
Doing differences at work: Comparing practices in inclusive and sheltered work institutions for persons with learning difficulties

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Résumé

There is a large body of literature discussing and researching the intersections of dis/ability and gender (Thomas 2006). Rather than assuming that disabled women are subjected to double oppression, we argue that the intersections of gender and dis/ability vary in concrete situations that are structured through social norms and institutional backgrounds.

We start by pointing out that both gender and dis/ability are embodied categories, which are enacted in everyday practices. The notion of doing gender (West and Zimmerman 2002) implies that gender differences are reproduced in social interactions which mostly take place in institutionalized settings such as work places. The concept of undoing claims that gender differences can also be deconstructed, reduced or ignored (Deutsch 2007). This approach can be applied to other identity categories such as dis/ability (Moser 2006).

Against this conceptual background, our talk will present empirical findings from own ethnographic research conducted in inclusive and sheltered workplaces for persons with learning difficulties in Germany. We draw on one recently published study (Karim 2021) and our on-going research project "Dispositifs of 'Dis/ability' in Transformation: (employed) work as biographical experience and everyday practice in the context of dis/ability", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and conducted at the University of Cologne (Waldschmidt et al. 2020).

We shed light on how dis/ability is performed in everyday work situations. The observed strategies show that persons with learning disabilities try to avoid, diminish or modify the association with disability and tend to emphasise other identity categories, such as gender, with the intention of bonding with other persons who are perceived as non-disabled.

Finally, our study indicates that the work context is significant. Individual practices vary between different kinds of institutionalized workplaces. Dis/ability turns out to be less of a dichotomy and more a hierarchical spectrum in which people locate themselves in relation to others. The institutional framing of dis/ability is key to understand how dis/ability and gender are enacted in daily work practices.

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