Making Disability (Matter) in Philosophy of Education

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> My disability is very visible, and therefore it is accompanied by many wonderful attitudes and assumptions about me: people wonder if I can love, have sex, compete philosophically, and succeed on my own. These assumptions I believe have lead [*sic*] to a degree of marginalization and social isolation which I struggle to free myself from. No doubt, my peculiar embodiment has led to a unique philosophical perspective on matters people rarely think about and it motivates me to do the philosophical work that I do.[1]

Such is the ambivalence that attends the experience of being a disabled academic. On the one hand, this individual's very visible disability invites suspicion from colleagues about his capacity to perform (philosophically, socially, even sexually), a suspicion that betrays the pervasive prejudice towards people whose bodies do not conform to societal standards of normalcy and health. On the other hand, this man recognizes that his disability gives him a "unique" perspective from which to address issues in his field, enables him to reveal problems that are often ignored by or simply not on the radar of other philosophers, and motivates his desire to pursue these questions in his research. Disability is at once a liability and a resource.

These attitudes of suspicion betray a pervasive skeptical stance towards disabled individuals' academic membership that undermines their ability to be included in communities of scholars. In fact, we might say that these attitudes *disable*. The marginalizing effects of able-bodied privilege prevail despite academic institutions' efforts to recognize and accommodate a growing number of students and faculty with disabilities. At the same time, as researchers argue that these growing numbers provide the rationale for postsecondary institutions to continue to expand services and opportunities for individuals with disabilities, they also urge these institutions to recognize that the substantive inclusion of individuals with disabilities demands examining how cultural and institutional norms are based on an assumption that all individuals are able-bodied.[2] This includes spaces of academic deliberation, which are often difficult for people with disabilities to physically access, navigate, or feel comfortable within because they are designed according to expectations of able-bodiedness.

I argue that those of us who participate in these spaces have good reasons to be concerned about this problem, even if — and perhaps *especially because* — it does not directly impact our experience. The aim of this essay is to convince educational philosophers of these reasons and of their corresponding stake in transforming research practices, meeting environments, and scholarly pursuits to enact principles of inclusion. My argument is composed of three parts. First, I describe common institutional responses to disabled scholars in academia and explain that academic environments participate in locating disabilities as marginal and even threatening to academic pursuits. These institutional responses perpetuate able-bodied privilege and shape who has the opportunity to directly impact scholarly deliberations. Second, I explain why this tacit exclusion is a problem for academics who experience able-bod-

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ied privilege as well as for those who are marginalized on the basis of disability: this marginalization potentially undermines the quality of scholarship being produced within educational philosophy in general. I conclude by suggesting that substantive inclusion involves a commitment on the part of philosophers of education to making philosophy of education differently in light of disability.

Disability in Academia

People with disabilities have a stake in the academic deliberations and research produced within philosophy of education. This scholarship affects disabled people not only insofar as it represents them and their experiences, sometimes inadequately or inaccurately, but also because it frequently omits consideration of ability diversity in the first place. Yet whether and how one sees oneself reflected in research and in knowledge production bears directly on one's social identity and status as an epistemic agent.

Those of us with commitments to educational justice will likely simply agree without necessity of argument that, at a minimum, a person's disability should not prevent them from the opportunity to access institutions of higher education or to contribute to academic scholarship. Most of us would also agree that our field of study — philosophy of education — should be particularly concerned to actively avoid exclusion on the basis of disability, or any other identity marker. These feelings of obligation arise when and because we are committed to individuals' equitable access to educational goods and experiences and to removing barriers to full participation in educational institutions and scholarship.

Yet recent debates on diversity in philosophy have made it clear that the underrepresentation and lower rates of retention and promotion of women and people of color are explained neither by overt discrimination (sexism, racism) nor even by the absence of accommodations or active recruitment.[3] Rather, those working to understand and rectify underrepresentation have argued that to fully explain why women and people of color enter and remain within philosophy at significantly lower rates, we need to look not just at formal barriers to access or systems of support within departments, but also at the culture and climate of inquiry and research production. As feminist philosophers have emphasized for some time, philosophical inquiry reflects norms of argumentation that privilege those behaviors encouraged in men. In the case of women, then, it is often the discursive tenor of philosophical debate, along with the structural organization of labor, that deters them from continuing or that undermines their performance.[4] These norms are not only institutionally supported through departmental practices but also frequently reinforced through microaggressions, "the brief verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, denigrating, and hurtful messages."[5] The frequency of experienced microaggressions is one of the reasons why people with disabilities find academia in general and philosophy in particular to be hostile.[6] Some disabled academics even recount that they are perceived as the antithesis of the good academic because they literally embody the societal construct of lesser capability. Microaggressions can therefore operate to reinforce the message that people with disabilities simply do not belong in academia.

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In a certain way, disability does turn academia on its head: it often challenges presumptions of fluid rational discourse, verbal debate, communicative precision and competence, norms of professional behavior, energetic participation in scholarly pursuits and, in general, presumptions about the professional norms of academic work. Disabilities can and do contribute to individuals' experienced limitations in functioning within particular contexts, and they can undermine a person's ability to perform professional tasks, whether chronically or acutely. For example, an academic with chronic fatigue syndrome may find her level of energy affects her ability to teach, to produce research, to take part in departmental service, and so on.[7] An instructor who is deaf will not be able to hear his students' distracted chatter while he is lecturing, just as a professor who is blind will not be able to visually monitor students' project work. An autistic academic may find social gatherings or large audiences difficult to navigate or overwhelming. When viewed through these functional limitations, disabilities seem counter to the standards of performance — productivity, sociability, mobility — that are expected and rewarded within academia. Therefore, disability complicates even our most progressive commitments to and strategies for increasing representative diversity in academia because it challenges those expectations that seem functionally vital to academic scholarship.

However, it is not always disability itself that is responsible for disablement. Rather, the perpetuation of stereotypes and misguided assumptions can be responsible for individuals' experiences of being disabled by an academic environment. This happens because there persists widespread misunderstanding of what disabilities entail for individuals' competencies or for their experiences of well-being.[8] For example, the stereotype that a person's speech impairment indicates that they are less intellectually capable does more than simply frustrate the possibility for dialogue; it can actually undermine the confidence or desire of the person with speech impairment to deliberate with other academics, even leading to the lowered quality of their work overall.[9] Furthermore, despite the fact that the effect a disability has on an individual's performance is neither uniform nor universal, disabilities are often thought about as all-encompassing in their effect on individuals' lives. Yet some disabilities flare up at particular times of the day or in the presence of particular external triggers; others render communication or mobility consistently challenging, especially in the absence of accommodations or support; others remain hidden or invisible. While attempting to pass as nondisabled by hiding a disability often enables one's best chances of integration into academic or other environments, this integration is premised on hiding a portion of oneself and doing so can have significant detrimental consequences on one's relationships and learning, even as it permits access to the benefits of able-bodied privilege.[10]

Put simply, a disability exists within a social and epistemic context, and this context greatly affects how disability is experienced. This is further evidenced by how other aspects of a person's identity shape how disability is perceived. All persons with disabilities also have racial, gender, sexual, cultural, and social class identities, and these mitigate or enhance the effect a disability has on a person's participation in academic environments. It is a well-documented experience of black women

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academics, for example, to have their intellect and expertise questioned as a result of their racial and gender identity,[11] a phenomenon exacerbated by the presence of visible disability. Moreover, disability has been used as a tool of disempowerment when ascribed to women who fail to conform to dominant social norms of behavior or discourse; being called "crazy" or "mad," puts them in their social place.[12] For others, ability impediments directly affect their performance but are not associated with impairment: for example, the gender transitioning person who experiences extreme anxiety stemming from their social oppression. Disability is a complicated phenomenon, sometimes describing the particular functional limitations that individuals experience relative to their environments and sometimes describing how inhospitable environments are actually responsible for the disabling effects on individuals' lives.

Let's consider for a moment how the usual institutional norms that govern spaces of scholarly deliberation contribute to how disability is experienced. There are many ways in which meeting activities — including presentations, lectures, and social gatherings — are not designed around diverse abilities or do not include significant variability in opportunities for presentation or engagement. Some of these activities are deeply challenging for members with (and without) disabilities, whether because, for example, they cannot adequately hear presenters, because they are provided no alternative to engagement in the form of written text or visuals, or because room designs impede their mobility. Now, of course, these environments are not intentionally designed to exclude. Rather, these designs correspond to an overall assumption of able-bodiedness that is endemic to academia in general. Nevertheless, these designs force members to normalize their behavior and communicative modes, hide their difficulties with sensory stimuli, or even remove themselves in ways that minimize the scholarly benefits they receive from collaborating or socializing. The reverse of this, of course (as in all instances of disadvantage and privilege), is that the experience of fitting comfortably into meeting norms and structures compounds existing advantages.[13]

These examples illustrate that the academic environment plays a role in producing the disabling effects of disability. In other words, academia participates in *making* disability. The view that social structures contribute to the creation of disability corresponds with what disability studies scholars refer to as "the social model" of disability.[14] This model places the onus on the social institution (or society) to change in response to differences of ability, rather than on the individual to assimilate into existing norms. It also highlights the sense in which institutional norms and physical structures are formed according to able-bodied norms that prevent disabled individuals from belonging. This perspectival difference is illustrated by differing interpretations of the legal requirement that institutions of higher education provide "reasonable accommodations" to "otherwise qualified" persons with disabilities.[15] On the one hand, accommodations can be seen as compensatory, wherein the accommodation fills a deficit of the individual (a sign language interpreter fills in for an individuals' *lack* of hearing; a prosthetic replaces a *missing* limb), or they can be seen as responding to a structure not built around diverse bodies or abilities. The latter

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view sees accommodations as revealing the inequalities inherent in the institutional structure and therefore places the responsibility for adaptation and transformation on that structure.

Rather than simply concluding that people with disabilities are excluded when they fail to meet standards that are functionally vital to the demands of scholarly work, we can understand the role that academic contexts play in this exclusion. In fact, the demands of academic faculty positions often preclude the possibility that individuals with particular disabilities can successfully hold a position, even when their disabilities do not affect their abilities to perform essential tasks.[16] While some individuals work at a slower pace or through personal assistants, for example, the expectations of these positions conform to a degree of energy, full-day functioning, and productive speed that reflect rather inflexible able-bodied norms. Even where academic institutions, consistent with improved legal mandates, have begun to acknowledge the increasing need to accommodate faculty with disabilities and health problems, academic environments nevertheless reward highly productive, highly participatory individuals who conform to professional norms of behavior and communicative competence. Where able-bodiedness in general is rewarded, and not merely the ability to perform a necessary task at some slower pace or in some different way, these standards amount to ableism, supported by institutions.[17]

Given the challenges that disabled academics face within an environment that is so clearly inhospitable for them, it is no wonder really that many attempt to hide their disability, or that the rest of us do not do much to call attention to this problem; it is often simply not in nondisabled academics' interests to challenge this privilege because we benefit from it. Nevertheless, and as I hope to show, nondisabled academics actually do have good reasons to challenge their own privilege, reasons that include but go beyond a commitment to social and educational justice. More specifically, there are important epistemic reasons for challenging the tacit exclusion of individuals with disabilities, including the potential jeopardy to the quality of our research in failing to do so.

The Epistemic Value of Ability Diversity

I will now advance what I am aware is a controversial thesis: that educational philosophical research is impoverished when it does not draw upon the perspectives of individuals with disabilities. The epistemic value of diversity in research in education is a topic that many philosophers of education and educational researchers have taken up.[18] Recently, Jeff Frank argued that the concept of epistemic injustice is preferable to that of epistemic diversity in giving arguments for more inclusive epistemic practices.[19] The reason is that the concept of epistemic injustice more accurately represents the concern that is at stake in many arguments for epistemic diversity, namely that research ought to accurately reflect its research subjects and avoid reproducing inequalities. Frank's approach is helpful in considering what is at stake in the inclusion of people with disabilities in spaces of academic deliberation and research.

In considering epistemic justice in the context of higher education, Elizabeth Anderson describes how systematic privileging can operate to narrow the field of

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knowledge production so that dominant group members are the ones doing most of the research and making major institutional decisions.[20] She writes, "When groups of inquirers are segregated along the same lines that define group inequalities, the shared reality bias will tend to insulate members of advantaged groups from the perspectives of the systematically disadvantaged."[21] According to Anderson, the fact of cultural, racial, and gender diversity necessitates an educational structure that is constituted so as to be "systematically responsive to the interests and concerns of people from all walks of life."[22] This requires that academic elites have some degree of contact with and understanding of people from diverse life situations, but also that these latter individuals have equal opportunities to become elites as well. However, just as elites are largely constituted from the ranks of white, middle-upper class males, they are also largely nondisabled. This lack of cross-positional contact, along with the kinds of prejudices and social imaginary around disability that I described earlier, makes the challenge of producing scholarship that includes accurate understanding of disability and positive representation of disabled individuals' capabilities quite challenging.

Miranda Fricker calls the phenomenon of unbalanced power in shaping social meanings "hermeneutical injustice."[23] Hermeneutical injustice obtains when the societally powerful have an unfair advantage in shaping social norms and social meanings, including the interpretive tools that individuals have for understanding their own experiences. This means that those in disadvantaged positions have fewer interpretive resources to draw from in identifying and naming the marginalization they experience. A clear example is the only very recent entrance of the term "ableism" into mainstream English language to describe discrimination towards disabled people and to allow people with disabilities to name their oppression in ways intelligible to the nondisabled.

The epistemic consequences of hermeneutical injustice are complex: the hermeneutical imbalance disadvantages those already in positions of societal disempowerment and correspondingly advantages those already in positions of societal power, all the while potentially undermining the quality of research in general. To explain, and as I stated earlier, it is not always in the interests of nondisabled people to learn about and transform social conditions that privilege them. There is an ease of not having to take into account how one's research or theorizing might affect those with disabilities, or how it might produce assumptions and expectations that privilege able-bodied people. It is a kind of philosophical research that benefits from the privileged epistemic position of its producer. However, the so-called "shared reality bias" involves "the tendency of individuals who interact frequently to converge in their perspectives on and judgments about the world."[24] While this is epistemically useful because it helps to resolve conflicts, keep interlocutors on the same plane of understanding, and so on, it can also lead to an epistemic insulation and narrowing of hermeneutical resources that is ultimately detrimental to nondominant groups. Furthermore, at the same time as the hermeneutical imbalance advantages nondisabled people, it also potentially undermines the quality of their research. The "shared-reality bias" has the tendency to narrow the range of perspectives and interpretive frameworks

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through which researchers approach a problem. When nondisabled researchers have limited contact with people with disabilities and, perhaps especially, do not learn from scholars who experience disability, the research they produce is far less likely to represent the range of ability differences existent in our society.

I am advancing the philosophical view that epistemic diversity does matter to knowledge production in philosophy of education; specifically, that disability *matters* to philosophy of education. I am not, however, making a stronger causal claim that epistemic diversity causes better research to be produced. I do not believe there is any necessary connection between epistemic diversity and better research. Rather, following Kenneth Howe, I am simply endorsing the view that inclusive communities have better chances of producing worthwhile results in research and theorizing.[25] Since we are, as philosophers of education, especially concerned with education's relationship to democracy, we likely want to conduct research that contributes to democratic processes. And while this is not *only* enabled by democratic research practice — that is, inclusive practices in research communities — there is evidence to suggest that it makes a significant difference.

The point of this argument for epistemic inclusion is to illustrate how philosophy of education — and the scholarship of nondisabled philosophers — can actually *benefit* from the substantive inclusion of people with disabilities. Because we have these reasons to be concerned that people with disabilities are included in our field, we also have a vested interest in enacting change that is aimed toward substantive inclusion. Of course, this line of argument supports the need to remove barriers to access by creating equal opportunities for people with disabilities to be part of this academic field, but also the need to transform exclusionary institutional structures, academic norms, and cultural attitudes that I described earlier. There are many ways to send the message that historically marginalized people are welcome in historically noninclusive spaces. And while I do not have room to explore each of these here, suffice it to say that it involves a commitment on the part of academic organizations to change many of their practices.

Making Philosophy of Education Differently

My discussion has been aimed at illustrating how academic environments have been and continue to be inhospitable places for people with disabilities. This is in addition to the well-documented historical role that academic research has played in the social isolation and dehumanization of individuals with disabilities.[26] I have set out to explain how people with disabilities are systematically denied educational and social justice because of the design of academic contexts and the abilities that are consequently privileged therein. One of the main reasons we have to be concerned about the absence of people with disabilities from philosophy of education therefore has to do with the perpetuation of injustice in general, and in particular in the inequitable distribution of cultural, economic, and epistemic resources. As I have shown, we know that spaces of academic deliberation are not typically designed with diverse abilities in mind, and this can translate into unequal opportunities through lack of access or support, unfair or unnecessary expectations of ability, or preferencing of particular forms of functioning or pace of performance. Thus, attention to

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formalized access may not generate conditions of inclusion when the institutional norms of performance, organizational design, physical structure, *and* institutional culture remain intact.

The case of disability in academia suggests that substantive inclusion requires what Nancy Fraser calls "transformative remedies": these do not simply correct the inequitable outcomes of social arrangements but actually unsettle the underlying framework that produces them.[27] In fact, inclusion may be the wrong word to use, as is made plain by Claudia Ruitenberg's distinction between an ethic of inclusion and an "ethic of hospitality": while inclusion assumes that a whole exists into which another is assimilated, hospitality "does not seek to fit the guest into the space of the host, but accepts that the arrival of the guest may change the space into which he or she is received."[28] The ethic of hospitality implies a transformative change on the part of the host simply because the newcomer's presence alters or, perhaps more accurately for my argument, necessitates the alteration of the original space. This sort of transformation requires that we redesign the structures and professional norms of our spaces of academic deliberation to *expect* a range of abilities. Such a measure not only anticipates the presence of people with disabilities but also the inevitable bodily, sensory, or cognitive changes that members experience as they grow older. It requires, however, an openness to making philosophy of education differently in light of diverse bodies and abilities.

Certainly inclusion should concern all academics. However, philosophers of education are in a unique position to theorize and implement the obligations of justice that educational institutions have to all people. Moreover, philosophers of education in particular lead the charge in addressing issues of systemic inequality within learning and the deliberative environments of education. Concerns over equity in educational environments therefore strike at the core of what we do. Let's consider, then, that our scholarship could be much improved through a demonstrable commitment to transforming the conditions under which it is produced.

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11. See *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, eds. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2013).

12. See Andrea Nicki, "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma," *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 80-104.

13. See Garland-Thomson, "Misfits."

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