

Disability Identity and Social-Symbolic Work



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Disability Identity and Social-Symbolic Work

ABSTRACT

Management research on disability has been primarily guided by Stone and Colella's (1996) seminal work focusing on the 'treatment' of disabled individuals¹ by co-workers. Subsequently, the perspectives of managers and organizations in the recruitment, selection, performance appraisal, inclusion, etc. of disabled individuals received considerable attention (for review, Colella & Stone, 2005; Vornholt, Uitdewilligen, & Nijhuis, 2013). Despite being the largest minority group in the world (15 percent of the world population (UN World Health Organization, 2011)), disabled individuals have been continuously projected as recipients of managerial actions and remain an underrepresented set of actors in the academic literature on social relations and work (Dovidio, Pagotto, & Hebl, 2011). Owing to these ableist assumptions prevailing in the society and workplace, disabled individuals have crafted their ways of negotiating with the disability identity² (Darling, 2013) and developed their insights and alternative means to navigate through the notions of performing tasks in a 'normal' way (O'Brien, 2001). Their internal subjective experiences and the agency of the disability identity in mobilizing the immediate context demand attention (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016). Hence, this dissertation attempts to give voice to disabled individuals by examining the agency of disability identity and social-symbolic work³ in facilitating the experiences of disabled individuals.

¹ Owing to the social model of disability, I have used the term 'disabled individuals' and restrained from using euphemistic terms like individuals with special needs, differently abled etc. Throughout the manuscript, I have used terms disabled individuals, people with disabilities, person/employee/individual with a disability. Although these terms differ in their epistemological standing keeping the person first vs identity first debate in mind, but prior management literature has used these terms interchangeably and hence, I am following the same.

² Disability identity is a part of worker's self-concept defined by having a disability (Bogart, 2015). Unlike other social identities, it is considered to be variable and unique based on the experiences of the disabled individual.

³ Social-symbolic work includes various forms of work such as identity work, emotion work, institutional work, strategy work, cultural work etc. wherein actors (individuals/organizations) expend their efforts to affect their social-symbolic context (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012).

Drawing from the work of Maitlis (2009; 2012), the first research question discusses the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) process carved out by individuals with an acquired disability (a spinal cord injury/amputated leg) by explicating their narratives from sixteen autobiographies. These narratives mainly focus on the agency of the disability identity and forms of social-symbolic work (in this context, emotion work, identity work, and narrative identity work) in crafting new work identities for themselves thereby overcoming the trauma of an acquired disability and engaging in a growth process. The first part of the dissertation specifically contributes to the PTG literature by paying attention to the *process* of growth and by seeking responses from those who have actually experienced the phenomena of PTG. The findings illustrate a set of recursive responses to the traumatic experiences of acquired disability leading to three growth pathways- Commitment Path, Diversity Path, and Contribution Path.

Moving closer to the workplace, the second research question builds on the work of Baldrige and Veiga (2001). It explores the social-symbolic work undertaken by disabled employees in claiming spaces/seeking accommodation for themselves at the workplace and in sensitizing organizations and co-workers about their presence. This interview-based study explicates the strategies deployed by 43 disabled employees in proactively seeking accommodation and creating awareness about their disability in their respective organizations and immediate social spaces. The findings indicate that strategies include the use of artifacts, labels, assistive devices, etc. to signal the disability to observers and overcome the obstacles, seeking accommodation by waiting for a right moment to ask, eliminating threats to the continuity of self by discussing the advantages of change and benefits for the organization and engaging in disability activism at organizational and policy level. This implies that the agency of disability identity and desire to prove self-worth in the workplace motivates the disabled employees to seek new ways to communicate their disability and ask for their rights. The underlying argument is that although in the past organizations have modified their policies and processes to enhance disability

inclusion, the perspective of a disabled employee would have significant implications in augmenting their workplace experiences.

Keywords: *accommodation, disability identity, disabled individuals, post-traumatic growth, social-symbolic work*

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)

BAFTA: British Academy of Film and Television Arts

BYOD: Bring your own device

CA: Chartered Accountant

CRPD: Convention on Rights for Persons with Disability

DDA: Disability Discrimination Act

ILO: International Labour Organization

MLA: Modern Language Association

OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

POS: Positive Organizational Scholarship

PTG: Post Traumatic Growth

PTGI: Post Traumatic Growth Inventory

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

PWD: Persons with Disabilities Act 1995

RPWD: Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

UN: The United Nations

UPIAS: Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation

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