

## Dismantling Bias Conference Series

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### The Dyslexic Struggle for Dignity in the Workplace

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## **THE DYSLEXIC STRUGGLE FOR DIGNITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

Based on a qualitative interview study of 51 dyslectic working adults, this investigation explores dyslectics' struggle for dignity at work. Dyslexia is a learning disability, often defined as “an unexpected difficulty in reading for an individual’s chronological age or intelligence” (Ferrer et al., 2015: 1121), and estimated to affect 5% to 10% of the population. While many assume dyslexia is only a problem for children in school, dyslexia has a neurobiological origin and affects a person throughout their lifespan (Leather, Hogh, Seiss & Everatt, 2011; Ferrer et al., 2015; Berninger, Nielsen, Abbott, Wijsman, & Raskind, 2008; Peterson & Pennington, 2015). Dyslexia most obviously results in literacy challenges, but also impacts performance in the workplace in a variety of ways (Ramus et al., 2003), including problems with executive function (e.g., working memory deficits, difficulty with self-organization and time management), distractibility, clumsiness, and having to work longer and harder to perform at the same level as non-dyslectic peers (De Beer, Engels, Heerkens & Van der Klink, 2014). Hence, dyslexia undermines one’s ability to complete common, often taken-for-granted work tasks such as reading, writing, self-organizing, and planning. In addition to these ability-related challenges, many dyslectics also incur deep emotional scars in childhood that often follow them into adulthood, influencing their workplace experiences. Indeed, “[w]hile learning issues are at the heart of dyslexia, one wonders if the emotional scars may not be the bigger challenge” (Nalavany et al., 2017: 19).

In our data, we found evidence of strong feelings related to the negative stigma associated with dyslexia. As we listened to the complex stories that participants shared—people who were in many ways so very competent at their jobs, yet also routinely underperformed at taken-for-granted tasks—we learned about their deep feelings of inferiority and stupidity, their

sharp awareness of being different from others, the personal slights they endured, their ambivalent attitude toward seeking help or disclosing their dyslexia, and their desires for validation and social support. Overall, a story emerged about dyslectics' struggle for dignity at work in the face of feeling (and often being seen as) someone who is not quite the same as others.

Dignity is often defined as “a personal sense of worth, value, respect, or esteem that is derived from one’s humanity and individual social position; as well as being treated respectfully by others” (Lucas, 2015: 622). While dignity is a very interpersonal construct, research on workplace dignity often focuses on people’s experiences with undignified work (e.g., “dirty work”, cf. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Past research also primarily examined deliberate social undermining behavior (e.g., harassment/bullying). Yet, dignity, and dignified work, involves much more than the simple absence of harassment (Sayer, 2007). Being dignified at work includes not feeling like a burden to others, having discretion to do one’s work, being trusted and recognized as competent and self-reliant, and being taken seriously. We found that dyslectic employees often struggle to attain especially these elements of dignity in their work as they are forced to work around, ask help for, or try to hide and compensate for their deficits.

We also examine the “dignity work” that dyslectics engage in to rebuild or maintain their personal sense of dignity. At the heart of this dignity work is a strong desire to escape the label of “Other” placed on dyslectics by their colleagues, and their struggle to escape the feeling of Otherness that many dyslectics impose upon themselves from childhood onwards, as they are confronted with the fact that they clearly cannot do some of the things that others very easily can. Othering is a form of social representation, closely related to the idea of stereotyping, in which individual differences are glossed over and replaced by stable, generalized, often

decontextualized beliefs about groups and their members (Dervin, 2012; Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Through this process, the Other is characterized as the lesser, the less desirable, the weaker, and inferior (cf. Brons, 2015; Jensen, 2011). The interpersonal dynamics associated with Othering produce profound challenges in maintaining dignity. We propose that dyslectics face pervasive challenges in being perceived—and understanding themselves—as profoundly different, or Other, and that they engage in dignity work to create a work reality wherein they can competently do their jobs with the same grace and worth as their non-dyslectic peers. Ultimately, our study hopes to contribute to the literatures on stigma, (invisible) disabilities, and dignity in the workplace.

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