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Living on the Outskirts of Things: Women and Nonbinary People of Color with Cognitive Disabilities Describe Their Employment Experiences

by

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in
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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of discrimination and the strategies used to navigate employment for women of color and nonbinary people of color (POC) with cognitive disabilities (CD) through their own narratives. Using Dis/ability Critical Race Theory and an interpretive description methodology, this study engaged 10 women of color and/or nonbinary POC with CD in semi-structured interviews in order to answer the following research questions: 1) What stories do women of color and nonbinary POC with CD tell about their experiences seeking employment? 2) What are the narratives of women and nonbinary POC with CD about their experiences of racism, sexism, and/or ableism when seeking employment? 3) What strategies do women and nonbinary POC with CD use to navigate the labor market? Findings indicate that they have a strong desire to work, contribute, and belong to the community in which they live. Findings also show that despite daily occurrences of discrimination and microaggressions and lack of support from external organizations, participants create their own supports and strategies that allow them to pursue their goals. Study findings have practical implications for employment services and supports, future research in disability and employment, and the field of social work.

Dedication

To the participants I interviewed, who so graciously gave of their time to help improve supports and services for others like themselves. Thank you for entrusting me with your stories.

Acknowledgments

There are countless people who helped me along this journey. My parents, Sonia and Manuel, thank you. You taught me the values of determination and perseverance. My abuelo and abuela, David and Suraya, who survived the communist revolution in Cuba and had to start over again in the United States in their adult lives. You taught me that education is the one thing that can never be taken away. My brother, Manuel, is the original doctor in the family; you taught me to strive for the unthinkable. My wife, Hilary, you are my rock and my life partner. Thank you for your endless support and humor. To my dog, Wynonna, who provided me with unconditional love and moments of joyful playtime.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Employment is not just a means of obtaining personal income, but an avenue that creates a social network, financial independence, and the ability to make choices about one's life. Research has shown that employment improves health (physical and mental) and provides inclusion in the community where you live (Bush & Tassé, 2017; Kirsh et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2019). Employment for adults with cognitive disabilities (CD) can create the same economic and psychosocial benefits that it creates for adults without CD (Nevala et al., 2019; Strnadová & Evans, 2015). But for a variety of reasons, adults with CD seldom get an opportunity to work in integrated community work settings. An integrated work environment refers to a workplace "where there are regular opportunities for meaningful interactions with co-workers without disabilities and/or customers or the general public" (Oregon Department of Human Services, n.d., About employment first, para. 2). This could also include self-employment.

It is estimated that 28.5 million people in the United States have a cognitive disability. According to the Federal Communications Commission (2016), CD is a term that refers to a broad range of conditions that include intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, severe and persistent mental illness, brain injury, stroke, and different types of dementia. Despite research showing that adults with CD want to work in integrated settings, many do not have the opportunity (Barrows et al., 2015; Migliore et al., 2007). Among adults with disabilities, adults with intellectual disabilities have one of the lowest employment rates (Santilli et al., 2014).

Statistical data on employment rates for adults with CD disaggregated by race or ethnicity are limited. Data for some groups like Native American/Indigenous, Alaska

Native, and Black people are largely nonexistent, mostly due to small sample sizes collected from communities of color and other nondominant communities. As of this study, there are no national employment rates for people of color (POC) with CD, regardless of gender. This is not surprising, since the majority of disability research uses a colorblind approach and typically neglects to include race and/or ethnicity in the research design.

At the state level in 2021, 33.2% of noninstitutionalized adults with a cognitive disability (ages 21–64 years, all races regardless of ethnicity, all education levels, living in the state of Oregon) were employed—compared to 76.6% of nondisabled adults of working age (Paul et al., 2023). The national U.S. employment rate for adults without disabilities is 76.6% versus 33.6% for those with CD. Statistics disaggregated by gender and race were not available for adults with CD. But nationally, for women with disabilities as a whole, the employment rate was 20.5% and for men with disabilities it was 24.8% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

There is a fair amount of literature pertaining to employment and disability as a whole (Friedman, 2020; Potts, 2005; Rudstam et al., 2013; Smits, 2004; Van Aswegen, 2020; Vornholt et al., 2018). However, when looking at race, gender, and cognitive disability combined, literature is sparse. In the existing literature, women with cognitive disabilities tend to be employed fewer hours than their male counterparts, and in the past, tended to be employed in sheltered workshops rather than integrated community work environments (Strnadová & Evans, 2015). Sheltered workshops refer to

> facilities in which people who experience intellectual and developmental disabilities are employed by provider organizations to perform tasks for pay, often

> for less than minimum wage. These workers have few or no opportunities to interact with people who do not have disabilities, other than support staff. (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2015, p. 3)

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation explores the following research questions: What stories do women and nonbinary POC with CD tell about their experiences seeking employment? What are the narratives of women and nonbinary POC with CD about their experiences of racism, sexism, and/or ableism when seeking employment? What strategies do women and nonbinary POC with CD use to navigate the labor market?

In order to answer my research questions, I conducted qualitative interviews with 10 women and/or nonbinary POC with CD. I specifically chose this group to interview because as members of several minoritized communities, they occupy a unique social location in U.S. culture. This social location provides them with perspectives and experiences vastly different from those of White males with CD.

Throughout the following chapters, I use the term *minoritized* to refer to the interview participants' status as belonging to multiple communities that are intersectional (e.g., disability, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and also to make clear the connection between power and equity by exposing the actions performed by the dominant group and culture that minoritizes specific people and communities (Wingrove-Haugland et al., 2021).

Additionally, the term *cognitive disability* will be used throughout this study. Cognitive disability refers to a broad range of conditions that include intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, severe and persistent mental illness, brain injury, stroke, and different forms of dementia (Federal Communications Commission, 2016).

Furthermore, the terms *U.S. culture* or *U.S. dominant culture* will be used to describe, “the unquestioned standards of behavior and ways of functioning embodied by the vast majority of institutions in the United States” (Potapchuk, & Gulati-Partee, 2014, p.27).

Lastly, I will use the terms *people of color* and *nonbinary*. The term *people of color* in this study refers to anyone who self-identifies as Black, Indigenous/Native American/Native Alaskan/Native Hawaiian, Asian, South Asian, Latine/x/o/a, biracial, and multiracial. And the term *nonbinary* is used to refer to people who self-identify as gender diverse, which is more expansive and inclusive than the dominant culture gender binary of male or female.

This dissertation contains five chapters. In the next chapter, I explore the historical connections of race and disability in the context of the United States and how these connections create present day realities of employment for women of color and nonbinary POC with CD. Then I review the scholarly literature on disability and employment and give an overview of Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). In Chapter 3, I review my methodology and study design as well as my epistemological position. Chapter 4 will center on my research findings, and Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the findings, implications for the field of social work, future research, and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Employment Discrimination for People with Cognitive Disabilities

The history of discrimination in employment has been fairly well documented for people with disabilities, but for the most part, this body of research does not include the unique experiences of women or nonbinary POC with CD who encounter not only ableism but multiple other forms of discrimination like racism, sexism, and transphobia. Employment inequalities may be exacerbated for adults with CD who are multiply marginalized due to their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, citizenship status, or other minoritized social identities (Johnson et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2022).

Little research has been conducted to determine employment rates for women or nonbinary POC with CD, but there is reason to believe employment outcomes are worse (Bleiweis et al., 2020). The employment research available has shown that women with disabilities as a whole earn lower wages than men with disabilities and people without disabilities and are more likely to be living in poverty than men with or without disabilities (Bleiweis et al., 2020). In addition, women of color with disabilities tend to earn low wages and be employed part-time and in the service sector economy, which generally does not offer health insurance or other benefits (Oberoi et al., 2015; O'Day & Foley, 2008). This pattern holds true even when women with disabilities are participating in employment services like vocational rehabilitation programs (Boeltzig et al., 2009; Oberoi et al., 2015).

Among people with disabilities as a whole, POC with a disability were found to have a significantly higher unemployment rate than White people with a disability

(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Furthermore, when looking at sexual orientation and/or gender identity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+) workers are known to experience significant employment discrimination even without accounting for disability discrimination (National Public Radio et al., 2017). LGBTQIA+ is a term used to describe a person's sexual or gender identity (The Center, n.d.).

Individuals who do not fit the dominant culture standard—even without having CD—are known to encounter discrimination and access barriers related to White, male, middle-class standards of behavior in the labor market and workplace settings (Casey et al., 2019; Smith & Joseph, 2010). Women and nonbinary POC with CD, at minimum, are likely to share these experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The dearth of research literature that includes POC with disabilities within employment has been documented (Johnson et al., 2021). This gap in the literature erases the lived experiences of POC with disabilities and folds them into the experiences of dominant U.S. cultural experiences of disability. This essentially silences the needs of POC and creates a false universal disability narrative. It is critical that disability research looks at people with disabilities not as a monolithic group but as a heterogeneous group with varied and diverse experiences. There is substantial evidence that suggests that there is more heterogeneity within groups (e.g., people with disability) than between groups (e.g., people without disabilities vs. people with disabilities) (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005).

My aim in this study was to use Dis/ability Critical Race Theory or DisCrit

(Annamma et al., 2013) as the theoretical framework for disability research on employment. My goal in doing so was to understand and expand research knowledge about the experiences of women and nonbinary POC with CD when seeking employment. The ultimate goal of the study was to contribute to improvement of employment services and experiences for women and nonbinary POC with CD. Below, I discuss DisCrit.

DisCrit is a theoretical framework that originated within special education research. In 2013, scholars Annamma, Connor, and Ferri wrote the seminal journal article, "Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability," which introduced DisCrit as a theoretical framework. DisCrit combines aspects of critical race theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and disability studies (Zola, 1982) to include an examination of how race and disability are historically intertwined within the U.S. culture to form the current overarching system of oppression experienced by POC with disabilities. Although predominantly used in special education research, DisCrit is applicable to other areas of research such as employment because of its nonprescriptive nature.

DisCrit posits that POC with disabilities are simultaneously racialized and disabled (Annamma et al., 2013). As a theoretical framework, it assumes "that racism and ableism are normalizing processes that are interconnected and collusive. In other words, racism and ableism often work in ways that are unspoken, yet racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 6). These unspoken forms of oppression can be found in all aspects of life such as mainstream narratives, institutions and systems, and individual interactions. Because of these unspoken norms, POC with disabilities will experience the world differently than White people with disabilities (Crenshaw, 1991; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

DisCrit has seven tenets, which guide researchers to illuminate issues in an intersectional way (Annamma et al., 2013):

1. DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
2. DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
3. DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of Western cultural norms.
4. DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
6. DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.
7. DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance. (p. 11)

My study incorporates pieces of each tenet throughout the research process. For example, my introduction incorporates the historical context of ableism and racism to show how laws and policies create, to this day, systemic barriers for POC with disabilities. However, my main foci are on Tenets 1, 2, and 4.

Tenet 1 shows how the forces of racism and ableism are interdependent, often in invisible ways that uphold notions of normalcy. This idea that discrimination is invisible and neutralized in everyday life and upholds the image of normalcy can be seen in the way disability research literature generally uses a colorblind approach, excluding any mention or analysis of racial and other social demographics (e.g., ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity). The exclusion of demographics like race, ethnicity, and gender within mainstream disability research assumes that disability is the main social factor that needs attention and that disability itself provides a universal experience for individuals and groups who have it. When the focus is solely on disability and not other identities, the assumption is that all people with disabilities share the same experience. My study specifically uplifted women of color and nonbinary POC for this very reason. I wanted to center experiences that have been silenced by the default mainstream narrative.

Tenet 2 connects to the idea of Tenet 1, which is that if research assumes all people with disabilities are the same, then they have a one-dimensional identity. Tenet 2 states that researchers need to reveal the challenges with singular notions of identity, such as disability, and see identities as multidimensional and fluid within the context of time and space. For my study, I examined the multidimensional and fluid identities of women and nonbinary POC with CD within the context of their employment journeys.

Due to its examination of power dynamics, historical context, and views of people with disabilities as multidimensional, DisCrit subsumes within it the concept of intersectionality. Therefore, by using DisCrit, I am also drawing attention to concepts of intersectionality. Analytically, intersectionality speaks to marginalized social identities as interlocking and dynamic to each other—all while interacting within the systems and contexts of society. Crenshaw (1989) used the term intersectionality in her legal scholarship to describe the impacts of both sexism and racism on Black women in the workplace. Crenshaw's work has become synonymous with intersectionality, but this concept has been around for many decades and has been used by many women and communities of color. For example, at the Women's Rights Convention in 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered the speech *Ain't I a Woman?* where she addressed the reality that as a Black person and a woman, she would not choose between abolition and feminism (Woman's Rights Convention, 1851). In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa spoke in *Borderlands* to the struggle of being a woman in a machista culture and queer in a heteronormative culture. Machista culture describes men/women who believe women are inferior to men. She spoke of existing in and between the Mexico and U.S. borders. In short, Black women and other women of color experience many forms of oppression within employment settings and these need to be looked at in interlocking ways.

Lastly, Tenet 4 speaks to privileging the voices of marginalized populations traditionally not acknowledged within research. There is scant disability literature that explores the experiences of women of color and nonbinary POC with CD within the field of employment. By exploring and centering the counternarratives of participants, this study expands our understanding of the particular barriers to employment and strategies used by women and nonbinary people of color with cognitive disabilities.

Literature Review

This section of the literature review includes research on women and/or nonbinary people's experiences with various forms of discrimination, not solely ableism, but the interconnected intersectional experiences of POC with disabilities within different institutions and, whenever possible, within employment. In reviewing the available research literature, there was an absence of research about women of color with CD and racial and gender-based oppression in employment. The literature addressed women of color and employment, but it did not include women of color with CD (Browne & Misra, 2003; Evans & Cokley, 2008; Ko et al., 2014; Velez et al., 2018). There is literature on disabilities and employment discrimination, but the literature generally omits race and/or gender either completely or as a salient identity to be examined with the disability identity (McMahon, 2012; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Vornholt et al., 2018). Therefore, in what follows, I am going to address these related issues that do not yet overlap: 1) historical context of race and disability, 2) historical exclusionary immigration laws, 3) experience of women of color with discrimination in employment based on race, and 4) people with CD and employment discrimination based on ableism.

Historical Connections Between Race and Disability

Historical context is important when researching different forms of oppression and their impacts on communities today. There is a strong connection between structural racism, sexism, and ableism in the United States that can be linked back to colonialism and slavery (Du Bois, 1920) as well as Native American genocide, enslavement, and immigration exclusionary laws (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015). It is difficult to discuss employment issues among women and nonbinary POC with disabilities and not include a brief summation of historical and sociocultural factors that inform present day challenges.

The early 17th century colonization of North America was done in part by the Christian church, which held power and authority. Colonial settlers at the time were taught that Indigenous people did not have a religion; therefore, they did not have souls. These teachings rendered Indigenous people nonhuman; thus, Christian missionaries concluded that Indigenous people could be treated as less than human. This rationale was used as a way to shift the settlers' views. If they could see the Indigenous peoples as "barbarians," they could enslave and kill them without retribution from God or the state (Grosfoguel, 2013). This logic continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. One example is the creation of Indian boarding schools across the United States. The purpose of the boarding schools was to culturally assimilate Indigenous children (i.e., Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian), stripping them of their cultural identity and history. The boarding schools are known to have been places of abuse and neglect, which created generational trauma in families and communities that persists to this present day.

Along with the genocide and dehumanizing of Indigenous people, slavery in the United States created a system of unpaid labor for wealthy White landowners. At the same time, pseudoscience was being developed that suggested that Blacks (and other non-Whites) had inferior intelligence that was inherently biological. These arguments were made to justify the dehumanization of Blacks and other non-Whites within the U.S.

society and to develop laws that excluded enslaved people from any type of economic, civil, or legal rights (McGhee, 2021).

After Reconstruction in the late 1800s, formerly enslaved Black people (and other POC) were excluded from the mainstream public education system. The exclusion of formerly enslaved people in public education was another barrier to obtaining jobs outside of manual and domestic labor (i.e., fieldwork and domestic housework). Well after the Reconstruction era, decades of exclusionary and predatory laws (e.g., GI Bill, redlining, subprime lending) continued to economically and socially impact communities of color while benefiting Whites (McGhee, 2021).

This created an unequal distribution of wealth by race, in particular between White and Black Americans. Structural inequalities are visible in the accumulation of wealth, and this inequality is not by accident. The long history of exclusion laws, for example, have created this wealth gap over decades. The Center for American Progress asserts, "less wealth translates into fewer opportunities for upward mobility and is compounded by lower income levels and fewer chances to build wealth or pass accumulated wealth down to future generations" (Hanks et al., 2018, para. 2).

Along with colonization, genocide, and slavery, U.S. immigration laws were also used as a structural tool to deny access and/or oppress immigrants of color and immigrants with disabilities. At times, skin color was used as a proxy for disability to exclude certain ethnic groups with darker complexions. In a sense, having dark skin or complexion was associated with being disabled, having inferior intelligence, an inability to support oneself through work, and becoming a public charge (Baynton, 2017). A *public charge* was defined as an individual who would be dependent on the government (i.e., public welfare). These ideas were tied to concepts espoused by the eugenic movement. The eugenic movement was focused on creating a perfect “White” race and ridding the world of “social ills” (Baynton, 2017). The ideology of eugenics encompassed the ideas that intelligence and other social traits were a result of heredity. Following this logic, state-sponsored medical procedures like sterilization were done without consent (and sometimes knowledge) of women, POC, and people with disabilities. The goal was to perpetuate a racial hierarchy with the White race being at the top.

Employment Experiences of Racism and Sexism Among Women of Color

The landmark works of Crenshaw (1989; 1990) on racism, sexism, and classism applied to employment law provide a foundational understanding of intersectionality and how Black women experience racism, sexism, and classism simultaneously within the U.S. legal context and employment. Crenshaw’s (1989) and Collins’ (1990) work on intersectionality and the matrix of domination provide an important context when looking at the experiences of discrimination for women of color in the labor market. Black women and women of color do not simply encounter one form of oppression at a time but experience them as articulating within a broader system(s) of oppression (Collins, 1990).

Studies have shown that gender discrimination affects all aspects of one’s life including mental and physical health and economic opportunities (SteelFisher et al., 2019). In addition to gender discrimination, there is a large body of research that shows racial discrimination similarly affects one’s livelihood (Cobbinah & Lewis, 2018; Elias & Paradies, 2016; Feagin & McKinney, 2005; Gee, 2008; Nazroo, 2003). While studies show that most women—regardless of race or ethnicity—report discrimination based on their gender, Latina, Black, and Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and

LGBTQIA+ women report experiences of discrimination at higher rates (SteelFisher et al., 2019). These experiences include not being called back for an interview, low wages, or being passed up for a promotion.

A study in 2013 not only shows intrapersonal racial and gender discrimination in the labor market (e.g., harassment, microaggressions) but also current and historical institutional forms of discrimination (e.g., gender wage gap, parental leave policies, lack of affordable childcare) within institutions that contribute to the experience of gender and racial discrimination for women of color (Blau & Kahn, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, women in the labor force experienced a *shecession*, which was coined after the recession of the 1980s and 2000s (Alon et al., 2022), but was named to imply its gender-specific effects.

COVID-19 added yet another layer to the many barriers faced by women and nonbinary people in the labor market. The effects of the pandemic on employment have disproportionately affected women, trans and nonbinary people, and in particular women of color (Holder et al., 2021; Woulfe & Wald, 2020). This has been attributed to the impact on “nonessential” services (services industry, retail, childcare, cashiers) that are disproportionately occupied by women of color (Frye, 2020). Nonessential services were one of the first industries to layoff or furlough workers when mandatory closures were enacted. In addition, according to Holder and colleagues (2021), women occupy more low-wage occupations than men.

Furthermore, the pandemic exacerbated socioeconomic challenges faced by trans and nonbinary people (Kia et al., 2022; Woulfe & Wald, 2020). According to the

American Psychological Association (2022), trans and nonbinary people, in particular Black trans women, have experienced higher rates of job loss and discrimination.

The combination of low wages, lack of affordable childcare, and lack of benefits like paid sick leave have disproportionately impacted women, trans, nonbinary, and people of color. The pandemic did not necessarily create these inequalities; it only illuminated and exacerbated the structural oppression that already existed for many communities of color (Holder et al., 2021).

The lived experiences of women, trans, nonbinary, and POC within employment and other institutions demonstrate not only the oppressive factors they live with on a daily basis but also the ways in which they resist and form alternative ways of living and thriving in the United States. For example, Hooks (1989) writes, “I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as sites of resistance-as location of radical openness and possibility” (p. 23).

Collins (1990) describes reconceptualization of community and power for women of color as a place of resistance. Women of color intentionally created collective power through connections to community, which is a place of resistance but also sanctuary from the dominant culture.

Examples of ways women of color have excelled and thrived despite multiple forms of daily oppression can be seen in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Research in the STEM field has explored ways in which women of color use various strategies that help and support them to thrive (Ko et al., 2014). These strategies range from seeking out peer networks, engaging in activism, finding or creating safe spaces, and seeking environments and mentors that enable success.

Research focusing on the careers of women of color in academia has also shown strategies developed by women to cope and thrive within their chosen profession. Hall and colleagues (2012) discussed spirituality and forming networks of support among Black women as coping mechanisms to deal with and manage gender and racial discrimination. Other forms of resistance women of color have used within academic careers include leveraging the power they possess within academia to gain tenure or prominent positions; requesting that students, faculty and staff address them by “doctor” or “professor;” self-care; believing in themselves; developing mentorship opportunities outside their academic departments; and peer mentoring (Evans & Cokely, 2008; Murakami & Núñez, 2014; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

When reviewing the literature on trans/nonbinary POC and resilience/coping strategies in the workplace, I was only able to find literature on trans/nonbinary people in general, not specific to race/ethnicity. Although there is a growing body of research that is focusing on trans/nonbinary people’s resilience/coping strategies, most have been within healthcare settings. One example of a study within employment settings was by Mizock and colleagues (2017). They describe gender-diverse employees using multiple forms of coping strategies such as resource utilization, power-acquisition strategies, navigating relationships, and structural strategies to navigate the work environment as well as preserve their mental health. Resource utilization was described as both internal and external resources like human resources, supervisors, legal counsel, and support groups. Participants in their study discussed using internal resources like supportive managers/supervisors to counteract stigma from employees or policies that are discriminatory (e.g., bathroom policies). When internal resources were not available or the workplace was actively discriminating and being hostile to them, participants used external resources such as legal counsel to try and change or add new employment laws for future trans/nonbinary employees.

Power-acquisition strategies involved seeking leadership roles within the organization to impact and change the policies and culture of the organization. Along similar lines of acquiring a more powerful role within the organization, participants looked at structural strategies, like obtaining advanced education or specialized training to become leaders in their field. When professional development and training were not an option, participants changed their workplace to more supportive and inclusive organizations. Lastly, navigating work relationships was used as an interpersonal strategy of choosing one's battle. Participants used this strategy in different ways including use of humor, isolating oneself from certain coworkers, and educating coworkers who may be open to listening and changing their behaviors.

Other studies within employment settings focused on the mental health impacts on nonbinary and trans individuals (Matsuno et al., 2022) as well as organizational supports that create inclusive workplaces (Huffman et al., 2021). These studies focused on improving organizational culture and training and education for supervisors and leadership as ways to support gender-diverse employees. Similar to the gap in studies focused on trans/nonbinary POC's resilience/coping strategies in the workplace, no known studies to date document counternarratives of resistance among women and/or nonbinary POC with CD.

Experiences of Women with Cognitive Disabilities in Seeking Employment

To date, no known studies document counternarratives of resistance among women and/or nonbinary POC with CD. Although women with disabilities tend to fare worse than their male counterparts in attaining and retaining employment (Boeltzig et al., 2009; Lindsay et al., 2018), there is limited literature exploring experiences of women with CD, and in particular women/nonbinary POC with CD and employment. The literature that discusses the impacts of race and/or ethnicity and other social identities (e.g., gender) is largely about transition services for high school students in special education and vocational rehabilitation services for employment support (Balcazar, 2012; O'Neill, 2017; Powers et al., 2008). Several disability and employment scholars have pointed to the gap in the existing literature and the importance of addressing it (Dutta et al., 2020; Rodriguez, 2021;Trainor, 2008). Dutta and colleagues (2008) expressed a need to examine the effects of gender and racial differences between vocational rehabilitation providers and clients in successful employment.

In recent years, special education research has begun to center the experiences of POC female students with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2020; Erevelles & Mutua, 2005; Erevelles & Nguyen, 2016; Gary et al., 2019) and examine their experiences within the school system and transition services. For example, Annamma and colleagues (2020) explored how disciplinary disparities impact girls of color and how racism and ableism are interdependent and how they interact with sexism within the school system. These school experiences impact the employment and postsecondary trajectories of girls of color with disabilities.

Trainor and colleagues (2008) acknowledged that race and/or ethnicity and other socially marginalized identities need to be considered in education research when examining transitions post-school for students with disabilities. In addition, these authors affirmed that addressing all macrosystemic areas of inequities—not only school systems, but political, economic, and social structures—are critical in creating opportunities for youth of color with disabilities following graduation from high school.

The subject of employment and issues of intersectionality within CD research is nonexistent. The research on employment was limited and did not mention or address identities such as race or ethnicity and many times did not explore gender within the research topic. For example, Kumin and Schoenbrodt (2016) point out that the data on employment and unemployment in the United States either groups people with disabilities as a monolithic whole or uses outdated Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) data from 2004. IDEA data include intellectual and developmental disabilities but cannot be disaggregated by different diagnoses (e.g., Down syndrome). While the authors speak to the importance of separating data by diagnosis, they do not discuss other categories that would be important for employment services such as race, ethnicity, or gender identity.

Although characteristics of gender, race, and ethnicity are not integrated into their study, Kumin and Schoenbrodt (2016) brought to light areas of employment that would benefit adults with Down syndrome seeking employment, such as computer skills and the use of social networks for finding employment. They found that information technology is rarely used in educational transition plans or vocational rehabilitation services, but recent research has shown that many adults with Down syndrome have strong computer skills (Kumin et al., 2012). Authors argue for integrating computer skills, testing, and training into employment plans in high school internships, transition planning, and vocational rehabilitation services.

Another important finding of Kumin and Schoenbrodt's (2016) study was how the survey participants found paid work. Participants rated their social networks (i.e., parents, friends, family) as the best source for finding work. Previous employment research showed that women and POC without disabilities have a disadvantage when it comes to using their social networks to find employment within the labor market (McDonald, 2011). This is a disadvantage because social networks are typically segregated by gender and race due to structural racism and other forms of discrimination (i.e., sexism and ableism). Therefore, examining how women and nonbinary POC with CD find work is crucial and needed in future studies.

Bush and Tassé (2017) examined the current state of employment for three groups of adults: adults with Autism, Down syndrome, and idiopathic intellectual disability. Their aim was to study unique factors associated with successful employment that could be developed for an intervention. Although they collected gender, race, ethnicity, and other social demographic information, these data were not integrated into their analysis or discussion sections.

According to Bush and Tassé (2017), "many employment rate estimates [either] group all developmental disabilities (Butterworth, 2015) or report on adults with a wide variety of disabilities (Department of Labor, 2016)" (p. 25). Bush and Tassé's (2017) main finding was that adults with developmental disabilities continue to have the lowest employment rates among all people with disabilities. One of their recommendations for future research is to examine barriers and facilitators to employment “beyond simply demographics” (p. 33)—in other words, integrating race, gender, and other marginalized identities and how they impact barriers and facilitators to employment.

In addition, Bush and Tassé (2017) found a downward trend of integrated paid employment among their study participants. These findings replicated previous findings among individuals with developmental disabilities and employment (Butterworth et al., 2015). Lastly, their findings also suggested that the participants who had mild intellectual disability and were able to make short-term choices throughout their daily schedule (e.g., what to do with their free time or what to buy with their money) had greater odds of being employed in an integrated employment setting.

Other well-established areas of employment literature explore barriers to employment and support that enable successful employment for people with CD. The well-known barriers to employment include transportation, employer perceptions, societal stigma against those with disabilities, and lack of work experiences during school years (Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020; Luecking, 2011; Timmons et al., 2011). As of this literature review, I was unable to find studies that analyzed or discussed how these barriers to employment are experienced with the added layer of discrimination POC with CD experience in the labor market.

Consensus in the employment literature discusses how characteristics that enable successful employment involve support from families, school-based experiences, and well-established transition plans. All of these are crucial aspects for adults with CD to have successful employment journeys (Timmons et al., 2011; Trainor et al., 2008). What is missing from the literature is the intersectional analysis of structural dynamics for POC with CD and the factors that inhibit and/or positively contribute to their experiences with gaining or keeping employment (Gary et al., 2019; Trainor et al., 2008).

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The research literature on employment after transitioning out of high school is largely based on vocational rehabilitation services outcomes (e.g., case closures, relationship between counselor and client, counselor training) and disparities. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs help persons with disabilities "prepare for gainful employment by providing a range of services, including vocational evaluation, education/training, and placement services" (Oberoi et al., 2015, p. 146). There is a body of literature that speaks to the unequal treatment of women and minorities with disabilities in VR services due to racism and sexism (Fine & Asch, 1981; Oberoi et al., 2015; Sprong et al., 2017).

Disparities for women and minorities with disabilities in VR services are found in VR program outcomes, funding allocation per VR counselor, and experiences of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and gender (Lukyanova et al., 2014; Taylor-Ritzler et al., 2010). For instance, women with disabilities participating in VR services have a lower successful case closure rate than their male counterparts; in other words, women are less likely to gain employment placement than men (Oberoi et al., 2015).

While searching for literature on employment experiences, I came across a unique body of research relating to POC with CD and the impacts of employment on their families/siblings. This research discussed the employment impacts on family caregivers of POC with CD.

Employment Impacts on Siblings of Adults with Cognitive Disabilities

There is a growing body of literature focused on the experiences of siblings and/or family caregivers of color and the implications for employment and post-school life for their family members with CD (Blacher & McIntyre, 2006; Burkett et al., 2015; Kao et al., 2012; Richardson & Stoneman, 2019; Shogren, 2013; Skinner et al., 1999; Williamson et al., 2020). These studies bring to light the role that employment outcomes for individuals with CD have on their family members and siblings and how family culture may shape employment choices for both.

Richardson and Stoneman (2019) argued that one's culture shapes the way in which families view their roles and responsibilities for members with disabilities. For example, siblings in families of color tended to choose a career path based on long-term caregiving needs of their sibling with a disability, as opposed to White families. Although not specifically focused on siblings of adults with CD, Burkett (2015) identified cultural influences, both by healthcare professionals and families, that caused delays seeking and receiving services for African American children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which ultimately delayed diagnosis and treatment.

Their study investigated cultural factors that erect multiple barriers for African American children being diagnosed with ASD, and cultural factors and perspectives of African American families caring for their autistic children and its impacts on seeking health care services. The effects of the U.S. healthcare culture, which include biases, attributed to delayed diagnosis, misdiagnosis, and diagnosing African American children with more severe ASD than White children (Burkett, 2015). This study went beyond the healthcare system's culture to examine the cultural factors of African American families such as mistrust of the healthcare system and providers when seeking services.

These studies ranged in methodologies, but the studies that used qualitative interviewing (Burkett, 2015; Kao et al., 2012; Richardson & Stoneman, 2019) centered the voices and lived experiences of POC and recommended alternatives for adapting services to meet the needs of diverse cultures and voices within the disability community. An overarching theme in these studies suggests the need to increase voices of POC with disabilities and their families in all research stages and interventions. In this study, I centered the voices of women of color and nonbinary POC with CD, particularly as they narrated their experience with employment. In this way, I hoped to contribute to a broadening of disability research in this area.

This chapter reviewed the literature and theory that inform the present study: an overview of DisCrit, the historical context that informs present day assumptions and ideology on race and disability, and the available literature on employment and its impacts on women, nonbinary/trans individuals, women/people with disabilities, and families of color. The next chapter reviews my epistemological orientation and the methodology used for the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study aimed to produce a deeper understanding of the employment journey of women and/or nonbinary POC with CD. Interpretive description (ID) methodology (Thorne et al., 1997) aligned well with the critical epistemology and theoretical framework of my study as it centers the experiential knowledge of the research participants while examining the contextual (i.e., structural factors, power dynamics) and historical factors that influence their experiences.

ID was utilized in my study for several reasons. As a social worker, I align myself with the mission of the National Association of Social Workers. The mission for the field of social work is "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Worker, para. 1, n.d.). This research intentionally sought to uplift the voices of women and/or nonbinary POC with CD, which have been largely absent from the research literature in both disability and employment fields. By centering the voices of these participants, this study provided alternative narratives, which can guide these fields to more holistically support women and nonbinary POC in seeking and retaining employment.

ID draws on "practice wisdom as well as empirically generated knowledge to design investigations oriented to what might be missing from the existing disciplinary knowledge base or even challenging widely accepted assumptions that may exist in a given discipline" (Ocean et al., 2023, p. 3). This research centered the voices of women and/or nonbinary POC with CD because they have been historically left out of the research that directly affects their daily lives. ID helps to produce practical and actionable outcomes for the field by using the experiential knowledge of the participants (Ocean et al., 2022; Thorne, 2014).

Research Design

Interpretive Description

ID was developed by Thorne et al. (1997). It was developed within the field of nursing as an alternative to “quantitative research within a highly biomedically oriented science environment” (Thorne, 2013, p. 295). ID is a qualitative research approach that utilizes applied disciplinary knowledge (i.e., nursing, social work) as well as the experiential knowledge of participants to design research studies that produce actionable knowledge (Beck, 2013). In ID methodology, data saturation is not the goal of data collection and analysis. ID emphasizes the quality and depth of understanding gained through the interviews.

There are no clear-cut guidelines in ID for sample size. However, ID does describe circumstances in which to guide the researcher towards a larger or a smaller sample size. Generally speaking, if a phenomenon is in its early infancy and not well-documented, a smaller sample with brief exposure may be warranted. Alternatively, if the phenomenon is well-documented, then the study might call for a more nuanced and comprehensive depiction with a larger sample size (Thorne, 2013).

This methodology holds several tenets that align well with anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks such as DisCrit (Ocean et al., 2022). These anti-oppressive values can be seen in ID’s principles of attending to participants' experiences as they are explained by participants themselves, conducting interviews in a naturalistic setting that respects participants’ wishes, attending to the time and context of human expressions, and developing action from the findings to inform the field (Thorne, 2016). These guiding principles closely align with the theoretical framework of DisCrit, which privileges voices of marginalized populations traditionally not acknowledged within research and considers historical aspects of dis/ability and race when developing a research study (Annamma et al., 2013).

Epistemology

Critical epistemologies aim to change the status quo by examining power, privilege, and oppression (Bernal, et al., 2017; Crotty, 1998; McDougal, 2014; Smith, 2021). Critical epistemologies claim that the search for knowledge is not just for knowledge's sake but to be “emancipatory knowledge, knowledge in the context of action and the search for freedom” (Crotty, 1998, p. 159). I too believe, as the early scholars of the Frankfurt School believed (Crotty, 1998), that knowledge should be used for social change.

My study design, rooted in critical disability theory and guided by the ID methodology, focused on the counter narratives of women and/or nonbinary POC with CD with the purpose of using their narratives to inform systems change (Given, 2008). As a critical researcher, I believe that research is affected by implicit and explicit biases within the researcher's worldview, which influence all aspects of the research project. There is no one objective truth or way of knowing (Bernal, et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; McDougal, 2014; Smith, 2021), but it is important to take into account the specific social location of the knower, the power inequities among the producers of knowledge, and the strengths and limitations of participant and researcher perspectives (Collins, 1990). In addition, I believe that knowledge is situated within time and place, which has social, economic, and political consequences (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

As a researcher, my professional and personal lived experiences informed my research questions and study design. As a social worker, I have worked with adults, homebound elderly, and families of children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through my direct work with individuals and families, I have heard and listened to firsthand accountants of how race/ethnicity, gender, and other minoritized identities affected every aspect of their lives. Additionally, as a social worker I saw disparities not only in the ways that services were provided by organizations but also the ways in which economic disparities impacted health, social, and living conditions of individuals and families.

Lastly, as a queer daughter of Cuban immigrant parents, I experienced the ways in which dominant cultural norms influenced my family to assimilate to fit into the American culture. Although my parents and family tried and in many ways succeeded in their assimilation, they were not immune to discrimination in health care, housing, and employment. Growing up as a bicultural queer woman left me straddling two worlds, my Cuban heritage and my American life, not fully immersing in either culture. This left me feeling like an outsider in both contexts. These are some ways in which my personal and professional experiences shape my research interest. In the following section, I will delve into my research design.

Research Questions

My study aimed to present the narratives of participants who were thriving multidimensional and multifaceted adults and their experiences of obtaining and/or looking for work, despite experiencing the daily barriers and challenges at the micro, meso, and macro levels of discrimination.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What stories do women and/or nonbinary POC with CD tell about their experiences seeking employment?
2. What are the narratives of women and/or nonbinary POC with CD about their experiences of racism, sexism, and/or ableism when seeking employment?
3. What strategies do women and/or nonbinary POC with CD use to navigate the labor market?

The following sections will discuss the research design in detail and how it aligns with my epistemological stance.

Pilot Interviews and Advisory Group

This study was grounded in a critical epistemological perspective, which calls for praxis and social change through knowledge production (Crotty, 1998). Although ID does not center equal participation in its research design (Thorne, 2016), I did want to connect the critical theory underpinnings of my study, which contributed to community engagement and centering of community voices typically left out of research. Initial interview questions were drafted, and two pilot interviews conducted. For the pilot, one participant self-identified as male and Middle Eastern and the other participant self-identified as female and White; both identified as having CD. Each pilot participant was compensated for their time with a $40 gift card. As a result of these two interviews, I learned that I needed to change terminology/language and the order in which I was asking the questions.

After the pilot interviews, I then convened an advisory group composed of direct care providers; administrators; advocates; and diversity, equity, and inclusion staff members in the field of disability. I tried to include two self-advocates for the first advisory group, but I was unable to recruit any to participate in the initial advisory group. However, in the final stages of the study, I was able to engage with the participants whom I interviewed and build rapport to receive feedback on my thematic interpretations.

Recruitment for the advisory group members happened during my initial phase of building rapport and community connections. As I met with individuals and groups, I asked if people would be interested in being part of the advisory group. Individuals that showed interest were put on a list, and when I was ready to start the advisory group process, I circled back with them. I was able to recruit five advisory group members.

The advisory group met twice during the study period: once before interviews were conducted and once at the end of the study during data analysis. The group's primary purpose was to advise me on the interview questions (including language and terminology), help with participant recruitment from their networks, and provide feedback on my initial themes during the analysis phase.

The first advisory meeting was conducted on December 1, 2022. The agenda can be found in Appendix A. During this meeting, I conducted a brief presentation of the study's purpose and then asked the group to review my initial interview guide and provide feedback. The results of the meeting informed the questions in the interview guide. The second advisory meeting was held January 8, 2024. The agenda can be found in Appendix B.

During this meeting, I briefly presented the study overview to refresh the members and then discussed the initial themes and findings from the participant interviews. I then asked the advisory group members to provide their comments and feedback based on their professional and lived experiences in the field of disability and/or employment. Each advisory group member was given a $40 gift card for their time.

Lastly, during the month of February 2024, I reached out to participants individually and asked if they wanted to meet with me to hear the findings from the interviews. The purpose of these meetings was to provide participants with an opportunity to hear my interpretations and provide their insights and feedback based on their lived experiences and knowledge.

I was able to connect with two of the study participants to review my interpretations of the interviews. I met with each participant individually instead of in a group setting due to scheduling conflicts. Both meetings were done remotely, one over the phone and one over remote video. The interpretations and recommendations that came out of the interviews were received positively by both participants. Each stated they agreed with the themes and the recommendations. Additionally, they expressed that hearing the data from all the interviewees gave them a sense of validation for their experiences. Each participant was compensated with a $40 gift card for their time.

Participants

After Portland State University’s institutional review board approved the study, I started to actively recruit participants through my developed network. My study took place in Oregon and focused on Oregon residents. To be included in the study, participants needed to self-identify as Black, Indigenous, or a POC; as a woman or nonbinary person; as having a cognitive disability; and as between the ages of 18–65 years. After a year and a half of recruitment, I was able to recruit 10 participants to interview.

The 10 participants’ ages ranged between early 20s to late 40s. Seven participants identified as women and three identified as nonbinary. Participants had diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. All but three participants were currently employed; and all but one participant had previous employment histories. Participants lived in the Portland, Salem, or Eugene areas (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Interview	Living	Gender Identity	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Diagnosis	Job Type
1	Telephone	Alone	Female	Chinese	26	Learning disability	Customer service
2	Remote video	Parents	Female	Biracial (Japanese & White)	22	Down syndrome	Unemployed/ Volunteer
3	Telephone	Foster home	Female	Biracial (Black & Puerto Rican)	40	Autism, traumatic brain injury	Advocate
4	Email	Partner	Nonbinary	Multiracial (Indigenous, Asian, White)	26	Autism, ADHD, aphantasia, physical disability	Technology

Pseudonym	Interview	Living	Gender Identity	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Diagnosis	Job Type
5	Remote video	Parents	Female	Latina (Mexican)	20	ADHD, PTSD	Government
6	Remote video	Alone	Female	Biracial (Guatemalan/ Chapina)	30	ADHD, depression, anxiety	Nonprofit
7	Remote video	Spouse	Female	Biracial (Indigenous & Latina)	Unknown	Anxiety, depression, unknown	Government
8	Remote video	Alone	Female	Indigenous (Choctaw & Cherokee)	48	Ataxic cerebral palsy	Unemployed
9	Remote video	Spouse	Nonbinary	Biracial (Indigenous & Latino)	33	ADHD, depression, PTSD	Self-employed
10	Remote video	Alone	Nonbinary	Multiracial (Cherokee, Haitian, Ashkenazi)	30	Autism, ADHD, PTSD	Unemployed

Note. All participants self-identified as having an intellectual or developmental disability. ADHD: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder; PTSD: post-traumatic stress disorder.

Recruitment

For a year and a half, I cultivated and built relationships with key informants that worked and/or volunteered with local, county, and statewide organizations that served adults with CD. During this time, I met with individuals and groups for conversations and presented my study and its purpose. Professionals, providers, self-advocates, and others with whom I spoke validated and agreed that the topic and purpose of my study was vital to the disability system's improvement.

Each person was willing to reach out to their network and provide my study flyer (see Appendix C) and contact information for the purposes of recruitment. While I was building rapport with individuals and organizations for my interviews, I was also recruiting individuals for an advisory group that would assist in the development of the interview questions, recruitment of participants, and the initial data analysis.

Interview participants for the study were recruited through several different methods. I presented four times to two self-advocacy organizations, a college program that supports students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and during a board meeting for a self-advocacy organization. In addition, I sent out recruitment flyers to universities' disability centers, social work departments, and several county and state disability services programs. Furthermore, I spoke with individuals working in employment programs serving adults with disabilities and workers in rehabilitation programs around the state. Ultimately, I became connected to participants via a personal contact that worked directly with the participants (e.g., service provider, program coordinator). Alternatively, they reached out to me directly after seeing my flyer or hearing a presentation on the study.

Data Collection

ID research uses naturalistic settings to ensure participant needs are met. Interviews were scheduled at times and modes most convenient to participants. Participants had the opportunity to choose between in-person, remote video, phone, or email. The different data collection strategies allowed for flexibility in how and when participants participated, their range of experiences, and for creating a safe and comfortable space for the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed demographic questions to capture relevant information needed to provide contextual data from each of the participants (Appendix D). In addition, I reviewed the informed consent process and obtained permission for audio recording when interviews were done by remote video and telephone. To maintain confidentiality, only myself and my chair (SB) had access to recordings, forms, and transcripts. Furthermore, identifying information was stored separately from the transcripts.

I initially contacted all potential participants over the telephone and/or email, screened them for eligibility and comprehension of the study and assessed for their ability to consent to participating (see Consenting section). In total, I interviewed seven participants remotely using Zoom. Two participants opted to participate via telephone, and one participant chose to communicate via email.

I used a semi-structured interview guide, which was created with the assistance and input of the advisory group. The interview guide was structured using seven domains and 11 questions (Appendix E). Each domain built upon the last to structure rapport while giving space for participants to address areas they felt were important. Semi-structured interviews were used because this form of data collection allows for some "latitude and freedom" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 112) for the participants to talk about what is of interest to them while answering the project's predetermined questions. In addition, research has shown that semi-structured interviews have been successful tools to capture the experiences of adults with CD within exploratory research studies (Ottmann & Crosbie, 2013).

Consenting

Participants in this study were viewed by Portland State University's institutional review board as a vulnerable population, and individuals with cognitive disabilities have often been excluded from research studies, partly because they are perceived as lacking capacity to provide informed consent. Given this high vulnerability context, I took extra measures, outside of the general consenting guidelines for research, to ensure that participants understood the research study and what their participation meant in the study (Horner-Johnson & Bailey, 2013; Lennox et al., 2005).

To determine the extent to which participants understood the study information, I used the developed guidelines by Horner-Johnson & Bailey (2013). The guideline questions captured information in four key areas: 1) the participant’s capacity to understand the project's goal and purpose, 2) the participant’s understanding of their own participation related to the research, 3) the capacity of the participant to understand the available options, and 4) participant’s capacity to communicate their choice about their participation in the research. For more information on the consenting and assessing the participant understanding process, see Appendix F and Appendix G.

Data Analysis

My analysis process followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) five phases of thematic analysis: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. All participant interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed, except for interviews completed by email. Because I had a manageable number of interviews (i.e., ten), I decided to use Google Docs and Google Spreadsheets for the analysis process to capture memoing, reflections, coding, and theming (Saldaña, 2021) The phases of data analysis are described in detail below.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself With Your Data

In this phase, I read and reread the transcripts five times. The first time, I read the transcripts and listened to the audio recording of each interview to make sure the transcripts matched the audio recording. The second time I reviewed the interview transcripts, I read them and tried to listen to what the participants were saying without creating codes or ideas. During this second round, I created a spreadsheet with my interview questions along the horizontal lines and excerpts from the participants that answered the questions.

Once this spreadsheet was created, I debriefed with my chair about my initial thoughts. After our discussion, I reread the transcripts for a third time and started to memo my thoughts on what I heard the participants say. I then began the process of creating a second spreadsheet with four columns. The four columns were for each participants' interview, codes, similarities and differences, and potential quotes that captured the codes.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

During this time period, I was accepted and attended the Intersectional Qualitative Research Methods Institute for Advanced Doctoral Students at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. While at UT, I had various discussions with professors who are experts in critical methodologies and with other doctoral students. The goal was for these consultants to help me deepen my analysis using a critical intersectional perspective. At the workshop, I presented my initial codes and received feedback to guide my early analysis process.

The fourth and fifth time I read the transcripts, I created both inductive and deductive codes and began to memo based on what the participants were saying, and then connected it to my theoretical framework, DisCrit. After the fifth review of the transcripts, I reviewed my memos and codes with my dissertation chair (SB). Following our discussion, I began to group codes together and develop initial themes.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

After I had initially grouped codes and developed preliminary themes, I discussed them with my chair and another committee member (GM) who has expertise in intersectionality and critical theories. All of us agreed that the themes were at a place where I could present them to the advisory group. The advisory group met on January 8, 2024. In addition, I reached out individually to participants and asked if they wanted to meet to discuss and comment on my interpretations of the findings. Two participants responded and said they would like to meet with me and discuss the findings. I met with the individual participants in February 2024.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

During this phase, I reviewed the feedback along with consensus or disagreement on the findings from the advisory group and participants. Overall, the advisory group and participants agreed with my interpretations. Along with validating the findings based on their work experience, the advisory group wanted more concrete recommendations that could be brought to the field. After I debriefed with my chair on the outcome of the advisory group meeting and individual participant meetings, I went back and reviewed the participant recommendations again and revised my Recommendations section and provided concrete strategies and areas for improvement in employment services and supports.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Lastly, during this phase I refined my themes based on my discussions with the advisory group, participants, and my chair. I then defined each theme to highlight its uniqueness and relationship to my research questions. This process helped me to see what excerpts from the interviews were best to tell the story of the data (Braun & Clark, 2012). During this phase, it was also helpful to see how to bridge theory with practice. Connecting theory with practice helped to generate relevant understandings for the field of disability and employment practice (Thorne, 2016).

Trustworthiness, Rigor, and Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, social worker, and someone who does not identify as having a cognitive disability, I intentionally created an advisory group composed of representatives from the field of disability and employment as well as circling back to participants to hear their feedback and opinions on my interpretations. In order to maintain trustworthiness and rigor throughout my research study, I wrote memos after each interview and I debriefed with my chair (Morrow, 2005). During the analysis process I debriefed with my chair, a committee member (GM), and other scholars of color during my time at the Intersectional Qualitative Research Methods Institute for Advanced Doctoral Students. This helped me remain close to the data and explore additional perspectives and insights.

Through meeting with the advisory group and individual meetings with participants, I was able to hold myself accountable to the participants throughout the data collection, analysis, and knowledge translation stages. The presence of the advisory group and the participants within my study also grounded the study in critical epistemology and my theoretical framework, which values centering voices typically excluded from knowledge creation. At the same time, these groups added important checks and balances to my interpretation of the findings, which contributed to the trustworthiness of my study.

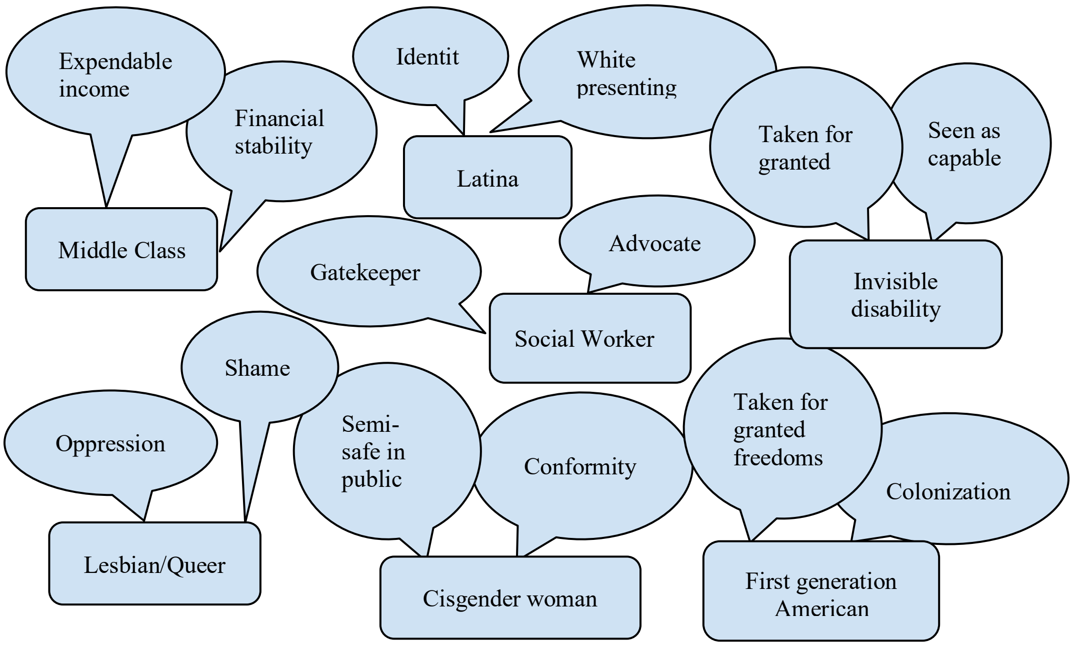
Although researchers cannot account for all the ways in which our research is used, I made every effort to safeguard the interview participants by upholding confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent as well as engaging in reflexive exercises in every aspect of the research study. An example of how I engaged in reflexivity is the process I used of creating my own identity map before the start of my interviews (and one after the interview process) and debriefing my identity maps with colleagues and my chair (see Reflexivity section). Another example of upholding research ethics was my process of developing an additional consent process to assess participants' understanding of the research study and what their participation meant in the study (Horner-Johnson & Bailey, 2013).

Reflexivity

My positionality shaped how I designed the study and the questions I asked. It also shaped the way I see my participants and the way my participants see me (Alcoff, 1988; Maher & Tetreault, 1993). To provide some level of transparency and account for my insider/outsider positions and biases (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) within this research study, I reflected on my positionality before, during, and after the different phases of the study (e.g., research design, research question, data collection, analysis, and findings process) (Crenshaw, 1989). During this reflection, I created two social identity maps (see Figures 1 and 2). I also had conversations with other scholars and journaled about my positionality and social location. These maps were used as a reflexivity tool throughout my study process (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). These tools helped me to reflect on my biases, both implicit and explicit, and to deepen my understanding of the participants' experiences.

Figure 1

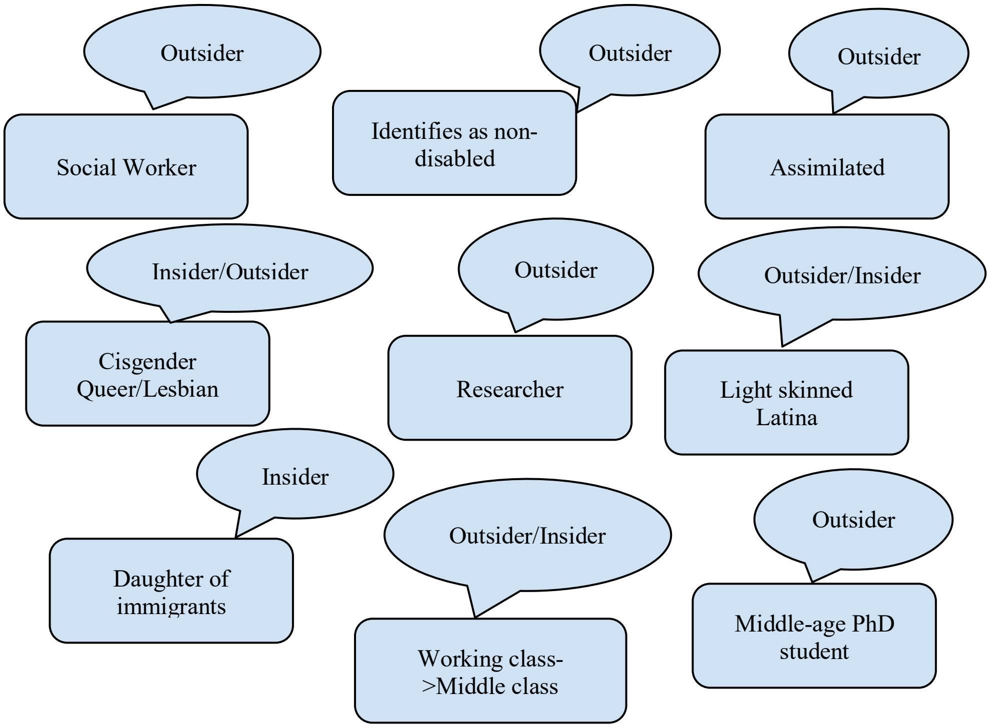
Social Identity Map 1



Note. Jacobson, D., & Mustafa, N. (2019). Social identity map: A reflexivity tool for practicing explicit positionality in critical qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919870075

Figure 2

Social Identity Map 2



Note. Jacobson, D., & Mustafa, N. (2019). Social identity map: A reflexivity tool for practicing explicit positionality in critical qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919870075

These maps, along with conversations with my dissertation chair and other scholars, guided my reflections on how my social identities impacted my research and research participants. One specific example happened during the recruitment process. After a presentation to a self-advocacy group, I was told by a self-advocate of color that they would not feel comfortable participating in the study because I was “White passing.” I thanked the self-advocate for their honest feedback. There was a moment of silence, and then the meeting facilitator continued the meeting. The interaction was not necessarily surprising because I have experienced similar types of comments throughout my personal life from many of the identity groups I belong to, and I had been thinking about my social identities and visible appearance since the start of the study. Part of my reflexive work had been discussing similar types of situations with other scholars, my chair, and colleagues and along with journal writing.

Furthermore, after the interaction, I purposely started to share some background information on who I was and my interest in this topic area before I started an interview. Some of the information I included was my nonvisible identities such as my cultural background and my sexual orientation. I felt that providing some context of who I was as a person would be helpful to participants and possibly make them feel more comfortable in the process. If I was asking participants to share vulnerable experiences, then I needed to be willing to be more vulnerable as a researcher.

Through this experience, I was able to continue my reflection of my social location, which places me simultaneously as an insider and outsider in relation to the mainstream dominant culture. Therefore, I used this experience as a reminder to check my assumptions and ask clarifying questions during the interview process. Clarifying questions were particularly important for credibility during analysis because they provided me with more data in participants' own words; further, asking for clarification allowed me to understand how questions were being received and/or understood.

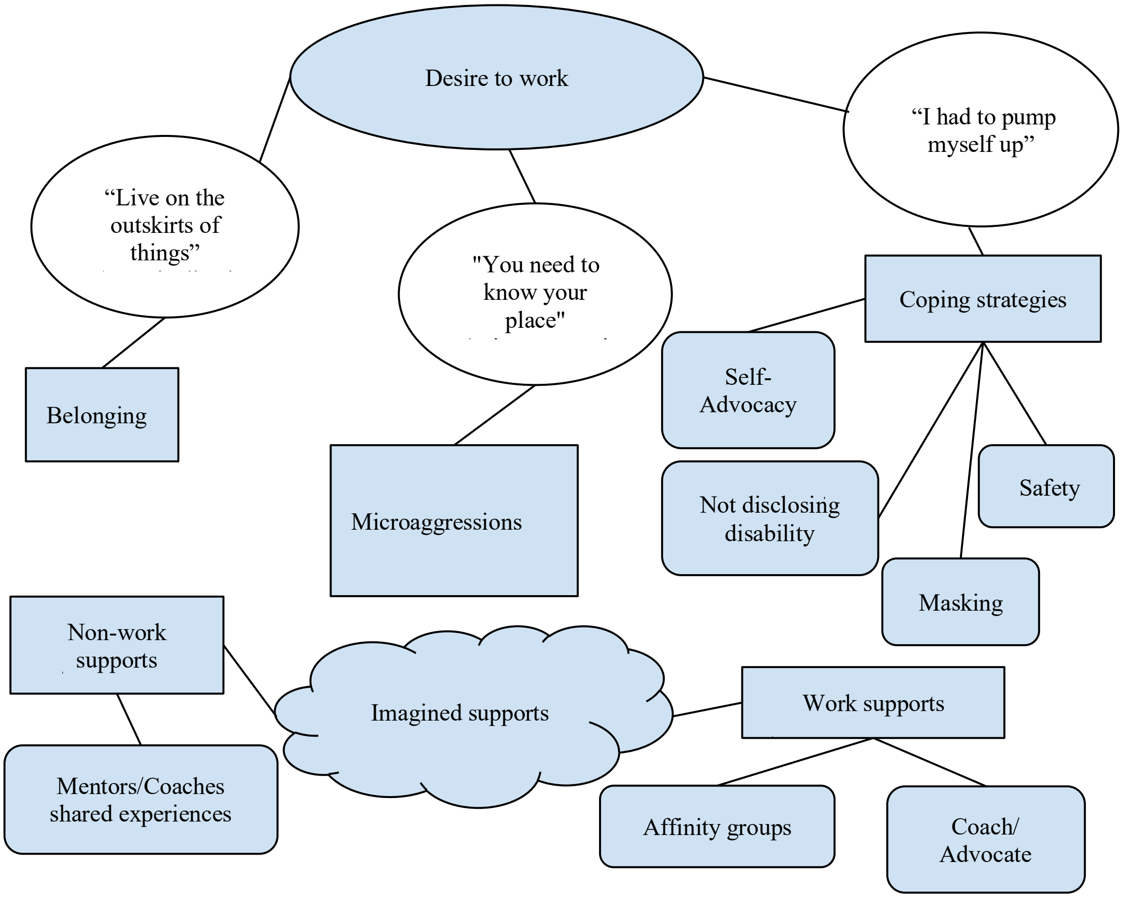
In the following chapter, I take a deep dive into the interview data and share the participants' narratives by using exemplar quotes and participant descriptions. I begin by sharing an image that depicts my interpretations of the cumulative data and the four main themes that shape the narratives of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Below is an image that illustrates my four thematic findings based on my interpretation of the data: desire to work, belonging, daily microaggressions, and strategies used to navigate employment. This chapter will describe each of these themes in detail.

Figure 3

Themes



"It Keeps Me on My Toes": Desire to Work

Participants were forthcoming about their desire to work, their experiences of discrimination, and the strategies they used to navigate discrimination within employment settings and their daily lives. These experiences were unique to the study participants because of their distinctive social locations as women and nonbinary POC with CD. As evidenced by previous research, adults with CD desire to work and be part of their community. At the same time, they are not a monolithic group, and their reasons for wanting to work vary along with the barriers they encounter and the ways in which they navigate the systemic challenges.

Participants described their desire to work stemming from various reasons. For some, work was a means to support themselves and/or their family. For example, one participant who identified as a nonbinary multiracial person stated,

> My parents, teachers, school counselors, and my grandparents, they always told me that I needed to be able to provide for myself and also be able to take care of my family. I come from a multigenerational family, so it was always expected that I would make enough to care for my elders.

Work also gave them a sense of safety and security. The participant describes, “It means I have safety and security; it means my partner has health care to help with their chronic conditions. It means I feel like I’m a part of the household.”

This sentiment was echoed by another participant who identified as a biracial Latina who discussed the link between having a job and access to health benefits, specifically for mental health care. When asked, she said, “Independence and access to resources like health care. Specifically mental health care.”

Other participants spoke about wanting to work to “produce labor” or to “stay out of trouble.” These concepts emerged frequently during the interviews. For example, one participant who identified as a nonbinary multiracial person talked about feeling fulfilled when they are doing thing: “...it fulfills a desire to produce labor. You know, in terms of doing things and getting things done. It grants me fulfillment, regardless if it's for an employer or myself."

Another participant who identified as an Indigenous woman discussed work as being something that, "...keeps me out of trouble. It keeps me busy in something. It keeps me on my toes and everything and keeps me focused."

While the desire to work was important to participants for financial reasons, health benefits, and giving them something to do, others described their desire to work in order to contribute back to their community. Several participants spoke about the desire to give back to their community because of their own lived experiences. For example, one participant, who is a transracial adoptee and who identified as an Asian woman with White parents, described how her dream job would be helping others like herself:

> ...working within the adoption community or adoption work. Since I am a transracial adoptee myself, I would like to get a job at the adoption agency. I was adopted through [name of organization]. [I would like to] educate others and share my story or journey growing up in America with Caucasian parents.

Another participant who identifies as a half-Japanese woman talked about how she wanted to work in a healthcare setting educating others with disabilities. She explained that this came about because of her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the beginning of COVID-19, she and others with disabilities needed help understanding what was happening.

> I want to work [in a] health care setting because I want to work with my community. Like I [would be] happy [working] in health education. I was, during [the] pandemic [in] 2020...I [needed] help learning about the pandemic… because

> it was hard for me. But some people with disabilities didn’t know about the COVID pandemic. And so, my job would be like in health care [educating them].

One participant who identifies as a Latina talked about wanting to give back to her community because of all the people that helped her “make it” along the way. She stated, “Like in high school, I wasn’t doing well, so if it weren’t for like all these groups of people as in like counselors, teachers like helping me, I wouldn’t have made it.”

Lastly, one participant who identified as biracial discussed how she did not want to necessarily work in the sense of labor for pay. She wanted the ability to support and provide mutual aid to her community because that is most important to her. She also discussed how she was able to do this during the pandemic.

> ...my dream job is to have no job. I legit would love to be a housewife. I would love to just take care of my community [through] mutual aid. Like my job is literally to be able to take care of my community, but not in a money way, and just like just having my time and giving it to the community [where] I live in and being able to support the people around me. That to me is my dream job.
>
> So, a great example, like during the pandemic. I was pretty much able to be a housewife, because I didn’t have to work which was so lovely for me and mostly what I did was I volunteered at a food pantry. I made sandwiches to give out to unhoused folks, so I would just go out into the people who literally lived like a couple blocks from me and feed them or give to the free fridge…because it’s important for me to like, when I mean community, everyone who would be like in my surrounding areas.

“You Need to Know Your Place”: Daily Microaggressions

While a desire to work was common in the participants’ narratives, just as prominent were the experiences of discrimination both in the workplace and outside of the workplace, which were shared by all participants. For some of the participants, discrimination was based on their visible appearances (e.g., race, gender identity) and at times it seemed to eclipse their disabilities. But there were also several incidents where discrimination was not as clear-cut as to the origin of the prejudice.

Although many interactions of microaggression happened at work, participants also experienced microaggressions in their daily lives outside of the workplace. For example, one participant, a biracial Black and Latina woman, described how she was told to “know her place” when waiting in line at the drugstore.

> I went to a [drugstore name]… I was trying to check out, but I also wanted to ask for an application… There was a lady and her daughter who just jumped right in front of me. I said, “Excuse me, I believe I was in front of you, and you just [stepped] in front of me. There is a line.” The cashier looked at me and said, “You need to know your place.”

The political climate of the time period also affected some of the participants’ experiences of discrimination. For some, discrimination increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election of Donald Trump because of their race and ethnicities. For example, one participant who identified as Chinese stated,

> Yesterday I was on the bus and this guy told me to go away or get out of here; [he] means get out of this country. I ignored him. I went out the back door of the bus, not by him, but I went out the further exit of the bus.

Another participant who identified as Latina and who worked as a nursing assistant shared this experience:

> I remember clients were always racist, or most of them were racist. Like, I remember with the whole Donald Trump thing; they were like pro-Trump and saying like the cartels are coming, and like the cartels are your people.

Many of the participants' discrimination experiences were specific to their race, and it was easy for them to recall a situation where they were discriminated against. One participant who identified as a biracial Latina talked about an experience with her White manager who had similar disabilities as her but was unable to recognize the same disability symptoms going on with her. She stated, "So, I definitely think that race has a huge part in that, [my manager thinks] I'm just being defiant; it's not my disability."

Another participant who identified as a biracial Latina and Indigenous woman discussed an interaction at work that happened between her and a White customer based solely on how she looked "Mexican."

> One very blatant [example of racism]... I was working in an intake. Someone did a walk in, and I was sent out front to meet that lady. I introduced myself, and she looked at me, and she was silent, and then walked over to reception and she wrote a note, and she said, "I don't feel comfortable working with a Mexican because of my bad experiences with Mexicans in the past... Could I please request a White person to speak to?"

Whereas the visibility of race for some participants seemed to overshadow their other identities (e.g., disabilities) in their experiences of discrimination, one participant who identified as a mixed-race trans woman described their experiences of transphobia in the workplace because of their outward physical appearance, gestures, and voice.

> Due to my stature and my voice, I’m often mistaken for a cisman, which puts me in a lot of very uncomfortable situations with how people just speak to me or [are] around me. It’s pretty rough in that particular niche field. Misogyny is pretty rampant, as [well as] racism. When you think about White collar tech, it just says White males all over the place.

While participants encountered discrimination that seemed more explicitly focused on one aspect of their identity (i.e., race, or gender identity, or sexuality), other forms of discrimination emerged that were more nuanced and implicit. These forms of daily discrimination showed up across the narratives and are best described as microaggressions. Microaggressions typically refer to racial discrimination but can also refer to gender, disability, or other forms of discrimination. They are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).

Participants described many acts of microaggressions at work. For example, one participant who was a biracial Latina received feedback from her manager about her coworkers feeling “uncomfortable” around her. The participant was a new employee and had just started working at the organization two weeks prior to this feedback.

> Like one time my general manager... sat me down and told me that people felt uncomfortable around me. I don’t understand why anyone would feel

> uncomfortable around me. I mostly just talked about my schoolwork, and that's like really the only thing I talked to people about.

Another participant who identified as biracial Black and Latina talked about how her supervisor would start talking to her about slavery or other nonwork topics that seemed to come out of the blue: "This supervisor for no other reason brought up slavery and things from the past with me and made me very uncomfortable."

For many participants, their multiple identities created discrimination experiences that have been termed intersectional. For example, the quote below was from a participant who was a person of color with physical and cognitive disabilities, as well as who identified their gender as nonbinary. They acknowledged being "microaggressed" multiple times and for different aspects of their identity in past employment settings. In addition, they discussed implicit and explicit experiences.

> At my previous job, I was consistently undermined and questioned about my work, even when I was the most knowledgeable in the room about the topic. When I was actively being harassed, it was written off as "overreacting" or "misunderstanding intentions," because of my autism. I was regularly misgendered and microaggressed when I asked to be gendered correctly.

Another example of an experience of intersectional discrimination happened when a participant's coworker explained a school policy to the participant because she was "Hispanic" and "young" and thought she might overstep her role and partake in a student protest.

> I mean like I'm young and Hispanic, and all my admin are like White men. So, it's kind of intimidating to even share anything. So, part of, like, my disability is

> PTSD. So, like, my students did the walkout protesting gun violence. Then a staff member was like telling me, “So, you can’t participate in this because of the district policies,” but she was telling me like, “I bet you none of these people have been affected by gun violence.” And I was just there like… I didn’t even answer her. But I'm like, “You’re literally talking to someone who’s been affected by it.” Yeah, so that’s like part of my PTSD. But I guess she just didn’t know.

One participant who identified as an Indigenous woman discussed how her supervisor would “hover” over her: “...and then she would always look over my shoulder. She would hover for part of the time.” Along with hovering over her, the supervisor would switch from being “nice” to the participant and then “rude” to her.

A second participant who identified as biracial discussed a White coworker who would “stare” at her, her co-workers, and clientele of color.

> She’s the only older White lady who works in [organization], and she does stare a lot [at customers of color], and she does like even with us [coworkers]. Sometimes, if we do a certain act, she’ll like, stand over us and watch us do it. It’s weird.

For all the participants, microaggressions were a daily occurrence. Because these events happened daily, many participants developed individualized ways in which they dealt with these situations. Some participants spoke about these actions as coping strategies to get through the day.

“I Had to Pump Myself Up”: Coping Strategies

After hearing the context and environment in which participants lived and worked, I asked participants about what had helped or supported them in the job process.

Participants described a multitude of strategies they personally developed and used almost on a daily basis, either at work or in their personal life. The theme of coping strategies appeared throughout the interviews. For the purposes of this study, coping strategies as action(s) or thought process(s) used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation (American Psychological Association, 2018). Coping strategies consisted of self-advocacy, nondisclosure of their disabilities to their employer, safety planning, and masking.

Coping Strategies

Self-Advocacy

For many participants, self-advocacy, or standing up for themselves, was a coping strategy used in the workplace. As mentioned, a coping strategy is an action, or a series of actions, used in meeting a stressful or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation. Participants discussed standing up for themselves to get support and be treated respectfully by coworkers and supervisors. When I asked participants if they felt they were treated unfairly because of their identities (e.g., race, gender, and ethnicity), several participants spoke about specific examples.

One participant who was an Indigenous woman discussed how she was treated differently by her supervisor than other employees at work. She explained that there were other employees at her job who have disabilities, but she had not seen the supervisor treating them with disrespect. The participant went on to discuss one particular incident where she had to stand up for herself and demand respect:

> Because the people at my work that have a disability, she treated the other people with respect, and I told her, "Can you please treat me with respect like the other

> people?" And I said, "If I didn't have a disability, would you treat me with respect? If I was like the other people?" And she said, "Yes, if [you] didn't have a disability I would treat you with respect. Now, since you have a disability, I'm treating you a little bit differently." That's what she told me.

One participant who was a biracial woman described how she was her own self advocate and how she developed an internal voice to keep herself going and not give up.

> I do find it difficult to be taken seriously… Then having those barriers, individuals telling me, "No, you can't. No, you'll never be able to." Just pushing me down like I had no voice. I had to pump myself up. I kept telling myself, "You've got to get angry. You've got to push forward. You're not this person. That's not who you are." Then I told myself I'm a soldier, got to keep going. No man left behind.

Another strategy discussed by one participant who identified as a multiracial nonbinary person was overpreparing for job interviews. Overpreparing meant taking a day off from everything to focus, giving themselves a pep talk, and to come up with various anecdotes to have ready for possible questions that may be asked.

> Prepping answers for myself for commonly asked questions, like having stories/anecdotes prepared in a document for myself so I can go over them and remember them. Taking the day off from other activities when I have interviews, to make sure I can reserve all of my brain space for the interview. Talking myself up / trying to quiet down my anxieties and low self-esteem and working on accepting compliments. Working on being more open with communication and getting over my trauma associated with asking clarifying questions and taking

> time to think. It's important to remember that I deserve space, and it's okay to take some.

While self-advocacy was one way participants managed discrimination and other stressful situations at work, not disclosing their disability was another approach many participants used.

Not Disclosing Disability

Not disclosing their disability and/or their need for workplace accommodations was another tool used by the participants to navigate their employment situation. Not all participants had the benefit to decide whether or not to disclose their disability to their employer. Meaning, some participants could not visibly mask their disability, race, and/or gender identity. But for the participants who had the option to decide, the choice they made became part of their larger strategy to navigate their employment. Although the Americans with Disability Act (1990) prohibits discrimination in the workplace based on disability and requires employers to provide people with disabilities workplace accommodations, a majority of the participants described how they intentionally do not disclose their disability. For example, one participant discussed how disclosing a disability puts up "an automatic red flag" and is seen as a barrier to employment.

> The way, like, the society works right now, like, I feel if you write down, "Oh, I have a disability," it's like an automatic red flag. So, it's like there's the last chance for you to even get an interview or an actual job.

Two participants discussed how they do not feel the need to disclose their disability to their employer until it is unavoidable. For one participant, a situation came up during the pandemic when there was a shortage of medications for her disability. She told her employer that she needed time off for medical reasons.

> No, I really don’t feel like I need to [disclose disability]. I don’t think that needs to be said. I think if it becomes an issue, then we can talk about it or like I said I usually take my medication when I go to school [and work]. So, when I’m in the [workplace], I usually do take my medication… though [during the pandemic] there was a shortage. So, I did have to take a couple of days off, and I emailed them and was like, “I need to take days off for medical reasons, like I just cannot come to work without my medication.” It’s very difficult for me so I don’t directly say it, but I’m like there is a medical situation is what I kind of call it.

Another participant had a similar response about not disclosing to their employer until it was “absolutely” necessary. This participant talked about hiding her disability and needs until it was no longer an option for her.

> I didn’t say anything [about disability], and I didn’t say it when I applied. I didn’t say it in the interview. I didn’t say anything until it became like a problem. And yeah, so that’s I think that’s part of that coping is just hiding it until you absolutely can’t anymore.

One participant talked about how it was difficult to disclose invisible disabilities in the workplace because the onus was on them, which adds more to their “plate.” They’re already entering the workspace with multiple minoritized visible identities (physically disabled, “fat”, POC) and they need time to build trust before opening up to coworkers and other colleagues about their needs.

> So, it’s hard, because I already show up in these spaces as a fat person, as a disabled person physically. But to mention my invisible disabilities, to mention my language needs, to mention my trauma responses, to mention my trauma needs… That’s already a lot on my plate to be able to say that, and so it takes time... for me to open up to people.

Another participant spoke about how they “don’t want to be any more different,” referring to the fact that they are a POC, and they do not think it would make things “easier” for them by telling their employer or coworkers that they also have a disability.

> I already have to work a little harder to, like, really socialize well and like, relate to people. I feel like I’m doing more performance from the get-go… I don’t feel like it’d make it easier for me to just, like I’m already exposed for being different, I don’t want to be any more different right now. I know that eventually people are going to figure out. People are going to catch on. People are going to know, but like not right away, like I don’t need that.

The same participant talked about having more time in the workplace before needing to disclose their disabilities so they did not “ruin” potential opportunities and could be seen first as “a totally capable person.”

> I feel like, because I didn’t want it to ruin any potential opportunities in the future. I didn’t want it. I don’t want it to stop. I don’t want… people to think of me just that, like I want people to think of me as, like, a totally capable person, and like, I want to impress people. I don’t want them to think lowly of me, or differently of me because I know that I’m a person that is deserving of respect, and I want to give myself a chance before losing that by revealing too much right

> away… I don’t want people to think of me differently or then lose opportunity and not be given a chance to do well.

Along with not disclosing their disability to employers, participants talked about having to think about keeping safe, both physically and psychological.

Safety (Physical/Psychological)

Safety planning or ways in which one modifies their behaviors in order to protect oneself from forms of physical/psychological was another way participants discussed their strategies. At times, coping strategies meant physically protecting oneself from an outside force such as another person being physically violent. Other strategies expressed by the participants involved psychological safety and protecting oneself from emotional trauma.

For example, one participant who identified as a Chinese woman discussed how she planned her travel to and from work on the city bus. She explained that she has had several incidents using public transportation, which increased during the pandemic. Because of her experiences, she and her parents developed a strategy that she used to stay safe from physical harm while traveling on the bus.

> I just keep my clothes in front of me and look over my shoulder, so make sure nobody’s following me home. I get my keys out immediately when I get home and then I call my mother, say, “I got home safely, I’m inside.”

Another participant, who identified as a biracial woman, talked about how she carried a backpack with all her coping tools in it. She explained that this backpack helps her to control her anxiety and keeps her grounded.

> I have a backpack that I carry that has my headphones, my charger, my drugs, of course. It has my iPad. It has everything that I need. If I get anxiety, I make sure that I have definitely little things to do inside my bag. I have total reign. I usually carry coping strategies with me.

Masking

While some participants talked about ways they strategized when traveling to and from work, other participants talked about a need for "masking" or assimilating their speech and/or behaviors in the workplace in order to be seen as human and worthy of getting their needs met. For one of the participants who identified as a nonbinary Indigenous person, masking was a strategy they used to work in dominant culture settings. But they also spoke about how it can also be hard work to mask behaviors and communication while also feeling like they are not being supported in return.

> There's a certain level of masking that is part of me, and while I hate it, it has provided me with the ability to convey information that is really important to me. But I've had to learn how to do it. And in work settings, you know, I've had to go the route of humanizing myself in order to get my needs met. Because if I don't humanize, and if I just go straight in for "This is what I need," people will not understand what I actually want. Which is a lot of work, because now I'm holding their hand while [I'm] telling them, "I need you to hold space for me."

Another participant discussed using masking as a way to assimilate their behaviors growing up at school, and most recently at work, in order to pass and be successful. They also discussed how masking creates a "secretive" way of living with disabilities and how it hides who they really are when they are at work.

> One more thing I’d like to express about myself is that I think growing up with these disabilities, I’ve learned to really hide them as much as I can, and I make up in other ways, make sure that I could get by and pass my classes, or, you know, keep up. I do have my own coping [strategies]. I’ve been really good with my coping, in like constantly seeking resources. But I don’t think that’s true for a lot of people that come from similar backgrounds. So, I feel like it’s a very secretive lifestyle, living with disabilities. So yeah, as a professional it’s just yeah, it’s like hiding who I really am and like you know, not yeah, who I am, and like you know [my] full self, you know… Like you’re not able to bring your full self to work.

While masking was a strategy that helped these participants, they also expressed that they wished they did not have to perform these behaviors and that workplaces had environments and procedures in place so they could just be accepted for who they were, their full selves. For example, one participant who identified as a nonbinary, fat, Indigenous person explained that if they did not have to mask all the time, they wondered what type of support they would need, and what type of job they would want.

> So, then the question becomes if that [masking] wasn’t a factor, what [support] would I need? What would I want for a job? I think at some point I would be able to function without the masking…and it would be complete and utter creativity that would allow me to be who I am—ADHD, autism, all in one go—without having to mask, without having to medicate, without having to give people humanization examples of why I need this, and why I need that.

One participant who identified as Latina spoke about the fact that she does not see her disability as a disability. She explained how that's how her "brain's wired." She wanted to not mask because she wanted to be accepted for who she was.

> I don't see it as a disability, because there's nothing wrong with me. It's just how my brain's wired, and I think that should be accepted and celebrated instead of constantly having barriers against it and making it seem like it's not normal.

Lastly, another participant expressed similar desires to be accepted for who they were and added that the workplace should have rules in place to support their employees: "I think the process of being able to find a job and be accepted for my disabilities in every way and for who I am would have been better supported if there were rules in [the work] place."

"I Really Live on the Outskirts of Things": Belonging

The last theme interpreted from the participants' narratives was the notion of people of color with disabilities not being a monolith or fitting into a particular stereotype. For one participant, not fitting the stereotype of various identity groups made them feel like they were "living on the outskirts" of several communities but not being fully integrated in any one community. These concepts appeared both in workplace settings and in their personal lives. For several participants, the invisibility of some of their identities—or their lack of fitting a certain stereotype, whether that be racial, disability, or gender—left them feeling estranged from their communities.

> So I really live on the outskirts of things, and I kind of just keep to myself and I keep my identities not necessarily a secret, but I don't necessarily share about them, because it brings a lot of pain and hurt to address myself as part of a

> community when the question has always been, “Do you really belong in this community?” And this has been like on multiple levels, like this has been across states, like across countries… Like, so it’s always like, okay, this is not where I’m allowed to be or be at. So, [for example] I do identify within the rainbow umbrella and even trans umbrella. “But am I really part of it?” is always the question that I’m asked.

One participant who identified as a multiracial nonbinary trans woman spoke about their experience trying to fit into several different communities that they identified with but never feeling accepted in any due to their appearance and their disability, which included understanding social cues.

> I attempted to kind of segue my way into communities… I tried to engage in the Jewish community because of my dad, but because my mom’s not Jewish it was pretty much like, “You’re going to suffer until you prove how bad you want this.” And I’ve tried to kind of join, you know, like transgender groups in queer communities. But because of my emotional dysregulation, I get upset pretty easily. People seem to be really catty and harsh with their words and critique in the queer communities. And I just got my feelings hurt a lot. I can't really sense the intentions behind somebody's language or what they actually mean. So, when they say something [I’m] like, “Are you being nice, are you actually being nice?” I have to think about every sentence. And most of the time it turns out, people are just being mean. Like sarcasm doesn’t work with me. Yeah. So, I just kind of left those communities.

Another participant talked about how adoptees from China raised by White people in the United States, like herself, are different from Chinese people born and raised in China. She went on to discuss prominent stereotypes, how they do not fit all Chinese people, and how adoptees need different things than non-adoptees.

> I think we have this stereotype [about] what they see in a Chinese person and what they think Chinese can do. I think it's stereotypical because they think that Asians and Chinese are good at math and very hard workers. They eat rice every day, but that's not even true. Us Chinese adoptees, we need different things. We're all not good at math, and we're all not geniuses, you know what I mean?

The same participant also discussed the perceptions people have about the abilities and aspirations of people with disabilities in terms of what they can accomplish or what they desire to do for work. She continued to discuss the choices that some people with disabilities make in wanting to work in a coffee shop or at a grocery store versus being a doctor or public speaker. She went on to explain that people question the work choices of people with disabilities, for example questioning why they chose to work in a service job.

> I think people should stop perceiving people who have disabilities [as people] who can't be a nurse, or who can't get a bachelor's degree. I think that's the perceived notion of people with disabilities, that they can't get a bachelor's, or they can't become a doctor or a doctorate student because they didn't think people with disabilities can go to college. Or people with disabilities used to be locked up in institutions… People think people with disabilities get low menial jobs, but that's not always true. People with disabilities are public speakers or they work at

> a grocery store. They work at a coffee shop, or they work at an animal shelter or receptionist. I just don't know, but I just get tired of people saying, "Why didn't they get a good job after college? Why couldn't they get a better job?"... I just say, "That's the path I took so you need to respect the path I took after college. I got a job and here I am now."

Chapter Summary

Study participants described their desire to work, their daily experiences of intersectional discrimination, and ways in which they navigated situations in the workplace (and outside) in order to succeed. Their desire to work centered on being productive, supporting themselves, their families, and their communities. Their daily experiences of discrimination touched all their various identities, not just their identified disability. Through their lived experience they creatively developed strategies of coping to obtain employment. The employment experiences of these participants were affected not only by ableism, but by various forms of discrimination that were interconnected and daily. In addition, findings showed that participants developed their own strategies that enabled them to successfully navigate the employment journey. Finally, belonging and/or not fitting the stereotype(s) created a sense of alienation or living on the outside of communities they otherwise identified with.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings, integrate them with the research literature, interpret potential implications for the study, and review limitations and implications for the field of social work. I then conclude with future areas of research for employment supports and services, specifically for minoritized adults with CD.

My study design was rooted in DisCrit and guided by the ID methodology. I used DisCrit as a framework for this study because of its roots in critical epistemology and its underpinnings, which include historical and current day political and social context to view social realities. By using critical epistemology in my research, my goal was to obtain knowledge not just for knowledge's sake, but that which could be "emancipatory knowledge, knowledge in the context of action and the search for freedom" (Crotty, 1998, p. 159). ID methodology has similar underpinnings to DisCrit in that it is action oriented and centers the experiences of its participants.

People of color as well as people with disabilities are not a monolith, and I was not trying to capture the experience of all POC with CD. I was looking to start a dialogue about the complex nature of this topic based on my initial findings. By using DisCrit, I was hoping to find that the participants' stories illustrated the experiences of people with disabilities in a more nuanced and multidimensional way. The narratives of the women and nonbinary POC with CD described the ways in which racism, ableism, sexism, and transphobia circulate interdependently often in neutralized and invisible ways.

By using DisCrit, I solicited stories of the participants that were multifaceted, not solely focusing on disability as their singular identity. That made the narratives richer and more complex, just like the world the participants interact with every day. Like critical race theory, DisCrit can reveal the structural and interpersonal power dynamics that facilitate success, create barriers, or act in neutral ways depending on one's social identities. Lastly, my findings centered and privileged the voices of the participants who are traditionally not acknowledged within research.

This study itself is important for looking at race, disability, gender identity, and intersectionality for people with CD and employment. The findings are important because the participants' narratives contradict much of mainstream disability research discourse for people with CD within employment. Contrary to previous narratives, the participants were able to speak for themselves and articulate their experiences of intersectional discrimination along with strategies they used to navigate their employment journeys. Additionally, their narratives about challenges and barriers add a novel and nuanced perspective to the current challenges and barriers to employment found in the mainstream disability research literature. For example, mainstream narratives around transportation as a known barrier focus on access to public transportation but not on the physical and psychological safety aspects of using public transportation to get to and from work.

Currently, well-established areas of disability employment research explore barriers to employment and supports that enable successful employment for people with CD. These well-known barriers to employment include transportation, employer perceptions, societal stigma against those with disabilities, and lack of work experiences during school years (Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020; Luecking, 2011; Timmons et al., 2011). Although these barriers can also be true for minoritized people with CD, the existing knowledge around barriers are seen through a colorblind lens, which does not account for structural discrimination (e.g., racism, homophobia) embedded in these barriers.

My findings suggest that our understanding of the barriers to employment are incomplete and need to be reexamined through a more critical lens like DisCrit, which interconnects and examines various structural oppressions together to capture more accurately the experience of women and nonbinary POC with CD in the labor market. Without reexamining mainstream employment literature through different lenses like DisCrit, the field will continue to create supports that only privilege the mainstream disability population (i.e., heterosexual, middle class, and White) leaving many people to continue to fend for themselves.

By looking at the participants as a whole in relation to their environment, I was able to illustrate more precise narratives of discrimination, barriers, and strategies that are unique to this group. In the spirit of action orientation and centering the voices of the participants, my study focused on counternarratives of minoritized people with disabilities with the purpose of informing systems change in employment services and supports as well as paradigm shifts in disability research (Given, 2008). My study, to the best of my knowledge, is one of the first studies to ask participants of color with CD directly about their experiences in the labor market. I believe their narratives are critical to creating a better, more responsive, and effective employment system of supports and services that are genuinely for all people with disabilities. In the following sections, I go into more detail about how my findings connect to the literature.

Desire to Work

My findings show clearly that ableism alone does not fully articulate study participants' experiences of and barriers to employment. By using DisCrit to frame my study, I sought to center both injustices and the resistance that these participants engaged with in their daily lives. The participants' narratives also refute the colorblind dominant narrative that all people with disabilities have the same experiences and struggles as White heteronormative people with disabilities within employment.

My findings suggest, as previous research has shown, that adults with CD want to work and be part of their community (Barrows et al., 2015; Migliore et al., 2007). Although there were various reasons why they wanted to work (e.g., financial stability, healthcare benefits), a valuable insight from the narratives points to a desire to contribute to their community because of their personal experiences.

For instance, one of the participants, a transracial adoptee with learning disabilities who identified as an Asian woman with White parents, dreamt of working at an adoption agency to educate others about her experiences growing up in America with Caucasian parents. Another participant, who identified as half Japanese and half White, wants to work in a healthcare setting to educate others with disabilities, citing her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of the existing employment literature confirms the overarching theme of people with cognitive disabilities desire to work (Novak & Rogan, 2010); however, the desire to give back to the community through employment was unique to this study. Giving back, or what could be seen as altruism, through one's work is a concept that is seen in the literature for marginalized communities such as POC (Mattis et al., 2008), women of color (Johnson et al., 2009), and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Lewis, 2010), but there is minimal literature on adults of color with disabilities and women and nonbinary POC with CD. For the purpose of this study, altruism is defined as a value and/or practice of concern for the well-being of other people.

In Johnson and colleagues' (2009) article, women of color in STEM research were motivated to help others find meaning in their work in order to improve circumstances for their communities or others being subjugated by similar structures. In Mattis et al. (2008), the ways individuals engaged in altruistic behavior was rooted in their survival because public structural supports (e.g., social services, police) historically perpetrated more harm than good. This created the need for close-knit community structures rather than relying on public services.

In a study by Lewis (2010), members of the LGBTQIA+ community gave back to the community through their work in the nonprofit sector. LGBTQIA+ individuals in the study were motivated by creating social and political change for their community. These findings can also be seen in my study where one participant explicitly talked about providing mutual aid during the pandemic. She expressed that her "dream job" would be providing mutual aid to her community and "not in a money way, just my time."

The idea of wanting to give back to their community through their work can be seen as deriving from their socialized experiences of exclusion and isolation due to structural, historical, and systemic discrimination. These experiences are informed by the structural barriers and ideological views of the dominant culture and can be seen as a form of resistance to the dominant culture. Being women and nonbinary POC with CD, their experiences of marginalization and exclusion provide them with motivations to make it better for others like them and to create communities for themselves (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). In Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) *Care Work*, the author describes how disabled POC have historically created communities and resources and care for each other in the absence of services and spaces for themselves in the dominant culture. This is seen as one of many forms of resistance to the dominant ideology.

Ableism Is Not Everything

Another important finding from the study is that participants experienced complex and nuanced intersectional discrimination both inside and outside the workplace. This finding is not a surprise, but it has not yet been documented in the disability and employment research literature, which typically focuses solely on ableism as the most salient oppression. Discrimination discussed by the participants is often seen as being based on visible appearances, such as race and gender identity, and at times seems to overshadow their disabilities. However, the origin of prejudice is not always clear. Taking the perspective of DisCrit and its use of intersectional analysis to frame perspectives, systems of oppression are continuously working and colluding with one another, not in isolation from one another, so labeling experiences as racism or ableism falls short of true lived experiences.

Regardless of how discrimination is viewed, the material effects are very real. Focusing on the nuances of discrimination can shape how systems support women and nonbinary POC with CD. For instance, the political climate and context of a time period can seem to increase or make one identity more salient and vulnerable than others. Two recent examples show this. Discrimination among Asians and Latinos increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and Donald Trump presidency (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021;

Gover et al., 2020). As one participant recalls when working as a nursing assistant, “Clients were always racist. Like I remember with the whole Donald Trump thing. There were like pro-Trump signs, and they were saying like, ‘The cartels are coming and they’re your people.’”

Another example is how the political climate during the COVID-19 pandemic affected participants. One participant feared for her safety taking the bus to and from work. “Since I’ve heard of all the hate crimes and the bias crimes, I take extra precaution when I’m going [to work] because I have an Asian face, and I’m a person of Asian descent. Since the pandemic has been happening, people have been getting targeted and I don’t want that happening to me.” The same participant also discussed several times being verbally attacked on the bus or at her place of work.

Once again, the experiences, which are barriers in their employment, are wrapped up in the participants’ whole experience and not solely related to ableism. The visibility of their race overshadowed their other identities, such as disabilities, when encountering micro-level discrimination. These types of individual-level encounters stem from embedded structural and systemic discrimination. There are various studies on microaggressions and discrimination in the workplace, but few focus on people with disabilities. Research on microaggressions in general has increased over the last few decades, but many studies still focus on one singular category of identity rather than examining the structural pieces that cause the microaggressions (Keller & Galgay, 2010; Olkin et al., 2019; Timm, 2002). My study suggests it is more efficacious to explore the intersectional, fluidly salient, and time- and climate-dependent nature of discrimination.

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is defined in this study as the act of speaking up for oneself and one's interests. Although there is a big self-advocacy movement in the disability field, self-advocacy is viewed differently when it is done by minoritized groups (i.e., women, LGBTQIA+, POC) versus when it is done by White mainstream individuals. Unexamined within this mainstream discourse is how identity, power, and environment shape minoritized people with disabilities use of self-advocacy as well as the ways they engage in self-advocacy (Karpicz, 2020).

Participants spoke about how self-advocacy was essential in the workplace to receive any type of support and be treated respectfully as whole human beings. Participants often discussed having no other option but to stand up for themselves to maintain their dignity and not give up. Although some participants recognized that White people with disabilities might have similar experiences in the workplace, one participant mentioned, "If I was White [with a disability], I would get more support." This again reflects the self-advocacy literature that race and other minoritized statuses shape the ways employers respond to people speaking up for themselves.

For the participants in the study, self-advocacy was a daily occurrence. For minoritized individuals with disabilities, self-advocacy is not a privilege or something they volunteer to do, it is a survival mechanism done on a daily basis inside and outside of the workplace. For many of the participants, it is done in isolation with no support from others because many times they are the "only one" of their kind (e.g., person of color and/or gender minority) in the workplace.

Disclosing a Disability

Another important finding from my study is the narrative surrounding the "why" many participants did not disclose their disabilities to potential or current employers. Despite the Americans with Disability Act (1990) prohibiting discrimination in the workplace based on disability and requiring employers to provide accommodations, there is no legal way to capture discrimination involving the entirety of someone's identity that encompasses all minoritized statuses (i.e., race, disability, and gender) (Crenshaw, 1990; Shaw et al., 2012). The law sees discrimination in a single-axis category (i.e., racism or sexism), which ultimately isolates one identity over another to define the experience as an "either/or" instead of an "and" scenario.

In addition, participants stated the burden is put on them to disclose their disability and ask for accommodations, which adds one more thing for them to navigate while trying to adjust to the work environment. Participants discussed how they were already marginalized for their race and gender identity and adding one more thing, their disability, to navigate in the workplace is exhausting and potentially a red flag for employers (Ameri et al., 2018).

Research by Mullin and colleagues (2021) found similar findings—that race influences the types of discrimination people with disabilities experience and the ways in which they make use of employment rights. For example, in Shaw and colleagues' research (2012), being a racial or ethnic minority and a woman increased the risk of experiencing disability harassment at work. They go on to highlight that White men with physical disabilities had the lowest rate of disability-based harassment. Another example of experiencing the labor market differently can be found in Quillian and colleagues' study (2017) in which applicants who were White with disabilities received 53% more callbacks than non-White applicants with disabilities.

Further, participants talked about not wanting to be any more different, referring to their race and gender identity, and not believing it would make things easier in the workplace for them to disclose their disability. As such, participants did not feel the need to disclose their disability until absolutely unavoidable. And even then, participants sought to find work-arounds. One example of this was during the pandemic when there was a shortage of medications for one participant. The participant used time off for "medical reasons" as a strategy around informing her employer.

Always an Outsider

Lastly, an important and valuable finding highlights the concept of people with disabilities not being a monolith and at the same time not feeling a sense of belonging to any of their communities. For participants, being a POC with a disability felt like they were "living on the outskirts" of several communities, not fully submerging in any one. In addition, many participants felt that not fitting the typical stereotype of the communities to which they belonged reduced their ability to identify with any group fully and made acceptance by the group(s) challenging (Olkin et al., 2019). This occurrence has been termed "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). This conceptualization of intersectionality posits that people with multiple intersecting identities from marginalized backgrounds experience intersectional invisibility because they are not prototypical of either (or all) group(s) of which they are a member, thus rendering them "invisible" and leading to consequences such as isolation, marginalization, and disempowerment (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

This concept can also be seen in my study's findings. For example, one participant discussed how people think that Asians and Chinese are "all good at math" and "all very hard workers," but as a Chinese adoptee with learning disabilities living in the United States, she "needs different things." Again, using DisCrit as a lens to examine the participant's experience, the myth of the "model minority" stereotype is colluding with the views of people with disabilities (Poon-McBrayer, 2011).

The participant's narrative highlights the juxtaposition many racialized and minoritized people with disabilities face in navigating society, which pigeonholes them to one or the other perceived ideological and socially constructed views. Even when stereotypes are perceived as positive (i.e., model minority), they reinforce essentialist thinking and cause harm, especially to those who do not fit into the stereotype(s).

Recommendations

Many times, recommendations focus on changing the individual's or community's behaviors or actions in order to solve social inequality. DisCrit and disability justice allow us as researchers, policy makers, and service providers to shift our focus away from the individual level and onto the systems that reinforce oppression, discrimination, and prejudice. People with disabilities are complete and whole people living full lives despite the many systemic challenges they face. They do not need to be fixed or changed to fit an ideal of normalcy that is embedded in the American psyche. Rather, institutions should be the focal point of change because they were built to keep a hierarchy of racial, gender, and economic status quo.

Employment systems need to be examined at the systemic level using an intersectional lens. This systemic examination allows us to see the interconnectedness of discriminatory policies that impact employment for minoritized disability communities, such as housing policies that are enmeshed with schooling options, which are, in turn, entwined with restricted opportunities for employment. Policies created to address employment outcomes for people with disabilities like Employment First (Kiernan, 2011) are not sufficient to address employment outcomes because they are solely focused on disability discrimination and centered on the individual's ability to change for the purpose of being employed.

Employment First is a nationally supported employment model that is used in Oregon. This model and subsequent policy is grounded in a framework which identifies increased productivity, integration, and independence as the desired outcomes of services and supports for adults with developmental disabilities. This framework centers neoliberal values such as individualism, independence, and integration (i.e., assimilation) to build employment opportunities for people with disabilities. With these values of independence, individualism, and assimilation, the system will not change because we are not questioning how these values impact the most minoritized people with disabilities. In order to change the direction of employment experiences and outcomes, these policies need to reexamine the questions/problems they are trying to answer/solve with a critical intersectional lens focused on power and oppression at the systemic level. For example, how do these values honor the individual's/family's culture and sense of belonging at work or in the employment process? How do these values change employers' racial, transphobic, and gender discrimination? How do these values change employer and/or coworker stigma around POC, LGBTQIA+, low income, and people with disabilities? How are these values creating a work environment of inclusion and belonging?

Furthermore, previous research has shown that multiply minoritized people with disabilities experience discrimination at several levels; individual/attitudinal and structural/systemic levels that shape their labor market outcomes as well as wellbeing and daily lived experience (Fuentes, 2024). In other words, structural inequalities affect and connect to the individual and attitudinal experiences of employment.

That being said, policy change is one critical aspect to change, but policy changes alone are insufficient for changing individuals' and institutional mindsets, ideas, and attitudes. In order to shift individual and attitudinal (and eventually structural) discrimination, additional interventions and solutions are needed to address the multiple isms within and beyond the workplace.

Applying a Critical Lens to Employment Models

Disability justice groups like Sins Invalid and more locally in Oregon, Disability Justice Leaders Collaborative, have developed critical frameworks and recommendations for organizations and local and state leaders. In this section, I will discuss the participants' recommendations for employment supports as well as my recommendations for the employment system based on previous work of Sins Invalid, Oregon's Disability Justice Leaders Collaborative, and the many disability scholars and activists that came before me.

Participants' Recommendations

After completing the interview questions with each of the participants, I asked participants two questions related to recommendations they had to improve employment services and supports. Those questions were: 1) Who or what has helped or supported you in your job experience? and 2) Based on your experiences, what ideas do you have to help improve work experiences for others like you?

Participants discussed several areas for improvements and recommendations. These areas include advice for employers, advice for employees, and supports they wish they had received in their employment and hope to see in the future.

Interview Process: Advice for Employers. One participant who identified as a multiracial autistic person with other disabilities had multiple concrete ways for future employers to make the job application and interviewing process more supportive to autistic applicants. They spoke about having "an interview process that is neurodivergent friendly." This meant having a "dedicated time and space for job applications." They also included recommendations such as, "giving applicants the interview questions in advance, clear communication, and steering clear of unspoken social rules" that can be hard for them to interpret. Other suggestions included rewording a job description:

> Applicants that are cishet able-bodied White men apply for jobs they only have 60% of the qualifications for, while marginalized people (be it women, nonbinary folx, POC, etc.) only apply for jobs they have EVERY qualification for. Rewording job descriptions helps embolden people to apply even if the voice in the back of their head (imposter syndrome) says they aren't enough.

In addition to the application process, one participant spoke about including diverse voices during the job interviewing process, "If you're having an interview committee, try and make sure there's at least one other woman/marginalized gender person and one person of color, so that the interviewee has people they can relate to and can see that people like them can succeed in this position."

Rewording job descriptions, having a more inclusive interviewing process, and including minoritized people in the hiring process can encourage people to apply for positions that they previously may not have applied for. Along with suggestions for the interview process, participants also talked about emotional and psychological supports that would promote retention—for themselves and other employees of color with cognitive disabilities. These suggestions are discussed in the next section.

Supports and Advice for Employees. At the individual level, several participants talked about peer support, accommodation supports, and emotional supports. One recommendation was a desire to belong to some type of affinity group, both inside and outside of the workplace, that was made up of people like them (i.e., LGBTQIA+ and POC with disabilities). Participants talked about these groups being a place they could receive emotional support from peers who are having similar experiences. Along with affinity groups, multiple participants mentioned having some type of mentor and/or coach that shared similar identities as them to help them in their employment career.

In terms of suggestions for employees regarding accommodations at work, one participant gave concrete advice for others needing accommodations based on their lived experiences.

> Go to your doctor and have them write a medical accommodation request. Don't even go to your employer. Because the only person [who] is going to know how your brain works is you. So, if I have a job, and I need 5 minutes of quiet time every 30 min, I'm going to go to my doctor, and they are going to write out a full accommodation, stating that [name] needs 5 min every half hour of quiet time, due to the nature of her disability. Your boss and your hiring manager would have

> to come up with an extremely compelling argument on why that wouldn't be reasonable.

Along with suggestions for accommodations and, peer and emotional support, a number of participants stated that working in a place that has wide range of diverse staff helped them feel comfortable being themselves. As one participant mentioned, “I think, having non-White coworkers would be a nice kind of a support. So that we can like lean on each other when things happen. I don't like HR.”

Another participant shared that they access different community groups at their current job for support. “I definitely access work communities at work for inclusiveness and accessibility, and then also diversity. Those are like the top 3 things that are important to me in groups that I identify with.”

Outside of the individual level of support mentioned by participants, one participant discussed the need to diversify the workforce in order to support and create a sense of belonging for employees of color with disabilities and other minoritized statuses.

Hiring and Retention: Advice for Employers. One structural recommendation mentioned by a participant was increasing the diversity of the workforce. This participant spoke about making the workforce more diverse in order to make POC and other minoritized employees feel supported as well as retaining employees of color longer. At the same time, the participant stated that if employers do increase diversity, they should plan on creating spaces for those employees like affinity type groups to build community and mutual support.

> Please hire a more diverse workforce, no matter what it takes. You know you should. That should be your number one priority, so that we at least have a chance

> to, you know, have a diverse workforce. But then if we did have a diverse workforce, I feel like we would need, you know, as much support as possible for work groups or support groups, so that we can retain those employees because I've definitely left positions where I feel uncomfortable and I feel like if I would have had those work groups, or if I would have seen other people of color working or had a support group, I would have stayed. And maybe I would have a [position] sooner so, and it would have been better for me in my career, and it would have been better for them.

Participants' experiences highlight the importance of diverse and inclusive workplaces for employees of color with disabilities and other minoritized statuses. Employers should prioritize hiring a more diverse workforce and provide necessary support like work groups and support groups to ensure a more inclusive and supportive environment. But increasing racial, gender, disability diversity in the workforce alone will not build a culture of inclusion or belonging. In order to create an inclusive workplace, employers will need to understand why it is important to create a diverse workforce and how to do it. In conjunction with the participants' recommendations, I have drafted further recommendations for reconceptualizing employment systems.

Study Recommendations

My recommendations are drawn from my study participants' recommendations, my professional experiences, and the many disability activists and scholars whose work I have studied over the last few years. In alignment with the tenets of DisCrit and the principles of disability justice (Sins Invalid, 2019), one of the most important steps for employment services to take is to center the voices of the most impacted, which are POC, low income, and LGBTQIA+ people with CD disabilities. There are many ways to do this, and it will depend on an organization's level of readiness. Before an organization begins any of this work, there are several important questions for organizational leaders to consider: 1) Do you think this work is necessary? 2) Why do you think this work is important? 3) Are you willing and committed to doing this hard and never-ending work? and 4) Are you willing to continuously question the status quo and business as usual mindsets?

It is important to remember that this work is not to be done as a siloed endeavor within an organization. Systems change work cannot be done in isolation and without the people and communities at the center of the work's purpose. In other words, creating employment supports that are rooted in DisCrit tenets and/or other social justice values cannot be done as a separate project siloed off from all the other work happening in the organization. This work needs to be part of every level (individual, group, structural) and every part of the organization. This work requires a multipronged approach, starting internally with the organizational culture, which is influenced partially by its policies, procedures, and trainings. Internal organizational work is the starting point, but it is not the only work. Planning for the implications on external services, communities, partnerships, and advocacy are also crucial.

Recommendations for employment systems include the acknowledgment and incorporation of the 10 principles of disability justice (Sins Invalid, 2019). These principles include intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist politic and commitment to cross movement organizing, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation. Organizations can use these principles as a guide to help shift the organizational culture and change the status quo mentality that centers dominant mainstream disability narratives. Below are examples of three of the disability justice principles, their definitions, and ways to put them into action. My main recommendation comes in the form of questions and reflections.

Intersectionality

Disability justice describes intersectionality as follows:

> knowing that each person has multiple community identifications, and that each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression; the fulcrums of oppression shift depending upon the characteristics of any given institutional or interpersonal interaction; the very understanding of disability experience itself being shaped by race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization and more (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 23).

Using intersectionality to shift the way employment systems support consumers is a key component to challenging the status quo. For example, instead of building programs and services to change individuals with disabilities, leaders can take a structural/systemic approach and examine the structural factors that hinder or support individuals in their employment experiences when planning for improvements. In other words, when using an intersectional approach to improve services and programs, leaders will ask different questions because they will be solving different problems. For instance, instead of asking, “How can we train or mold service users to fit into this potential employment setting?” We might ask, “How do racism and/or other forms of oppression impact users of the program/service? Who/what communities is this intervention or program currently benefiting and who is missing?" These questions reflect a new way of thinking. Along with asking different questions to solve different problems, leaders in organizations should ideally understand who is missing from the conversation. Multiply minoritized people with disabilities—who live and work in dominant systems—should be centered in this work. This leads us to the next principle: leadership of the most impacted.

Leadership of the Most Impacted

This principle states that individuals' and communities' experiences and understanding of ableism are shaped by the context of other historical systemic oppressions. Therefore, systems change and improvements should be led by those who most know these systems (Saia et al., 2023; Sins Invalid, 2019). One concrete way to apply this principle to an organization is to create and formalize ways for POC and people from low income and LGBTQIA+ communities to have a central role in the formation of services and programs. This can be accomplished by holding biannual listening sessions or creating advisory councils. These sessions or groups should be predominantly POC, low income, and LGBTQIA+ people with disabilities. Information gathered by these groups should be accompanied by co-constructed action plans. Organizations should be ready to circle back to the community about how the information is being used and how it is going to be implemented and communicated back to the community. These groups should always be compensated for their time and labor. Disability justice takes a collective effort and responsibility. Just as POC are not a monolith, people with disabilities are not a monolith. Ensuring cross-disability movement solidarity is essential to moving this work forward.

Cross-Disability Movement Solidarity

The principle of cross-disability movement solidarity describes valuing and honoring the insights and participation of all community members and therefore being committed to breaking down ableist, patriarchal, racist, classed isolation between people. Isolation ultimately undermines collective liberation (Sins Invalid, 2019). Concretely, this principle describes building relationships not just internally within an organization but across organizations, communities, and spaces. The spirit of this principle inspires organizations to build relationships first, not because an organization wants something (i.e., transactional). Within this principle, there is a commitment to understanding and creating a strong network of support between an organization and the communities and partners with which it works. This work is critical to earning and receiving trust (i.e., relational).

Putting these values into action may include partnering with other disability organizations, culturally specific organizations, and/or advocacy groups to share knowledge or leverage resources as well as supporting and showing up for each other's community events. In order to start changing the way employment services support people with disabilities, there needs to be a firm commitment to shifting paradigms away from resource scarcity (i.e., hoarding resources) to resource abundance (i.e., sharing and/or redistributing resources) by those who hold the power in the organization.

Lastly, DisCrit and disability justice allows researchers, policy makers, and service providers to shift their focus away from individual behaviors and actions and turn their attention to addressing the systems that reinforce oppression, discrimination, and prejudice. Additionally, these frameworks center and take the lead from the people most impacted by the systems of oppression. By examining the systemic and structural levels of discrimination, centering the voices of those most impacted, and implementing and/or envisioning new interventions and solutions, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable workplace, which embodies a sense of belonging for all individuals with disabilities.

Implications for Future Research

The hazard for research operating with a singular view of the world is that it runs the risk of completely overlooking the needs of a segment of the population it intends to serve (or represent). As Bell (2006) quotes Ann ‘du Cille’s: “[O]ne of the dangers of standing at an intersection . . . is the likelihood of being run over” (p. 593).

Disability and race are deeply rooted in the construction of the United States’ ideology and social structures. Throughout U.S. history, systemic structures like immigration laws, slavery, and genocide of Indigenous peoples have dehumanized and excluded minoritized people and people with disabilities. This history has created structural barriers and conditions that limit economic opportunities and safe environments for minoritized people with disabilities to live and work. It is imperative that disability research uses frameworks that incorporate critical theories such as DisCrit to truly understand the needs of people with disabilities.

If disability research continues to use a single-axis view, it will further marginalize and/or erase the experiences of minoritized people with CD. As Bell (2006) states, “When you come across a non-White disabled person, and solely focus on the disability, you elide their race and ethnicity, letting them be run over, and forgotten” (p. 278).

Future research on disability and employment should take an intersectional and community-based approach that incorporates the voices of those at the margins, not just their representatives and not just White heterosexual middle-class people. Research participants need to include racialized and other minoritized people with disabilities (e.g., low-income, gender minority, LGBTQIA+). There is a false mainstream narrative that puts the blame on minoritized communities for not participating in research studies because of their mistrust of the research process. Examples of such research narratives are that certain populations are too small and too difficult to capture in research studies; this has been used for decades as an excuse to not include racialized and other minoritized communities in research. Instead, researchers should examine and change the underlying problem(s) in research practices and institutions.

As Gilmore-Bykovskyi and colleagues (2022) assert, "This narrative is one of many deceptively nuanced manifestations of racialized hegemonies that prioritize access to collective social processes, such as research, for White populations as a preferential and referent norm (Boyd et al., 2020; Portacolone et al., 2020; Scharff et al., 2010). This hegemony problematizes rather than engages diverse values and needs of minoritized populations" (p. 714).

Without including the participants who have lived experience in the research process, employment and disability services systems will continue to create interventions and programs that only help the privileged few, leaving minoritized people with disabilities on the outskirts. For example, the participants in this study shared their recommendations for improving the supports they need inside and outside of the workplace that are currently not available. Participants were able to express their needs and ideas of how to improve supports. Participants discussed supports in the form of affinity groups that reflect their identities, mentors and coaches who reflect their identities, and advocates in the workplace to help navigate conversations around their needs.

Future research needs to examine the efficacy of such supports in recruiting and retaining people of color with CD and in changing the organizational culture of the workplace. Listening to and acting on what participants express directly about their needs is essential for future research to explore in disability and employment literature.

Implications for the Field of Social Work

Demographics of the U.S. population have shifted over the last few decades and will continue to shift towards an increasingly non-White, gender-diverse, and aging population that will have or gain disabilities throughout their lifetime. At the same time, there is an increasing economic inequality for many communities, especially racialized and other minoritized groups, both in wages and employment opportunities. People with CD are in all communities and will show up in every social work service setting. Despite this, social work education has not adapted its curricula to embed disability content with other discourses, including social justice.

The field of social work needs to adapt to the changing demographics and the rising social consciousness of the population by creating curricula that reflect the complex world we live in. It is crucial that the field of social work starts using frameworks that include critical theories and analysis (i.e., critical race theory, DisCrit) in order to adequately understand and try to solve social problems.

Many social work programs have limited disability-specific content, and some do not have any disability content at all (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020). In addition, very few offer field placements and certificates focused on disabilities (Council on Social Work Education, 2016). As some scholars have argued, this may be because the ideologies underlying many of social work's traditional spaces and traditional practices often fail to take disability into account (Kim & Sellmaier, 2020). One clear example is absence of disability from the current social work efforts like the National Association of Social Workers' Social Justice Priorities Equity and Inclusion 2018–2019 (National Association of Social Workers, 2018).

Lastly, previous research has shown that approximately 37% of schools of social work include disability content in their curriculum (Laws et al., 2010). Needless to say, disability content in social work education needs improvement, beginning with making it a foundational topic in social work curricula that crosscuts all areas of practice.

Limitations

Like all studies, this study has a number of limitations. This study did not focus specifically on one field of employment (i.e., service industry, professional, blue collar). Different fields of employment could have different barriers and facilitators. Additionally, as stated previously, POC with disabilities are not a monolithic group; therefore, this study does not capture all lived experiences of women and nonbinary POC with CD. Another study limitation is that the study participants all lived and worked in Oregon. Oregon is a state set in the Pacific Northwest and has its own unique history and culture.

For example, Oregon is a predominantly White state because it historically banned Black people and other racial minorities from living in the state through exclusionary laws in the mid-1800s (Nokes, 2023). This history has contributed to Oregon's racial demographic being predominantly White, although that is changing (Office of Economic Analysis Department of Administrative Services State of Oregon, 2019). Therefore, participants in other more racially, culturally, or ethnically diverse states may have different or unique experiences.

Furthermore, immigration, citizenship, and/or refugee status may create barriers to employment due to limited work options and other forms of stigma like xenophobia, which could add more complexity to discrimination and other challenges. Lastly, this study only interviewed English-speaking participants. POC with CD who speak languages other than English may encounter different and/or other barriers and facilitators in employment not captured in this study.

Conclusion

This dissertation focused on the experiences of discrimination that women of color and nonbinary POC with CD encounter within the labor market and the ways in which they navigate those experiences. Although scholars have shown connections between race, gender, and disability in different areas of employment (e.g., employment outcomes, employment preparation), there is still a dearth of research that explores and examines how race, disability, and other minoritized statuses create unique experiences and perspectives in employment. Without using an intersectional and/or critical framework in disability and employment research, we will miss the opportunity to create more robust supports and services that could minimize discrimination and contribute to true inclusion in the workplace.

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Appendix A: Advisory Group Meeting 1 Agenda

Dissertation Advisory Workgroup Agenda Meeting #1		December 1, 2023; Zoom; 5pm		
Agenda	Discussion	Tasks/Conclusion	Responsible	Time
Welcome	Welcome and wait for folks to join.	**Can I record this meeting for transcription purposes only?** I will keep it confidential and delete once I've transcribed for notes.	Laura	5 minutes
Introductions & Ice Breaker	Name (what you like to be called), pronouns (optional), why are you interested in this study, and position/role. *What is bringing you joy today? Or what has helped you find joy on bad days?*	Go around and introduce ourselves.	Group	15 minutes
Purpose & Goal	Purpose of workgroup and goals of the dissertation project		Laura	5 minutes
Group Agreements	How do we want to work with each other?	Jam board / white board	Laura/Group	10 minutes
BREAK	Turn off the camera and take a quick break.	Take a break	Group	3 minutes
Review Proposed Interview Questions	**Purpose**: Key purpose of the interview. **Questions for small group discussion:** Highlight the most important questions. What am I missing that I need to add? What questions could be cut? **Large group debrief:** Have one person be the spokesperson to share out to the large group. **Note takers for the groups for each group**	Break out rooms for discussion. Come back for a large group debrief.	Laura/Group	5 minutes (purpose) 25 minutes (small group) 10 minutes (large group)
Recruitment	Each member thinks about individuals who might be interested in interviewing, and/or places to post flyer and recruitment materials.	Brief discussion	Group	7 minutes

Dissertation Advisory Workgroup Agenda Meeting #1		December 1, 2023; Zoom; 5pm		
Agenda	Discussion	Tasks/Conclusion	Responsible	Time
Wrap-up & review next steps	Summary of what was discussed today. Next steps for and communication for the group.	Summary of what was done today and follow-up steps and tasks.	Laura	5 minutes
Meeting adjourned at: 6:45pm				

Appendix B: Advisory Group Meeting 2 Agenda

Dissertation Advisory Workgroup Agenda Meeting #2		January 10, 2024; Zoom; 4pm	
Agenda	**Discussion**	**Tasks/Conclusion**	**Time**
Welcome	Welcome and wait for folks to join.	**Can I record this meeting for transcription purposes only?** I will keep it confidential and delete once I've transcribed for notes.	1 minutes
Introductions	Name, pronouns (optional), and position/role.	Go around and introduce ourselves.	5 minutes
Role of the Group	Purpose of workgroup for today	Any questions?	2 minutes
Research Questions & Purpose	Brief overview of research questions the study is trying to answer and purpose of the study.	N/a	2 minutes
Presentation of Interview Findings	4 Main Themes & Recommendations from participants	N/a	25 minutes
Comments/ Feedback	If you have more comments/feedback about the findings please complete this quick survey. Here's the link:		15 minutes
Meeting adjourned at: 5pm			

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

Interested in sharing your story about working or looking for work?

Eligibility

- Want to share your experience about looking for work & working
- Identify as a woman of color or non-binary person of color
- 18 years old or older
- Identify as having an intellectual disability (Down Syndrome, learning disability, etc.)

Interviews

- One-on-one interview (a parent, provider, or a friend can be with you)
- Interviews are 1 hour long
- **Get a $40 Starbucks, Amazon, or Target gift card**
- You can do the interview over video, phone, or in-person
- What you say will be private and confidential

For more information contact Laura Rodriguez, doctoral candidate at Portland State University: email rodrig29@pdx.edu or call / text (971) 264-1257

Approved study by Portland State University/IRB # 227854-18

Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire **Participant First Name:**______________________ **Participant Assigned ID #:**____________________ *(For student researcher use only)*	
1. What is your name?	Researcher Notes/Comments
2. **How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?** ***(check all that apply)*** ● Black/African American ● American Indian/Alaskan Native ● Asian/Pacific Islander ● White ● Middle Eastern ● Multiracial ● Latino/a/Latinx ● Another (describe):_________	
3. How do you identify your gender? ● Male ● Female ● Nonbinary ● Gender Fluid ● Transgender ● Another (describe):____________ ● Do Not Want to Disclose	

4. What pronouns do you use? ***(check all that apply)*** ● She/Her/Hers ● He/Him/His ● They/Them/Theirs ● Another (describe):___________ ● Do Not Want to Answer	
5. How do you describe your sexuality? ● Gay or lesbian ● Straight/Hetero ● Asexual ● Bisexual ● Pansexual ● Questioning ● No label ● Another (describe):____________ ● Do Not Want to Answer	
6. How old are you? ● **18-24** ● **25-39** ● **40-60** ● **60 or over**	

7. Where do you live: ● Group Home ● Family Home ● Own your own (apartment or home) ● Another (describe):__________	
8. Have you used any type of employment service? ● **Vocational Rehabilitation** ● **Aging and Disability Services** ● **Employment First** ● Another (describe)**:** ______________________	
Additional Notes	

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Interview Protocol Guide

Opening Interview: *Hi, my name is Laura Rodriguez. Thank you for talking with me today. Before we start, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a Portland State University student in the school of social work. I'm Latina and daughter of immigrants. When I'm not working, I like to hike with my dog and watch detective movies.*

Today I would like to have a conversation with you and hear about your experience seeking work, especially as a woman/nonbinary person of color with intellectual disabilities. There are no RIGHT or WRONG answers. This is a safe space. If there are any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, let me know or give me a signal (like raising your hand) and we will skip the question. We can also stop the interview at any time. It is okay to ask questions. Please let me know if there's anything you are unclear about. The interview will take about an hour. I will be audio (or voice) recording the interview for note taking purposes only.

Consenting

Do I have your permission to start recording the interview?

Domain 1: Rapport Building

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
    a. Who do you live with?
        i. Who's important to you?
    b. What do you like to do for fun (art, sports, video games)?
    c. What communities are you a part of or belong to?
        i. Prompt: This could be cultural, LGBTQA+, religious, racial (White, Black, Latino), ethnic, disability, sports, other. **(Visuals if needed)**

***Check-in: how are you doing?**

Domain 2: Defining Employment

2. Is having a job important to you?
    a. What does it mean to you?
    b. Prompt: Who talked to you about work growing up? (Parents, teachers, providers, siblings)
        i. What did they tell you about work?
3. Why do you want to work?
    a. Prompt: Examples, to earn money, be independent, feel involved in the community.

***Check-in: how are you doing?**

Domain 3: Dream Job

4. What is your dream job?
    a. Why is this your dream job?
    b. Have you tried to get your dream job?
        i. YES: How did it go?
        ii. NO: What happened?

Domain 4: Employment History

5. Have you ever had a (paid) job?
    a. **If yes, currently working.**
        i. Where are you working right now?
        ii. What do you do at work?
        iii. Do you like your job? Why or Why not?
    b. **If yes,** what was your job(s)?
        i. Did you like it? Why?
        ii. How did you get it? Or hear about it?
        iii. Why didn't you stay at your job?
    c. **If not**, have you tried getting a job(s)?
        i. Why do you think you didn't get a job?
        ii. What things do you think stop you from getting a job?
            1. Prompt: examples- transportation, filling out an application or cover letter, etc.

Domain 5: Social Identity & Discrimination

6. I'd like to ask you about how you see yourself. **(REFER to answer of 1c)** When I say social identity, I mean how you identify yourself. For example, I'm Latina because my parents are from Cuba, a Latin American country in the Caribbean.

7. Thinking about your experiences looking for work (or at work), do you think you have been treated differently/unfairly/bad because of the identities we just talked about?
    a. How has your race, ethnicity, gender, and/or disability affected your experience? In what ways (e.g. good or bad)?

***Check-in: how are you doing?**

Domain 6: Supports or Services

8. Who/What has helped or supported you in the job process?
    a. Prompt: family, teachers, friends, case manager, service coordinator, voc rehab, job developers?
    b. How have they supported you? (Example: through their network or connections)
    c. What supports did you not get that you needed or would have been helpful?

    d. What supports would have helped or made it easier?

9. What has helped you be successful in your job or in looking for work?

Domain 7: Recommendations

10. Based on your personal experiences and everything we talked about, I would like to know what ideas you have to help improve work experiences for people like you?
    a. What can help other people like you get a job?

11. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience with work that we didn't talk about today

Appendix F: Assessing Understanding Guidelines

To determine the extent to which participants understand the study information, I used the developed guidelines by Horner-Johnson and Bailey (2013). The guideline questions captured information in four key areas: 1) the participants' capacity to understand the project's goal and purpose, 2) the participants' understanding of their own participation related to the research, 3) the capacity of the participants to understand the available options, and 4) participants' capacity to communicate their choice about their participation in the research. The questions were:

1. Please tell me in your own words; what is this study about?
2. What will you be doing if you take part in this study?
3. What are the risks of being in this study?
4. When I say your taking part is completely voluntary, what does that mean to you?
5. When I say that your answers will be kept confidential/private, what does that mean to you?
6. What can you do if you start the study but do not want to finish it?

A correct answer was determined by the participants' ability to paraphrase the study information using their own words. Where there was doubt about the participants' answers, I erred on the side of caution and tagged the question and the answer as insufficient, meaning the participant did not fully understand. Participants who were unable to answer any of the questions after two attempts were excluded from the study. Participants who were not eligible for the study were thanked for their time and still received a gift card for their time.

Appendix G: Consent Form

Portland State UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in Research (No Signature)

Project Title: Employment experiences of women/nonbinary people of color with cognitive disabilities

Population: Women/nonbinary people with cognitive disabilities

Researcher: Laura Rodriguez & Dr. Stephanie Bryson, PhD, School of Social Work Portland State University

Researcher Contact: rodrig29@pdx.edu; sbryson@pdx.edu; Phone: (503)725-5004

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below shows the main facts you need to know about this research for you to think about when making a decision about if you want to join in. Carefully look over the information in this form and ask questions about anything you do not understand before you make your decision.

Key Information for You to Consider
● **Willing to be part of the study**. You are being asked to be part of a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to be involved or not. Nothing bad will happen if you choose not to join or decide to stop. ● **Purpose of the study**. The reason for doing this study is to hear your experiences of unfairness as a women/ nonbinary people of color with intellectual disability when seeking work. ● **How much time?** You will be part of a 1-hour interview. There may be a second follow-up interview to get more information that the researcher could not get from the first interview. This second interview will be 30 minutes long. ● **What will happen in the study?** You will take part in a one-hour interview. This can be over video, or in-person (whichever you choose). In the interview you will share your thoughts and experiences about looking for work. You may need to do a follow-up interview to answer any questions that could not be answered in the first interview. This 2nd interview will be 30 minutes and the interview can be done over video or in-person. ● **Chance of danger.** This study has no major dangers to you. However, you might feel uncomfortable with some of the questions you are asked. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you can choose to not answer it or end the interview at any time. ● **Good part of being part of the study**. You will receive a $40 gift card as a "thank you" for doing the interview and you will share your experience with other people.

- **Options for you.** It is up to you on whether or not you want to be part of the study, and it is private, meaning I will not tell anyone your name or information. If you do not want to take part in the study, you do not have to. You can stop the interview at any time.

What happens to the information collected?

Information collected from you for this research will be used to identify successes and challenges in seeking employment. Interviews will be held in a private, confidential location. With permission, interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder or Zoom. The audio/video file will be transferred to a password-protected computer immediately after the interview (before the Investigator leaves the site) and will be saved to a password-protected folder on the computer. In addition, interviews will be transcribed as soon as possible after they take place. Only the Investigators will have access to the transcribed interviews and to the audio files. No identifying information will be included in the transcripts. Interview transcripts will be assigned a code that will be kept separately from the audio file. Audio files and the code list will be destroyed 3 years following completion of the study

How will I and my information be protected?

I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Your name or any identifiable information will not be used in any published reports about this study. Interviews will be identified by participant number or using a fake name (or pseudonym) to protect your confidentiality. No identifying information regarding your employment history or staff members of agencies you use will be shared. If agencies are referenced in publications/presentations, they will only be referenced by the type of site such as "non-profit" or "state agency". Despite taking every step to protect your privacy, I cannot fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected.

Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information. These individuals include the Institutional Review Board that reviewed this research.

What if I want to stop being in this research?

You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to join in any study activity or completely stop your participation at any point without penalty or loss of benefits you would otherwise get. Your decision whether or not to take part in research will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There is no cost to taking part in this research, beyond your time.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

You will receive a $40.00 gift card upon completion of each interview as a "thank you" for your time.

Who can answer my questions about this research?

If you have questions or concerns, contact the research team at:

Dr. Stephanie Bryson
(503)725-5004
sbryson@pdx.edu

Who can I speak to about my rights as a research participant?

The Portland State University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of the people who take part in research are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office at Portland State University that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights, or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Office of Research Integrity
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
Phone: (503) 725-5484
Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400
Email: psuirb@pdx.edu

Consent Statement

I have had the chance to read and think about the information in this form. I have asked any questions I have, and I can make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions anytime while I take part in the research.

☐ I agree to take part in this study
☐ I do not agree to take part in this study