

A close-up photograph of two hands touching. The hand on the left is dark-skinned, and the hand on the right is light-skinned. The hands are positioned as if they are about to shake or are in a firm grip. The background is dark and out of focus.

FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

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| 09 |

Disability

The forgotten side of race science

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The impetus for this book was an article, the first line of the abstract of which reads: “Colored women in South Africa have an increased risk for low cognitive functioning.”¹ There is no question that the article reproduces racist ideas, and we are in agreement with the authors of the other chapters in this book. There is, however, another side to this article that has been less discussed. What does it mean to describe a group of people as having “increased risk for low cognitive functioning”? In much that has been written about the article, there has been almost no discussion of the social context in which the idea of somebody having, or being at risk of, “low cognitive functioning” is seen, automatically, as a form of insult.

In this chapter, we will not go into any detail about the methodological and measurement problems associated with the Sport Science article – others have done that. But we do want to point out that all the patterns of exclusion and discrimination on the basis of “race” link very strongly to other forms of exclusion and discrimination – and, notably, to discrimination on the basis of disability. People whose bodies or minds differ from what is seen as “normal” have been stigmatised and socially excluded for centuries.² This includes people with what has been termed “low cognitive functioning” and people with a range of other differences from the mainstream in terms of bodies and minds.

In a country with a history like South Africa's, it is appropriate that scholars should be very concerned with questions of race, racial exclusion, and the legacy of the racist science of eugenics. But eugenics has always been concerned not just with the issue of race as a form of exclusion and supposed inferiority, but also with disability. It was no anomaly that during the Nazi regime, for example, the first people to be murdered were killed not on the basis of their supposed racial inferiority, such as Jews and people of Sinti and Roma origin, or on the basis of what were seen as their immoral sexual habits, such as homosexuals. The first people to be killed were killed on the basis of being disabled.³ In Hitler's view, and in Nazi ideology, disabled people were commonly viewed as "useless feeders", a drain on limited state resources (and, by implication, on the hard work and sacrifice of nondisabled people), and hence worthy of extermination.⁴ What has been termed "the genocidal gaze"⁵ had its roots not only in the slaughter of Herero people in Namibia long before World War II, but also in the killing of disabled people.

Race and disability scholars have examined the intertwinings between race and disability issues in a number of ways. Most prominent at present, perhaps, is an intersectionality approach, following on the work of Crenshaw.⁶ Exploring this approach, Erelles and Minear note that there are many ways in which intersectionality can be understood and applied.⁷ These may range from scholars who regard all identity markers as social constructions to others who argue that central to understanding intersectionality must be an appreciation of categories such as race, gender, and disability, as categories of embodiment, profoundly affecting one's being in the world, even if the categories by which one is excluded are socially constructed. Recently, Loutzenheiser and Erelles note the importance of a disability approach to understanding educational exclusion for helping to "complicate spectacles of inclusion".⁸ They suggest that "disability is central to the very logic of oppression and its concomitant violence in social and educational contexts".⁹ Exclusion and oppression are common features of the experience of all excluded groups; disability is an especially productive category to study in the educational context, because a number of impairments (such as, for example, blindness or inability to walk) have an embodied reality that exists apart from social exclusion, but these impairments only become disabilities in the context of social exclusion and oppression. Watermeyer, for example, discusses how there is a reality to his visual impairment that affects his ability to browse in a library, but that there is a politics at stake when books are not available to him in accessible form.¹⁰ A disability lens is helpful for understanding racism and racial oppression in the academy, not just because of its drawing attention to issues of embodiment but also because of its showing how the educational context may act to counteract or contradict the indisputable realities of the need for appropriate inclusion of bodies which are not the norm.

Recent work examining eugenic and Nazi ideologies demonstrates how clearly ideas about racial othering and ideas about disability are not only similar and intertwined but also, to a degree, mutually constitutive. Robertson, Ley and Light note that the Nazi exterminations – and especially those murders that ended lives viewed as not worth living – were predicated on the idea that some lives have value, and some do not.¹¹ The Jewish other, the Sinti or Roma other, or any variant on an othered “racial” group, was constructed as similar in some way to the disabled other – living a life not worth living, and, crucially, becoming burdensome to the healthy population. It is clear if we look at the Sport Science article that, regardless of the authors’ intentions, there is something in the construction of coloured women’s cognitive inferiority that their lives are seen both as less worthy and as burdensome to others. The notionally neutral language of epidemiology – “increased risk for low cognitive functioning” – inserts the article into discussions of deficit on the basis of both race and disability, deficits that may be burdensome to others.

Imada makes explicit the links between ideas about disability and the colonial project more broadly:

In the broadest sense, colonialism demanded able bodyminds from subordinated subjects. Colonial projects imposed impossible regimes and expectations of self-regulation its subjects would not be able to perform. Thus, the colonized were *always already figured and constituted as disabled* [emphasis in the original], whether because of their perceived unproductivity as laborers; embodied racial-sexual differences; “unchaste” proclivities of their women; susceptibility to moral contagion and infectious diseases; or inability to learn. In the undulating colonial hall of mirrors, the inversion of these qualities – too much learnedness and the adoption of European manners, for example – could mean colonized people had failed to maintain the vigor of their “race”. Thus, we begin to see how disability operated as a flexible and capacious concept and a very useful weapon during the incarceration, elimination, and removal of unfit colonial Others.¹²

For the purposes of this chapter, a crucial feature of Imada’s argument is her recognition that the concept of disability is flexible enough to exclude and dehumanise people in a range of ways. For Imada, colonised people were constituted as disabled when they passed the threshold of being “at risk” for not being as clever or learned enough; but they were also disabled if they were indeed “clever”, as this state of learnedness removed them from their natural state.¹³ In brief, as we can see from the work of Imada and of Robertson et al., as soon as there is a discussion of race, there cannot not at some level be a discussion of disability.¹⁴ But this discussion may well be submerged and implicit.

In South Africa, because race has been, and continues to be, such a prominent and important source of discrimination and exclusion, it is probably not altogether

surprising that disability tends to be overlooked. As we have argued¹⁵ recently, though, silences around disability exclusion in higher education are serious and have negative consequences for anyone wanting to create a truly inclusive higher education system. An education system, and a system of research, that does not engage with questions of difference on the basis of diversity of bodies and minds, cannot claim to be fully inclusive. Similarly, if we view the reproduction of racist or sexist or homophobic research as a form of symbolic violence,¹⁶ it is also important to consider that the relative lack of attention given to disability in South Africa may also be a form of symbolic violence.¹⁷ Not considering disability, not seeing it, not thinking about it, is a form of effacement, a way of making disability a non-issue and, by implication, of making disabled people into non-people.

The authors of this chapter are all white South Africans, and in this we all acknowledge our historical and contemporary privilege. We work at three different universities, three of us in the privileged position of having permanent academic positions, and one of us being in a more precarious temporary academic post. Three of us have severe visual impairments that affect our daily work. In order to illustrate how disability exclusion is enacted in institutions such as our own, we now present a story from each of the disabled authors of this chapter. We will then discuss the implications of these stories for thinking about diversity in higher education in South Africa.

Story 1: Disability and the politics of time

I am a visually impaired (completely blind) lecturer at my university. Because of my disability, people are often interested to know how I do my job. They ask, for example, “How do you give feedback to your students?” “It’s quite simple,” is my usual reply, “as long as work is in an electronic format, I can read it. I have software on my computer – called a screen reader – that translates visual text into audio speech. In other words, my computer reads everything out loud.”

What I do not tell them is that the demands on a blind lecturer cannot be reduced to feedback to students – it is in actual fact, not really “quite simple”. Preparing for lectures, for example, requires some extra work on my part. Just like my colleagues, I design PowerPoint slides for each lecture. And, just like my colleagues, I prepare for lectures by reading through these slides, to familiarise myself with course content. But, unlike my sighted colleagues, I cannot stand in front of a class and read the PowerPoint slides directly from the overhead projector. And yet, I still have to be familiar with the order and content of the slides. I have to be on top of my game and relatively in control of my lectures, without any visual cues mapping my way.

But, to my mind, there are several, somewhat effective and rather time-consuming ways to surmount this obstacle. First, I could attempt to memorise the content and order of all my lecture slides. I choose not to opt for this option, not only because I do not trust my memory but also because it would take days to memorise all my slides (for some lectures I have more than 30 slides). Second, I could listen to the course content on my computer and then relay it to the class. This would certainly be the less time-consuming option. However, while some visually impaired lecturers have perfected this art, finding the perfect rhythm of speaking and listening at the same time is a skill that I have yet to master. In the end, I always find myself most comfortable with the third option – converting my slides to braille. Although this is no perfect solution, it is the one that I am most comfortable with. Brailleing slides manually (I do not own a braille printer because of its high cost) is an extremely time-consuming task. It means that I copy, word-for-word, each letter on my electronic slides.

Given all this, it is probably safe to assume that I spend more time on lecture preparations compared to my sighted colleagues. Therefore, to save at least a bit of time, I prefer to teach on the same course each year. After all, once slides are brailled, they are hopefully brailled forever. For the same reason, I prefer course content to stay the same for at least four years. This would mean that I wouldn't have to braille slides for at least three years.

But naturally, course content must change from time to time. It is, after all, important to stay up-to-date with the latest research in one's discipline. And so, not too long ago, the inevitable happened yet again – the textbook for the first years needed to change. Since I teach some lectures on this module, I immediately realised the practical ramifications this decision would have for me. Once again, I would have to braille the lecture slides. And so, over large cups of coffee, I begrudgingly buckled down and did what needed to be done. Of course, I was not cheerful about it – it is, after all, such a mind-numbingly tedious and time-consuming chore. I did not suffer in silence. I complained to anyone who wanted – and who didn't want – to listen. One early morning at work, I ran into a colleague who was also lecturing on this course. And, once again, I voiced my annoyance with the extra work I needed to do. Our conversation went something like this:

Colleague: “How was your weekend?”

Me: “Super boring. Lecture preparations, you know”.

Colleague: “I hear you. I didn't have much of a weekend, either. Nowadays it's just work, work, work”.

Me: “You can say that again. And to top it all, I had to braille my slides for next week's lectures and it took forever!”

Colleague: “That must be tough. But you know what? Whenever I want to complain about this course, I remind myself that there is no marking needed for this course. So, actually, we save a lot of time.”

What my colleague disregarded during our exchange was the fact that, while none of the lecturers on this course needed to mark test and examination scripts (a machine marks the first year scripts), only I needed to braille my work. While she rightfully pointed out that we all save some time on this course because of marking relief, she overlooked the fact that I needed to put in extra effort and time to prepare for my lectures. When she said, “that must be tough”, she validated my feelings, yet, in what followed, she dismissed and disregarded my experience under a blanket of sameness. This intolerance of difference that I’ve experienced is not unique to my situation as a disabled employee. In a fairly recent study, employees referred to their disabled colleagues as “different just like we are all different”.¹⁸ In this phrase, just as in the encounter with my colleague, there is a complete invalidation of the specific difference narrative of disabled persons. “We are all different” could be equated to proclaiming that racial differences and racism do not exist, because “we are all part of the human race”. This dismissal of the difference experience and narrative of disabled persons is a micro-invalidation, whereby disabled persons are squashed into a mould of sameness where they often do not fit comfortably.¹⁹

What do these invalidations do? For me, in that briefest of encounters with my colleague, I felt ashamed and embarrassed for raising my annoyance with this extra duty I needed to perform. I felt subtly reprimanded for failing to comprehend how fortunate I was. I felt like my experience was not important and perhaps even not a “real” experience. But mostly, I felt silenced and unheard.

So, what would have been a helpful response from my colleague? After relaying my frustration with brailing slides to another colleague, he insightfully remarked, “You have to do so much extra work.” In that moment, I felt validated. I felt that it was okay to feel frustrated about my situation. I felt heard. In that encounter, I knew that my experience differed from that of my sighted colleagues and that it was okay to have a difference narrative.

Story 2: The politics of (lack of) accommodation

I joined my current academic department through being awarded a highly competitive five-year fellowship. Application for the fellowship had to be done jointly between myself and my chosen university department, who were expected to commit themselves to hosting me, thereby expressing support for the capacity that I would bring to their programmes. Senior staff in the department knew me

well, and were thus aware of my visual impairment. In addition, I made it clear that, if successful in my application, I would require reasonable accommodation upon joining the department.

The accommodation I requested was a half-time personal assistant, mainly to speed up laborious or inaccessible administrative tasks, but also to provide face-to-face reading for research purposes. Even with the best technology, having a visual impairment will always make the core business of academic work, that is, accessing and processing information, slower and harder. This disadvantage is amplified greatly by digital resources and applications – from university administration forms to the host of online platforms essential to scholarship – that neglect the principles of universal design. Given this unethical practice, a simple task such as filling in a form, which should take five minutes or less, can take an hour, as it involves features which are inaccessible to screen reader users such as myself.

Asking for support is not easy, and it took me several years of struggle to reach clarity that my need was justified. Until that point, and still today when my confidence is down, I ascribed my struggle to one or another lack in myself; when isolated in an inaccessible work environment, self-blame is hard to resist. In the more than a decade during which I have used assistance for the many mechanical tasks that, for me, would be extremely laborious, it has become clear to me that having assistance is essential for both my academic productivity and my sense of fulfilment in my work. Spending much of one's time battling, and often failing, to perform the most menial of one's daily tasks does not build self-esteem. It also leaves very little time or energy for the core businesses of academic life, which are research and teaching. I would not have made the contribution to disability studies that I have without reasonable accommodation.

Having been awarded my fellowship, I arrived at my new department to begin a five-year contract. Even before arrival, I prepared a document explaining, in far more detail than I provide here, my need for assistance. My head of department responded positively, and the issue was forwarded to the deanery. Then the silence began.

Over the ensuing months, my host professor and I made regular inquiries about the progress of my request, but received no official reply. Someone said there was uncertainty about how such accommodation would be funded, as HR had no mechanism for such a situation. We heard that the issue had then been escalated to the office of the deputy vice-chancellor for transformation, and requested to meet with him. Our request was granted, and I again presented my account, now for the fourth or fifth time. We were told that the issue would be attended to immediately, and we would receive an answer, but again none came. This silence was extremely

difficult for me – any real engagement would have been preferable. In the silence, I wondered whether my request was seen as entitled or absurd, or so outlandish that it did not deserve a response. Needless to say, my own demons were reawakened. Why the silence? Were university officials too embarrassed by my needs, or by their responses? I could not guess. We then heard, somehow, that the issue had reached the office of the vice-chancellor, but still the months rolled by, with regular inquiries, but no decision. Unfortunately, the inability to facilitate a simple, candid conversation about issues of disability inclusion – in fact, about issues of disability *difference* – is all too familiar. I looked back at the original document I had written requesting the accommodation, and felt embarrassed by its naïve openness. To those of us who work for disability inclusion at our universities, the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s metaphor of “matter out of place”²⁰ feels all too apt. Douglas was referring to social phenomena that trouble our cultural conventions, and must somehow be “dealt with”; it is an idea applied to disability by the theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.²¹ I use this idea because it feels so viscerally resonant – when one raises one’s difference, and the response is silence, the difference itself quickly feels like “matter out of place”, like something wrong, illegitimate, ugly. And one’s difference is, much of the time, indistinguishable from oneself.

After endless lobbying, my request was finally granted, thankfully, a little over fifteen months after it had been made. For that time, my salary was being paid by my funders, to a university that had failed to provide me with the means to do the work I was contracted to do, leaving me at times wondering what I was there for. I want to be clear: I have no issue at all with open discussion and disagreement regarding the nature of appropriate reasonable accommodation for an employee such as myself. Anyone who knows anything about disability understands that these questions are complex, and, even as someone with two decades of experience as a disability studies researcher, I do not pretend to have all of the answers. But what is reflected in this story is a systemic and stubborn avoidance of engagement with the pressing questions posed by disability difference in our institutions. We remain far from a basic, broad recognition of disability inclusion as a pivotal matter of social justice, which is elemental to the diversity and transformation debate as a whole. Somehow, it remains acceptable in our institutions to avoid, dismiss, diminish or otherwise demean basic needs for inclusion presented to us by students and staff with disabilities. Correctly, there is a strong recognition that institutional, cultural and also personal changes have to take place if we are to transform our universities in terms of systemic responses to colour and gender. Corresponding, and arguably even more acute, forces of marginalisation in the case of disability remain peculiarly unattended to.

Story 3: The illegitimacy of anger

I have a visual impairment that makes it impossible to read standard-sized text or to do other tasks that require visual acuity. My disability is slightly unusual in that my vision is not so impaired that I need to walk around with a white cane or require the assistance of a guide dog. But my sight is so compromised that I can't drive, I often don't recognise people even if I know them, it is impossible to do things like draw money from an autobank and I cannot read anything that is printed (unless it is electronically manipulated to make it accessible). I guess when most people meet me for the first time they are not immediately aware that I am disabled. But anyone who is attentive enough and watches me trying to engage with any printed information will soon realise that I don't see like most other people. I often have to ask people to help me and frequently I have to rely on strangers to do things for me that I simply cannot do unassisted.

I am employed at a university in South Africa as a lecturer. I have worked in the same department for more than eight years, so I am fairly well known to my colleagues and I have made no secret of my disability, although it is far from the first thing I announce when I meet someone for the first time. My primary identity is not that of "disabled person" – there are many other things that I identify as before I called myself disabled. I don't consider myself an activist for disability rights; I probably don't make my disability prominent enough because I am too politically passive, too keen to fit in, too afraid of being dependant on the kindness of others and too eager to pass as competent.

Recently, I was called to a meeting along with other members of my department. We were told the meeting was "urgent" and that it was "very important that everyone attended". At the meeting a strategic plan was presented to us. We were informed that our input was needed on this "very important document", and that the purpose of this meeting was to "consult with staff". It was apparent to me that the chair of the meeting was trying to perform some kind of "participative leadership", in what I took to be a genuine effort to involve the staff in a planning process.

No electronic copies of the strategic plan were circulated to us before the meeting, and no hard copies were provided. At the meeting, the document was displayed on the wall via a data projector. The image projected onto the wall was small and the text was completely impossible for me to read. We were told that the document we were reviewing had to be submitted the next day, and so we needed to discuss it now.

For about the first hour of the meeting, I listened carefully to what was being said, but could not see any of the text that was being discussed. It was clear that other members of staff were able to read the document and were engaging with

the content of the strategic plan. An hour or so into the meeting, I calmly pointed out that I was unable to see any of the contents of this “important strategic plan” and that I felt excluded from the meeting and unable to participate in the process. The chair of the meeting looked surprised and replied something along the lines of, “But we thought you could see. I asked others, and we decided you could read it.” I was flabbergasted by the response, particularly because I had been emailing the chairperson regularly over the previous six months to ask for special computer equipment, because all printed text was inaccessible to me. I thought I had made it very clear to them that I cannot read any printed documents and that I need to modify text or use text-to-speech software to make any printed material accessible. I was even more flabbergasted by the fact that I was being told that other people had been consulted and that “we decided you could see”. Why were other people being consulted, and why was I not the one to be asked about what I can and cannot see? But the thing that amazed me most was that I had just found the words to say, “I can’t see” and “I am feeling excluded”, and the response of the chairperson was to tell me, “But we think you can see.”

The rest of the staff did not react, and no one said anything. There was silence for a little while. I tried to catch myself and tried not to react, but I could feel my face getting hot and red. I reiterated that I could not see the document and I asked if a copy could be circulated via email.

Then we took a break for lunch, after which the meeting continued. I checked my email and still no electronic version of the document had been provided. The discussion went on, and I sat silent, still unable to see what was being discussed and relying on the conversation to make fragmented sense of what was going on. I considered getting up and leaving the meeting. Then I considered staying in the room, but withdrawing and just getting on with my own work on my laptop. But I decided to ask once more for an electronic copy of the document. This time my tone was not so calm – I was angry. I was angry that my time was being wasted. I was angry that I was being excluded. I was angry that my needs were not acknowledged. I was angry that I had to ask twice for something that I should not have needed to ask for at all. I was angry that I had to get angry.

This time my request got a response – the document was emailed to us. I opened the document and started to manipulate it so that I could read it. But it was still difficult to follow. When you have a visual impairment like mine, you can’t skim something or scan over it – text-to-speech software reads every word on the page, and so it takes a long time to get through a document that you are seeing for the first time. I tried to make the font bigger so that the text was huge – but still I could not keep up with the other people in the meeting – I did not know what page we were on,

because the font was now so large that my version of the document was not the same as the version on the screen. I could not “read” fast enough or find the right place to be on the same page as everyone else. So I closed the document and withdrew from the meeting. I stayed in the room till the meeting ended and reminded myself that my opinion was not that important, and I probably did not have anything significant to add anyway. I felt bad for acting like a drama queen and for thinking that I was so important that I needed to be part of this conversation. I felt I had been unhelpful and difficult by asserting my needs so strongly. I felt foolish for making a scene. I felt disappointed with myself for letting this get to me. “Next time, rather don’t go to the meeting. It will be easier for everyone and much less stress”, I thought to myself as we all got up to leave at the end of the discussion. I started to wonder if perhaps I was not disabled enough to expect accommodations or perhaps if I was part of the problem for not making my disability more visible.

Discussion

When we met as an author group to discuss this chapter, we did not discuss in any detail what stories each of the disabled authors, each at a different South African university in 2019, would write. When we look at the three stories together, though, there are obvious common themes. Most striking for us is the casualness with which forms of disability discrimination occur, even in universities keen to transform, in a country in which discrimination on the basis of disability is outlawed constitutionally. There simply does not seem to be the worry that we find in ourselves and in colleagues about not wishing to discriminate on the basis, say, of race, gender or sexual orientation. Disability and its implications can be denied or overlooked – can easily be micro-invalidated.²²

A second feature of all of the stories is the way in which we, as academic disability activists ourselves, dealt with the exclusion and discrimination we faced. All of us, to some degree, blamed ourselves or doubted ourselves. Just as in issues of racial exclusion, one of the key issues to face is the internalisation of stigma; we also need to face our own internalised stigma and what it does to us. In the case of disability, though, this has another layer. We have suggested elsewhere²³ that in the complex emotional politics of disability, disabled people are called upon not only to manage their own disability but also to manage how nondisabled people respond to disability – disabled people are tasked with taking on the emotional labour of making disability palatable for nondisabled people. This includes making the denial of disability – the refusal even to see or acknowledge it – somehow OK. The disability scholar, Sally French, who has a visual impairment, describes being asked by her anxious parents when out on a walk, “Can you see the rainbow?”²⁴ French could not see the rainbow,

but knew that her visual impairment would cause distress to her family. So, she pretended that she could see the rainbow. In so doing, she colluded in her parents' denial of disability, their unwillingness to see it. In very different circumstances, in all three stories, we see even empowered and articulate white academics colluding in their own exclusion, and blaming themselves implicitly for being the objects of discrimination.

This observation has profound implications for how we think about the project of this book as a whole. There is no question that racism, sexism and homophobia, for example, are all issues that transforming universities need to consider. But if our universities continue to overlook and ignore issues of disability and to disavow the struggles for disability inclusion, we cannot say that they have overcome the legacy of race science. Thinking about disability and giving it its due is core to any real transformation project.

Endnotes

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