

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE



Department of Women's and Gender Studies

**CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY AMONG YOUNG STUDENTS LIVING
WITH VISUAL OR PHYSICAL DISABILITIES AT A UNIVERSITY IN
CAPE TOWN**

A Mini-Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Women's and Gender Studies Department,

University of the Western Cape,

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA Degree in Women and Gender Studies.

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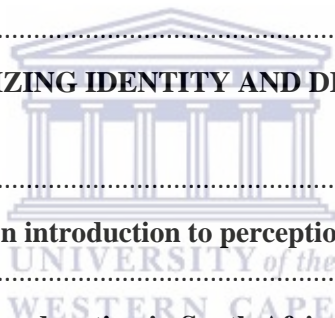
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ABSTRACT

Not all disabilities are the same and the way that society may respond to people with disabilities depends on their “disability” and how their body deviates from the appearance norms of society. People with disabilities constitute a significant portion of the South African population. A body of research and physical evidence shows that people with disabilities may face certain obstacles or limitations in fulfilling a normal life. Obstacles include perceptions of disabilities, negative stigma and attitudes, barriers to an environment which is accessible for people with disabilities, and constructions of ableism. In a way, these obstacles influence the way people with disabilities construct their identity. Beyond this, the voices of people with disabilities are not always heard and their personal experiences are not always given political recognition.

This research aimed to explore how a group of students living with a physical or visual disability constructed their identities in their environment or society. A feminist qualitative method was conducted. The study focused on the experiences and perceptions of nineteen to twenty-seven year old female and male students with disabilities. Out of the six participants, two were coloured, three were black and one participant is classified as coloured, but identifies as biracial. A semi-structured interview was used for data collection and a Qualitative Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. Social constructionism and intersectionality were useful theoretical approaches adopted in exploring the lived experiences of students with disabilities.

The results of this study revealed that students with disabilities find living with a disability as not being a barrier to living a fulfilling life. Students with disabilities construct their identities in a way that frees them from ideologies which shape the experience of disability in a negative way. However, the study revealed that negative barriers to identity construction still exist. These barriers come in the form of negative perceptions and stigma of disability, ableism and the medical model. The study further revealed that when the lived experiences of students with disabilities are understood through the lens of gender, race and class, these social divisions overlap and are cumulative on the effects of student’s experiences. The one major barrier in identity construction that the study revealed is the negative social perceptions of disability. The way in which students feel that they belong in their society is representative of how they respond to negative social constructions of disability.

Key words: Disabilities, narratives, perceptions, experiences, students, feminist qualitative approach, social constructionism, identity, intersectionality, Cape Town.



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the study

Disabilities have not been given adequate attention in research globally, yet people with disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from full participation in different societies. The World Health Organization indicates that 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability and in South Africa, the prevalence of disability is at 7.5% according to a 2011 South African census. Disability is more prevalent among females than males and the 2011 census revealed gendered prevalence to be 8.3% and 6.5 %, respectively. What's more, disability is shown to be more prevalent with increasing age and that 53.2% of people over the age of eighty-five experience a level of disability in their life.

Defining disability is controversial due to the differing interpretations of it. There are many terms that people prefer to adopt when describing those who live with a disability. Perhaps adopting Collier's (2012) understanding of using a "person-first language" will construct people in such a way where they are not defined by a medical diagnosis. In this way, the disability of the individual becomes a secondary characteristic and acknowledges the personhood of that individual. Adopting a "person-first language" is an example of the progress that has been made in an attempt to break down attitudinal barriers towards disability. However, the Research Brief on Disability and Equality in South Africa (2013-2017) indicates that a major obstacle to inclusion for people with disabilities is that disability is still stigmatized. Stigma and negative perceptions of disability are key explorations in this study, and will be unpacked later on. Overall, this study focuses on how students with disabilities construct their identity in their environment or society, which is further framed by the negative perceptions and stigma of disability. A limitation to understanding constructions of identity among students is the sparse literature on disabilities in higher education, globally and particularly in South Africa. South African scholars who have researched disability within higher education, illustrate the need for further research and for a continued debate within higher education (McKenzie et. al., 2014; Ohajunwa et. al., 2015; Mutanga, 2014). It is envisaged that this study can contribute to the

scholarly field of disability and to social justice and empowerment for people with disabilities in higher education and other similar contexts.

In an attempt to comprehend the lived experiences of disability, narratives of students with disabilities are used to investigate how they construct their identity in their environment. Another key thing to remember is that narratives can be used to deconstruct normalized beliefs around disability as the true experiences of people are told through narratives (Yuval-Davis, 2010). It is through these narratives that social barriers and challenges encountered by people with disabilities emerge. The influence that oppressive systems have on constructions of identity is also explored through student's narratives. Furthermore, this research intends to understand how students define disabilities; how people's perceptions of disability influence student's identity construction, the influence of the students' environment on identity construction, and how social divisions such as gender, class and race mediate identity construction. The answer to these questions will be achieved by using social constructionism as a theoretical approach, to demonstrate that disability is a social construct. Intersectionality, as a theoretical approach, further supports the research by emphasizing that race, class and gender (as social divisions) are experienced differently among students. Intersectionality is a very important approach to use, because it highlights that the experiences of people with disabilities are not the same. This approach to understanding society reminds us that groups of people cannot be viewed through a homogenous lens as they do not share the same experiences.

In understanding how a group of university students with disabilities construct their identities in their environment or society, this thesis unpacked the following questions;

- How do students with disabilities construct their identities within higher education at a university in Cape Town, South Africa?
- What does it mean to have a disability?
- How are the identities of students with disabilities shaped by perceptions of what it means to have a disability in their context?
- How does the experience of a student's environment shape how they construct their identity?
- Are social factors such as race, gender and class, experienced differently amongst students with disabilities? How do these factors mediate the construction of identity?

This research was inspired by insight gained through an internship at an organization that taught skills to people with disabilities, for them to be better equipped for the workplace in the United States. Upon interacting with different individuals, it was fascinating to familiarize with different personalities and discover how disability identity can be constructed. Thus, it became apparent that further research could significantly contribute to a scholarly approach to disabilities, and that such research could be used as a platform for people to share their experiences and knowledge. By allowing students with disabilities to speak about their experiences, the personal becomes political (bell hooks, 2000). We also need to view students with disabilities as those who have lived through a particular experience, as experts on their issues (Ramazanoglu, 2002). This research also provides a platform for students with disabilities to tell their own stories about what it is like to live with a disability, within their own context. I hope that this research will contribute to the scholarly understanding of disability identity and motivate other authors to continue the discussion of constructions of disability identity in society. This research was conducted in the hope of using constructions of identity among students with disabilities to attempt to change negative mindsets and normalized views of what it means to live with a disability in society, and particularly in the space of higher education.

1.2. Disability policies in South Africa

The population of people with disabilities is protected by the South African Constitution and section nine of the Constitution states that an individual cannot be discriminated against because of their disability. Similarly, The White Paper of South Africa on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015) was established to improve the lives of people with disabilities, and to move towards an inclusive society. “Persons with disabilities must be afforded equitable rights as all other people in society, because the provision of these rights enables full participation in the life of society” (p. 33). Such equitable rights include the right to education, health care, housing, transport, sport, recreation, culture, social development services, food security and family life. These rights were not previously afforded to people with disabilities under the South African Apartheid system, as people with disabilities had limited access to “fundamental socio-economic rights such as employment, education, appropriate health and welfare services” (Howell, Chalklen, Alberts, 2006, p. 48).

However, to rectify past injustices, the White Paper (2015) emphasizes that people with disabilities should have the right to fully participate in community life through a supportive and barrier-free environment. Through building socially cohesive communities, improving education, health outcomes and building safer communities, social cohesion can be possible. Therefore, by having a barrier-free environment, more support for people with disabilities to participate in community life can be achieved (White Paper on the Rights of Person with Disabilities, 2015).

Such evidence shows that, a connection can be made between the facets of the environment and public policies, however, the way in which the government implements these policies reflects widespread societal attitudes and values (Brown, 2001). The fact that people with disabilities still face challenges due to societal attitudes, prejudices and negative perceptions towards disabilities, indicates that established policies have had little effect. Thus, whilst the South African Constitution has established policies that are intended to benefit people, this implementation is not sufficient to drastically change their lives.

1.3. A global overview on living with a disability in society

Existing literature frames disability as a problem that is not only related to the body, but also to society (Asch, 2001; White, 2005; Shakespeare, 2009; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Oliver, 2013) and this framework is important in challenging outdated approaches towards disability. Outdated and traditional approaches to understanding disability create a divide between how bodies are constructed and understood. An example of an outdated and traditional approach is that of the medical model. Medical models have created an ideal and normalized body, which does not include bodies considered to be different or disabled, and these bodies constructed as disabled are seen as needing to be fixed (Hughes, 2007; Asch, 2001; Williams, 2001; Thomson, 2001). In turn, the medical model creates constructions of normalcy which exclude those minds, bodies and sexualities that do not fit into a particular culture's concept of what is normal or acceptable (Mohamed & Shefer, 2015). As such, a fear of imperfectability arises, creating a social norm in society, or what is described as disability discourse.

Because of these negative constructions of disability, people with disabilities are in a sense invisible and unaccounted for by mainstream society (Asch, 2001; Thomson, 2002; Campbell, 2008; White, 2005 & Shakespeare, 2009). Coupled with the constructions of normalcy, built

environments exclude people with disabilities by not meeting their needs or bearing in mind human variation. Above all, it seems pertinent to remember that the problem of disability is not only associated with health and biology, but also associated to a lack of civil, social and economic rights (Asch, 2001; White, 2005; Shakespeare, 2009; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Oliver, 2013). Such an approach to understanding disability is representative of the social model which is unpacked further on.

All things considered, whilst it is important to acknowledge how disabilities are negatively constructed, this study also stresses that disabilities should not be viewed through a homogenous lens, as not all people experience disability in the same way. Whilst disability does correlate with disadvantage, not all people with disabilities are equally disadvantaged. However, this study also highlights that one disadvantaging factor that people with disabilities may share is the negative stigma and perceptions of disability. This study used the narratives of students with disabilities to contribute to a scholarly field that brings disability awareness to the forefront. It also illustrates that people with disabilities can redefine what it means to live with a disability (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999)

1.4. Background on disabilities in higher education

Despite a democratic constitution, people with disabilities still experience many inequalities in South Africa and access to quality education is one such barrier. Access to quality education is a challenge for people with disabilities and as well as the fact that three hundred thousand children are currently not enrolled in schools (Ground Up, 2017). A lack of enrolment is due to an increase in waiting lists for special needs schools, which continues to constrain large numbers of children from receiving an education. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) indicates that inclusive education is a right for people with disabilities. However, with a staggering number of children not enrolled in schools, the prospects of university admission are reduced and Stats SA (2011) indicates that a majority of people with disabilities between the ages of twenty and twenty-four are not enrolled in tertiary education.

Within the current debates on basic education, issues pertaining to higher education should be included (Mutanga, 2014) to address inconsistencies, especially those affecting students with disabilities. A major inconsistency in higher education is that students with disabilities are not

represented well, and therefore may not want to disclose their disability (Bell et. al., 2015). A better representation of students with disabilities can be achieved by including people with disabilities in research processes (McKenzie et. al., 2014) and including disability as part of the curriculum (Ohajumwa et. al., 2014). These scholars highlight the need for perceptions of disabilities to change, by means of future research and curriculums being more inclusive of disability. Further, future research by scholars should consider using people with disabilities to guide the research process (McKenzie et. al., 2014). In doing so, future research can yield results that have practical implications in the lives of people with disabilities. The involvement of people with disabilities in research is significant, as people are experts on their own experiences and should be included in disability policies that aim to bring about change. Such involvement can monitor the impact of programs set out to address discrimination, change perceptions and combat stereotypes and prejudices. The United Nations has established disability policies to guide universities in achieving inclusion (McKenzie et. al., 2014; Ohajumwa et. al., 2015). However, with Stats SA (2011) indicating a small population of students with disabilities at universities, it is clear that this inclusion has not been fully achieved.

The lack of inclusion within institutions of higher learning can also be attributed to negative social constructions of disability. However, despite negative social constructions of disability, a growing body of research foregrounds that positive disability identity can be achieved through deconstructing what is considered to be normal (Shakespeare, 2009). Narratives in this study are used to deconstruct negative understandings of disability and brings true realities of disability to the forefront. By redefining disability outside of normalized social constructions of disability, students with disabilities can construct their identities within their own understanding of disability.

1.5. Organization of study

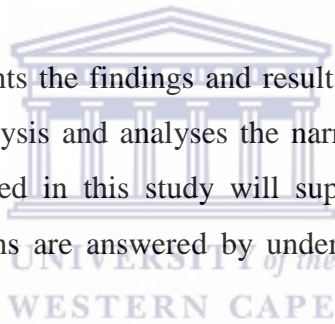
CHAPTER 1: This chapter has introduced the key arguments of the thesis and what the thesis aims to investigate and the questions it will ask, to obtain data that will achieve the objectives of this thesis. This chapter also explains the significance of the chosen theoretical frameworks used in the study. Lastly, the chapter has also provided a brief background of literature around disability issues, especially within South African higher education.

CHAPTER 2: This chapter will unpack the literature review presenting key arguments in the constructions of identity. Identity as a concept will be discussed in depth. In understanding constructions of identity, perceptions of disability are explored with a focus on ableism, medical models and stigma surrounding disabilities. The challenges of environmental factors for people with disabilities will be explored, as well as how gender, race and class can be understood through intersectionality. The social constructionist approach will provide an analytical lens to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which students construct their identities around their disability.

CHAPTER 3: This chapter presents key methodological practices that are used to undertake this research such as semi-structured interviewing, transcribing, data analysis, self-reflexivity and ethics. It will discuss the importance of these approaches and why they are suitable for the current research.

CHAPTER 4: This chapter presents the findings and results of the research. These themes are representative of the thematic analysis and analyses the narratives of students with disabilities. The scholarship that has been used in this study will support the findings in this research. Furthermore, the research questions are answered by understanding the narratives of students with disabilities.

CHAPTER 5: This chapter presents the conclusion of the research and provides recommendations and also suggests possibilities for further research.



CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORIZING IDENTITY AND DISABILITY IDENTITY

2.1. Introduction

The following chapter introduces global debates on disabilities and then unpacks the complexity of identity and how identity is theorized. Identity is a contested subject, and research suggests that if identity is used appropriately, the experiences of people with disabilities can be better understood through personal narratives and accounts (Yuval-Davis, 2010). This study draws on students personal narratives and accounts to explore identity constructions. Furthermore, this study focuses on how politics of belonging and the importance of belonging shape meaning in the construction of identity. It is noteworthy that the experiences of people with disabilities are not the same, just as the identities of abled bodied people vary across social divisions like gender, race, and class. Able bodied as well as people with disabilities all possess different identities which are shaped and influenced by the aforementioned social divisions. This study therefore uses intersectionality and social constructionism as theoretical approaches to understand the social construction of disability, and the influence of social divisions in the construction of identity.

2.2. Global debates on disabilities: An introduction to perceptions of disability and disability identity

Research on disabilities portrays the scholarly approaches to how disabilities are perceived and understood (Hughes, 2007; Asch, 2001; Williams, 2001; Thomson, 2001). These perceptions are usually framed within negative societal constructions of disability. However, other claims also show that narratives of people with disabilities contribute to deconstructing negative perceptions of disability. Positive disability identity can be achieved by redefining what it means to live with a disability (Shakespeare, 2009). The way disability is defined is further framed through an ableist ideal and how society is shaped by ableism (Campbell, 2008). People with disabilities are

discriminated against and are not considered to be individuals who can live a fulfilling life, as their disability is seen as a hindrance. Therefore, the stigmatization of disability defines disability as a characteristic that is contrary to the norm of a social unit and marks an individual as less valuable in society (Link & Phelan, 2001).

A key aspect to redefining disability is also understanding that identity is a porous category which is constantly changing (Hall, 2000). Thus, by considering that identity is a concept that is always in process and never complete, new positive disability identities can emerge (Shakespeare, 2009; Siebers, 2011). Using narratives as a means of understanding constructions of identity is extremely useful, as the true experiences and knowledge of people with disabilities are represented through their stories (Yuval-Davis, 2010). By making the personal political, disability can be used as a form of political representation, (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Siebers, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011) allowing people with disabilities to free themselves from ideologies that are limiting in their daily lives (Siebers, 2011). Freedom from negative ideologies may also frame the way in which people with disabilities feel a sense of belonging in their society. Belonging is a psychological need that is shared among all people in society (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and when boundaries prevent people with disabilities from being part of a political community, their belonging becomes threatened (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Furthermore, research has shown that people with disabilities are in a sense invisible and unaccounted for by mainstream society (Asch, 2001; Thomson, 2002; Campbell, 2008; White 2005; Shakespeare, 2009). Although activists advocate for civil rights in the lives of people with disabilities, the activism and implementation are often not enough to dramatically improve their quality of life. Law, science, medical and political models of disability are embedded in social and cultural norms and consequently, these models create barriers for people with disabilities (Asch, 2001; Campbell, 2008; Thompson, 2002; Shakespeare, 2009). Furthermore, built environments “other” people with disabilities by not meeting their needs or bearing in mind human variation. Therefore, the problem of disability is a civil, social and economic right and not a problem associated with health and biology (Asch, 2001; White, 2005; Shakespeare, 2009).

Evident in literature and also emerging in this study, is the negative societal stigma and perceptions of disability, disadvantaging people with disabilities. Such negative understandings view disability as a deficit (Thomas, 2002) and a condition that requires fixing (Hughes, 2007;

Asch, 2001). The social model points out that people with disabilities are often disadvantaged because of their social setting, and not because their body limits them (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Oliver, 2013). This research will further reveal that despite social models attempting to redefine disabilities, negative societal understandings of disability take precedence in how the lives and experiences of disability are understood. Yet, the power also lies in the hands of people with a disability, to redefine its meaning (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999). As narratives of students with disabilities were used in this study, it is significant to understand the context of higher education in South Africa in more depth.

2.3. Experiences of students in higher education in South Africa

Several academic authors in South Africa have researched the current issues of disability in the spaces of higher education. Authors such as Bell, Carl and Swart (2016), Mckenzie, Mji and Gcaza (2014), Mutanga (2017) and Ohajumwa, Mckenzie and Lorenzo (2015) have contributed to this sparse field of research. Little research exists in the field that encapsulates the challenges that people with disabilities face in higher education and the possible solutions to achieving inclusion. As indicated earlier on, people with disabilities are stigmatized and marginalized because of how disability is understood and perceived. As a result, students with disabilities at university do not disclose that they have a disability, especially if their disability is not visible to the naked eye. Having a hearing impairment is an example of an invisible disability and because of the nature of this disability, students may prefer not to identify with a deaf identity (Bell et. al., 2016). However, not disclosing their hearing impairment can negatively affect the student's educational success (Bell et. al., 2015).

Underrepresentation of students with disabilities in spaces of higher education is a contributing factor to non-disclosure practices. Self-identity can be related to non-disclosure practices, as student's perceptions of "how others view them plays a pivotal role in their interactions with both institutional processes and structures, and this may have important implications for their academic success" (Bell et. al., 2015, p.7). It is recommended that university should play a pivotal role in ensuring inclusion among all students at their respective institutions. The pressure to ensure inclusion, for the South African government, is enforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (McKenzie et.al., 2014; Ohajunwa et. al., 2015). The convention sought to achieve rights for people with disabilities by addressing

discrimination, changing perceptions and combating stereotypes and prejudices (McKenzie et. al., 2014; Ohajunwa, et. al., 2015).

The debates that surround basic education in South Africa should include the issues pertaining to institutions of higher education (Mutanga, 2014), especially for the purpose of redressing certain inconsistencies. In South Africa, these inconsistencies are manifested in the education system, which continues to be shaped by historical legacies. Communities classified as black during the Apartheid era were systematically oppressed through Bantu education. Today, the effects of this oppressive system are still evident, as high dropout rates among black students are apparent and access, success and completion rates are racially skewed (Mutanga, 2014). Access, success and completion rates can also be understood through an intersectional approach and on how gender, race, disability and language have varying effects on student's realities. Nonetheless, universities should aim to offer opportunities to develop skills and knowledge required for the development of a flourishing society and this will be beneficial to oppressed and marginalized groups (Mutanga, 2014).

Other authors have proposed solutions to implement policies recommended by the United Nations. McKenzie et.al., (2014) and Ohajunwa et. al., (2015) argue that universities should place emphasis on people with disabilities to guide future research and for disabilities to be included in the university curricula. McKenzie et.al., (2014) suggested that including people with disabilities as research partners, would have practical application in their own lives. This type of research is considered to be emancipatory research, as it has a transformative aim (McKenzie et. al., 2014). Research becomes transformative when people with disabilities are more than participants in a research; they set the research agenda, "as well as conducting, commissioning and disseminating the research" (p. 2). In current literature on disabilities, this involvement in research is apparent where people with disabilities are used only as participants. According to McKenzie et. al., (2014), this is considered to be a weak engagement and research should be communicated in a way that provides evidence to action. Often, current research provides literature about the experiences and challenges of people with disabilities. However, the research itself doesn't always have an impact on their lives. Thus, research suggests that what is needed is improved research that can be translated into policy and practice (McKenzie et. al., 2014). A stronger

engagement from people with disabilities in the processes that affect their lives, can also have an impact on how others view them as people.

Essentially, there is need to change perceptions of disability, especially at academic levels. The awareness students with disabilities by academics would be heightened, if disabilities were included in the academic curriculum (Ohajunwa, et. al., 2015). Ohajunwa et. al., (2015) further assert that an inclusion of disability within the curriculum has not yet been given the recognition it deserves, because the curriculum is overcrowded. A positive aspect though is that university staff are showing an interest in including disabilities in their teaching. Such institutional interests can be seen as a starting point to fulfil an agenda that supports disabilities. Improving the representation of disabilities in higher education in this way will also influence the way in which students construct their identities in their university environment.

2.4. Theorizing identity as fluid and changing

Identity defines an individual through traits and characteristics, social relations, roles and social group memberships (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012). Identity can also be understood as a shared origin with another person or group, as well as being stable and always remaining the same, however such an approach is essentialist (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012). When considering disability identity, it should be understood as a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context (Link & Phelan, 2001; Michalko, 2002) and has a close relationship with history, structural forces and cultural images (Oliver, 2013).

When identity is recognized as fluid (Borsay, 2002; Hall, 2000) new sources of identities surface, which move beyond the identities homogenized by society, that identify all people with disabilities under one ascribed single identity (Murugami, 2009). Research suggests that old approaches to identity first need to be deconstructed to allow for a new approach of identity to emerge. Deconstructing old approaches ultimately forces one to consider that identity is a concept that is never complete and is always in process (Hall, 2000; Oyserman et. al., 2012; Scott-Hill, 2008). Indeed, identity is constantly under erasure and “in interval between reversal and emergence” (Hall, 2000, p. 2), and therefore the way in which a person with a disability constructs their identity is an ongoing process and changes over time. Disability identity can be constructed in a way that creates a self-identity based on what people with disabilities are able to

do, as opposed to how they do it (Watson, 2005). Consequently, people with disabilities can challenge those identities which are potentially disabling, allowing for greater freedom and mobility in society, whilst at the same time reconstructing what is considered by society to be normal (Siebers, 2011; Watson, 2005).

2.5. Constructions of identity

A significant amount of research has shown the influence that society has on shaping and constructing the identity of a person with a disability, as identity formation of people with disabilities is usually constrained by a marginalizing society (Hughes, Russel & Paterson, 2005; Yanchak, 2005; Shahnasarian, 2001; Murray, 2002; Shakespeare, 2009). However, some scholars argue that identity constructions could be a choice (Darling, 2013; Watson, 2005), and people with disabilities can choose how they construct their identity, despite the negative perceptions of disability. Generally, perceptions of disabilities tend to be negative, and people with disabilities need to construct their identities around normalized perceptions. These perceptions stem from notions of ableism which govern the ideal body as “non-disabled” and unmarked, consequently, erasing the reality of human diversity (Campbell, 2008; Asch, 2001). Furthermore, other negative perceptions stem from how disabilities are stigmatized (Link & Phelan, 2001) and such stigma creates a mark on bodies with disabilities.

Disability identity has been devalued due to otherness, stigma and ideals of ableism (Ingstad, 2011; Link & Phelan, 2001; Campbell, 2008). Stigma and social constructions of disabilities have a huge influence on shaping disability identities. Nonetheless, people with disabilities have the agency to redefine what it means to live with a disability. By reconstructing what is considered to be “normal, people with disabilities can achieve and construct positive self-identity (Watson, 2005; Darling, 2013). Understanding the constructions of identities among students explores the diverse ways in which identity matters in society through self and belonging. If identity is assumed to be socially constructed and not neutral, people with disabilities play a significant role in determining how their life experiences fundamentally shape their identity. Identity as a socially constructed and fluid entity will be further explored throughout this paper.

2.5.1. Using identity narratives

In an effort towards constructing disability identity, young students used this research as a platform to share their life narratives. “A narrative is a semiotic, mostly linguistic presentation of at least two successive state of affairs, events or actions” (Teichert, 2004, p. 181). Individuals use and construct narratives to internalize, evolve and integrate a story of themselves (McAdams, 2008). People begin to construct their narratives and identities during their adolescent years and these constructions continue to be worked on across adult life (McAdams, 2008). The “self” comes to terms with its society through narrative identities, which allow sense to be made of lives, through gender, social class and communities (McAdams, 2008). Narratives are powerful because they serve in rejecting traditional misrepresentations of disabilities and the voices of people with disabilities become a political entity, which is controlled by and for people with disabilities (Abbas, Church, Frazee & Panitch, 2004). Therefore, challenging stereotypes, being more unified and sharing narratives are all part of developing disability culture (Shakespeare, 2009).

By researching the experiences of people, identity is theorized better than abstract or generic reflections, and meaning can also be revealed without committing the error of defining it (Yuval-Davis, 2010; Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2006). The use of narratives is useful in analysing the disability experience as it brings forth unheard voices and therefore individuals take part in a process that constructs their everyday life stories, which is a participatory and engaging process (Pasupathi, 2000; Thorne, 2000). For this reason, narratives are “a necessary condition for the existence of any notion of agency and subjectivity” (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 267), which provides people with disabilities the freedom to narrate their lives and construct their identity, outside of a “taken-for-granted” identity that is shaped by negative societal perceptions of disability (Burr, 2015).

Yuval-Davis (2010, p. 267) cited Margaret Wetherell (2006) who argued that identity narratives provide people with a sense of personal order due to a connection between personal experience and larger social and political structure. Narratives express themes of agency and life stories which focus on “personal concern for things like power, achievement, personal mastery, impact on others, status and independence” (Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2006, p. 85). Narratives also play an important role in understanding groups of people since narratives yield stories that we tell

about our lives and ourselves and “construct accounts which encompass plot, causality and conflict” (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001, p. 6).

A narrative is also an example of how people can show their agency, and the way that agency is constructed is constituted by the self. Bamberg (2010, p. 7) sees agency as typically viewed in terms of “who-is-in-control,” asking “whether it is the person, the I-as-subject, who constructs the world the way it is, or whether the person, the me as undergoer, is constructed by the way the world is, subjected to it.” This definitely relates to constructions of identity amongst students with disabilities as they have the agency to choose whether they personally define what a disability experience is, or they choose to subject themselves to societal constructions of disability. Furthermore, when students with disabilities have agency in their lives, it shows their capacity to act independently and make choices. Identity becomes a political entity, used as a paradigm for constructions of disability identity when people with disabilities express agency, and act in a manner that is not controlled by society (Davis, 2006).

2.5.2. Identity as political representation

bell hooks (2000) says that the personal can be political. The lives of people with disabilities are threatened by an ableist society that has denied people with disabilities basic human rights; therefore, politics becomes a useful paradigm to reclaim stolen rights (Davis, 2006). A repressive society can be analysed using a disability analysis, which can assist in interrogating the state of identity and point towards future politics (Davis, 2011). Future politics, which include a representation of people with disabilities actively, exposes “the effects of ideology on individuals, providing a rational basis for the acts of political emancipation” (Siebers, 2011, p. 84). Furthermore, representation through people’s narratives can make sense of the experience of illness and impairments and the way in which it has been constructed and shaped by social structures (Williams, 2001).

Disability identity can be used as a form of representation as well as for political development, which is similar to other forms of political representation (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Siebers, 2011; Davis, 2011). Such a political representation is important for people with disabilities to free themselves from ideologies that are limiting in their daily lives (Siebers, 2011). Ideologies that shape the experience of disability are characterized by negative perceptions and stigma, which is

embodied within the experience of disability (Link & Phelan, 2001). With shared experiences through common identity, people with disabilities can “gather together into groups for the purpose of better struggling against injustices” (Siebers, 2011, p. 89).

Identity politics can also contribute to the success of a democratic society because this allows the voiceless to be heard, which in turn, represents significant communities of interests, minor affiliations and different points of views (Siebers, 2011). Students with disabilities need this representation to construct their identities in a way that reframes the experience of living with a disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). It is worth noting that although identity as a narrative can be used as a political representation, people living with disabilities still feel the need to belong in society. Feeling part of a community is a need shared by all people, however when society perpetually excludes someone, this belonging is threatened and compromised.

2.5.3. Belonging and emotional attachment

Identity is constructed by recognizing common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, and individuals have many identities within distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy and play roles (Hall, 1996; Stryker & Burke, 2000). An individual creates different identities based on the groups they interact with (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Shame and pride are learned by interacting within groups, and an individual will construct their identity based on a group-based self (Darling, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This process of constructing one's identity from interactions with groups of people is a process that is never complete (Hall, 1996). Internalized role expectations are involved in constructions of identity, which are organized in a hierarchy of salience, thus behavioural choices depend on which identities are most salient (Darling, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The feeling of belonging in society influences the way in which people construct their identities and belonging is a dynamic process that is multi-layered, multi-scale and multi-territorial (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Belongingness can be as compelling as the need for food, and human culture is conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging can also convey an emotional attachment and a feeling of being “at home” (Yuval-Davis, 2011), which can provide hope and the reassurance of being in a safe space. That same feeling has a sense of rootedness and can also generate negative feelings such as resentment and anger (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Morley, 2001; Savage & Bagnall, 2004).

The need to form interpersonal relationships is innate among human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and these very relations are what constitute the self (Rouchy, 1995; Producers, 1999). Interactions with other people should exist through frequent physical interaction and reach a minimum number, which varies from person to person (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Autobiographical and relational factors contribute to the emotional attachment of belonging (Antonsich, 2010). These factors are important in identity constructions, because interactions with people generate a sense of connectedness on which belonging relies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, to generate a sense of group belonging, relations must be long lasting, positive and stable, and derive from auto-biographical and relational factors. Auto-biographical factors relate to a person's history. Personal experiences, memories and family ties also play a key role in belongingness (Antonsich, 2010). Relational factors such as interacting with strangers in public spaces also play a role in belongingness. However, weaker ties with strangers or occasional encounters are not sufficient to generate a sense of connectedness to others on which belonging relies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Nonetheless, these social ties enrich the life of an individual in a given place (Antonsich, 2010). Even, if people are prevented from being part of a community due to boundaries, their belonging and identity becomes threatened and politics of belonging are concerned with these boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Disability can be seen as being politicized when it includes the struggles involved in belonging and being a member of a community, which has been threatened by hegemonic political powers (Yuval-Davis, 2011). A dissemination of hegemonic structures is also represented through institutions of higher learning, where students with disabilities are underrepresented. In a way, students face challenges in spaces of higher education due to a societal structure that is designed for an able bodied majority. Within such a context, the chapter will continue to discuss how students with disabilities constructed their identities in South African higher education.

2.5.4. Positive disability identity

Positive constructions of identity are achieved when people with disabilities resist negative perceptions of disabilities and create alternatives to negative identification with impairment (Shakespeare, 2009). Challenging stereotypes, being more unified and sharing narratives, are all part of developing disability culture which in turn, contributes to a positive disability identity (Shakespeare, 2009). For positive disability identity to be achieved, a relationship with disability

pride, self-confidence and solidarity within communities needs to exist (Hahn, 2002; Shakespeare, 2009). Ultimately, this suggests that the power to redefine the disability experience lies in the hands of those experiencing it. By creating solidarity within a disability movement and identifying oneself as living with a disability, people enter “into co-operation for socially valid reasons” (Siebers, 2011, p. 84) and sharing a common disability identity can be used as a united front against oppressive and exclusive practices (Finkelstein, 1993). In other words, disability is an identity that is constructed from the place of the other and can never be identical to the subject processes invested in them (Hall, 2000). Subject processes stem from oppressive and exclusive practices as Finkelstein (1993) suggests. Thus, by sharing a common identity, a united front is formed, that goes against oppressive and exclusive practices, which subjugate bodies with disabilities.

Scholars have shown how the responsibility to create positive disability identity often lies in the hands of those living with a disability. However it is also true that able bodied people should be obliged to share this responsibility as well. Disability is a porous category which means that anybody can acquire a disability in life. Therefore it is difficult to identify one specific group of people that represents disability as a whole (Davis, 2011). Therefore, solidarity in community should stem from all individuals’ in society and not only those living with a disability. One evident challenge and obstacle to building strong disability identity is that people with disabilities have been socially constructed into believing that they are inferior. As a result, it is difficult to link being constructed as a category of otherness and then use the same category as a source of strength (Shakespeare, 2009). Rather than blaming the self for failure, the individual should be enabled to blame exclusionary social processes instead (Shakespeare, 2009). A way of making the personal political is by using narratives as a story (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Through storytelling, an individual constructs his/her identity and can provide people with a better understanding of their lived experience.

2.6. Stigma surrounding disability

Disabilities and the concept of stigma are interrelated, and stigma is defined as a negative characteristic of a person or a group that is not widely accepted by society (McLaughlin, Bell & Stringer, 2004). Stigma can also be defined as a characteristic of a person that is contrary to the norm of a social unit (Link & Phelan, 2001). The word “norm” is a recurring word when

investigating social sciences and people are often expected to conform to these norms to be accepted by other people in society. Therefore, it can be argued that a person or a group that is stigmatized deviates from this norm (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; McLaughlin et. al., 2004). Stigma can be dangerous as it marks a person and excludes them from society, marking them in such a way that causes the person to be seen as less valuable (Parker et. al., 2002; Link & Phelan, 2001).

Due to the stigmatization of disability, the condition of a person becomes his master status and is symbolic because whatever a person may accomplish, the condition is the first thing that other people see (Goffman, 1963). Similarly, stereotypes are the cause for people making split judgments on others who have negative stereotypes attached to them, “the linking of labels to undesirable attributes becomes the rationale for believing that negatively labelled persons are fundamentally different from those who don’t share the label” (Phelan & Link, 2001, p. 369).

People with disabilities are in fact different from one another, but one thing that they share is the problem of attitude (Thumen, 1966), thus it then can be argued that attitudes reinforce the stigmatization of bodies with disabilities. For example, when a child is born with a disability the reaction of the parents and the family may vary. They may show horror, anxiety and bitterness but they rarely see a baby with a disability as a “welcome gift” and are not seen as equal to able bodied babies (Thumen, 1966, p. 48). Stigma is something that starts from birth and carries on into adulthood and adults with disabilities in a society that stigmatizes deviant bodies can affect the way in which adults gain access to the workplace. Negative societal attitudes can have a harsh impact in terms of gaining access to the workplace (McLaughlin et al., 2004), eloquently put, “mostly people don’t admit that disability is the real cause of refusal but nonetheless, the disabled person is gently but firmly placed where society wants him to be, not in a place of his/her own choice” (Thumen, 1966, p. 50). This is represented in South Africa where a low market absorption of people with disabilities exist with out of 5% of people with disabilities, only 1.8% are employed (Census South Africa, 2011). This evidence is a representation of the low expectations that society holds for people with disabilities to live a fulfilling life.

Another salient point is that the perspective of the stigmatized should be considered alongside the theory of stigma, and “stigma should be described with reference to the relationships between a set of interrelated concepts” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 366). A challenge to understanding stigma is the perpetuation of unsubstantiated assumptions. This occurs when scientists do not give

priority to the words and perceptions of the people they study (Link & Phelan, 2001; Goffman, 1963). The challenges that young students with disabilities face in identity construction is that their identity is typically taken for granted (Link & Phelan, 2001). In other words, a group of students with disabilities are stigmatized in the same way, because of social, economic and cultural forces that maintain and make human differences (Link & Phelan, 2001). However, humans have agency in how they accept or reject stigmatized roles (Bury, 1997). This is relevant in this research as students have the agency to construct their identities outside of a socially constructed identity that is fuelled by stigma. By doing so, they have the potential to construct positive disability identity or they merely contribute to the perpetuation of stigma that serves to maintain the status quo. Disability can be understood as a socially constructed entity but also understood as a varied experience shaped by race, gender and class. Therefore, it was useful to use social constructionism and intersectionality as a framework, to better understand the concept of disability.

2.7. Social constructionism as a theoretical framework

Throughout this research it has been stated that disability is a socially constructed entity which limits people with disabilities in living a fulfilling life. The social model is an approach that rejects traditional ways of understanding disability and views disability as a problem relating to the structure of society. Thus, using social constructionism as a theoretical framework for this study was appropriate. Social constructionism can also be used to understand why people with disabilities have been discriminated against. “Disability is therefore a function of the environment in which people are constrained to live, not a quality that belongs to them as people” (Burr, 2015, p. 38).

Disability, as socially constructed, places the impairment of an individual in the context of social and environmental factors. The disability population is controlled by socially constructed concepts of disability, as people are limited to social life such as work, domestic and political behaviours (Burr, 2015). However, this is not to say that all people with disabilities experience limitations. Therefore, disability should be understood through the interaction between the person with a disability and society; and a critical stance towards “taken-for-granted” ways of understanding the world should be considered. A noteworthy characteristic of social constructionism is understanding that truth is not absolute, and the way in which the world is

perceived may be influenced by social structures and power (Burr, 2015). Furthermore, social constructionism requires one to be critical of the idea that observations of the world may be problematic, and that conventional knowledge which is based upon objective, unbiased observations of the world, needs to be challenged (Burr, 2015). Similarly, assumptions of the world and how it appears to be should be challenged, and as a result, “radically different accounts of many psychological and social phenomena” are generated (Burr, 2015, p. 3). Moreover, assumptions of the world need to be reconceptualized because people are products of their culture and history, and knowledge is sustained by social processes. Here, knowledge is therefore seen not as something a person has or doesn’t have but as something people do together (Burr, 2015). What is regarded as the truth, varies historically and cross culturally, and may only be accepted by examining the understandings and perspectives of the world (Burr, 2015). A powerful point of social constructionism is that it criticizes traditional and colonialist ways of thinking, which are generally imposed on people.

Lastly, social constructionism focuses on language as a precondition to thought, as language is performative and a form of action (Burr, 2015). Language is powerful and has practical consequences for people. When the language towards people with disabilities is considered, the adjectives are usually degrading words such as “retarded”, “lame”, “crippled” and “handicapped”. These words have negative connotations and do not describe people with dignity. All things considered, it seems reasonable to assume that using social constructionism as a way of understanding disability gears towards a more positive disability identity. The use of intersectionality as a theoretical approach is important as it highlights how experiences cannot be viewed as homogenous. By using social divisions such as race, gender and class, intersectionality foregrounds how identities are constructed through social divisions, which interact with one another. The last part of this chapter will briefly explain intersectionality.

2.7.1. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework

Intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who used the concept of intersectionality to denote the ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple experience of black women’s employment (Crenshaw, 1993). In the same way, intersectionality is used in the current research, to represent how social divisions such as gender, race and class interact to form different experiences among students with disabilities. Intersectionality is

significant in constructions of identity, as it brings to the forefront the reality of intragroup difference and Crenshaw (1993) argues that a major critique of identity politics is that intragroup differences are ignored. Often, people with disabilities are viewed as sharing the same experiences and perceptions and this is why intragroup differences are so important to consider, when researching constructions of identity.

A key intersectionality theorist who will be used in the research is Yuval-Davis (2006). Social divisions such as gender, class and race are not fixed categories, they are fluid and unsettled, meaning that they can change and recreate themselves at any time. Social divisions are historically specific and are not valid in every situation, therefore, they are constantly under a continuous process of contestation and change (Yuval-Davis, 2006; McCall, 2005). Furthermore, these social divisions also have different ontological bases which are autonomous, and each prioritizes different spheres of social relations (Yuval-Davis, 2006), thus, whilst these social divisions share common features, they are not reducible to one another. Simply put, the experiences of a group of black, middle class, female individuals who live with a disability cannot be assumed to share the same experience as this results in creating narratives that reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Creese & Stasiulis, 1996). Thus, intersectionality is used to shed light on how social divisions such as race, gender and class mutually constitute one another and by doing so, create different experiences within a social group of people, and indicate how power, privilege and inequality exist in society (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Creese & Stasiulis, 1996).

Above all, it is important to note how positionings, identities and political values are socially constructed and how they also interrelate and affect one another in certain locations and contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Creese & Stasiulis, 1996). Furthermore, social and political meanings will vary in different historical contexts and will continuously be restructured across individuals and society (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Systems of race, gender and class do not have identical effects on socially constructed categories of women and men (Creese & Stasiulis, 1996) therefore intersectionality as an approach, changes homogenous ways in which groups are viewed and defined. Gender, class and race as social divisions are important to consider because of how people subjectively experience “their daily lives in terms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, specific aspirations and specific identities” (Yuval-Davis, 2006,

p. 198). Such a subjective experience shapes an individual and constructs how they identify with themselves and the attitudes that they may have towards other people. Similarly, social divisions also exist at a level of representation (Yuval-Davis, 2006) in images, symbols, texts and legislation.

South Africa is a country that largely represents how race and class are constantly changing. After the Apartheid regime collapsed, South Africa's rigidly racialized class began to disintegrate (Whitehead, 2014). However this has been happening at a very slow pace. The inequality of wealth in South Africa means that poor black families lack the economic resources to move to more desirable areas, and as a result, most are still settled on the outskirts of cities (Christopher, 2001). In an effort to reduce inequality, affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment was introduced, to give black people the opportunity to move into middle and wealthy classes (Bond, 2000; Franchi, 2003). However, it is evident that not all black people benefited from this, and those who did were already in a position to use it to their advantage. So many black people are still in the same position as they were during Apartheid (Seekings & Natrass, 2005; Terreblanche, 2003).

When class and disabilities intersect, disadvantaging effects on the individual who has a disability can emerge. Class is still somewhat racialized as a result of Apartheid (Seekings & Natrass, 2005) and despite the democratic front South Africa has taken, whites still maintain an economic advantage. Giliomee (2003) states that disability grants were only provided to white people during the Apartheid regime, which shows that the advantage white minorities with disabilities have had historically, over those of colour. People with disabilities and their families are subsequently poorer than the rest of the population (Emmett, 2006), which ultimately means that people of colour and who have a disability are significantly more disadvantaged than other people. Living with a disability and having a lower socioeconomic status means that families are also burdened with additional costs (Emmett, 2006). These include costs of medical care, rehabilitation and restorative equipment and services, and affording special education needs, as well as paying a caretaker to alleviate the workload of the family members (Emmett, 2006).

Women with disabilities are more disadvantaged than their male counterparts (Wheaton & Crimmins, 2016; Peta, 2017), as they are often unemployed and less educated, and therefore bear a heavier burden than men (Emmett, 2006; Haq, 2003). Women are also disadvantaged by

negative perceptions deeming them unfit to fulfil traditional female roles (Wickenden, Nixon & Yoshida, 2013; Hassouneh-Phillips & McNeff, 2005). This is due to women with disabilities typically seen as asexual (Howland & Rintala, 2001). Shefer and Mohamed (2015) describe women's bodies as a battleground through which normalcy is negotiated. Notions of normalcy surrounding women with disabilities assumes them to be individuals in need of care, and therefore it's not fitting to see a mother with a disability filling the caring and nurturing mother role (Peta, 2017; Howland & Rintala, 2001). Research shows that women with disabilities were less likely to get married, compared to their non-disabled female counterparts (McHassouneh-Phillips & McNeff, 2005; Savage & McConnell, 2015; Cohen, 2006). Furthermore, discrimination towards women with disabilities was also experienced if they attempted to adopt children or become foster mothers (Asch & Fine, 1988).

In masculinity studies, physical functioning plays a role in the fulfilment of traditional male roles (Shuttleworth, Wedgwood & Wilson, 2012; Fink, Weege, Manning, 2014). Traditional male roles then alienate disabled men from their manhood and define them as being less of a man (Zulu, 2004, Staples, 2011). Nonetheless, despite the sexualities of men with disabilities being compromised by heteronormativity, they still benefit from a patriarchal system. Men with disabilities are more likely to be employed and earn more money than their female counterparts (Emmett, 2006).

This study makes use of intersectionality as a theory to investigate how living with a disability intersects with gender, race and class. While students may assume to have marginalized identities as people with disabilities, their varied experiences are informed through social divisions such as gender, race and class. Therefore, intersectionality highlights the multiple realities, oppressions and perceptions that shape the lived experience of people with disabilities. Intersectionality supports this study in investigating that constructions of identity are not homogenous among people with disabilities. Thus, this theoretical approach is an important analytical tool that “challenges hegemonic approaches to the study of stratification, as well as reified forms of identity politics” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 201).

2.8. Conclusion

In conclusion the literature review has mapped out the global debates on disability, which includes the attitudinal barriers towards disability. These attitudinal barriers stem from the way that people perceive disabilities and the stigma attached to bodies that are different. Due to an ableist ideal of what the body should look like, bodies with disabilities are seen as deviant. However, what is useful in combating these homogenous ways of thinking is using identity as a narrative because of its political components. Although identity is contested and not always well understood, what is very clear is that identity is not fixed and is not stable. In this way people with disabilities can contest negative disability identity and create new disability identities through narratives. Therefore, the personal becomes political and people with disabilities can have a better sense of belonging in society. The belonging of people with disabilities was also represented within the context of South African higher education. Research has shown that students with disabilities are underrepresented in spaces of higher education. Future research that improves the lives of people with disabilities is a need that requires attention. Furthermore, through using theoretical frameworks, the experience of disability can be understood as a varied lived experience. Using theoretical frameworks as social constructionism indicates how disability is not only innate and biological but also steered and reinforced through medical models. Intersectionality indicates that even though people with disabilities share a common identity of living with a disability, this does not equate to the same experiences. In the next chapter, methodology is discussed and the role of feminist qualitative research in this study is unpacked.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This study investigates the construction of identity among young students with disabilities. For this study to capture the essence of what it means to live with a disability, a qualitative feminist method was adopted. Understanding my positionality as a researcher was important, and this is a key tenet in feminist principles of doing research. My positionality shaped how I understood the research process and my participants. This research was located within a wider research ethics framework, to ensure the protection of participants during the interviews. This chapter further unpacks the methodological process that was undertaken in this research. For a broader understanding of the methodological processes adopted in this research, the next section will unpack qualitative and feminist principles of doing research.

3.2. Qualitative research

A Qualitative approach was chosen in this research process because of the rich data that can be collected. “Qualitative research is an exciting interdisciplinary landscape comprising diverse perspectives and practices for generating knowledge” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.5). As a qualitative researcher, interviews were used to obtain data and this data was interpreted by building and analysing themes to convey social meaning. One main advantage of qualitative research is the ability to study symbolic dimensions and social meaning (Bryman, 2006). Such an approach also gains a better understanding into the lives of people by understanding their feelings, opinions and experiences, and by interpreting meanings from their actions (Denzin, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Eloquenty put, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

This approach is very important in this study, as it uses the narratives of young students to investigate how they construct their identity in their environment or society. Using the narratives of students with disabilities contributes to a scholarly field that provides a deeper insight and understanding into disability identities. By understanding the experiences and perceptions of

students with disabilities, social issues are known, and various challenges experienced by the students are understood. The use of narratives grants access and insight into participants varied life experiences and deepens the understanding of what it really means to have a disability. Furthermore, the contexts of participants are important in a qualitative research as contexts assist in understanding how participants act and the influence contexts have on their actions (Maxwell, 1994). Qualitative research design also has a flexible structure as the design can be constructed and reconstructed to a greater extent (Maxwell, 1994), which is useful in a research, as it does not limit the researcher to collect data in strict and rigid ways.

Maxwell (1994) adds that in Qualitative research it is important to understand your purpose for the research, whether it is a personal purpose, practical purpose or a research purpose. My purpose is purely for research. I sought to understand the experiences of students with disabilities and more importantly, how they construct their identities in an ableist society. In the same breath, I would also say that this research is based on my own personal experiences due to the marginalization I have seen in society towards people with disabilities. I personally know people with disabilities and how societal barriers limit them, thus the research had a personal purpose because of my passion for social justice.

Therefore, to produce a meaningful qualitative report, it is important to consider different research purposes. Maxwell (1994) states that these important purposes serve as understanding the meaning that participants possess in the study. This understanding can be achieved in terms of the events, situations and actions that they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences (Maxwell, 1994). The lives and experiences of students with disabilities are considered to be part of the bigger reality that I attempted to understand.

It was crucial to consider how they perceived their own experiences and how their experiences influenced identity construction. Drawing on feminist principles of conducting research, I interviewed young students with disabilities, to collect their individual unique experiences but also listened to these experiences collectively as disability experiences. Each student who was interviewed had a different story and similar themes emerged (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), so did unique circumstances. In turn, I believe that “understanding the processes by which events and actions take place” (Maxwell, 1994. p. 75) was considered. Therefore, this research adopted a qualitative feminist approach as qualitative researchers are after meaning, which they extract from

the themes and thematic categories (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The data collected from the narratives of students with disabilities yielded a depth of social meaning which made qualitative research more relevant in this study.

3.3. Feminist research

What makes feminist research feminist are the motives, concerns and knowledge brought to the research process. Feminist research is used to gain insight into gendered social existence (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003). Furthermore, feminist research seeks to produce knowledge that will be useful in transforming injustice and subordination. People with disabilities are an example of this injustice (Asch, 2001). These groups of people form part of the oppressed and marginalized, as they do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as those who are able bodied people. Feminists are concerned with interviewing people, observing people and examining documents. Feminist research places women and other marginalized groups in the centre, which makes it appropriate in understanding how students with disabilities construct their identities as an oppressed group of people.

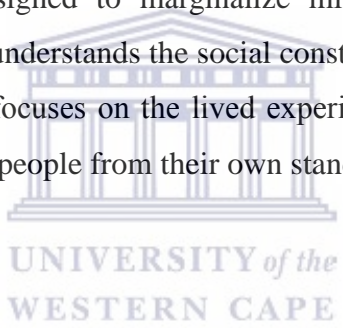
Feminist researchers challenge androcentric biases which acknowledges that social inquiries are androcentric, and this results in distorted explanations and understandings of the world (Harding, 2004). Feminist researchers interrogate, disrupt, modify and challenge existing ways of knowing within and across disciplines “creating a shift in the tectonic plates of mainstream knowledge building.” Importantly, feminist researchers ask who can know and what can be known? (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 8). Furthermore, feminist research also believes that feelings and emotions play an integral part in the researcher’s decision in conducting research, and to determine which questions to ask in the research (Jagger, 1989). By listening to the experiences of the “other”, a more complete understanding of knowledge can be achieved.

One of the reasons that I decided to undertake this research on students with disabilities is because I believe that through telling their own stories, they empowered themselves. bell hooks (1991) speaks about how theory has a healing power which assists people and helps them to understand what is happening around them, when they are confused by their surroundings or even by themselves. Through feminist research, I have understood life from a different angle; and bell hooks in *Theory as Liberatory Practice* writes: “when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to

processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice” (pg. 61). This study is feminist in its roots the experiences of the “other” is considered as legitimate knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The narratives in this study serve as a powerful tool in uncovering legitimate knowledge that is often hidden in subjugated groups.

Feminist research places a significant focus on the experiences of women, and is used to gain insight into gendered social existence (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003). However, understanding what causes and maintains oppression is another key feature of feminism (Hesse-Biber, 2007). People with disabilities should be considered as a group who are affected by some form of oppression and exploitation. Therefore, including people with disabilities within the feminist realm is significant, as an inherent ableist society perpetually excludes them. Thus, I conducted this qualitative feminist study to give a voice to students with disabilities and to disrupt systems of power and privilege that are designed to marginalize minority groups. This study adopts a qualitative feminist approach as it understands the social construction of bodies and the effect that it has on people’s lives. This study focuses on the lived experiences of those who are marginalized and understands the perceptions of people from their own standpoint (Harding, 2004).

3.4. Participants of the study



Name of participant	Age	Type of disability	Gender	Race
Sipho	27	Visual disability	Male	Black
Viwe	22	Physical disability	Male	Black
Andrew	23	Visual disability	Male	Coloured
Nicki	20	Physical disability	Female	Coloured
Melissa	20	Physical disability	Female	Black
Dineo	19	Physical disability	Female	Coloured

The participants were a group of six students with disabilities, from a university in Cape Town. I will not disclose the name of the university; neither will I specify the disability of the participants in detail. I will also not specify the socio-economic background of the participants, including the neighbourhoods that they live in as their anonymity might be compromised. The disability

community is very small at the university and letting out elaborate demographical information would compromise ethical considerations. The table above uses pseudonyms and indicates the ages, form of disability, gender and race of the participants.

3.5. The research process

The participants were recruited from a university in Cape Town through a department that extends their services to students with disabilities. There were a few challenges to overcome in recruiting participants, as their details are kept private and confidential by the department. For the department to alert the students of my research, I had to get permission from the registrar at the university to be allowed access to the department. Thereafter, the department for students with disabilities sent out an email alerting students of my research. However the response that I received was weak. I received only two responses from the email alert; thereafter, I used a snowballing method to recruit more participants. In the end I was able to interview six students who had volunteered to be interviewed.

Participants were informed of the aims of the research, given the background of the research and the motivation behind the research. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Thereafter, consent forms were provided and signed by the participants. Interviews lasted one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. The interviews were conducted on campus at a venue that was accessible to the participants. With permission from the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed - verbatim. English language was used throughout the research. The interviewing schedule was used as a guide and new questions emerged from the existing ones, as the process allowed the participants to share their stories. Participants were informed of their freedom not to answer questions that they were not comfortable with.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

3.6. Semi structured interview

The approach to interviewing that I chose was semi-structured interviewing. DeVault & Gross (2006, p.173) describe feminist interviewing as, interrogating “the challenges of communication, and the inherent contradictions in the desire to give voice to others.” A semi-structured interview is conducted using a specific interview guide. This guide contained a list of questions that needed to

be covered in the interview; there was no specific order to the questions and not too much control over it. “This allows for spontaneity on the part of the researcher and the interviewee” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 115). This approach to interviewing was chosen as it allowed for the exploration of emerging themes and ideas, rather than relying on concepts and questions defined in the research. As an interviewer, my role was engaging and encouraging. In semi-structured interviews, the questions were prepared before the time, therefore giving me confidence when asking the questions. Because it was a semi-structured interview, the participants enjoyed the freedom to express their views on their own terms (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

To show that I was taking an interest and listening attentively during the interview, I acknowledged what the participants were saying by using probes. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007, p. 230) describe a probe as a sign of understanding, interest and empathy that the researcher puts forward to the interviewee. It was used as a way of encouraging the participants to continue speaking. For a feminist researcher, it is important that the methodology be “objective, rational, detached and value-free” (Edwards, 1990, p. 479). Furthermore, social structures can be examined to understand the link between societal relations and experiences of individuals in everyday life (Edwards, 1990). Despite the participants coming from different backgrounds, there were both similarities and differences in their narratives of living with a disability.

3.7. Data analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was used for data analysis. A thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It also interpreted various aspects of the research topic. This type of analysis can be exciting, as the researcher discovers themes and concepts embedded throughout the interviews that were conducted. According to Braun and Clarke (2013) this is useful to the researcher as it denies the active role that the researcher always plays in identifying themes and patterns. Every interview was read and reread in order for themes to emerge. Then the common themes were grouped together. Verbatim data from the interviews were used to illustrate the emerging themes. It was important to have used these quotes to express the voices of the participants.

3.8. Self-reflexivity

Feminist research foregrounds self-reflexivity and according to England (1994) self-reflexivity is a process that acknowledges that the researcher is an integral part of the research setting. For research to be complete it needs to include an understanding of the active role of the researcher throughout the research process, which makes this entire study a feminist research study.

The interviewing process was very rewarding, as I got to know students with disabilities on a personal level. One challenge for me was being aware not to be insensitive to their needs, or to assume that they needed help in any way. I wanted them to understand that my standpoint as a researcher was to hear their stories and not to judge them. I was nervous that they would not open up to me; however they were very forthcoming and honest, which I appreciated. The participants' stories are very close to my heart and I think of all of them very fondly. It also made me frustrated hearing their stories and understanding how the negative perceptions of other people could hinder them in their lives. However, it was also comforting to know that despite negative perceptions, that the participants are strong willed individuals who are very aware of who they are. A challenge I had with this research was that I had to constantly resist delving into investigative journalism which would have caused me to lose focus on identity construction. The participants shared a lot of knowledge with me and unfortunately, I could not use all the data because of the limitations of this mini-thesis and the questions that this work intends to pursue. My challenge was definitely on not losing the focus of my research questions and not being tempted to use my research as a way to expose the universities' limitations in supporting students with disabilities. However, data that I could not include in this study will be shared in other relevant publications and platforms, going forward.

3.9. Limitations

Needless to say, every research has its limitations. I did not experience too many limitations in this research; however, one limitation that I did experience was access to the participants in the disability unit for students with disabilities. The process took longer than expected as I had to go through different channels to get details of the participants. Another limitation was that some students that did respond were studying via correspondence through the university, and lived too far away to meet

me for the interviews. I also found the literature on construction of identity among students with disabilities in universities to be extremely sparse, at both global and national levels. The few available studies are extremely outdated. Furthermore, I had to exclude the voices of students who are deaf, due to cost limitations of not being able to afford a translator. It would have been interesting to get a perception from students who are deaf; however in the future, I hope to hear their stories and experiences too.

3.10. Ethical issues

Researching disabilities is a very sensitive process with even tighter ethical concerns from the university ethics boards. I had to be mindful and considerate of this sensitivity throughout the research process. The participants were fully informed of the aims and objectives of this research. They were aware that their stories would be used towards a research report and that the results could be publishable upon completion. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. The participants' anonymity was assured as pseudonyms were used. Transcripts were kept under password protected files on my electronic devices and used only for the purposes of this research.

Lastly, participants were informed that they were free to leave the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable, without any penalty. The university psychological services were available if students experienced any emotional distress during the process of the study. The interviews that I conducted were of a very sensitive and personal nature, and were emotionally intense. I needed to be extremely sensitive and careful of any potential harm that the study could cause to the participants. I took extra care in approaching my questions in a sensitive and sensible manner. Participants were not obliged to answer questions that they were not comfortable with.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

In the following section I will explore the narratives of students with disabilities and how they constructed their identity in their environment or society. Throughout this study, I have highlighted that disability can be understood as a socially constructed entity that attaches negative connotations to particular physical disabilities. Despite this approach to understanding disability, negative societal perceptions and stigma are still associated with the lived experience of disability. In this chapter I explore the narratives of students with disabilities to understand how they construct their identities, as they give meaning to what it means to be live with a disability in their society. I hope that by understanding the true experiences of people with disabilities, new knowledge is formed, and new definitions of disability can be constructed.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the students who were interviewed have various forms of visual or physical disabilities and the stories that emerged represented different and also similar realities and experiences among the students. I used a Qualitative Thematic Analysis to analyse the data. This was done by carefully reading the transcripts of participants' experiences, developing codes and searching the data for meaningful themes that emerged and connected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes that emerged from the findings included participants' perceptions and experiences of gender, race and class and how this influences identity construction. They also expressed that disability did not mean inability, even though they are labelled negatively. The participants further expressed the challenges in forming friendships, but argued that one's mindset was central in forming positive disability identity. These themes are unpacked here to show how students with disabilities construct their identity in their environment or society.

4.2. Perceptions and experiences of gender, race and class among students

Participants were asked about how social divisions such as race, class and gender influence their experience of living with a disability and how this influence shaped identity construction. What emerged were narratives that highlighted how race, class and gender influenced identity construction in students with disabilities. I drew on intersectionality, to understand how race, gender

and class are social divisions that mutually constitute each other in identity construction. Social divisions such as race, class and gender are connected but always fluid, unsettled and affect people in different ways (Yuval-Davis, 2006). For instance, people with disabilities can be located within the same boundaries of belonging but still have a varied lived experience of disability. To further illustrate this, students with disabilities within the same social divisions do not share the same experiences. Assuming that students with disabilities experiences are identical essentializes experience and creates narratives that reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, intersectionality is a useful approach in understanding identity, as well as intragroup difference. An imagery that Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1993) used to illustrate intersectionality, was of an intersection at a busy crossroad to show how social divisions intersect and mutually constitute identities. Such an imagery will be used in this theme to illustrate what happens when students with disabilities face the crossroads of race, gender and class.

Race in South Africa is historically influenced and identities around race are very prevalent. During the Apartheid regime in South Africa, people were classified into different racial groups. Although I do not condone the use of these racial classifications it should be noted that in South Africa, the categories are still widely used, particularly for purposes of redressing apartheid inconsistencies. Viwe, Melissa and Siphon are black students, Nicki and Andrew are coloured students and Dineo is also coloured, but prefers to refer to herself as ‘biracial’. Two perceptions of black identity emerged from Viwe’s, Siphon’s and Melissa’s narratives. Viwe believes that the black identity is constructed within oppression and marginalization. His narrative suggested that people who are considered to be white in South Africa are more privileged than he is. This opinion of white people having more privilege is historically shaped because during the Apartheid regime, disability grants were only provided to white people (Giliomee, 2003). Therefore, Viwe’s extracts show that his understanding of race is shaped by the privilege of white people and the oppression of black people. Such an understanding also stems from the fact that people of colour experience poverty at a higher rate than white people in South Africa (Emmett, 2006).

Viwe further explains:

“There are differences in terms of race. For white people, they have a different socio-economic status. They are dominant and presume a power and this has been instilled

in their minds. I think it is easier to be white and disabled as these people are born with privilege. My background is different to theirs, I grew up oppressed.” (Viwe)

However, Siphon and Melissa position themselves differently as young, black people with a disability. They perceive the black identity as an advantage, because of affirmative action set in place to correct past injustices. Affirmative action gives black people the opportunity to be empowered through policies of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) (Bond, 2000; Franchi, 2003). Whilst, Viwe sees the black identity as still being shaped by oppression, Siphon and Melissa view black identity as an identity which has gained an advantage:

“I hope that being black is going to influence my life in a good way. I’m saying that because here in South Africa there is a policy that is referred to as affirmative action, they’re basically trying to remedy the disadvantages of the past. When I consider things like affirmative action, I’ll be a person of colour who happens to have a disability but also who happens to have a qualification as well.” (Siphon)

“I think it’s an advantage. I look at companies and they’re usually looking for black women and women with disabilities because of the Apartheid era. Now post-Apartheid, they hire these people so it’s kind of an advantage.” (Melissa)

Viwe, Siphon and Melissa’s observations show how race is fluid, unsettled and recreates itself at any time (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The above narrative illustrates how the construction of race has changed because society has changed. In the past, people with disabilities would not have constructed their racial identity in the same way as Siphon and Melissa have done. However, Viwe’s sentiments should not be disregarded, as many black people are still oppressed post-Apartheid (Seekings & Natrass, 2005; Emmett, 2006).

A feeling of marginalization or oppression because of race is also shared by Nikki, who identifies as coloured. Nikki’s narrative suggests that race and disability share an interchangeable relationship because certain races enjoy a certain advantage, one of privilege. According to Nikki, a hierarchy exists within race where white people are valued and respected more than coloured people. Nikki’s subjective experience of race shapes how she identifies as a coloured person, but also her attitude towards people of other races. These experiences are further explained in her narrative:

“Race plays a part in disability. Also, at hospitals when you go for appointments and you have a disability and there is somebody who is white, they get spoken to differently than how you get spoken to. Your own coloured people will treat you differently than they would treat a white person who also has a disability.” (Nicki)

Dineo is coloured, but prefers to call herself “biracial” and she has the freedom to identify with what she is comfortable with, as identity, as in this case, is a freedom of choice (Darling, 2013). However, this identification is contested as she grew up in a coloured community. Whilst her identity is rooted in the coloured identity, she identifies as biracial, so that her Sotho identity is not disregarded. Dineo’s identification with a ‘subgroup race’ is conflicted by the pressure within her family to fit into one particular race:

“My dad always wanted me to be blacker than I was coloured. I can’t speak Sotho so now I don’t fit entirely into that box of being black, but I don’t fit into that box of being coloured either. It was hard for me growing up because I grew up with my mother, so I grew up being coloured.” (Dineo)

Another participant, Andrew took a completely objective standpoint by perceiving race as a cause for separation among people. People with disabilities can indeed remain separated by race and not unite for a common goal of gaining political representation. Political representation is important for people with disabilities to free themselves from ideologies that are limiting in their daily lives (Siebers, 2011). Andrew stresses that a collective goal can only be achieved if people’s views aren’t separated by race:

“Race is a very big thing and people don’t see that race separates our views. It’s very difficult to build a good relationship as people have different views on being white, coloured or black. I feel if we have one collective goal then we can achieve what we want to achieve as a rainbow nation and as a society that reaps fruit of development and growth.” (Andrew)

Participants perceived class as constructed around the amount of wealth a person has accumulated and where they are in relation to the poverty line. People with disabilities are also subsequently poorer than the rest of the population (Emmett, 2006). Similarly, participants affirmed that class held more importance than race, because if a person with a disability has wealth, they are better off

than those who don't, regardless of their race. Melissa, Siphon, Dineo and Nicki have all emphasized that living with a disability comes with a financial cost. People with disabilities in South Africa are burdened by additional costs, which include costs of medical care, rehabilitation and restorative equipment and services (Emmett, 2006). Despite the colour of someone's skin, if they don't have money, they don't have access to certain privileges. Perhaps the dynamic of privilege has started to shift in the minds of the participants. When they positioned themselves as people with disabilities of a certain race, they attached various benefits or detriments to this. However, when they faced class at the intersection of the busy crossroad, they realized that a socio-economic background has a higher salience than race. Siphon presents this evidence in his narrative:

“Wealth has more influence than colour. For me, what plays a big role is your financial situation. If a white person is in the same situation, I do not think that the colour of the person will make things to be better for him or her. There is technology to assist people with disabilities, but that technology is extremely expensive. Even things like wheelchairs, there are people who cannot afford wheelchairs, irrespective of their colour.” (Siphon)

In the same way, Melissa and Dineo equate class or socio-economic background to enjoying certain privileges or being disadvantaged. Having money as a person with a disability means being able to afford privatized health care and private therapists. The privileges afforded by money can drastically change the experiences of people with disabilities through their environment being made more comfortable. Melissa and Dineo further illustrate the difficulties involved in not having access to wealth:

“When you are disabled you have to go to the doctor obviously. So, people who are wealthy can go to a specialist, people are poor use the clinic which is not really helpful. I think for poor people, they are struggling, there is no advantage there. Having a disability and being poor is a big disadvantage.” (Melissa)

“Money plays a large role as my mom didn't have money to send me to private therapists and teachers to help me with my speech problems. Maybe if I had gone to a speech therapy specialist from a younger age and attended more things that helped me with speech, then maybe my stuttering wouldn't have been so bad.” (Dineo)

Nicki and Viwe expressed that the positionality of someone's race changes when they have money. Before, they felt that positioning themselves next to a white identity disadvantaged them. However, when they situated themselves as people of colour by the intersection of class, they realized that it had a bigger impact on their lives as people with a disability. This is what they had to say about the importance of class in constructing identities:

“I’ve never been on a medical aid, so I have to go to a public hospital. There are coloured people who have medical aid who will be treated differently to me. Sometimes I feel like people who work at the hospital look down on you as they think that because you have a disability, you should be [medically] covered.” (Nicki)

“Your socio-economic background plays a big part. Being disabled and poor is the biggest oppression because even if you are black and you have money you are better off.” (Viwe)

Andrew's perception of a socioeconomic background is that it can perpetually exclude people socially:

“The socio-economic concept plays a big role. I feel for other people who come from a poor background and because they come from a poor background, they always experience this social exclusion.” (Andrew)

It is interesting to understand the importance of a socio-economic background in the lives of people with disabilities. Whilst Siphon and Melissa saw race as an advantage for a person with a disability, they understood the socio-economic background as having more of an influence in their lives. The participants indicated that it is indeed possible to have certain racial advantages; however wealth has more salience in accessing privileges and a better quality of life.

Participants continued to draw on gender in their narratives, positioning themselves within traditional gendered roles. They defined gendered roles as what a man should fulfil in his life and what a woman should fulfil in her life. Siphon, Viwe and Andrew constructed their male identity by addressing masculinity and the fulfilment of traditional male roles. In masculinity, physical functioning played a role in fulfilling traditional male roles (Shuttleworth, Wedgwood & Wilson, 2012; Fink, Weege, Manning & Trivers, 2014). Siphon and Viwe believed that fulfilling a traditional

male role was being in relationships. They had either experienced being in a relationship, or they knew of people who are in relationships. This goes against homogenous assumptions which see people with disabilities as incapable of having intimate relationships. They further narrate these experiences:

“I know men who have disabilities who have dated able bodied people. People with disabilities are in relationships.” (Sipho)

“I have had girlfriends who did not have any disabilities. For me, I don’t have a problem dating. I haven’t spoken to anyone with a disability who has found it difficult to date as most of them have girlfriends.” (Viwe)

Whereas, Andrew’s assertion is that as a male he should be a leader. An interesting piece of literature states that traditional male roles label men with disabilities as being less of a man (Zulu, 2004; Staples, 2011). However, coupled with Sipho and Viwe’s views on masculinity, Andrew believes that his role is to lead and bring about development and growth:

“I feel that as I am a male and I have this visually impaired disability, I feel like I should take the role of leading and making people aware of the problem and the solution. A male should lead and be the one to play the role to bring development and growth.” (Andrew)

It is interesting to note how male participants’ way of thinking is gendered, when defining what men should be able to do in society. Similarly, the female participants have also shown how their expected roles are gendered. Nicki and Melissa emphasized in their narratives that society holds low expectations for women with disabilities to fulfil traditional roles. One of these traditional female roles was being a mother. Research shows that women with disabilities are considered asexual (Howland & Rintala, 2001). However, Nicki and Melissa’s narratives indicate that they are aware of their sexuality as women and that they have a desire to procreate. Nicki expresses how she is aware that her child may also have a disability, but she has also seen women like her able to procreate. She further narrates this below:

“I am aware of the fact that my offspring may have this condition or that I can die in the process or that I can’t have kids at all. But I’ve also been doing my own research

and I've seen a lot of women with my condition having kids and their kids are normal but then later on start developing this condition.” (Nicki)

Emmett (2006), Peta (2017) and Howland and Rintala (2001) describe the stigma attached to women with disabilities who procreate. The authors affirm that mothers are blamed and stigmatized for giving birth to a child with an impairment. This apparent stigma is also representative in Nicki's narrative, because she understands the complexities of giving birth and the fact that her child may not be 'normal.'

Melissa acknowledges her role as a female to have children; however, the way she constructs her female identity is also shaped by what she believes are people's perceptions of ideal mothers and motherhood. She believes that her future in-laws may not think she can fulfil female roles as being a mother and a caretaker. These perceptions are in line with Hassouneh-Phillips and McNeff (2005) and Wickenden, Nixon and Yoshida (2013) who claim that women with disabilities are disadvantaged by negative perceptions deeming them unfit to fulfil traditional female roles. Melissa explains these concerns below:

“I think that me as a female who is supposed to have children and get married and take care of the house and everything. I think what will I do once I get married? What will my future in-laws say? Will they judge me or criticize me or put me down or something, or will they not accept me as I am disabled?” (Melissa)

Melissa's concerns, here are in line with Emmett (2006)'s observation that having a person with a disability in the family is thought to damage the marriage prospects of other members of the family. Melissa worries that she may face criticism from a family that she might marry into. Perhaps, Melissa's concerns stem from fearing that people with disabilities are perceived to have the potential to change family dynamics and thus have a low likelihood of getting married (Emmett, 2006; McHassouneh-Phillips & McNeff, 2005; Savage & McConnell, 2015; Cohen, 2006). In addition to the challenges in fulfilling gendered roles, another concern that Melissa and Nicki raise is their vulnerability as females with disabilities. Nicki feels that she is vulnerable as a female, as men may take advantage of her because she has a disability. Melissa expresses that society sees women with disabilities as weak and easy to control. Such views have also been raised in Emmett (2006) and Hassouneh-Phillips & McNeff (2005), as the scholars report that women with

disabilities are at a greater risk of being physically and sexually abused. This is what Nicki and Melissa had to say about vulnerability:

“I am limited in that regard with dating and being a woman and to fend for myself against men who might want to take advantage of me as I am a female with a disability.” (Nicki)

“Society displays us as weak beings, they feel that they can do anything to us, that they can control us.” (Melissa)

Dineo believes that being a female with a disability is difficult. She admits that as a female, you have to live up to certain standards and to be seen as perfect. Dineo believes that her disability is a flaw and therefore she will not be seen as perfect as other females. She expresses this in her narrative:

“Females have it worse as we are very self-conscious and for us also we always have to be perfect, you don’t want to show flaws. So, having a disability, you are flawed, you are not as perfect as someone else, like another female is.” (Dineo)

These narratives have illustrated the participants’ varied lived experiences through the intersection of gender, class and race. These perceptions and experiences of students indicated how power, privilege and inequality exist in society (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Creese & Stasiulis, 1996). Furthermore, their perceptions and experiences reveal how systems of race, gender and class do not have identical effects on socially constructed categories of women and men (Creese & Stasiulis, 1996). Thus, such a subjective experience shapes an individual and constructs how they identify with themselves and the attitudes that they may have towards other people. Participants have raised these mixed perceptions about how they constructed their identity within race, class and gender. Participants were also resolute in their perceptions of disability and this is explored in the next section.

4.3. Disability does not mean inability

Despite the negative social construction of disability, students emphasized that living with a disability did not mean that they were unable to do anything.

“Disability means that there are certain things that you can’t do but it doesn’t mean that you are disadvantaged.” (Melissa)

As Melissa emphasizes, it is necessary to understand that disability is socially constructed as people with disabilities are perceived as incapable of participating in society (Williams, 2001). Student’s narratives continue to challenge this perception here showing that having a disability does not mean that they are abnormal:

“My perception of disability is that people with disabilities are not abnormal, they are people like anyone else, the only thing is that they may not be able to do certain things.” (Sipho)

It is common knowledge that people with disabilities are less likely to perform everyday tasks in the same way as able bodied people (Ingstad, 2011). Viwe shows that whilst there is some truth in such an assertion, being limited in such a way is not an inability, but a limitation:

“It means not being able to do certain things. For example, I only have one hand, so people think that I am not able to wash myself like a person with two hands can.”
(Viwe)

The students in this study perceive disability as having the ability to live a productive and satisfying life in the same way as able bodied people. Viwe, Melissa and Sipho all acknowledge that people with disabilities are limited in certain aspects. However, an important point that they raise is that perceived limitations do not mean that people with disabilities are weak and helpless (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Williams, 2001). Indeed, the participants’ narratives seem to deconstruct negative perceptions of disability by normalizing disabilities and constructing people with disabilities as living with limitations, but also as being far from being “abnormal” and “disadvantaged”.

The way in which the participants normalize disability rejects outdated approaches to disability which devalue the person as weak and helpless, considering negative self-identity to be the outcome of physical impairment (Shakespeare, 2001 & Watson; Williams, 2001). Andrew’s narrative strongly illustrates that living with a disability should not devalue the person as he sees himself just as capable as able bodied people. He argues that although his society might limit him by perceiving

him as having a physical limitation, such a perception does not prevent him from living a productive and normal life:

“I am able to do things such as able bodied students or able bodied people do. Even though there has been discrimination and people thinking how can he be visually impaired, but he can do this and that? It’s all about the questions, how, how, how? But it is not about “how” it’s about me being a human being and my being able to do these activities.” (Andrew)

Melissa also draws attention to how disability is essentialized when she uses the term “normal people”, comparing herself to what a “normal person” is. This comparison is associated with research which shows that subjugated bodies are forced to fit the normalized category of what a body should look like (Thompson, 2002; Williams, 2001). Melissa further explains how society generalizes a “normal person”:

“Yes, I am different, from what people generalize about what being a normal person is but I can do everything that normal people can do.” (Melissa)

This societal generalization of what is normal creates a fear of imperfectability and people conform to a societal norm so that they are considered as fully human (Mohamed & Shefer, 2015). A normal person could be considered as the benchmark of what bodies should subscribe to. If bodies do not subscribe to this benchmark of normality, then the person becomes stigmatized. However, the stigmatization of disability can be disrupted by understanding that people with disabilities accomplish the same tasks, just in a different way. For example, if a person cannot walk, they have to use a wheelchair to be mobile, if a person cannot read because they are blind, they use braille instead and if a person has a hearing impairment, they use sign language to communicate. These examples illustrate that one different characteristic of the human body, or one subtle change of accomplishing everyday tasks does not mean that a person has an inability. Siphon emphasises that this is how disability should be perceived and understood in society:

“If a person has a visual impairment just like me or the person is blind, the only thing that the person is unable to do is to see, otherwise everything else is the same as another person. If the person is physically challenged, maybe they are in a wheelchair,

the only thing the person cannot do is to walk but then everything else is just like other people and this is how I perceive disabilities to be.” (Sipho)

These extracts further highlight that perhaps the definitions of disability are misinterpreted and misunderstood because of the pressures to conform to a societal norm. Participants consider themselves to be “just like other people,” and by doing so, they reject traditional and outdated approaches to disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Barnes, 2006). Although these were their perceptions, it should be understood that students with disabilities still face challenges in how other people perceive disability and this is explored in the next section. What is emerging here is that disability can be understood through a relationship between the experience of having a disability, the social situation in which people with disabilities are located and what effect this has on their lives (Williams, 2001; Brown 2001). The following section attempts to unpack this intersection.

4.4. “People stare, they are fascinated and curious”: stigmatizing the perceptions of disability

The way students with disabilities construct their identity is also shaped by people’s perceptions of disability. Student’s responses here show that attitudinal barriers have a bigger impact on the lives of participants than environmental barriers do. Within the responses of the participants, it is evident that societal perceptions of disability are framed by ignorance, stereotypes, pity and fear. Although the experiences of participants only represent a very small sample of disability experiences within Cape Town, it gives an idea of the perceptions and attitudes that do exist in South Africa. Nicki, Viwe and Dineo explained how their identity as people with disabilities was influenced by the treatment and reactions of strangers or people who they know. In most cases these were negative nuances and reactions to their disabilities.

“I face challenges in terms of people asking me how I became like this. As I grew older, it became easier to explain to people what happened to me. But it gets challenging when a little kid comes up to me and says, “Hey, you! What happened to you! Why do you only have one hand?” (Viwe)

Viwe expressed that a challenge he has are the questions people and even children ask him about his body, his experiences are an example of how perceptions are framed by ignorance or pity. He

sees the lack of awareness apparent in children as representative of an ignorant society that moulds them.

Nicki mirrors Viwe's experiences in expressing how stereotypes are already formed in children's minds:

"I get annoyed with the children in my area, they will make fun and it just shows what their parents are teaching them as parents don't educate their children around certain things." (Nicki)

Nicki further spoke about how people view her as "retarded". Because of her physical disability, Nicki believes that people assume that she is unable to communicate as well. The term "retarded" is a pejorative word used to describe people with disabilities and is considered as very insulting (O'Neill, 2011). However, this is also an example of how certain terms have created stereotypes and in turn, create low expectations of people with disabilities. This is what Nicki has experienced:

"Sometimes people think that I am "retarded". This one time I walked into a butcher with my mother and this man spoke to me in a certain way and I was like, 'okay, why are you doing this' I just said 'hi' and he was speaking to me as if I didn't understand him." (Nicki)

Dineo also expressed that the way she sees herself is influenced by people's perceptions of her. This is evident when she recounted how she was bullied as she was seen as different from the other children in her school. Bullying in her childhood lowered her self-esteem and consequently, she still feels nervous around people:

"A lot of times people's perceptions makes me nervous because you wonder if people are going to think what is wrong with you and that makes me more tense and nervous. When I was younger I was bullied a lot in school. It was bad for me and it led me to having very low self-esteem. I had to push myself to be more confident." (Dineo)

Sipho emphasised this point when expressing that his challenge wasn't in living with a disability, but in people's perceptions of him. He further explained that people's perceptions of him are influenced by pity, and this also shows that people are ignorant about disabilities as a lived experience:

“The greatest challenge that I face is when people view me, they tend not to look at me as a person. They tend to look at me as if I’m a person with a disability. They don’t look beyond my disability. They just see you as that blind person and they feel pity for you, so that it is the greatest challenge which I have experienced.” (Sipho)

Sipho made an interesting statement in that people “do not look beyond” his disability. This statement is also true of the challenges raised by all the participants in the above narratives. These participant’s sentiments echo Goffman (1963), who shows that disability becomes people’s master status, which is symbolic and whatever they may accomplish, the condition is the first thing that other people see. Although Sipho did computer training, he indicated that he had to use a computer for people to believe him, as he is blind:

“I know that if I tell people that I did computer training they would not believe me. For them to believe me, I would actually have to use a computer in front of them so that they can actually see that I have done computer training.” (Sipho)

Dineo and Nicki associated ignorance surrounding disability with a lack of education and awareness. A lack of awareness around the lived experience of disability perpetuates the marginalization and exclusion of people with disabilities. In turn, they become an outcast group with a permanent mark on their status (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Dineo and Nicki further explain the difficulties that they have in relating and engaging with people because of the negative perceptions of disability:

“There is little awareness about people who have a speech impediment. That’s my challenge, there’s less people for me to relate to.” (Dineo)

“People aren’t really educated so it’s difficult for me to engage with them because even if they know that I am at varsity they will still say that I am incapable of doing things. It’s just because of their lack of knowledge in certain things. Society hasn’t adapted, or they are not interested as this is their perception of people living with disabilities.” (Nicki)

In the above extract, it is clear that Nicki’s belief is that society does not wish to adapt to people with disabilities because society is deeply rooted in a particular perception of disability. These

perceptions view disability as a deficit (Thomas, 2002) and a condition that requires fixing (Hughes, 2007; Asch, 2001), and participants had to try and make meaning of their own identities in such contexts.

4.5. Labelling and Fitting into the right “box”

Stigmatising perceptions were indeed rooted in language used to describe disability experiences as shown above. But perhaps it is necessary to further explore how participants found these perceptions expressed through use of language. Language plays a huge role in how disabilities are perceived in society. An interconnectedness exists between language and society, as people express their negative perceptions of disabilities through language. Social constructionists emphasize that we use language to display the meaning of our experiences (Burr, 2003) and the use of terms and language played a significant role in shaping participants’ experiences of how they were perceived. Dineo and Melissa point out how the use of particular terms shape constructions of identity and how such terms can have devastating effects on the self-confidence of a person living with a disability. The way that a person thinks and the concepts and categories that shape their frame of thinking derive from language and from the people who share the culture (Burr, 2015). Dineo and Melissa expressed how harsh words and labels affected their self-confidence as people with disabilities:

“You hear it when people say you “hukkle” (South African colloquial expression for stutter). If people didn’t tease me as much when I was younger and just left me, maybe I wouldn’t have been that bad. People will ask why I am speaking like that and they tell me to ‘speak properly’ or to ‘finish talking’. I feel like people are very insensitive on things that they say.” (Dineo)

Melissa also brings up the importance of how language and negative labels can affect the way people see them:

“What if that person has a lack of self-esteem and then you call them crippled? Call them differently abled. I didn’t like it myself as I used to be made fun of. People would make fun of me and call me names and it got to me. If you call someone crippled it gets to a person, we shouldn’t just do that. Society should stop labelling a person as it destroys a person’s confidence.” (Melissa)

Although the participants raised these strong emotions around stigma targeted at their bodies, there was an element of tolerance to these negative nuances as a coping mechanism, as shown below:

“I have learned to accept the kinds of questions that people ask as it’s the same questions that people have asked me when I was a child.” (Viwe)

“I get that people are going to stare, as they are fascinated and curious and I am used to it. I don’t blame anyone for their thinking.” (Nicki)

What is clear from these narratives is that the participants’ experiences as people with disabilities vary but what they share is the problem of people’s attitudes towards them. The issue of labels was taken further to indicate how such kind of labelling fitted participants in boxes. They illustrated how society uses the restrictions experienced by bodies as a basis of naming and categorizing bodies. This interpretation of bodies trapped and fitted participants into particular kinds of “boxes”.

“People consider me as an amputee and they label me as an amputee.” (Viwe)

Viwe highlights an issue of how disabilities have a “mark” attached to them. He says that people label him as an amputee and consider him as such, which shows that people already have a preconceived notion of who he is, even if they don’t know him personally. This is an example of how disabilities are stigmatized, and the social identity of a person is devalued by their social contexts (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigmas are also an example of how people have placed him and other people like him into a box labelled, “amputee” and have created a prescribed social identity which is based on physical difference.

Dineo, Melissa and Nicki’s narratives focus on the normal body as opposed to the abnormal. In both cases these labels work towards categorizing and fitting people into certain kinds of boxes, which promote stigma associated with difference. Here “normal people” are seen as those who are able bodied and have physical capabilities to “run and go on hikes”. Participants’ understanding of a normal individual signify how ableism discriminates against people with disabilities and excludes them from the blueprint of what a normal body is considered to be (Campbell, 2008). The narratives below further illustrate this:

“I feel as if society sees being normal as being perfect. Having the perfect image, perfect speech and it’s normal to have perfect speech and no hints of being strange.”

(Dineo)

“‘Normal’ are people with two arms, two working arms, two legs, people who are able to do and see everything.” (Melissa)

“I think that someone able bodied is somebody who can run, that can go to places that I can’t go and go on hikes as these are really things that I want to do but I can’t.”

(Nicki)

What is evident here is that these narratives seem to be positioning what is normal against what the body does in a social context, and any limitations of a body positions it as abnormal. It is therefore not surprising that participants identify able bodied people as fully functioning within their social environment and being able to “do and see everything”. However, scholars such as Brown (2011) argue that such a perspective emanates from the social environment. It is the social environment that disables the individual and not necessarily the body of the individual. Barnes & Mercer (2005) who are strong proponents of the social model, affirms this notion by adding that built environments have a tendency of excluding people with disabilities, by not meeting their needs and socially imposing disability on people (Oliver, 2013). Andrew picks on this reasoning by associating his perceptions of ableism with a safe and functional environment, emphasizing that for him to fit into the box labelled “able bodied”, his environment needs to change and what needs changing is not him or his body:

“For me, to be abled bodied means I want a safe social environment, I want to be in an environment where I will be able to say that my fundamental human needs are met. For instance, fundamental human needs are like protection, substance and identity and things like that, which are the most important things for me to be able bodied.”

(Andrew)

Interestingly enough, Siphon brought up another point by mentioning that it is not only people with disabilities that are othered or placed in undesirable boxes. He indicated that people who have HIV or who are gay are treated differently as they are stigmatized as possessing a characteristic that is not widely accepted by society. This concept of othering a group of people disrupts the personhood

of the individual (Ingstad, 2011). It seems that anybody who is not considered to be perfect, as Dineo suggested earlier, is not considered to be normal and Sipho further emphasized this view below:

“If people consider you as different they also treat you differently to other people. For instance, I have a disability, so I know what it’s like to be treated differently but I have seen what it is like for people living with HIV and who are gay, being treated different from everybody else.” (Sipho)

It is interesting to note that although the students overwhelmingly perceived society as disabling, they also felt that people with disabilities were not mere victims but had agency in choosing which boxes they were fitted into. This perception is raised by Dineo when she says:

“You as a person, have to fit into a box, you have to choose where you fit into.”
(Dineo)

Dineo shows an understanding of how certain positionalities are created for people, and as people live in such neatly organized boxes, one has to fit into one such box. In essence, what Dineo says here is that human beings have agency in how they accept or reject stigmatized roles (Bury, 1997). Siphon shows the agency illustrated by Dineo in choosing how he constructs his identity. For example, Siphon explains how he rejects the norm by labelling himself as able bodied as shown in his response below:

“I believe that I am able bodied because there is nothing that my body cannot do. The only thing that I am unable to do is to see, so I do not regard myself as a person who is not able bodied. I think people when they refer to abled bodied people they are referring to people who do not have disabilities.” (Sipho)

A clear construction of identity is shown in the responses that have been explored in this theme. Nicki, Melissa and Dineo construct disability identity along the lines of normalcy and as Siphon expresses in his narrative, normalcy usually refers to people who do not have a disability or who are not considered different. Deviating from others’ views, Siphon resists constructions of ableism and identifies as an able bodied person, instead of being placed into a box labelling him as blind. Whilst Andrew believed that being able-bodied could only be achieved through an accessible environment,

most of the participants focused on the body and not the context in which the body functioned, as Andrew did. Generally, the participants understood that collectively they constituted a group perceived in a negative way. Because of such perceptions and labels, forming friendships with other people, from such a positioning became a huge challenge, as indicated below.

4.6. Friendships as a sense of belonging at university

In the pursuance of investigating the importance of students' environment on constructions of identity, I explored their experiences of belonging at university. The sentiment here is that belonging is a dynamic process that is multi-layered, multi-scaled and multi-territorial (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Three identity-significant experiences are represented through the narratives of the students. Firstly, friendships and belongingness were influenced by the nature of their bodies, as participants felt that people tend to “stick to their own kind,” as Viwe illustrates:

“I do think that sometimes able bodied students like to stick to their own kind and walk with their normal group.”

Secondly, students demonstrated that through shared similarities with other students with disabilities, they formed friendships which were influenced by the same lived experiences of disability. Lastly, the students demonstrated how identities are formed within a group based self (Stryker & Burke, 2000), which means that identities are constructed through interactions with groups of people. These issues are discussed in-depth throughout this theme.

Yuval-Davis (2011) shows how society or people perpetually separate themselves into “us” and “them”, and such an assertion is seen in Viwe's emphasis of the experience of groups sticking to their own kind. Research suggests that an inclusive environment is not always achieved because identity is constructed by recognizing common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group (Hall, 1996; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The feelings of belonging for the participants here is manifested through their interaction with their university community. However, the narratives indicate that the community is not always inclusive. Dineo, Nicki and Siphon have experienced able bodied students' reluctance to interact with them:

“I have met other students already who don't want to deal with me. It depends on the person that you are.” (Dineo)

“It’s like other students are afraid to attach themselves to me as they are afraid that I will ask them for help constantly. Sometimes I think that they are ashamed of being with someone with a disability, or has a friend living with a disability. Some students won’t mix with me as they think that I won’t understand them.” (Nicki)

“People [students] think that they are free to say certain things to you, they do not think that you can engage with them about things that are happening in the world.”
(Sipho)

What the participants have highlighted here is the fear and the uncertainty of able bodied students mixing with students they consider to be different. This fear of interaction is also highlighted in Barnes (1997), who describes people having “a deep rooted psychological fear of the unknown” (p. 21). Thumen (1966, p. 50), argues that “people don’t admit that disability is the real cause of refusal but nonetheless, the disabled person is gently but firmly placed where society wants him to be, not a place of his own choice.” This assertion is true of Sipho, Nicki and Dineo’s narratives above. Exclusion in a social situation influences identity construction as shame and pride are learned through interacting with groups (Darling, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

The narratives have illustrated that a quest for belonging can be a threat to the self-esteem of students with disabilities. As belonging is a psychological need, not having that fulfilled can influence how students construct their identity. A sense of belonging is significant as it is an emotional attachment and a feeling of being at home, which can provide hope and the reassurance of being in a safe space (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Students with disabilities expressed this reassurance in their narratives as they illustrated that common origin is shared with students with disabilities. Through shared commonalities, participants did not feel excluded or ostracized by a group who shares the same experiences as them. Sipho describes a relationship with people with disabilities that is exclusive as they share an understanding of what it means to live with a disability:

“There are things that people with disabilities would understand that people who are able bodied would not understand.” (Sipho)

Andrew mirrors Sipho’s views by further explaining that people with disabilities form good relationships with one another as they experience the same things:

“I am very good friends with differently abled students, they are my friends and we understand one another very well. We have a very good relationship and that is because we are experiencing the same things. It might not be from a visually impaired point of view, or from a wheelchair user point of view, but we do all experience these things at the same time.” (Andrew)

Dineo also adds to this narrative of belonging as an emotional attachment and a feeling of being at home in the following extract:

“We share something in common, even though people can’t see my disability. I feel that they know that I am disabled so, for me we can relate with one another more easily than someone who is normal as they wouldn’t fully understand what we go through.” (Dineo)

Students with disabilities shared experiences of disabilities with other students. This is significant as students with disabilities can collectively unite “for the purpose of better struggling against injustices” (Siebers, 2011, p. 89).

Andrew suggested that a way of changing negative perceptions of disabilities on campus should be through using students with disabilities as consultants in events or future projects concerning people with disabilities on the university campus. In this way, other students may be able to view students with disabilities as autonomous individuals, since “how others view them plays a pivotal role in their interactions with both institutional processes and structures” (Bell et. al., 2015, p. 7):

“The university should include differently abled students as a consulting group. When a construction goes up, when there is planning done, when there is an event or when something is happening at university, that group [students with disabilities] should be consulted before anything happens.” (Andrew)

Andrew’s suggestion has been raised in scholarships on disabilities in higher education. McKenzie, Mji and Gcaza (2014) suggest that to transform negative perceptions about bodies with disabilities, a strong engagement with people with disabilities is required. Such an involvement, creates a presence of people with disabilities. Representing disability identity in this way is believed to reframe the experience of living with a disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001).

Belonging as a multi-layered construct is shaped and influenced by different dynamics. These dynamics as illustrated throughout this section, are shared origins and through shared origins, friendship groups are formed. In the same breath, these narratives also represent the shared origins that occurred between able bodied students and students with disabilities, as narrated below:

“I like hanging out with people of different age groups who share different ideas. Most of my friends do not have any disabilities.” (Vive)

“I also have friends who are so called able bodied people. I believe that you can learn something from each and every person.” (Sipho)

“I do have social circles and it’s a mix of differently abled students and abled students.” (Andrew)

“I have five friends who I’m very close with. They are all abled bodied people.” (Melissa)

Forming interpersonal relationships is an innate need in all human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and students with disabilities have illustrated this need to belong as shown in their narratives. Through these relationships, a sense of group belonging is generated, and research shows that these relationships should be long lasting, positive and stable (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Interactions within social groups shape and influence the construction of identity and this is a process that is never complete (Hall, 1996). Dineo, Melissa and Nicki further illustrate the importance of friendships, as a functioning support system that is accepting of who they are:

“I have a small circle of friends and they know about my speech impediment and they accept that.” (Dineo)

“I am a very bubbly person and I make friends quickly. Usually my friends are very supportive.” (Melissa)

“I have this one friend who is open with me and she treats me as a normal person and she would say, ‘You don’t have a disability!’ She always encourages me and stuff.” (Nicki)

All the narratives explored in this section are indicative of the friendship bonds that were formed which enrich the lives of an individual and in turn constitute the self (Antonsich, 2010). What is also interesting to note is that group identities are more salient than others (Darling, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This means that the construction of identity depends on the groups who students with disabilities interact with. Their group identity with students with disabilities has a higher salience than those who are able bodied because of the familiarity and shared experiences. As the participants indicated that there are “things that able bodied students would not understand,” therefore, their identity shifts as they interact with people from similar backgrounds. Participants also indicated that similar backgrounds can be shared with able bodied students, as they demonstrated that their social circle is diverse. This is representative of how inclusion between students in the university space is present and occurring. Inclusion is further achieved through changing perceptions of what it means to live with a disability. The next theme unpacks how positive disability identity is constructed by students with disabilities. The theme further demonstrates that through deconstructing normalized understandings of disability, a positive identification towards disability can be achieved.

4.7. “Once people get to know me I am as normal as everyone else. I want people to understand that”

This write-up as well as scholarship on disabilities indicates that the construction of identity is shaped and influenced by discourses of normativity. These discourses marginalize bodies who are different or who do not conform to the norm (Asch, 2011; Campbell, 2008). Collectively, participants seemed to accept this general construction of disabilities, but they also argued that having a strong mindset was necessary to overcome stigma and negativity. What is also evident in the narratives already explored, is that the participants exercised agency in constructing their identity as people with disabilities. Such agency comes with having a positive mindset and self-acceptance. Viwe also reminds us that having a positive mindset is not something that is easy in a society which stigmatizes and devalues those that have disabilities. He suggests that the positionality of people with disabilities can be difficult to accept:

“I think it is us as people with disabilities who find it difficult to accept our situation.”
(Viwe)

Viwe has suggested that people with disabilities find it difficult to accept their situation. This belief indicates that constructing a positive disability identity is through self-acceptance. However, achieving self-acceptance in an environment or society that is marginalizing can require more than a “positive mindset”. Nonetheless, Viwe, Andrew and Melissa narrate the importance of having a good attitude and mindset and how, this ultimately depends on the person:

“It depends on the personality of the person who has a disability and it’s also how you manage yourself with your disability.” (Viwe)

“It’s about your attitude but your attitude has a choice, it’s either a good attitude or a bad attitude.” (Andrew)

“It really depends on your mindset. Your mindset plays a really big role when it comes to your disability.” (Melissa)

Viwe, Andrew and Melissa place emphasis on a strong mindset in identifying as a person with a disability. However, this construction of positive disability identity can be difficult, especially when people with disabilities are constructed within a category of otherness (Shakespeare, 2009). Dineo, Andrew and Nicki express these challenges in removing oneself from the place of the other and using it as a source of strength:

“You have to develop a tough skin and tell yourself that you don’t care. It’s not something that goes away, it’s always there. You just have to push through what people say and what people think, and it makes you stronger.” (Dineo)

Andrew adds to Dineo’s narrative by expressing that living with a disability comes with a responsibility of not caring about what people think about you:

“I don’t care what people are saying as it’s about my success and me and where I want to be.” (Andrew)

However, Nicki also reminds us that not caring about what people think comes with a challenge of staying true to who you are despite people’s negative opinions:

“It’s really difficult for me to put my mind onto one thing and see myself as this when everybody else sees me in another way. I know that I am different, and I acknowledge that, so I know who I am.” (Nicki)

Drawing from the responses of Dineo, Andrew and Nicki, it can be understood that identity awareness is more than having the freedom to choose as Darling (2013) and Watson (2005) claimed. Dineo describes this freedom as having a tough skin and reminding oneself not to care about people’s perceptions, as Andrew also illustrated. Nicki’s response illustrates that it is difficult to see herself in a certain light when other people do not see her in the same way. This is what makes positive identity challenging and having a good attitude and mindset is important, however as Dineo says, *“You have to push through what people say and think.”*

By challenging identities that are potentially disabling, people with disabilities reconstruct what is considered by society to be normal (Siebers, 2011; Watson, 2005). Reconstructing disability identity is achieved through the power of having a positive mindset and as a result, new sources of positive identities can surface, and contribute to developing disability culture (Shakespeare, 2009). These narratives do attest to documented evidence of positive disability identities as shown in (Shakespeare, 2009; Davis, 2006; Siebers, 2011) who have demonstrated how one’s mindset on disability indeed has an impact on how they shape and construct their identity. Positive disability identity has been raised by several scholars (Shakespeare, 2009; Siebers, 2011; Watson, 2005; Darling, 2013), who see it as an alternative to negative identification of impairment. The authors also affirm that through positive disability identity, the disability experience can be redefined as identity is fluid and constantly changing (Borsay, 2002; Hall, 2000). Andrew and Siphon raised that people with disabilities have a responsibility in being agents of changing negative identities on disability. They indicated that they make people aware of their disability. Siphon sees himself as a person who is “just like them” or “no different from them,” and he demonstrates how negative perceptions of disability can change through engagement with people. Similarly, Andrew discloses his disability, taking responsibility and “making lecturers aware.” Both Siphon and Andrew, exercise agency by constructing positive disability identity within an environment that can be stigmatizing and exclusionary, as seen below:

“I make sure that I spoke to my classmates so when my classmates engaged with me they could see that I was a person just like them. They took me as a person who is not

different to them. There would be instances when I would be asking for something and the person would just point at where the thing is and when I tell them, 'no remember that I am blind' then they will say, 'well, we do not see you that way, so we forget that you are blind'." (Sipho)

"I had to take the responsibility and it was a continuous process of taking responsibility and making these lecturers aware. Through the years, I've been here for five years, they've been really accommodating because of the awareness that's been created all the time. I have experienced many challenges, but it was up to me to bring an inclusive environment to university." (Andrew)

Sipho and Melissa added to these views through illustrating how living with a disability did not affect the quality of life of an individual:

"I finished school despite being blind, went to university despite being blind and finished what I went there to do. I have achieved things that other people have achieved, I am able to do things that other people can do. I am able to participate in things that other people can participate in." (Sipho)

"I am proud of getting my degree and achieving things in life unlike people labelling you as a person who sits at home and does nothing." (Melissa)

The way in which people with disabilities represent and see themselves should be a true indication of how disabilities are perceived in society. Using the voices of people with disabilities provides a true representation of disability and the meaning of disability is revealed in a way that is not generic or abstract (Yuval-Davis, 2010). In doing so, new perceptions of disability can be created, which in turn influences the way in which disability identities are constructed. Deconstructing negative perceptions of disability is a work in progress as Sipho suggests:

"Slowly but surely people are starting to see me the way that I want them to see me."
(Sipho)

The participants in this study have expressed that they have absolutely no desire to change who they are. Throughout this chapter, the participants have shown self-acceptance towards their bodies. Their narratives indicated that what needs to be changed is the mindset of society and not their

bodies. Despite the challenges that participants are faced with, they still paint themselves in a positive and encouraging light. Viwe, Siphon and Andrew show self-acceptance as people with disabilities and they also show their unwillingness to change who they are:

“I have a disability and that’s the way it is. I have accepted it as I can’t change it. It’s how I lived with it.” (Viwe)

“I am okay with who I am, I have accepted who I am, and I do not have a problem with who I am. I know this might be unbelievable, but if God could ask me if I wanted something, sight would not be the first thing that I would ask for.” (Siphon)

“I am differently abled all my life, I have accepted that myself and I do not want to change that because I lived with it all my life and it did not stop me to where I am now.” (Andrew)

Melissa provides an understanding that a positive disability identity is something that happens over time. As she grows she builds more confidence as a person with a disability. The way she frames disability can also be seen to shift over time, where she acknowledges that everybody is indeed different. Nicki proves through her narrative that people with disabilities can achieve more than able bodied people and this is something that should be celebrated. These narratives convey positive disability identity as they have proven that living with a disability is not limiting:

“I feel as I grow, that I have more confidence in myself and I see how other people have confidence and it inspires me. I’m different, but so what? Everyone has a different characteristic about them. You know opening up about my story it builds up my confidence as I know that I am an inspiration to people.” (Melissa)

“I am at university and I have reached this level more than people who are abled bodied who I grew up with. I push through even though I have been through so much. I try to make people understand that this is me and this is how I do things, and this is how I can’t do things.” (Nicki)

Dineo’s narrative definitely summarises this study. She expresses herself as a normal person who has feelings and emotions like any other person. However, there are small characteristics about her that do make her different. Yet, this difference should not be seen as a limitation or as her being less

capable as an able bodied person. Indeed, once people get to understand people with disabilities and reframe their way of thinking, the way disability is perceived will be in a more positive light:

“I’m a normal girl, I have normal fears, and I have normal ways. The normal things you do, I do. It’s just that it’s only the small things that sets me apart from people. But once people get to know me I am as normal as everyone else is. I want people to understand that.” (Dineo)

This theme was powerful in representing narratives in a positive light. Often, the experiences of people with disabilities are not always represented through their voices. Participants were able to use their narratives to show a true reflection of the disability experience. Even though students with disabilities face challenges in how they are perceived as shown in this analysis, it is powerful to explore how they construct their identities around these stigmatizing constructions of disability.

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter discusses several issues which emerged in the investigation of how students with disabilities constructed their identities in their environment or society. The discussion revealed that students with disabilities shared commonalities in experiencing the university community as a group, but also continued to reflect on individual and different experiences of disability. They reflected on how gender, class and race intersected to inform their unique experiences as people with disabilities, and how these experiences informed identity constructions.

The analysis further revealed the challenges of living with a disability and how such challenges played a huge role in shaping identity constructions for themselves. Some of the challenges included people’s perceptions, reactions, and articulations of bodies with disabilities. Such discourses weaved into how students with disabilities viewed themselves or interacted with fellow students on campus, thus impacting on their friendships. However, it was also interesting to realize that having a good mindset was important in constructing positive disability identity. Their quest as students with disabilities was to demonstrate that they are not different from other people and would appreciate being considered in this way. Details of this conclusion are provided in the next chapter.



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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This research was undertaken to investigate how young students with disabilities construct their identity in their society or environment. The perceptions of disabilities were explored as well as the influence this had on the construction of identity. Furthermore, the research aimed to investigate the impact of the student's environment in shaping their identity and also how social divisions such as race, gender and class mediated students' constructions of identity.

The participants were six students from a university in Cape Town. They were a mix of three males and three females as I wanted to have an even number of each sex, to understand different gendered standpoints in identity construction. Three of the participants were coloured and three were black, which was useful in understanding intersections of race. This research found that constructions of identity among students with disabilities are indeed shaped and influenced by society. The way society perceived disabilities and the stigma that disabilities carry influenced the way in which students with disabilities constructed their identity.

Participants have also shown that constructing positive disability identity is achievable through a strong mindset. This was evident when participants demonstrated that positive interactions with people can change preconceived negative social understanding of disability. Importance was placed on participants being the agents of change, in creating new and more positive representations of disability. However, it is important to acknowledge that participants understood that creating positive representations of disability was in essence framed around negative perceptions, which were challenging to combat. Yet, through reconceptualizing what it meant to live with a disability, new narrations of disability were constructed. This is what made using identity narratives powerful in this study, it allowed students with disabilities to give a true account of what it meant to live with a disability.

5.2. Summary of findings

The thesis investigated how students with disabilities constructed their identities in their environment. The university that they attended served as the context for this study, as this is where they spent a lot of their time as full-time students. The research question was answered, as students' narratives gave different meanings and understandings on how identity is constructed through a societal framework of disability. The narratives of students with disabilities demonstrated that a positive disability identity can be constructed through redefining what is considered to be normal. However, the challenges that arose with constructing a positive identity to disability were apparent in their narratives. To understand how disability identity can be redefined, it was important to understand identity and how identity is theorized. Identity is a contested subject and difficult to understand however, I used personal narratives and accounts of students with disabilities as a tool to understand identity construction (Yuval-Davis, 2010). One main feature in the construction of identity is that identity is fluid and changing (Borsay, 2002; Hall, 2000) and such an understanding of identity made me realize that current negative assumptions of disability have the potential to change. This was an interesting approach to understanding disability identity.

To further comprehend how students with disabilities constructed their identities in their environment or society, students' experiences and perceptions had to be understood. The discussions revealed that students with disabilities were best understood as a collective and as individuals. It would be improper to assume that they only shared the same experiences, and intersectionality worked as a backdrop in understanding these intragroup differences. These intragroup differences were explored through students' perceptions and experiences of disability in relation to gender, race and class. The constructions of identity were understood in conjunction with the ways in which gender, race and class intersected with the experience of living with a disability. The intersectional understanding of disability highlighted the social dynamics that impacted on the way in which students constructed their identities. The discussions revealed that class had a higher salience over race, because poverty and living with a disability was seen as more oppressive than certain racial identities.

Furthermore, it was evident that the female participants felt that when gender intersected with disability, they faced multiple other forms of marginality. These discriminations stemmed from women with disabilities being perceived as incapable of ideal womanhood and motherhood.

Moreover, the fear of being subjected to gender based violence and sexual abuse was raised by the female participants. On the other hand male participants felt that living with a disability did not hinder them from fulfilling the gendered male roles associated with being a leader, or being in a relationship. Nonetheless, participants proved that experiences of disability are varied, and that when disability intersects with gender, class and race, different realities and experiences emerge all working together to inform the constructions of identity.

Whilst students displayed varied lived experiences of disability, there were still instances where they shared many similarities. These similarities emanated from the way disabilities are negatively perceived in society. However, the way participants defined disability went against such hegemonic and normative understandings of disability. This was evident in how participants responded to what it meant to live with a disability. They clearly articulated that living with a disability did not mean that they were disadvantaged or unable to live a fulfilling life. This perception of disability was significant because participants did not view themselves as incapable, but emphasised that even if their bodies had certain restrictions, these were just that, and this did not in any way make them feel inferior. They acknowledged the constraints they had in accomplishing everyday tasks, but argued that these were not limitations. However, what was understood as limiting for participants were the stigmatizing societal perceptions of disability.

These limitations were further associated with attitudinal barriers rather than environmental barriers. Such attitudes foregrounded their disability as their “master status”, as people generally failed to look beyond their disability. As a result of these stigmatizing perceptions of disability, participants expressed how they were stereotyped, placed into boxes and labelled the “other.” These labels were expressed in the language that society used to describe bodies with disabilities and in most cases this language was associated with the nature of disability. The participants indicated that such labelling associated with disability affected their self-confidence and influenced the way they constructed their identity. Their main concern was that instead of focusing on labelling and calling them in different and derogative terms, their communities could assist in making social and physical environments more accessible to bodies with disabilities.

The experience of the students’ environment influenced their identity construction in various ways. One of these influences derived from their sense of belonging in society. The discussions revealed that group belonging was influenced by what they considered to be similarities with other groups or

people. At times they felt an element of exclusion when able bodied students did not easily mix or befriend them. Yet it was also clear in the narratives that constructions of identity were significantly shaped by how they felt accepted into various other social circles. They indeed viewed belonging as a psychological need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but strongly felt that this need was hindered by the negative perceptions of disability that other people and group members showed in their environments. Hence they found it of great importance to make people aware of who they were as people with disabilities. In doing so, it was interesting to note a sense of agency emerge, as they chose to take certain positions in constructing their identity, but also emphasised that one had to have a strong mindset.

It was therefore not surprising when their narratives further revealed that positive disability identity was difficult to achieve, in a context that had predetermined assumptions of disabilities. A number of scholars have written about positive disabilities and one key observation is that when positive disability identity is constructed, disability pride, self-confidence and solidarity within communities are usually formed (Shakespeare, 2009). I found some relevance to this claim in this study as I noted how participants showed a strong sense of pride in their constructions of disability identity.

Despite the stigma that society attaches to bodies which are different, it was indeed remarkable to see participants resisting prescribed social disability identities, but it should be noted that this was not an easy task as already emphasised. I therefore have reservations about sentiments raised by Darling (2013) and Watson (2005) who claim that identity awareness is a freedom of choice. I believe that agency is indeed important in the construction of disability identity but I am also aware that, identity awareness requires more than freedom of choice, particularly after listening to this group of students share their experiences. More so, Shakespeare (2009) reminds us that it is difficult to come from a place of otherness and use that as a source of strength.

5.3. Concluding remarks

The narratives indeed revealed that the constructions of identity are threatened by a hegemonic society that disables people through negative social constructions of disability. The study believes that more awareness around the lived experience of disability will redefine and break down attitudinal barriers to disability which usually stem from normative ableist values. Narratives are indeed powerful in rejecting traditional misinterpretations of disability, which are often influenced

by such normative ableist values (Bell, et. al., 2016; Abbas, Church, Frazee and Panitch 2014). Narratives, in this study indeed served as a powerful platform through which students with disabilities could represent disabilities in an authentic way. As Burr (2015) states, people with disabilities have the freedom to narrate their lives and construct their identity outside of a “taken-for-granted” socially imposed identity.

5.4. Methodological contributions: Why a feminist qualitative study?

It was not my first time conducting a feminist research project; however, it was my first time researching a highly sensitive topic and I needed to be extremely cautious all the way. As mentioned in my reflexivity, I was nervous that the participants would not be forthcoming with their experiences and perceptions as I do not live with a disability. However, the participants were open and comfortable sharing their experiences and perceptions with me. The scarcity of current literature on disabilities, is clear evidence that disabilities have not been broadly researched.

Using a feminist qualitative approach indeed contributed to methodological processes in this field. I used my tools as a feminist researcher to conduct research that challenged androcentric biases (Harding, 1987). My main concern was to explore what causes and maintains the oppression of people with disabilities (Hesse-Biber, 2007) through attempting to understand how their lived experiences shaped how they constructed their identities. Using a qualitative approach in this research was the best way to understand the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities.

By using semi-structured interviews, I had a set of question that guided me; however, what I wanted to achieve from the interview was a conversation between the participant and myself. The semi-structured interview was useful, explanatory and yielded extremely rich data and to my dismay, I couldn't use all the data garnered in the research, due to the size of my project. The way that I analysed the data was through a thematic analysis, which I found very useful in my research. The themes served as patterns across the data that were relevant to the research question. Because I had so much data, coding and breaking it up into themes helped me to organize and understand the detailed data that was represented through the words of my participants.

Ethical issues were also a very big concern, particularly as I was working in the very sensitive area of disabilities. As I was researching a group that was largely marginalized (Asch, 2011;

Shakespeare, 2009; Barnes, 2006; Watson, 2001), I had to be sensitive in my approach as a researcher. Before entering into the research process, I worked very closely with my supervisor to write an interviewing schedule that used language that was not insensitive and I was extremely careful in avoiding asking questions that could be difficult for the participants to answer. To protect the interests of the participants, a consent form was provided, which they agreed to, and signed.

5.5. Theoretical contributions

The theoretical approach that I used in this research was social constructionism and intersectionality. Evidence in this study and research in this field attested to disabilities as socially constructed, making Social Constructionism the best framework within which to analyse the responses of students with disabilities. Social constructionism was indeed relevant as my argument throughout the thesis as well as in literature, is that disability is a socially constructed entity and not a problem relating to health and biology (Asch, 2011; White, 2005; Shakespeare, 2009).

A noteworthy characteristic of social constructionism that is relevant to this research, is that truth is not absolute and the way in which the world is perceived may be influenced by social structures and power structures (Burr, 2003) and these give meaning to reality. This theoretical approach was useful to show that groups of people cannot be socially constructed as sharing the same experiences and perceptions. Thus, social constructionism assisted me to criticize traditional and colonialist ways of thinking (Burr, 2003). Furthermore, through the use of social constructionism, societal structures that maintain the oppression of people with disabilities emerged as participants narrated their lived experiences, thereby indicating how these informed identity constructions. Participants believed that negative perceptions, the concept of ableism and stigma attached to disabilities, all perpetuated a cycle of oppression (among the participants), which constantly emerged as key issues shaping identity constructions.

Disabilities are not homogenous, and it was imperative that I use a second level theory to further interrogate other multiple dynamics that informed the construction of their identities. I therefore used intersectionality to further understand how their experiences were informed by the intersections of gender, race and class, as emerged in their narratives, particularly how these factors mediated the construction of identity. This approach was useful in further proving that people with disabilities do not share the same experiences and perceptions. Intersectionality assisted this

research in proving that intragroup differences existed among students with disabilities (Crenshaw, 1993). This approach helped this research in substantiating that race, gender and class mutually constituted one another and by doing so, allowed different experiences and perceptions among students with disabilities to emerge. Intersectionality in fact, revealed how power, privilege and inequality played a very significant role in shaping their own meanings and understandings in their society (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Creese & Stasiulis, 1996). I believe that using two theoretical approaches was useful in this research, as one cannot theorize disability without acknowledging that disabilities are socially constructed and that disability experiences are not homogenous.

5.6. Recommendations

First and foremost, this discussion has shown that there is a need for government to achieve rights for people with disabilities, by addressing discrimination, changing perceptions and combating stereotypes and prejudices (McKenzie et. al., 2014; Ohajunwa, et. al., 2015). Awareness around the experiences of disabilities needs to increase. There should also be more investments in specific programs for people with disabilities, especially within the university space. Universities should make it their priority to include disability awareness in the orientation programmes when new students attend the university. In doing so, it will break down disabling barriers and attitudes that able bodied students may hold against students with disabilities.

Secondly, more research is needed in understanding the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Research has been done on disabilities, but this body of work is old, and new studies are needed. I really struggled to get adequate relevant work in both national and international contexts. Scholars such as (McKenzie et. al., 2014) indicated that people with disabilities should be involved in future research. Their involvement should ensure that there are more than just participants, but should be positioned in ways that guide the research process and assist in what areas should be investigated for the purposes of disability awareness.

Furthermore, this is a feminist qualitative study that only focused on the narratives of a few students. More studies of a quantitative nature using statistics and questionnaires can be conducted to understand the prevalence of disabilities in universities and the circumstances of the experience of students with disabilities in such contexts for social justice.

Policies and terminologies within the university need to be adapted to bring about a more inclusive and sensitive environment. Human rights should also be linked to university policies and be strictly enforced for purposes of inclusivity and social justice. University staff should be more conscientized on bodies with disabilities, as they play a big role in the lives of students. Staff members working within the disability unit should be taught sign language so as to better include students with hearing impairments. More campaigns and workshops concerning disability issues should be a key priority of university management. Future students who research disability should conduct research with the intent of creating change and not just with the intention of adding it to their curriculum vitae.



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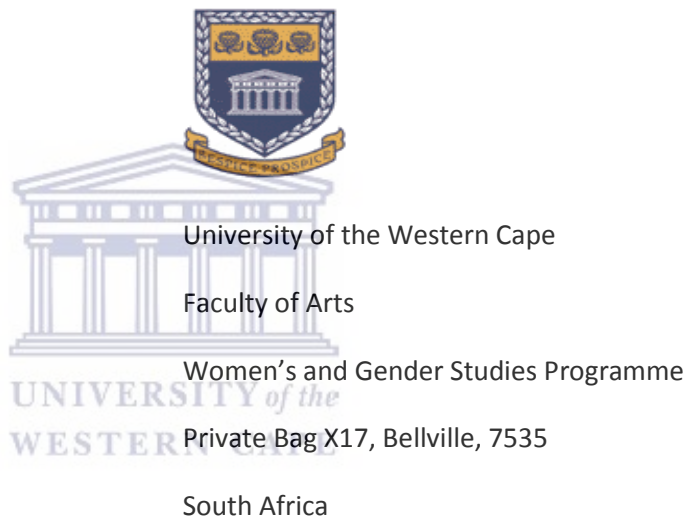
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Appendix



INFORMATION SHEET

Constructions of identity among young students living with visual or physical disabilities at a University in Cape Town

Dear Participant

This study aims to explore how students who are living with a physical or visual disability like you construct their identities in their environment or society. I will be asking you a number of questions around identity and how your experiences inform the way you understand who you are.

Please note that the interview will take up to an hour and it will be recorded with your permission. There are no hazards to being part of this research; however, there might be a recollection of emotional moments. In case of such an occurrence, interviews will be discontinued and you will be referred to appropriate counselling services on campus.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file and all electronic information will be coded and secured using password protected files. In order to guarantee confidentiality of the interviews, only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to audio recordings. The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as the research study has been completed and the transcripts will be kept in a locked secure place.

I guarantee that your anonymity will be assured as your real name will not be used in the research.

For any further enquiry do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor

Best regards,

Inga Steyn





Consent Form

University of the Western Cape

Constructions of identity among young students living with visual or physical disabilities at a University in Cape Town

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
(If I wish to withdraw I may contact the lead researcher at anytime)


3. I understand my responses and personal data will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the reports or publications that result for the research.

4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research.

5. I agree to take part in the above research project.



_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant <i>(or legal representative)</i>	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent <i>(If different from lead researcher)</i>	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Lead Researcher <i>(To be signed and dated in presence of the participant)</i>	Date	Signature



Copies: All participants will receive a copy of the signed and dated version of the consent form and information sheet for themselves. A copy of this will be filed and kept in a secure location for research purposes only.

Researcher:
Inga Steyn:
Department of Women's
and Gender Studies,
University of the Western
Cape.
Tel: 0764395109
ingasteyn@yahoo.com

Supervisor:
Dr Sisa Ngabaza
Department of Women's
and Gender Studies,
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Tel:0219592234 (e)
sngabaza@uwc.ac.za

HOD:
Prof. Lindsay Clowes
Department of Women
and Gender Studies,
University of the Western
Cape.
Tel:0219592234

19 July 2016

Dear Inga Steyn

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

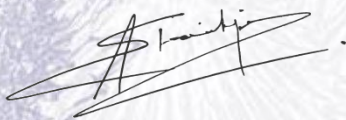
As per your request, we acknowledge that you have obtained all the necessary permissions and ethics clearances and are welcome to conduct your research as outlined in your proposal and communication with us.

Please note that while we give permission to conduct such research (i.e. interviews and surveys) staff and students at this University are not compelled to participate and may decline to participate should they wish to.

Should you wish to make use of or reference to the University's name, spaces, identity, etc. in any publication/s, you must first furnish the University with a copy of the proposed publication/s so that the University can verify and grant permission for such publication/s to be made publicly available.

Should you require any assistance in conducting your research in regards to access to student contact information please do let us know so that we can facilitate where possible.

Yours sincerely

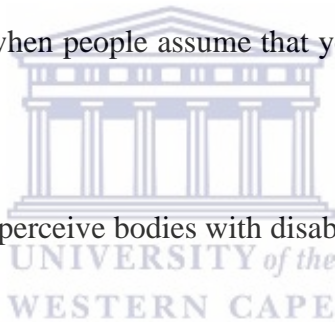


DR AHMED SHAIKJEE
MANAGER: STUDENT ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR

INTERVIEWING SCHEDULE

1) What does it mean to have a disability?

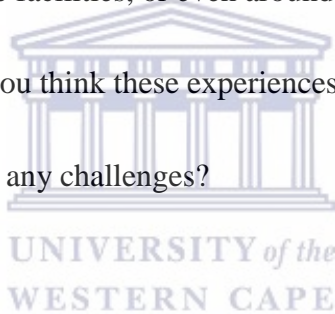
- What is your perception of disability? Can you describe what people may consider as your disability? Can you describe the challenges you may face and how you deal with it? If it is not challenging, explain.
- What do you think it means to be abled bodied in our society?
- How would you describe how people treat others who are considered different?
- What does it mean to you when people assume that you belong to a group that's labelled as "disabled?"
- How do people around you perceive bodies with disabilities?



2) How does the experience of a student's environment shape how they construct their identity?

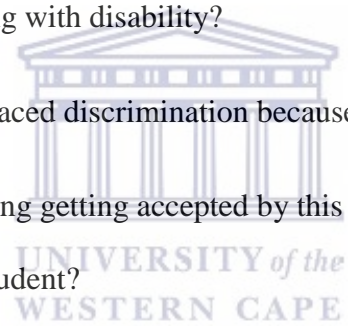
- Tell me about your experiences as a student living with a disability on this campus?
- Can you describe your social circle and the people you are friends with?
- What is it like to live on res or in your neighbourhood? How do strangers behave towards you?
- What do you think other students think about the office for students with disabilities?

- What is your perception of this office? Is it beneficial for students and the university?
- Describe your relationship with students from the office of students with disabilities? Are you friends with them outside of University?
- Describe your relationship and interaction with students not belonging to the OSWD
- Do you behave the same way around people who are considered to have a disability and those who are considered abled bodied? Or have you observed this behaviour amongst other people?
- Describe your experiences when getting around in public spaces. For example, public transport or accessing public facilities, or even around campus- getting into and participating in lectures etc and how do you think these experiences define or influence how you live your life? How do you overcome any challenges?



- 3) How are the identities of students who are differently abled shaped by perceptions of what it means to have a disability in their society or environment?
- What does the exclusion of other people living with disabilities mean to you? For example, that many people living with a disability cannot get a University education because of lack of opportunity or access? Can you speak about your experience of access in this university?
 - Tell me about how can society better include people who have physical or visual disabilities? How will this make your life and the life of others easier?

- How would you describe how people misunderstand disabilities?
- 4) Are social factors such as race, gender, class, culture and sexuality experienced differently amongst students who are living with a disability?
- Tell me how does being a male/female work in with having disability? How would describe dating and relationships?
 - How does being a person of colour and having a disability influence your life?
 - How does your socio economic background shape your participation in society as a person living with disability?
 - Have you ever faced discrimination because of the above (gender, race, class)?
 - Was it challenging getting accepted by this University? What was it like as your first time as a student?
 - What are your career plans for when you are finished with University?
 - What makes your life rewarding and exciting?





UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE