

# Crippling Equity and Assessment: Disability as Identity and Culture in the Context of Culturally Responsive Assessment

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Ezekiel Kimball, Jordan Abbott, and Jonique Childs  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) establish an ambitious goal in their occasional paper—*Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment*—namely, the development of “assessment that is mindful of the student populations the institution serves, using language that is appropriate for all students when developing learning outcomes, acknowledging students’ differences in the planning phases of an assessment effort, developing and/or using assessment tools that are appropriate for different students, and being intentional in using assessment results to improve learning for all students” (p. 10). Their model, which ties together disparate elements of the assessment cycle with intentional consideration of students’ unique needs and experiences, calls for administrators, staff, and faculty engaged in the assessment process to view this work as integrally linked to the educational experience writ large. Notably, they make considerable progress in demonstrating the centrality of both culture and identity to assessment processes that have been historically viewed through the seemingly dispassionate lens of positivist social science.

However, despite the many laudable features of Montenegro and Jankowski’s proposed approach to culturally responsive assessment, the occasional paper offers only limited attention to issues of disability or to the experiences of disabled students. In response, we offer a “cripped” reading of their occasional paper—raising questions about how Montenegro and Jankowski’s work might be supplemented by insight from crip theory. Crip theory draws on critical disability and queer theoretical perspectives to understand disabled people’s experiences as cultural products and disability as a cultural identity. Moreover, it both acknowledges that contemporary society normalizes compulsory, cis-heteronormative ablebodiedness and rejects that normalization by envisioning a crippled world wherein queer, disabled experiences have been made accessible as part of normative societal discourses.

# Equity Response

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A crippled reading of Montenegro and Jankowski's occasional paper suggests strategies for designing more inclusive assessment instruments, incorporating an intersectional understanding of a variety of disabled identities (and connected systems of oppression) into thinking about assessment, and reconceptualizing culture to include both disability generally and distinct disabled experiences specifically. Incorporating disability into culturally responsive assessment will both produce better, more inclusive assessment results when disability is not the focus of the assessment and also more robust, more intersectional assessment results when it is. In short, the argument that follows extends rather than contradicts the foundational insights of Montenegro and Jankowski's occasional paper. It does so by noting that disability status and cultural identity cannot readily be separated from one another.

### **Producing Inclusive, Accessible Assessment Instruments and Plans**

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A fundamental tenet of crip theory is all human beings make assumptions about how people's bodies and minds work and most of these assumptions normalize the experiences of ablebodiedness and ablemindedness. These assumptions function as part(s) of oppressive ideological systems that normalize bias in society and by extension within assessment. Critical scholars of disability typically refer to the ideological system that undergirds the erasure of disabled experiences as ableism, and to the active penalization of disabled persons for their disability as disableism. In Montenegro and Jankowski's occasional paper, they directly address neither ableism nor disableism but allude to both. They comment:

Of note is the fallacy referred to as the three musketeers, which is the idea that in order to make a measure equally valid for everyone, everyone completes the same measure—all for one and one for all—as a means to ensure fairness instead of using different measures for different groups. Yet, Sedlacek (1994) argues, “if different groups have different experiences and different ways of presenting their attributes and abilities...it is unlikely that we could develop a single measure or test item that would be equally valid for all” (p. 550); further arguing that there is no need to employ the same measure when what is desired is equity of results, not process. (p. 6)

The false assumption of normalcy advanced by the idea that fairness means that everyone must receive the same test is a form of ableism. It ignores the structural reality of human diversity that roughly a quarter of the people on earth have a diagnosable disability. Meanwhile, the recognition that an accessibility problem exists and might easily be addressed through a variety of instrument development strategies coupled with the active decision not to pursue these strategies is a pernicious form of disableism. We label this conscious decision as particularly pernicious because it is often made under the guise of fiscal or temporal expediency wherein access to a potentially large subset of human beings' experiences is not deemed worth the inconvenience of rendering an instrument accessible.

It is also important to note that latent ableism and disableism in assessment do actively produce bad assessment data. Testing theorists have long noted that instruments with

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systematic error—for example, those that introduce construct irrelevant variance by assuming knowledge not randomly distributed throughout the population—cannot be deemed valid. The bias introduced by a test inaccessible to some or all disabled students or a test unable to capture their experiences meaningfully renders the test unable to describe the entirety of the population. Simply put, accessibility represents not a final check on the reliability of an instrument but rather a fundamental design decision without which all the assessment findings that arise from it are rendered meaningless. Without including assessment data about students with disabilities, institutions simply do not know how students-as-a-whole experience the campus environment.

### Thinking Intersectionally About Disability as Identity

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Crip theory also reminds us that disability is a fundamental part of identity and integral to the experiences of human beings. That is, rather than regarding disability as a medical issue to be corrected through medicine or treatment, crip theorists hold that disability functions as a central organizing feature of people’s lives in the same way that race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, geography, and other markers of social identity do. Montenegro and Jankowski acknowledge as much when they cast disability as part of a constellation of social identities in higher education—including “race, ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc.” (p. 4). They describe Aydin Bal and Audrey Trainor’s work showing the intersection of disability with race, how disability and racial identities are connected with systems of oppression, and how the intersection of these systems of oppression can be magnified by institutional structures (p. 14). Again, this insight is fundamentally consistent with crip theory, which uses critical disability and queer perspectives to conceptualize more fully how normative assumptions about how bodies should look and work invade every facet of people’s lives—including their expressions of sexuality.

A truly culturally responsive approach to assessment would need to incorporate intersectional thinking about disability. That is, assessment activities must both attempt to understand how people with disabilities self-identify and also how those self-identifications help to explain variations in experiences when intersected with other social identities. For example, our prior shared work together has shown that students with disabilities respond to questions about disability status differently when asked about: 1) whether they consider themselves to be a person with a disability; 2) whether they have ever received specific disability diagnoses; 3) whether they had an Individualized Education Program in high school; and 4) whether they experience a functional impairment, activity limitation, or participation restriction in a major life domain. Not only is this measurement question critical to fully understanding the experiences of disabled students, but it is also important to recognize that any one of these responses must be contextualized within the constellation of other identities students hold. DisCrit, which combines critical disability and critical race perspectives, has shown the extent to which people’s experiences of disability are inextricably linked to their racialized experiences (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018). Likewise, studies have often shown how gender

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norms are bound with prevailing assumptions about disability and that economic means offer insulation from some of the negative direct effects of ableism (Connor, Cavendish, Gonzalez, & Jean-Pierre, 2019).

## Reconceptualizing Disability Culture in Culturally Responsive Assessment

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Finally, and most importantly, Montenegro and Jankowski frame their approach to assessment in terms of culture—noting that:

. . . culture should be thought of as: (1) the explicit elements that make people identifiable to a specific group(s) including behaviors, practices, customs, roles, attitudes, appearance, expressions of identity, language, housing region, heritage, race/ethnicity, rituals, religion; (2) the implicit elements that combine a group of people which include their beliefs, values, ethics, gender identity, sexual orientation, common experiences (e.g. military veterans and foster children), social identity; and (3) cognitive elements or the ways that the lived experiences of a group of people affect their acquisition of knowledge, behavior, cognition, communication, expression of knowledge, perceptions of self and others, work ethic, collaboration, and so on. (p. 8-9)

They also note that culture intersects with disability in powerful ways. For example, they describe Cathleen Spinelli’s work showing that “students with cultural and linguistic differences [are] misidentified as learning disabled” (p. 10). However, they fail to note that disability not only is a cultural product itself but can represent a distinct culture. This elision provides a misleading perspective on both disability and culture.

Among major approaches to conceptualizing disability, the most widespread approaches (e.g., social, environmental, human diversity, social justice) all acknowledge that underlying variations in people’s minds and bodies exist but that those variations only become disabling based on the way that society has been organized. That is, when a person utilizes a wheelchair, a mobility impairment becomes disabling only when a building has been designed with steep steps, narrow travel lanes, or an accessway is missing curb cuts. These choices about social organization and the built environment are cultural artifacts. They reflect people’s care or lack thereof about the full inclusion of people with disabilities. Assessment processes are likewise cultural artifacts and would do well to systematically consider disability.

More importantly, however, disability is itself a cultural identity for many people with diagnosable disabilities. For example, many culturally Deaf people would reject the disability label altogether since they would argue that “not hearing” is not a substantive impairment and is a key part of the way that they experience the world. Deaf students occupied Gallaudet University—demanding a “Deaf President Now,” and the culturally Deaf have distinct linguistic, artistic, and political traditions. Likewise, autistic self-advocates have created distinctive means of self-expression, formed

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communities wherein the autistic experience is normalized, and reconfigured what was once thought a negative label to be a part of “neurodiversity” while casting those who are not autistic as simply “neurotypical.” Similar examples are numerous. People with intellectual disabilities have assumed responsibility for their own wellbeing and attend college at increasing rates. Psychiatric survivors now run their own mental health programs via consumer-survivor initiatives. Freestanding museums center the disabled experience. Finally, pan-disability events have included a disability civil rights movement as well as semi-regular marches in most major American cities. In short, every element of the definition of culture can be satisfied by both an aggregate understanding of disability as well as many other identities lumped under the disability umbrella.

## Concluding Thoughts

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Montenegro and Jankowski have established an important way of conceptualizing culturally responsive assessment, an approach that is sorely needed in higher education. Throughout their work, they have offered tantalizing clues as to how disability might be read in or at least read into such a culturally responsive vision for assessment. Throughout this response paper, we have provided a number of points—informed by crip theory—where these connections might be drawn out more explicitly. Doing so will improve assessment—not just for disabled students, but for all the student populations of which disabled students are also a part. As we have noted consistently throughout, disability is a remarkably common feature of human diversity and must therefore be an integral part of any thinking about culturally responsive assessment.

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