Red-Shirting College Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

College and university students with disabilities, both visible and invisible, must deal with what sociologist Erving Goffman called information management; they must control and protect their stigmatized identity by considering who to tell what, how much to tell, and when to tell. A growing body of stigma-related educational research, as well as cultural evidence, suggests that postsecondary students with disabilities experience a significant stigma effect; they are in essence forced to wear a red shirt. This literature review article and the research associated with it suggest that disclosure may create as many problems as it solves and points out the need for students with disabilities to learn better information management strategies. The implications for learning support are myriad and suggest that DSS offices may need to re-educate the entire community, giving practical suggestions.

Defining the Problem

In the popular 1960s television series *Star Trek*, Producer Gene Rodenberry broke new ground with a number of entertainment firsts. In the midst of the Civil Rights movement, one show included an inter-racial kiss. While women were protesting for equal rights, the series portrayed women in positions of leadership. Finally, despite the famous "cold war" between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, the series portrayed a Russian without a negative stereotype. Further, throughout the series, aliens were not presented as an abject "other" to offend or truly frighten, but as diverse participants in a wider society. In essence, *Star Trek* was one of Hollywood's earliest and most successful efforts at dealing with social otherness and constituted an honest intellectual attempt to decrease social distances between "normal" people and various minorities or stigmatized identities. Perhaps the most notorious form of "otherness" portrayed on the show was created in a more subtle form: red-shirted security guards. These red-shirted characters (generally white males) were only briefly on screen before they suffered some kind of terrible, sudden, and usually unpleasant

demise. They represented a uniformed, characterless, expendable work force whose individuality was intentionally diminished and could be abruptly removed at any time without anyone ever missing them.

In a similar fashion, disability has often been a metaphorical red shirt, a type of intentionally or unintentionally bestowed label that immediately creates otherness. In the case of postsecondary students with disabilities, students must wear "this shirt" when they choose to disclose their disability to a college or university in order to receive accommodations. Three aspects of this decision are vital and underappreciated in terms of current practice: a general unawareness of or lack of concern about the red shirt effect by teaching faculty, a severe shortage of research related to disability stigma effects and postsecondary students, and, finally, a need to balance costs and benefits with special consideration to cases where disclosure can lead to more harm than good. Attention to these three aspects will highlight that disclosure means wearing the red shirt.

Literature Review

Disability has lagged behind many other forms of stigmatized identity in terms of scholarship and advocacy. Slavery was abolished in 1865; women gained the right to vote in 1920; individuals with disabilities were not completely liberated in the eyes of the law in both public and private settings until the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the subsequent Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment Act (ADAAA)in 2009.

Many current disability scholars see various factors behind this relative lag in social movement. These factors do not always seem consistent with the universal nature of disability and the long history of human experience with disability.   Disability historian Douglas Baynton (2006) calls disability not just a label, but also "a fundamental binary opposition," a dichotomy between the normal and abnormal that conforms to a widely agreed upon understanding of how our social world operates (p. 82). Lennard Davis (2002) , taking it one step further, suggests that Dismodernism, or a post-post modernist focus on both the uniqueness and universality of the disability experience is, in spite of social resistance, the new paradigm through which to understand the human experience in the 21st century. Disability scholars Doris Zames and her sister Freida remind readers that "handicapism" is the only "ism" we will all experience if we live long enough (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Scotch, 2001). Yet even with these new dialogues appearing, disability remains difficult to discuss.

Richard Scotch (2001) quotes sociologist Paul Higgins (1992) in describing the red shirt's unintended effects: "Policy that makes disability exceptional [as in the case of college and university disability support services] also separates disabled people from non-disabled people" (p. 389).   Or, as Scotch (2001) states in his own words, "Segregated programs persist and a separate community of people with disabilities continues to be reinforced by 'special' service strategies and the stigma that pervades our culture" (p. 389). In another words, it's "us" and "them."

In spite of these advances led by leading scholars, disclosure remains a

peculiar and understudied event. There is very little research, for example, about why some students with disabilities choose not to disclose. In Foucauldian terms, the disclosure process links "forms of power that turn individuals into subjects by tying them to identities" (Tremain, 2005a). Disclosure is not an insular action. It would seem that disclosure requires acknowledging a disability identity, and some individuals are not willing to accept that (Davis, 2002, 2006).

Disclosure involves sharing potentially harmful information and is inherently risky. In the 1960s, Erving Goffman interviewed stigmatized individuals and found almost universally that they were held hostage by the possibility of damning information about their identities being shared with others.

In almost all cases, the consequences of losing control over this information were alienation, stigmatization, and marginalization (Edgerton, 1967; Goffman, 1961, 1963). Disclosure as it is currently understood has evolved out of practical necessity (the ADA) and what are now historically acknowledged inequalities, but it has arguably continued to evolve into an openly accepted and variant form of social oppression (Davis, 2002; Kearney, 2003).

There is evidence to show that colleges and universities possibly create stigma by requiring disclosure (as the ADA mandates). To cite one example, students with various invisible psychological disabilities (anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorder, etc.) are often not comfortable discussing them and intentionally decline accommodations for this reason (Corrigan, 2005; Marson, 2004; Oliver, Reed, Katz, & Haugh, 1999). From a sociological standpoint, students who choose not to disclose do so in part to protect their identity and, in the words of sociologist Erving Goffman (1963), are attempting in one sense to "pass" as normal.

Many students choose not to disclose because they have seen what happens to other students who have disclosed or feel as if they instinctually know what will happen to them if they disclose (Trammell, 2002). Veronica Crawford, in an account of her multiple disabilities, calls disclosure the double-edged sword because any possible benefits to be gained from accommodation are often offset by the negative effects of social distancing and discrimination (Crawford, 2002; Hartmann, 2003).

Disclosure should lead to accommodation, but it can lead to discrimination, as well. Students must disclose if they want to be accommodated, and disclosure means putting on the red shirt. As research into mental illness has shown, telling is "risky business" (Hinshaw, 2007; Olney & Brockelman, 2005; Wahl & NetLibrary Inc., 1999). Disclosure opens a Pandora's Box for all parties involved, demanding that institutions also recognize and openly acknowledge the risks, along with offering an answer regarding whether there is more harm than good when certain accommodation decisions are made. This cost benefit analysis, however, is not considered universal practice in Disability Support Services (DSS) offices at this time (Corrigan, 2005; Robertson & Dykes, 2007; Smith & Erevelles, 2004). The semantics of disability complicate the issue. The name of the accommodations office (e.g., Disability Support Services or DSS) can be seen as problematic. McWhorter

(2005) bluntly states that the word disability, like the term "handicap" in the 1970s, has become a highly stigmatized and controversial term. Moreover, Shelley Tremain (2005a) writes that, "Assumptions about disability as negative ontology remain unchallenged" (p. 16).

Although for some time there has been a lively movement promoting "person first" language, and for very noble purposes, a reasonable person might argue that the word is not the problem, and that as long as the abstraction remains a negative one, it simply doesn't matter what temporary terminology is chosen to serve as a label. Currently, however, many consider the word "disability" already a compromised term (Davis, 2002; Longmore & Umansky, 2001).

To combat semantics in the U.S., some states have chosen to merge their gifted and talented programs with their special education departments, creating one over-arching office for exceptionalities. This type of linguistic reframing is consistent with the theory of twice exceptionality (2E), which maintains that disability and ability are two sides of the same coin. That ability is better seen as a continuum along which all humans slide back and forth daily and throughout their lives (and contradicts the early 20th century notion of intelligence). Some postsecondary offices have done the same (Eisner & Sornik, 2006). These efforts are well intentioned, to be sure, though they potentially muddy the water for those who would segregate students with exceptional ability from those with standard abilities, as has been historically the precedent. It may also confuse students.

The semantics of disability actually constitute the primary battleground for equal access in both Western and non-Western countries. Since cultural definitions remain the predominant variable within the social model of disability, the language used to debate disability constitutes the forum where social otherness and understanding are actually negotiated. Because the word "disability" itself is so charged with manifold meanings and threatening stereotypes, requiring students to visit an "Office for Disability Support" as a first step in getting accommodations forces a preliminary label on them before the accommodation process can even begin to unfold.

To confirm this red-shirt effect, growing empirical evidence is found in both quantitative and qualitative research across the disciplines of psychology, education, history and sociology (Danforth & Gabel, 2006; Tremain, 2005b). A recent study at three colleges and universities found significant levels of disability stigmatization amongst college students who had self-disclosed disabilities in order to seek accommodations (Trammell, 2006). The results considered both visible and invisible disabilities, such as depression and anxiety. As record numbers of students with mental health issues finish high school, take standardized tests, and attend postsecondary schools, the stigma associated with mental illness impinges increasingly on postsecondary academic life (Angermeyer & Matschinger, 2003; Brinckerhoff, 2002; Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993; Coleman, 1997; Ekpone & Bogucki, 2004).

While this cited research is important, there remains an inadequate pool of studies to develop a focused construct of how the red-shirting effect works specifically with students with disabilities and in more generalized ways, such as how it differs or is similar to race or gender-related stigmas.

Discussion

For college and university students, the lack of acknowledgement of a red-shirting effect, and the paucity of stigma research, make negotiating the accommodation process and adjusting to their disability identity very difficult. Since college and university students are required to disclose in order to receive accommodations, they are by definition forced to become disability identity information managers. Looking at the practical implications, few would suggest that there is any alternative to disclosure if accommodations are needed, yet the effects must be accepted. Although the optimism of universal design (UD) shows promise of someday making the world of academics more accessible without special accommodations, the reality is more stark (Bowe, 2000; Davis, 2006; Rose, Harbour, Johnson, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2006).

Because college students are required to accept the label up front before anything else can happen in the accommodation process, the practical question becomes how to help them manage their disability identity. Can they be better equipped to handle their own information management?

Studies have long shown that stigma interferes with assimilation into the educational community and can be related to chronic underachievement (Bakker & Bosman, 2003; Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, & Lickel, 2000). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) research, for example, has consistently shown relationships between ADHD and social difficulties and academic struggles (Canu, Newman, Morrow, & Pope, 2008; Weyandt & DuPaul, 2006). General stigma research suggests that the effect of stigma is ultimately a direct challenge to a stable sense of self, a potential crisis of identity (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Crocker & Quinn, 2000; Levin & Laar, 2006; Olney & Brockelman, 2005; Olney, Brockelman, Kennedy, & Newsome, 2004). For postsecondary students with disabilities, this often leads to the questions, "Do I really deserve to be here?" or "Do I really belong here?"

Ultimately, the students with disabilities who are the most successful are those who are able to answer these questions: Who do I tell? How much do I tell? When do I tell? They are the students who are best at information management. It is far from clear, however, how successful students learn to manage information and how those who aren't successful might learn such skills.

Even with growing evidence of stigmatization, much of the discrimination that still occurs is passive and unmeasured, and developing an overarching theoretical framework to study the core issue remains a challenge (Davis, 2002; Monaghan, 1998; Trammell, 2006). Since many students, particularly those with physical disabilities, have been suffering from stigma from a very early age, there is even a tendency for some students to accept their secondary citizen status without question (Fleitas, 2000; Green, 2003; Juvonen & Graham, 2001). The "real world" students are being prepared for is one in which more than ninety percent of disability litigation is decided in favor of employers and defendants, rather than the individual or group with disabilities bringing forward the complaint (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Marson, 2004). The real world is one in which the United Nations reports that

ninety-eight percent of children with disabilities in undeveloped countries receive no formal education at all ("U.N. stamps promote rights for persons with disabilities," 2008).

Nonetheless, acknowledging that students must choose to disclose to get accommodations, the issue then becomes one of information management skills (Goffman, 1963). After initial disclosure, most disability support offices on college and university campuses require students to communicate directly with their professors about their disabilities. This often means asking the student to deliver an official accommodation letter or communication to his or her professors that requests specific adjustments to the academic environment, such as permitting extra time on tests. What often goes without consideration is that an already stigmatized student is forced to confront the most powerful actor in his or her academic environment— the Ph.D. professor, the expert in his or her field—and to enter into the social exchange by introducing him or herself with what has historically been perceived as a weakness, a flaw, or a request for an unfair advantage (Campbell, 2005; Covey, 1998; Longmore & Umansky, 2001). While the accommodation letter legitimizes the student's disability in much the same way that applicants for Social Security claims or Workman's Compensation must "prove" their handicapping conditions in order to gain benefits, it also places them more at risk within what is already a heightened social disadvantage.

Of all the relationships that evolve in the postsecondary educational environment, that which evolves between the student and the professor is central to the entire college or university experience, particularly in the liberal arts environment where it is fostered from the start of a student's educational career (Grossman, 2001). In a similar fashion to the way medical sociologists such as Ivan Illich and Talcott Parsons have defined the interactions of the doctor-patient relationship—the roles each play and the primacy of medical authority—students and professors also inherently engage in an unequal dialogue (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999).

Bringing disability into the equation can potentially upset the natural evolution of the professor-student relationship. Because disability continues to be perceived in largely negative terms, students are understandably reluctant to begin an important relationship by talking about it. Their own evolving identity is somewhat fragile as an underclassman and is often shaped initially by grades and classroom performance (Barnes et al., 1999). The professor-student relationship, like the doctor-patient relationship, had been a fairly stable social norm in the late modern era. The relatively recent infusion of information about disability fundamentally alters and challenges traditional academic roles. No matter what the reason for a student's failure in any given class, if disability has been disclosed, there will always be questions about whether the student worked hard enough, the student was diligent in pursuing accommodations, the student was otherwise qualified, or even whether the professor has somehow intentionally or unintentionally discriminated against him or her.

Proposed Solution

This risk can be partially off-set by high school transition programs and disability support orientations paired with individual meetings at the postsecondary level that train students in strategies for information management—who to tell, when to tell, and how much to tell. Such programs are scattered and uncoordinated, where they exist at all. Such programs and freshmen orientations should specifically teach information management skills.

As students hand letters of accommodation to their professors or engage in similar discourses, they literally put on the red shirt and hope that nothing bad will happen. The reaction of the letter's recipient, as Goffman (1963) noted, becomes of primary importance. How will the professor react? Will a shadow cross his or her face because he or she has received other letters like this one and perhaps perceived that the accommodations were unreasonable, unfair, or abused? Will he or she smile pleasantly instead, remembering a former student with a learning disability who persevered in the face of adversity (and thus unintentionally reinforce a stereotype that suggests it is not enough to simply do; students with disabilities must do more) (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). Some students, using an instinctual form of information management, simply choose not to disclose because it seems safer.

Therefore, postsecondary staff and faculty also need more information. They need to be educated about the problem and given resources to help them work with students who are better information managers. More faculty, staff, and students in higher education must begin to think about disability in terms of information management. Historian Paul Longmore argues persuasively that disability has been neglected, ignored, and misunderstood in American historical analysis when compared to other stigmatized identities (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). DSS offices should prioritize educating the campus community.

The promise of universal design remains a desirable objective. As historian Linda Kerber (2006) wrote, "Those who articulate the needs of the disabled articulate the needs of us all" (p. 3). Perhaps most importantly, DSS offices can take a critical look at the disclosure process itself and identify ways to reduce stigma. Even something as ubiquitous as changing the name of the office (or redesigning signs) can signal a change in the attitude landscape. To the extent that the environment becomes easier to navigate, students with disabilities will find it easier to develop their information management skills. Ultimately, Simons & Masschelein (2005) state that such a process must result in success "Beyond the terms of exclusion and inclusion" (p.209).

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