degree or higher (*n*=10), and two participants received a degree in Disability Resources. Of the 13 participants, six worked at a 4-year private university, six worked at a 4-year public university, and one worked at a senior military college. All participants worked in the United States: Four participants worked in the Western region, one in the Midwest, two in the Southwest, two in the Northeast, and four in the Southeast region.

Data Collection

The researchers conducted interviews over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical representation of participants. To protect participants' privacy, researchers conducted the virtual interviews in private rooms with closed doors. The first author facilitated the interviews while another researcher collected field notes, conducted member-checks, and asked follow-up questions, as appropriate. The first

author began each interview by explaining the study's purpose, reviewing the risks and benefits of participation, and obtaining consent for participation and audio recording. Twelve of the 13 participants provided consent for audio recording.

All interviews followed a researcher-developed, semi-structured protocol that was refined through pilot interviews with two DRPs who did not participate in the study. The protocol included questions regarding participant (a) background (e.g., "Tell us how you got into the disability services field"), (b) experiences making accommodation-related decisions (e.g., "How did you develop your accommodation decision-making process?"), and (c) perceptions of identities and experiences as a DRP (e.g., "What of these identities/experiences do you draw on within [the accommodations] process?").

Data Analysis

The first author transcribed, cleaned, and de-identified the 12 recorded interviews. The research team also combined and cleaned the rigorous field notes taken during the non-recorded interview. All three researchers participated in data analysis, which started with each team member separately open-coding one transcript to identify initial categories in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). They then compared their results and developed an initial codebook to independently apply to another transcript. After coding a second transcript with this initial codebook, the research team met again and debriefed about emerging themes and thereafter developed the next version of the codebook that reflected new and/or refined codes. The team met again to repeat this process and ultimately developed the final codebook. Once finalized, the first author used this third codebook to re-code all 12 transcripts and the 13th interview's field notes using Dedoose software. Researchers then engaged in basic thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to determine themes and subthemes within the data.

Trustworthiness

The researchers took several measures to ensure trustworthiness in the research process. Immediately following each interview, researchers engaged in member-checking with participants by reviewing and making adjustments to field notes and major themes gathered, based on participant feedback. Further, researchers sent individual field notes to participants via email after the interviews and invited them to make any appropriate edits, emphasizing their ownership of the data. Following interviews, researchers engaged in peer debriefing with one another to discuss emergent themes and then independently recorded their

memos (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers also recorded interviews with participant consent to ensure the accuracy of the information collected. The researchers also triangulated data through interviews with multiple participants, participants' transcripts, and researcher memos and field notes. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained throughout the conceptual development and implementation of this study to keep a record of all decisions and methods related to carrying out this research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As a final measure of trustworthiness, all three researchers engaged in critical self-reflections of their positionality in relation to the research independently, and as a team during the data collection and analysis processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first author is an English-speaking cis female, former DRP, and a second-year doctoral student studying the disability resources profession. The second author is an English-speaking cis female, former special education teacher, and current special education faculty member who also has a medical condition requiring workplace accommodations. She is also a first-generation high school and college graduate. The third author is also an English-speaking cis female, former special education teacher, and current special education faculty member.

Findings

As participants discussed their perceptions of identities and experiences and their influence on the accommodation decision-making process, they described a general recognition of this phenomenon, in addition to the specific influence of convergent and divergent identities with students.

Recognition of Influential Identities and Experiences

This theme included two subthemes: (a) identities and experiences are influential to the DRP role and (b) the influence of identities and experiences can be for better or worse.

Identities and Experiences are Influential to the DRP Role

Participants generally acknowledged that their identities served as "lenses that you're looking into…" when interacting with students and provided perspectives that "you can't help but to be influenced by." Participants emphasized that their identities, which were directly influenced by their "personal and academic experiences," such as , "going to another country and experiencing their culture… volunteer experiences... [working with] a very high Hispanic population,"

guided "how [they] work with students." Moreover, participants described the overarching need to "be aware of identities, including how identities change over time and how one identity can "be a very big presence in day-to-day life," while other identities are "going to be less" pronounced in "a day of work as a disability services professional."

Further, participants described "grappl[ing]" with how their intersecting identities (e.g., gender identity and expression, disability, first-generation immigrant status, ethnicity, education) "influence each other," and, ultimately, informed the "totality of who [they]" were. Participants also agreed that their identities and experiences could be advantageous or disadvantageous with regard to the profession. For example, participants indicated that identities, such as being "raised upper-middle-class, [not being] completely saddled with literally hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of student debt," "a middle-class white lady," or "very physically healthy" resulted in "having privilege" such as safer interactions with police and "the ability to do a lot of different things." On the other hand, some male and female participants alike noted that some identities, such as gender identity and expression, created disadvantages. One female participant stated: "I think [gender] …that's something that men really get to capitalize on. The older you get, you're just more valuable and I don't necessarily think that's true for women."

One consistent message expressed by participants was that diverse and dynamic identities and experiences unequivocally shaped "how [DRPs] make decisions or respond to certain situations." Participants identified examples of specific ways that experiences or identities informed their approach to accommodation decision-making. For example, one participant characterized their process of "really try[ing] to boil [decisions] down to the most simplistic, somewhat concrete approach" as:

> ...Probably tied pretty tightly to my upbringing in a very science-minded, logical family. My mom was one of the first people to earn a bio-Ph.D. in her program as a woman…My dad is an engineer and has his Ph.D....my sister is a biomedical researcher, my brother's basically the same, so...I definitely think that…[my] much more logical, step-by-step [DRP] approach was probably very heavily impacted by that.

The Influence of Identities and Experiences Can be for Better or Worse

Participants described their identities and experiences as a "very big reason" why "we [DRPs] end

up on that spectrum with [making] accommodation decisions," noting that in general, some DRPs "hand out accommodations like candy," while others can be "way more strict." On one hand, participants agreed that the influence of their identities as a DRP could be helpful (e.g., "parts of my identity...positively impact my approach to do my job in a... more holistic way."). Conversely, participants also questioned how identities "affect [DRPs] accommodation decisions for good or bad," and expressed concerns about the "judgments and assumptions" stemming from context-dependent identities that "almost create a bias toward individual students," or resulted in "judgments about people." As an example, participants explained that particular identities may feel stronger to them in some interactions and not in others, depending on the time, space, and person with whom they are interacting. For example, one participant explained, "...my daughter has borderline personality disorder. And I work with a student who is about her age who also has borderline personality disorder...sometimes it's hard for me, depending on what I'm going through with my daughter."

Regardless of creating a positive or negative influence, participants noted that the influence of identities or experiences was not always evident to them when they were interacting with students. For instance, when speaking of the influence of identities and experiences, one participant expressed that although "sometimes [the identity influence] is going to be bad...it has this veil of professionalism over it" that affords DRPs the ability to not necessarily be aware of when this occurs. Moreover, participants consistently expressed that when the influence of their own identities was apparent, they sometimes felt "afraid to acknowledge or say anything about it." Participants regretfully attributed this fear to the human tendency to avoid discomfort, which one participant expressed as: "we're human, unfortunately". Further, participants noted that when the influence of identities and experiences on the accommodation decision-making process is ignored, "... [DRPs] can actually be a part of the problem" in terms of not appropriately supporting SWDs.

Influence of Convergent Identities and Experiences

This theme included two subthemes: (a) convergent identities and experiences can positively impact the accommodations process, and (b) convergent identities and experiences can negatively impact the accommodations process.

Convergent Identities and Experiences can Positively Influence the Accommodations Process

Many participants described identities and experiences that converged with student identities and experiences (e.g., disability, student status, minority culture, first-generation student) as helpful to "understand and relate" to SWDs and know "what students might be going through." This ability to relate created a general sense of empathy towards SWDs, particularly when it came to shared struggles. For example, one participant noted, "I understand the difficulty [SWD] are having right now. I live it every day and I'm still trying." Some participants emphasized "tap[ping] into" shared experiences or identities (e.g., "from an immigrant, working-class family…," being able to "relate to some...not entirely, but some of [the] undocumented students) when discussing student needs because they "know how hard it is" as someone with that similar identities or experiences. For example, one participant noted how "...being a student...I've got term papers, too, I get it!" came to the forefront during accommodation discussions with SWDs.

Being "a person who identifies with a disability," in particular, was consistently noted as influential to some participants' "point of view when it comes to... what [having a disability] means" and their ability to empathize with SWDs. Participants who identified as a person with a disability noted that being disabled in "high school and college" provided them the ability to "relate and understand the students" with the same diagnoses as them, including experiences with "stigma." One participant shared the following: "I have an anxiety disorder...there's so much about mental health that is not just stigmatized, but it's...the sense that people don't believe you." Further, for participants who identified as non-disabled, experiences with temporary disabilities (e.g., a broken leg) afforded them similar capabilities to relate to the experiences of SWDs with physical disabilities, such as cerebral palsy. For example, one participant described how her experience of "having gotten into a serious car accident" allowed her to "empathize with those [SWDs]." In short, participants indicated that convergent identities and experiences allowed them to "relate on so many levels to what [students are] experiencing" and develop "a closer relationship based on [the] shared issues."

Participants also consistently described having a sense of "trust" in students who held convergent identities or experiences as them (e.g., DRPs and SWDs who were both first-generation college students). This trust was emphasized as having a "big impact" on how participants "receive[d] students, [reviewed students'] self-reports…" and what participants saw "as being reasonable" requests throughout the accom-

modations process. One participant shared, "I know what it's like to not be able to get out of bed for...two weeks [due to depression]...it's, I guess, easier for me to make the connection to real-life impact." Another participant shared how their trust in students' requests was influenced by shared high school experiences:

> I went to high school in the area [where I work]... That was a very intense high school experience, and so when I ever meet other incoming students that have come from the same high school as me, I know what they're capable of, and the environment that they come...I think it really reflects in my trust that [students are] not going to misuse accommodations and also how I talk with them because I'm not gonna try to dumb things down for them because I know that they've come from this very elite environment.

Further, several participants described convergent identities as a part of their "toolbox" to build relationships with students and "try to help [students] feel comfortable." One participant noted, "...if I can tell that the person I'm talking to is...showing trauma behaviors, then I'll bring up…[my] white-trash persona to make them feel comfortable." Participants emphasized the general importance of "building that rapport" with students through these convergent identities, with one stating that having a "connection is so important" as a DRP so students know they "really [do] care." In addition, participants expressed the benefits of sharing "their own experiences" they had in common with SWDs so "students find comfort in knowing that [DRPs] are also...battling [their] own stuff." One participant shared, "I find myself offering the fact that I have a learning disability to my students if I feel it would help them to understand the importance of asking for help."

Convergent Identities can Negatively Influence the Accommodations Process

On the other hand, participants also described negative influences of holding convergent identities and experiences. In some instances, participants noted that convergent identities led them to "over-encourage and over-accommodate" students who reminded them of themselves. For example, one participant described their thought process about students during such instances:

> ...Not only do you have all of my identities...first-gen [student], mental health...very, very challenging [identities], but you also have another minority identity that I don't own. You're going

to have it three times as hard, and therefore I'm going to try to make it three times easier, ...or give you all of this extra support.

Moreover, participants noted that convergent identities and experiences can present "some bias," and such biases may result in a DRP "assum[ing] that [students] experience [identities] the same way" as they do (e.g., viewing autism spectrum disorder as a valued part of their personhood). Overall, participants felt that biases that stem from convergent identities can lead them to "...make assumptions or...misunderstand, realistically, the reality of that student's situation."

Conversely, participants emphasized that because of their convergent identities and experiences, they may unintentionally *under*-support students. For example, one participant explained, "I've had terrible experiences with [a wellness check] as a student, so I am very hesitant to do it for my own students." In response to over-or under-accommodating students, participants consistently described needing to "back-pedal" and "step back many times" when interacting with SWDs who share their identities or experiences to make sure they were being "objective about the everyday impact" about the students' unique experience on their education. Participants generally shared that they never intended to "treat students..." who have convergent identities differently, but, if they did, it manifested as "provid[ing] too much support for someone and just only the minimum for someone else." Consequently, many participants emphasized that DRPs may "over-nurture and over-help as opposed to doing [their] job" (e.g., objectively determining accommodations).

Influence of Divergent Identities and Experiences

This theme included two subthemes: (a) divergent identities and experiences can negatively impact the accommodations process, and (b) divergent identities and experiences complexify the accommodations process.

Divergent Identities and Experiences can Negatively Impact the Accommodations Process

Participants discussed the impact of divergent identities, or identities they did not have in common with the SWDs with whom they were working (e.g., male/female, disabled/nondisabled, white/students of color), on their accommodation decision-making processes. For example, one participant described how divergent identities "shaped [their] feelings" about working with SWDs, particularly as someone who grappled with their own "biases" they brought to the profession as someone who did not identify with their

diagnosis (e.g., "I don't personally identify as a person with a disability or as disabled…"). Specifically, they felt that because of the way they personally identified, they could not truly understand what students with disabilities must "even kind of deal with" throughout the accommodations process.

Further, participants described inadvertently projecting their own divergent experiences or identities onto students. For instance, one participant discussed instances where projecting their own experiences as a first-generation student did not result in empathy or compassion for students with similar identities, but rather caused them to think differently about the expectations they had for them. This participant explained, "...sometimes the first-gen [student identity] is just like, you have to do things right, you have to do them under the same time frame that everyone does...being successful in college means you finish at the same time as everybody else…" Moreover, participants described instances of making false assumptions about SWDs based on different experiences. For example, one participant shared that at times, coming "from a very supportive family" led them to have "...a tendency to just assume someone's parents are also going to be supportive," and perhaps unintentionally frame and interpret interactions under this assumption.

In contrast to convergent identities and experiences, participants acknowledged that when their "experience is...way different than any of [their] students" they had difficulties "relat[ing] to" them. As a result, divergent identities often necessitated that students "explain more about what they experience[d] so that [the DRP] can really understand and sort of help advocate for [them]." For example, a participant shared the following:

> ...I don't have a chronic medical condition...sometimes it's not always clear, like "wait, so why wouldn't you be able to do that?' And I'm sure just based on my...experiences and my beliefs, my worldview and values, I imagine there are times when I'm...I guess, I would say I'm probably judgmental based on [a lack of experience] ...without intentionally being judgmental, right?

Additionally, participants expressed frustration in trying to understand "the emotional support and the social support" that students with divergent identities required. As a result, some participants described their own identities as "limiting" (e.g., "...as [a] white person, it's hard for me to navigate providing that… [support for students of color] ...they need to be with other people who can share their experiences"). Overall, as participants questioned how they

"could possibly understand" students with identities and experiences different from their own and consequently emphasized a need to be "cognizant" of the "power dynamic at play" throughout the accommodations process.

Divergent Identities and Experiences Complexify the Accommodations Process

Participants expressed having to "constantly keep in check" the assumptions that stemmed from biases related to divergent identities they held. Participants described several ways in which "being aware" of divergent identities necessitated adjusting their accommodations processes, such as explaining "how accommodations work very differently" in high school compared to college. Even in instances when participants' experiences with students were similar, participants emphasized a need to "listen to the students' experience and take it as truth, because it's [the student's] experience" and "create a space where [students] can be themselves...instead of jumping to conclusions." Conversely, as one participant emphasized, sometimes it's a struggle when DRPs are "just not clicking" with a student. For example, one participant shared that differences in political views can be challenging. "Some students may say some really racist things...occasionally I'll run into students where our interactions are 'I just don't like you'" . In such cases, the DRP may have to remove themselves from the interaction entirely and "go to [their] supervisor" for support.

Further, participants acknowledged the need to "really just [be] aware of privileges" associated with their identities and experiences during student interactions. As one participant described:

> I am a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, female...I certainly have experienced a lot of privilege because of that…my family all went to college, my parents all have college degrees... that's very different from a first generation student, right?

Similarly, another participant made conscious efforts to "help student[s] see [them] as an ally," rather than someone with power. On the other hand, some participants did not spend "a lot of time thinking about that [privilege]" they may hold. For example, a participant acknowledged, "...because I'm privileged to not have to think about that too much...I just bring myself to the table and I don't expect that who I am is particularly impactful." Simultaneously, these participants desired to "make space for other people who don't feel that level of comfort and privilege" that they do

in critically examining the influence of identities, experiences, and power dynamics.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate DRPs' perceptions of the influence of their identities and experiences in accommodation-related decision-making. While previous research has broadened the field's understanding of the influence of DRPs' perceptions of disability on the accommodations process (Lindstrom, 2007; Yull, 2015), the results of the present study build on current literature by providing a deeper examination of the totality of DRPs' identities and experiences, and the cumulative influence of DRPs' identities and experiences on making accommodation-related decisions. Importantly, the findings of this study add to the important and emerging idea of *socially-just disability resources*, or "going beyond mere compliance and accessibility to promote social justice and impact larger campus dynamics of inclusion, belonging, and climate" (Kraus, 2021, p. 47).

As a key theme, participants described a general awareness that their identities and experiences were influential in their work as DRPs, some noting that this influence can be positive or negative, depending on which identities were triggered during an interaction with a student. This is consistent with the sentiments presented by Yull (2015), who noted that biases can influence behavior and, consequently, choices made during interactions with SWDs. Further, participants described an awareness that DRPs, in general, may not always be aware of when such an influence takes place throughout the accommodations process. This finding contributes to the literature by providing a new understanding of the complex influence of DRPs' identities and experiences. In fact, to our knowledge, this is perhaps the first investigation of a deep, comprehensive examination of this phenomenon among DRPs to date.

Specifically, participants described both internal and external responses (e.g., feeling emotionally connected to a student and then providing them with more accommodations) to instances where they and students with whom they were working shared convergent identities or experiences, and the influence of this convergence on the accommodations process in both positive (e.g., quicker decisions, deeper trust in students) and negative ways (e.g., negative biases and assumptions, over-accommodating students). This finding highlights how accommodation processes can unconsciously change when commonalities exist between students and DRPs and exposes gaps in the field's professional guidance in how to address this phenomenon in a consistent way across the

field. Similarly, participants also described challenges in interacting with students who held divergent identities or experiences as them, such as projecting their own identities onto them and making false assumptions about students' experiences and how they made meaning from these experiences. This finding not only answers the call of Guzman and Balcazar (2010), who recommended an examination of the hidden assumptions in the accommodations process when disability-related identities diverged, but also contributes to the literature by demonstrating the risks of unexamined biases in the DRP role.

Interestingly, although subthemes broadly differed between discussions of convergent versus divergent identities in terms of positive and negative influences of each on the accommodations process, this leads one to consider what constitutes a positive or negative influence. Specifically, one may consider if it is inherently positive if DRPs can relate to students, especially when the field points to objectivity in decision-making. Finally, while participants exclusively discussed complications in the accommodations process in the context of divergent identities, one must also consider what constitutes a *complication*. For instance, DRPs are expected to follow a *common-sense standard* (AHEAD, n.d.) and one could argue that any interruption to making a judgment in this way is a complication to this process. Such lingering queries may serve as discussion points for the field to consider as advancements are made towards socially just disability resources.

Limitations

First, this study primarily reflects the experiences of DRPs who identified as white and as female. In a 2020 Biennial Survey, however, AHEAD found that 86% of DRPs identified as white and 79% as women (Scott, 2021). Despite this, future research should seek the experiences of a larger, more diverse sample to better understand perceptions of this phenomenon in the profession from multiple and varied perspectives. Second, although this study investigated participant perspectives of how their identities influenced their work as DRPs, the authors did not conduct observations or interview students with whom the participants work, limiting a comprehensive understanding of this impact. Third, participants were primarily recruited through two national organizations on higher education and disability by sending recruitment emails to their membership listservs. As a result, the researchers were unable to directly manage recruitment processes. Fourth, we did not explore participants' professional training as a DRP and therefore are limited in our understanding of this

influence on the perceptions reported. Finally, study participants primarily reflect DRPs who were members of relevant national organizations on higher education and disability. These organizations generally require large annual dues for membership, limiting the themes from our sample to those who have access to the resources to be a part of these organizations either personally or through their institutions.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the results of this study present implications for the higher education disability resources field. Specifically, this study highlights the need for professional development for DRPs on (a) intersectionality, (b) bias, and (c) ways to utilize and minimize the influence of identities and experiences in the accommodations process. Because DRPs generally lack college degree programs or structured pre-career training (Banerjee et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2010), DRCs may benefit from embedding these professional development topics into onboarding training (e.g., orientation) for new hires, in addition to continual professional development for existing employees. Further, because of the complexities and hesitation in engaging with identity in the profession (as highlighted by participants), directors of DRCs should consider the most appropriate ways in which to implement corresponding DRP professional development. Because discussing identity can be sensitive (e.g., traumatic experiences), DRC directors may consider one-on-one conversations with DRPs, as opposed to large-group discussions, or guided reflections done individually following educational workshops.

Further, directors may also collaborate with other higher education staff such as the counseling department, LQBTQ+ office staff, or disability studies to provide training and support to DRPs and even SWDs registered with the DRC in bias recognition, identity development, and related topics. These trainings may draw on de-biasing techniques from similar fields to establish a strong foundation of strategies in higher education disability resources. In counseling, for example, extensive strategies, assessments, and training exist to facilitate practitioners' reflection on their biases in relation to professional judgment that may be transferable to DRPs (Boysen, G., 2010). The Skilled Counselor Training Model, for example, creates an opportunity for counselors to engage in role-play with one another to develop skills recognizing and managing implicit biases in a supportive, collaborative manner (Crews et al., 2005). If adapted to higher education disability resources, this form of professional development may prove powerful in enhancing equitable accommodation decision-making among DRPs.

Beyond individual DRCs, the higher education disability resources field may consider developing policies and guidance focused on examining one's influencing identities and the influence of identities on the accommodation process. For example, although the newly published *Code of Ethics* (AHEAD, 2021) urges DRPs to become aware of their biases and the limitations of their knowledge, this is followed by a direction to "use objective professional judgment in making decisions" (AHEAD, 2021, para. 5). Because of this juxtaposition (subjectivity versus objectivity), higher education disability resources' policies may fully embrace the nature of human subjectivity in its guidance for professionals in the field. Specifically, instead of directing DRPs towards objective decision-making, policies may acknowledge personal negative or positive bias as ever-present and instead, operationalize reflective practices for the disability resources profession to more effectively achieve socially-just disability resources.

Further, there are several implications for individual DRPs. First, there is an apparent need for DRPs to think deeply about their identities and experiences and how these influence their work with SWDs due to the varied ways participants described convergent and/or divergent identities altering accommodation decision-making processes. A starting place for this examination may begin with intentionally identifying one's own influential identities and experiences, and then reflecting on how each drives their work as a DRP. Second, given that participants desired to understand if it was possible to remove the "totality of who they are" from their professional work, DRPs may seek out opportunities for education, self-examination, discussion to learn about identity's influence in day-to-day life, including outside of their DRP-related responsibilities. Finally, as DRPs become aware of their influential identities and experiences, they should consider ways to address them as they recognize their relationship to accommodation decision-making. For example, participants in the present study described using strategies such as consulting with colleagues, stepping away from interactions to reflect privately before making decisions, and holding an inner dialogue to check their biases and assumptions.

Future Research

Although the present study highlights the general influence of identities and experiences in the disability resources field, there is much work to be done to better understand the role identity plays and its implications for advancing the socially just disability resources framework. For example, future research should seek a much more diverse sample to deter-

mine if themes of the present study are representative of the population of DRPs nationally. Further, due to the recent implementation of the updated AHEAD Code of Ethics (2021), replication or an expansion of this study in the years to follow would provide an important update on the progress of recognizing the influence of identities and experiences in the field under these guidelines.

Additionally, throughout the interviews, several participants connected discussions of their influential identities and experiences to the idea of *positionality*, a position one takes based on identities and experiences (England, 1994), and consequently described specific responses to their positionalities as DRPs. As a result, future research should deeply explore DRPs responses and reactions to the phenomenon of positionality in the context of the disability resources field and working with SWDs. Finally, given the varied ways in which participants expressed engaging with their influential identities and experiences, future research should seek to identify one disability resources office or disability resources professional exhibiting deep reflexivity as a collective in which to closely investigate. Disseminating the results of such an examination would allow for the field at large to clearly operationalize reflexivity to then translate to policy, procedures, and individual practice.

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