

# Disability, race/ethnicity and gender: themes of cultural oppression, acts of individual resistance

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**Abstract** Community psychologists have called for research on human diversity and interactions between individuals and society with a focus on oppression. This study examines learning disabilities as they co-occur with other sociopolitical minority statuses. We examined dominant cultural narratives of and individual responses to learning disability, race/ethnicity and gender identified by low-income men and women of color with learning disabilities. Our qualitative analysis identified cultural narratives that suggest that: (1a) individuals with learning disabilities are perceived as having an illegitimate impairment and being of lower intellectual ability and unworthy; (1b) having an invisible disability facilitates passing as nondisabled, thereby lessening disability discrimination from within racial/ethnic groups; (1c) having a learning disability detracts from positive gender expectations and exacerbates negative ones; and (1d) gender and

racial/ethnic narratives are relevant for individuals with learning disabilities. Our analysis also identified two overarching individual acts of resistance used to thwart internalization of oppressive cultural narratives: (2a) removing self from oppressive environments and (2b) reframing dominant cultural narratives (including discounting the validity of negative messages, using negative narratives for motivation, and engaging in positive self-talk). We discuss findings in relation to extant research and theory and consider implications for research, theory, and practice.

**Keywords** Disability · Sociocultural diversity · Oppression · Self-liberation

## Introduction

Human diversity and the interactions between individuals and society are central tenets of community psychology. Despite their conceptual prominence, community psychologists struggle to fully translate these guiding principles into their research practices (Martin, Lounsbury, & Davidson, 2004; Trickett, 1996). For example, although individuals with disabilities represent approximately 15% of adults living in the U.S. (Weathers, 2005), they are largely unrepresented in community research (Martin et al., 2004). This lack of attention to people with disabilities is surprising given the field's interest in sociopolitical minority groups (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Individuals with disabilities are well-represented among groups with whom community psychologists are concerned: they are more likely to leave school early, be

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involuntarily unemployed, and/or living in poverty (Charlton, 1998; White, 2005). Moreover, disability transcends other social divides as it touches individuals of all races/ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, religions and class strata. Gaining a greater understanding of disability can better enable community researchers to respond to the groups with whom we work and the social problems we seek to ameliorate. A focus on disability can also help community psychologists more fully explore and understand the perceptions and effects of power and oppression in self-society interactions, or how individuals perceive and respond to cultural narratives.

The current research adds to our understanding of disability as an element of human diversity and the role of power in self-society interactions from the perspective of those with firsthand experience. This research presents dominant cultural narratives of learning disability and the interplay of these narratives with those linked to gender and race/ethnicity. We also identify psychological strategies young adults use to self-liberate, or resist the internal incorporation of oppressive cultural narratives (Freire, 2001; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Although this study is exploratory and involves a small number of participants, we provide this initial research to help bridge the gap between our ideals and practices as we consider a contextualized experience of disability with a focus on the interplay between the individual and society. That is, we seek to develop a fuller understanding of the lives of those with disabilities who encounter substantial marginalization related to multiple aspects of their identities. We hope this and related work generates greater interest in and support for the study of disability and the multiple dimensions of diversity within community psychology.

#### Disability as a social construction

The presence of a disability has only recently denoted members of a social group. Traditional frameworks of disability emphasize the medical nature of disability and focus on individual-centered deficits and impairments. Newer paradigms reject a medical framing by redefining disability primarily as a socially construed issue. Under a socioecological model, disability is redefined as a function of an individual's impairment in context; social and structural limitations are stressed as the primary determinants of the experience of having a disability (Brandt & Pope, 1997; Nagi, 1991; Pledger, 2003; Rioux, 1997).

In recent years, a sociopolitical analysis of disability analogous to conceptualizations of social

problems in community psychology has emerged (Dowrick & Keys, 2001). In analyzing discourse, policies, and structures, disability scholars have identified dominant cultural narratives of disability (Linton, 1998; Peters, 2006; Snyder, 2006). Dominant cultural narratives are stories communicated to individuals through socialization channels such as schools and mass media and often convey pejorative stereotypes about sociopolitical minority groups (Rappaport, 2000). The analysis of dominant cultural narratives and their replacement with empowering personal stories and community narratives has helped many oppressed individuals and groups make sense of their experience and work to transform social inequality (Kloos, 2005; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Rappaport, 2000).

Cultural narratives of disability include assumptions that people with disabilities are pathological and incompetent. These analyses reveal that disability has been used to exclude people living with a disability from community life, including neighborhoods, schools, employment and leisure activities. Many individuals with disabilities have been led to feel ashamed to have a disability (Charlton, 1998; Linton, 1998). While these cultural scripts may represent degrees of truth for all people with disabilities, they were derived predominantly from a focus on physical disabilities that were easily identifiable. Other forms of disability may modify these cultural narratives. Individuals with learning disabilities (a group of disorders related to difficulties in acquiring and/or using listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, mathematical, or social skills [Kavanagh & Truss, 1988]) experience a form of disability that is less apparent in many contexts. Individuals with learning disabilities nonetheless encounter skepticism concerning the authenticity of their disability, assumptions of incompetence, and exclusion from social and community life. For example, individuals with learning disabilities are routinely questioned as to whether they use their disability to avoid working hard, often are perceived as less intelligent, and are placed in segregated classrooms (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Kruse, 1998). However, the less visible nature of their disability may allow individuals with learning disabilities to more readily evade being identified as a person with a disability. Similar to light-skinned African-Americans (Hooks, 1995) or closeted sexual minorities (Harper, 2005; Sherry, 2004), individuals with learning disabilities can potentially pass as non-disabled and chose to not openly affiliate with individuals with disabilities. These characteristics of learning disabilities may alter the nature and/or relevance of previously-identified cul-

tural narratives of disability for people living with learning disabilities.

#### Disability narratives in relation to racial/ethnic, gender and class narratives

Capturing people with their sociocultural context intact is a challenging and important task (Trickett, 1996). Without this sociocultural context, it is difficult if not impossible to elucidate the complexity of lived experience, an essential for the kind of situated understanding necessary for building community psychological knowledge and science (Jason et al., 2004). This challenge may be partly responsible for a crucial void in empirical investigations: the lack of significant attention to how other dimensions of human diversity interact with disability to create lived experiences (Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2001; Olkin & Pledger, 2003). While disability scholars have worked to move the discussion of disability to a more prominent position, they have yet to consistently incorporate a concern for the diversity of people with disabilities. Original analyses were largely informed by and directed at White males with physical disabilities (Fine & Asch, 1988; Linton, 1998). Many disciplines, and their parallel social movements, have been slow to address diversity within their group of interest, opting instead to focus on one form of diversity (Hooks, 1995). Focusing on multiple minority statuses may detract from advancing the cause of any one such status (Block et al., 2001). Yet, focusing on a single such status leaves many individuals disconnected from a fuller understanding of their experience and organized movements to address their distinctive concerns (Hooks, 1995). Some essayists have begun to connect the experience of disability with concurrent experiences of ethnicity, gender, and class (c.f., Charlton, 1998; Fine & Asch, 1988; Morris, 1993; Stuart, 1992; Vernon, 1999). However, empirical investigations with a variety of individuals with firsthand experience are largely absent and thus unable to inform our understanding of people in context. We focus herein on disability in relation to race/ethnicity, gender and class given the relative greater attention these intersecting identities have received and their relevance to our research program.

#### Disability and racial/ethnic minorities

Disability scholars have been criticized for their lack of attention to people of color with disabilities (Block et al., 2001; Charlton, 1998). There is considerable debate about the potential interplay between disability

and ethnic minority status, but relatively little is known empirically about their relationship. It is thought that having a disability may isolate people with disabilities from their ethnic/racial group. Likewise, individuals' race/ethnicity may segregate them from people with disabilities. In other words, people of color with disabilities may struggle to affiliate with groups based on either racial/ethnic or disability identification (Stuart, 1992; Vernon, 1999). Ethnic minorities with disabilities, who struggle with discrimination on two fronts, may find it more difficult to overcome negative stereotypes for either of their minority statuses (Block et al., 2001) and/or receive needed social support. This experience may be less true for people with learning disabilities who have a less directly observable form of disability. These individuals may have more choice in their group affiliations as they can more readily conceal the presence of their disability. In fact, disclosure of their disability may continue to isolate them from their ethnic/racial group. Ethnic minorities with learning disabilities may encounter experiences similar to ethnic minority lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) individuals. These individuals sometimes feel forced to choose between affiliating with their racial/ethnic community or the LGBT community. These individuals struggle as they simultaneously experience racism from the LGBT community alongside heterosexism from their racial/ethnic community (Harper, 2005). Disabled LGBT individuals have reported similar experiences (Shakespeare, 1999).

#### Disability and gender

Several female disability scholars have chastised the field for underattending to gender issues among individuals with disabilities (Morris, 1993), much as female African-Americans have noted with the civil rights movement (Hooks, 1995). Recent analyses focused on the experience of physical disabilities have suggested a relationship between cultural narratives of disability and gender. Men with disabilities may be perceived as incomplete men for their failure to live up to the assumption of masculinity as capable and strong. Women with disabilities may receive more conflicting social narratives. Consistent with cultural narratives of femininity, women with disabilities are often perceived as weak and dependent (Morris, 1993). However, unlike non-disabled women, cultural expectations for women with disabilities often exclude sexuality, work of any nature and motherhood. Women with disabilities are thus expected to be unable to fulfill traditional roles of homemaker, wife, employee, or mother (Fine & Asch, 1988; Morris, 1993). However, these rela-

tionships between disability and gender may not be as relevant to individuals with learning disabilities who do not experience the same physical difficulties and who can more readily pass as non-disabled.

### Disability and class

Social class, often identified by current economic resources, is significantly less well understood than either race/ethnicity or gender in relation to disability. In fact, we could not identify any cultural narratives related to disability and class in the extant literature. Equally noteworthy, the two methods of inquiry that we employed in this research suggested a lack of awareness or presence of these narratives and/or a discomfort in discussing them. While no cultural narrative regarding the intersection of class and disability was found, class and financial concerns play an important, albeit somewhat more implicit, role in the lives of low-income ethnic minorities with learning disabilities (McDonald & Keys, 2003). In fact, most people with disabilities are living in poverty (Charlton, 1998), so the implications of social class impact their daily reality. The experience of poverty may exacerbate the already marginalized experience of disability as people with disabilities living in poverty have fewer social and economic resources through which to constructively address any disability-related impairment and/or institutionalized discrimination (Block et al., 2001; Vernon, 1999). While limited financial resources and lower-class standing contribute contextually to the lives of participants in this study, as others have noted (Bond & Keys, 1993; Hooks, 2000), most individuals avoid explicitly addressing class despite its relevance.

Cultural narratives of disability and the intersection of these narratives with those related to race/ethnicity and gender derived from the sociopolitical analysis of literature, film and public policy are helping identify the pejorative ways in which members of these sociopolitical minority groups are popularly conceived of and represented (Peters, 2006; Snyder, 2006). While there is a clear need for data to assess the accuracy and comprehensiveness of these initial analyses, it appears that the experience of disability may further exacerbate already oppressed social identities and detract from advantaged social identities. For many, membership in multiple marginalized groups is an experience of being a minority within a minority or of an existence where one is marginalized even from the margins of society. Questions persist as to how individuals experience multiple layers of marginalization and how a less visible disability may modify these

experiences. For example, are there unique cultural narratives linked to learning disabilities? How does the invisible nature of a learning disability inform experiences related to gender and racial/ethnic group membership?

### Acts of resistance against cultural oppression

Concurrent with our focus on identifying empirically-derived cultural narratives linked to disability, race/ethnicity and gender, we also sought to understand how young adults who belonged to these multiple sociopolitical minority groups responded to these pejorative narratives. In response to oppression, some individuals accept their social position as a natural outcome of their relative lack of worth and hence out of their control (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Ryan, 1971). A second response offers greater hope. The likely presence of overwhelmingly pejorative cultural narratives linked to disability, race/ethnicity and gender suggests that individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups may need to forcefully employ strategies that help them resist incorporating negative messages about their social identities into their self-concepts (Block et al., 2001). Oppression theorists refer to this dynamic as resistance to internalized oppression or ways that individuals build personal resources that contribute to their well-being and help them contest injustice (Harper, 2005; Harper & Schneider, 2003; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003). These acts of resistance represent a psychological form of self-liberation as individuals develop a critical view of their oppression and seek to transform that reality (Freire, 2001). The path to liberation represents a *process* of critical understanding and transformation (Freire, 2001; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Participants herein speak to these issues from their perspective as ethnic minority young adults with learning disabilities from low-income communities.

### Research aims

The present research aims to further the goals of community psychology by expanding its treatment of human diversity and considering the role of power within self-society interactions. We focus on individuals with disabilities as an oft overlooked but prevalent group of adults in the U.S. In particular, we examine the experience of learning disabilities in co-occurrence with other elements of human diversity alongside

individual responses to these experiences. Three questions guided this investigation:

- (1) How are learning disabilities represented in dominant cultural narratives in the lives of young African-Americans and Latinos from low-income neighborhoods?
- (2) How do cultural narratives about learning disabilities interface with narratives related to race/ethnicity and gender in the lives of young African-Americans and Latinos from low-income neighborhoods?
- (3) How do low-income, ethnic minority men and women with learning disabilities respond to cultural narratives about their disabilities?

To develop a nascent understanding of these topics, we conducted an exploratory study based on group and individual interviews with low-income, African-American and Latino men and women with learning disabilities. The role of social class is considered in a limited yet distinctive way, not by comparing participants from different social classes, but by presenting the voices of those from low-income neighborhoods. We are not aware of previous studies that have examined the dominant cultural narratives concerning learning disabilities and individual responses to those narratives by people with learning disabilities. We used a qualitative approach to generate intricate, contextually rich information which preserves the voice of and accords greater power to participants.

## Method

### Setting

This research was conducted with students from two urban community colleges operating within a larger network of a seven-college system. Each college had approximately 6,800 students enrolled in associate degree courses, 75% of whom were from an ethnic minority background. The colleges draw primarily from a large urban public school system in which approximately 85% of students originate from low-income families.

### Participants

We recruited 13 participants through disability services coordinators, faculty, former high school case managers, and posted flyers. Since many individuals with learning disabilities do not pursue postsecondary education and among those who do, many do not readily

disclose their disability and seek related services, we encountered several challenges identifying eligible participants for this study.<sup>1</sup> With one exception, we successfully recruited participants through building trusting, sustained, mutual relationships with key professionals in each college. Six students participated in focus groups and ten students participated in individual interviews; three of these students participated in both a focus group and an individual interview.

All 13 students were taking courses towards a certificate or associate degree at the time of participating in the interviews. Students self-identified as and provided evidence of having a learning disability. Participating students reported a range of specific types of learning disabilities including dyslexia, reading, math, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and non-specific. It is not clear to what extent these forms of learning disabilities represent the range or distribution of students with learning disabilities in these colleges. Three students also reported a second disability: depression, bipolar disorder, and panic and anxiety disorder. Participants had a mean age of 23.6 years (range 19–32). Six participating students were male; four of which were African-American and two were Latino. The remaining seven participating students were female; two of which were African-American and five Latina.<sup>2</sup> Eighty-five percent of participants reported at least one indicator of a low- or limited-family income level (e.g., received free or reduced lunches in high school, and/or currently receiving food stamps, housing assistance, medical insurance or cash subsidies). Five of the students had at least one person in their family with some college experience. One student had a parent with an associate's degree, a second reported a grandmother who had a college degree.

<sup>1</sup> Noteworthy challenges to identifying eligible participants resulted from the invisibility of the group we sought to engage in the research. Individuals choosing to downplay their disability status are less connected to disability support services and not identified as disabled by college instructors and support staff, thereby rendering them difficult to locate and recruit to participate in research. This choice seemed to be employed by many of the younger students. These challenges highlight the need to conduct further research to assess the focal issues across a broader range of individuals. The recruitment success of the current research reflects the efforts of the research and intervention team that provided the organizational basis for this study. Team members spent over two years planning and initiating the implementation of an intervention that enabled us to develop good working relationships with community college staff and faculty who provided direct and indirect support for the very challenging task of recruiting participants for the present study.

<sup>2</sup> The small number of participating Latinos and African-American females further limits the potential of our findings to fully elucidate the societal narratives and acts of resistance relevant for low-income people of color with learning disabilities.

## Researchers

The first author implemented all research activities and met regularly with the other authors to discuss the research. I, the first author, am a White, non-disabled female in my late-20s. I have worked with individuals with disabilities for over eight years. I presented myself to participants as a graduate student interested in understanding the social experience of disability and working towards ending disability discrimination and improving disability services. I worked to create interactions with participants that minimized status differences by sharing honestly the aims of the research, participating in a mutual exchange of information and identifying with our shared role as students, and, as applicable, as a woman. I, the second author, am a White non-disabled male in my late 50s. I have spent over a decade working with people of color with disabilities from low-income communities as part of a research team that includes individuals from these groups. For the last 25 years I have conducted many studies, consultations and training programs on disability issues. I have a number of family members with disabilities including learning disabilities with whom I have discussed disability issues for decades. As the first author conducted her initial reconnaissance and interviews, I encouraged her to explore her social stimulus value for the participants and her evolving perspective on their experiences as members of multiply marginalized groups. I, the third author, am an adult immigrant from Colombia, South America who directs a research unit on advocacy and empowerment for minorities with disabilities and directed the intervention research associated with the current study. I am also the father of a child with a learning disability. As Principal Investigator of the research project, I met regularly with the first and second authors to discuss the development and implementation of this research component.

## Assessment strategies

The current study is a multi-method, exploratory, qualitative analysis based on group and individual interviews aimed at capturing participants' perceptions of and responses to dominant cultural narratives. We conducted these interviews as part of a larger study of participants' postsecondary experience, of which the data reported herein related to self-society interactions are one subset. We developed semi-structured, open-ended interview protocols for both interviews based on relevant literatures and discussions with knowledgeable professionals. The interview protocols included

questions about participants' community college experience (factors that influenced their decisions to attend college, select their program of study, and level of success in college and interactions with peers, faculty, and service providers) along with their own and cultural perspectives on and responses to their disability, race/ethnicity, gender and social class. The focus groups were conducted first as an initial step towards uncovering germane themes, and specific language used to discuss those themes, that could then be explored in greater depth in individual interviews. Based on our preliminary analyses of data from the focus groups, we refined the individual interview protocol to improve the clarity of questions and probe deeper into important themes. We then conducted individual interviews in order to more thoroughly investigate individual perspectives and give voice to individuals with little access to public platforms. Participants in both the focus groups and individual interviews also completed a questionnaire on their degree program, family educational history, living situation, receipt of government subsidies, and current employment.

## Procedure

The first author carried out all procedures, which were approved by our university's Institutional Review Board, under the supervision and support of the other authors. During the reconnaissance phase of this research, we spent approximately eight months at the two colleges building relationships with disability services staff, faculty, and administrators and learning about the community college environment. During this time we recruited students for focus groups and individual interviews and informally assessed the setting.

After three months of our on-going presence in the setting for this pilot study, six students participated in one of two focus groups (each group had three students). We began individual interviews with ten students one month after the focus groups. Students in both the focus group and individuals interviews learned about the purpose and nature of the study, consented to participate and be audio-taped, completed the background information questionnaire and received a \$25 honorarium. Participants in the focus group also received a snack. Both the focus group and individuals interview protocols had possible probes linked to each major question; additional probes were pursued that were salient to the interviewee. Topics that emerged naturally before they appeared in the interview guides were pursued as appropriate. The focus groups lasted approximately two hours each. We created verbatim

transcripts of the focus groups and conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns of response to the research questions (Tesch, 1990). We used these initial findings to further develop the individual interview protocol. Individual interviews lasted between 75 and 180 min, taking on average 2 h.

As individual interviews proceeded, we generated verbatim transcripts and revisited the interview protocol for modifications based on field notes of the interview process, ambiguous or insightful statements, and preliminary interpretations of the data. The dynamic interplay between data gathering and analysis in qualitative research often results in modifications to data collection throughout the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because interviewing is a co-constructed interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), wording modifications and new questions applied only to students whose participation followed these changes. For the individual interviews only, we also checked the integrity of each participant's narrative by mailing transcripts to participants. We succeeded in making phone contact with eight participants for clarifications and reactions. Participants offered updates of their lives and asked questions about what we were doing with the findings of the research; few provided novel information or clarifications. In the absence of researcher-provided accommodations to review their transcripts, some participants may not have been able to thoroughly review their report to best be prepared for the meeting. We were unable to meet with participants to solicit reactions to our overall findings due to participant's challenges in adding additional commitments to their already busy schedule of school, work, and family.

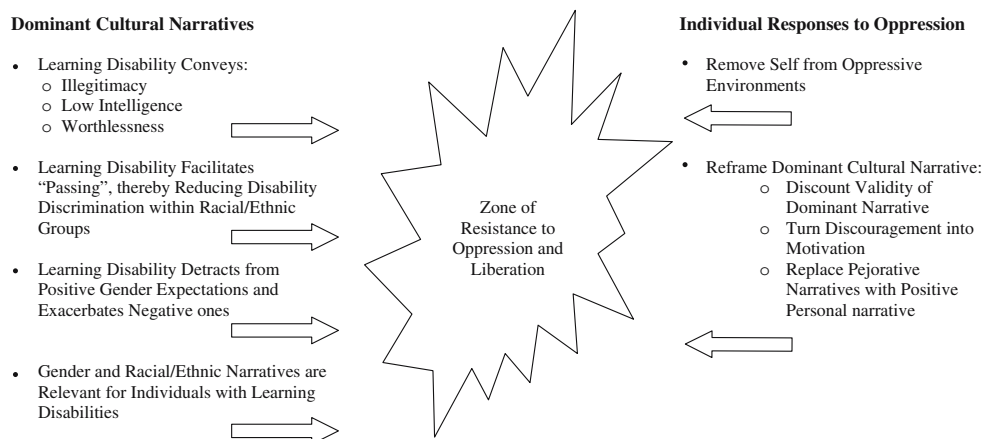
#### Data analysis

Our analytic process was informed by multiple qualitative methodologies including phenomenology (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998; Tesch, 1990) and grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998). Taking a phenomenological approach, we sought to discover the lived experience of participants. Using grounded theory, we used a systematic set of procedures to inductively conceptualize the phenomenon under study and begin to identify a conceptual framework of self-society interactions for low-income, African-American and Latino young adults with learning disabilities. Data analysis and data collection overlapped so as to permit analysis to inform subsequent data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our data analysis included three overarching

steps. First, we identified a general framework for the results using the focus group data that we then further developed using grounded theory strategies. In this second step, we engaged in iterative, three-stage coding process using the individual interview data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998). In open coding, we named and categorized phenomenon by breaking the data into discrete parts, examining it, comparing and contrasting the pieces, and asking questions. We inductively identified concepts in the data and grouped them into categories. We then specified the properties and dimensions of each category. In axial coding, we began making connections between categories and subcategories and creating primary categories. In selective coding, we integrated categories into a grounded theory, or conceptually framed descriptive narrative of the central phenomenon under study. In the third step, we checked the results of the grounded theory analysis with the individual interview data against the focus group data to verify the fit of the emergent framework. As we analyzed the data, we also examined findings across individual and group interviews to bolster confidence in the validity and reliability of our findings (Janesick, 1998).

To assist our insights and interpretations, we engaged in a process of theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). We drew on professional and personal experience and relevant literature, while also maintaining a critical view of our conclusions, in order to sensitize ourselves to the subtle meanings of the data. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and limited numbers of available participants and resources to continue the project, future research will be needed to establish whether we achieved data saturation, or the near exhaustion of novel information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We used inter-rater and temporal reliability to serve as a check to the data-coding process. The first author and an independent coder coded 25% of the transcripts. We identified segments of text that were coded differently as disagreements. Our coding differed in two ways: segments of text that were coded by one coder and not the other and segments of text that were coded with different codes by each coder. We did not include minor variance in length of segment coded as a disagreement. To capture inter-rater agreement beyond chance, we calculated Cohen's Kappa which, at 88% was highly satisfactory (Cohen, 1968). The first author also recoded 20% of the interviews two months after coding was finalized to assess temporal reliability (Foster-Fishman & Keys, 1997). No significant discrepancies were found.

**Fig. 1** Resistance to oppression: individual responses to oppressive cultural narratives



## Findings

We sought to examine dominant cultural narratives of learning disability and the interplay of these narratives in relation to race/ethnicity and gender identified by low-income men and women of color with learning disabilities. We also studied their responses to the negative messages conveyed in these narratives. We identified four themes related to dominant cultural narratives and two themes (one of which has three dimensions) related to individual’s responses to oppressive cultural narratives (see Fig. 1 for a graphical representation of these self-society interactions):

- (1) Dominant Cultural Narratives Related to Disability, Race/Ethnicity and Gender
  - (1a) Learning disability conveys illegitimacy, low intelligence and worthlessness
  - (1b) An invisible disability facilitates “passing”, thereby reducing disability discrimination within racial/ethnic groups
  - (1c) Learning disability detracts from positive gender expectations and exacerbates negative ones
  - (1d) Gender and racial/ethnic narratives are relevant for individuals with learning disabilities
- (2) Individual-level responses to oppressive cultural narratives
  - (2a) Remove self from oppressive environments
  - (2b) Reframe dominant cultural narratives
    - (2bi) Discount validity of dominant narrative
    - (2bii) Turn discouragement into motivation
    - (2biii) Replace pejorative narratives with positive personal narrative

Quotes from the focus group and individuals interviews are provided to illuminate these themes. Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative approach to knowing and the relatively small sample available, these themes are considered an initial statement of relevant concerns for these African-American and Latino/a women and men with learning disabilities from low-income communities.

- (1) Dominant cultural narratives related to disability, race/ethnicity and gender

(1a) *Learning disability conveys illegitimacy, low intelligence, and worthlessness*

Participants identified a range of pejorative messages pervasive in cultural narratives related to having a disability in general and a learning disability more specifically. These narratives represent learning disabilities as an illegitimate condition, an indication of an individuals’ lack of intelligence, a mark of the individual’s differentness, and as a basis for exclusion. These themes convey negative cultural stereotypes about disabilities in general and learning disabilities in particular that are grounded in misperceptions of each. Participants noted the societal messages they received regarding the possible illegitimacy of learning disabilities:

*Samuel*<sup>3</sup>: “Because [my learning disability is] hidden, it’s not physical, some people think, ‘Well, he’s just trying to get by. It’s a game’ ... that [I’m] faking.”

*Charletta*: “They don’t understand this as a learning disability, they think it’s something, like playing a game and it’s not. This is something for real here.”

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect participant’s identity.

*Tamika*: “[They think] that a person with a disability has to be blind or wheelchair bound ... Some teachers say there’s no such thing as a learning disability.”

Public perceptions of disability are of people who use wheelchairs or are blind, readily apparent markings of a disability; these perceptions have not yet expanded to naturally include the array of ways disabilities manifests themselves. The relatively invisible nature of learning disabilities in tandem with widespread misunderstanding of their nature likely helped create cultural narratives that question whether learning disabilities actually exist or whether the label is employed as an excuse to avoid working hard or for poor performance. A few participants evoked “game-playing” metaphors suggesting concern that individuals with learning disabilities may be attempting to manipulate the system and conveys distrust towards these individuals.

Participants reported the following cultural messages that reference the relative intellectual inferiority of individuals with learning disabilities:

*Bernadette*: “Having a learning disability ... sometimes people would assume me not even being able to read or something.”

*Aston*: “[People assume] that I’m a bit slow.”

*Maria*: “They were calling me stupid.”

*Samuel*: “[People with learning disabilities are] slow, stupid ... dumb.”

With substantial frequency, participants reported the societal assumption that disability is synonymous with inability to perform global and/or specific intellectual tasks such as quickly processing, learning or understanding material and reading. However, a learning disability is only applicable to individuals with normal or above normal intellectual abilities; thus comments about low intellect demonstrate a lack of knowledge about learning disabilities.

Participants also identified the cultural narratives that suggest that individuals with learning disabilities are less than fully human and regarded as less worthy of attention, respect and inclusion in community life.

*Tamika*: “Just because I have a disability doesn’t mean I’m not a human ... I bleed the same way you do ... I’m just the same as anybody else.”

*Samuel*: “Disability is still a stigma that society really doesn’t want to deal with.”

*Aston*: “[People] won’t pay that much attention to me.”

*Tamika*: “[Peers] frown up, you know, they don’t want anything to do with me after that. They ig-

nore me, they blow me off ... some staff ... [and] some students ... look at us ... as freaks.”

*Anthony*: “They look at you differently.”

*Charletta*: “We’re nobody to them ...teachers don’t talk to you with respect.”

*Bernadette*: “They exclude you from other kids.”

These statements reveal cultural narratives that suggest ways that having a disability denotes key differences between people with and without disabilities and renders an individual with a disability less fully human than those without disabilities. The differences ascribed to individuals with disabilities are negative and serve as a basis for decreased regard, disrespect, and exclusion. Some participants noted that others overlook that there is a person living with the label of disability; rather they reify the disability so that it overshadows the individual and the humanity we all have in common. As Tamika’s first quote illustrates, she wanted to share the message about the humanity of people with disability. Too often she has experienced “*being blown off*” by others once they know she has a disability.

Societal perceptions of disability are largely negative. Participants noted cultural narratives that question whether learning disabilities exist. Participants routinely reported being perceived as dumb rather than in need of accommodations to acquire and articulate information. These narratives convey that individuals with disabilities are different and use negatively perceived difference as a basis to disregard and shut out individuals with disability.

*(1b) An invisible disability facilitates “passing”, thereby reducing disability discrimination within racial/ethnic groups*

Participants did not explicitly identify any cultural messages about people of color with disabilities that exist either within or outside of their racial/ethnic group that were different from those expressed about individuals with disabilities in general. Furthermore, with one exception, participants reported that their learning disability did not inhibit their connections with their racial/ethnic group; that the within group bond of race/ethnicity was too strong to be overridden by the presence of their disability:

*Charletta*: “[My disability] don’t marginalize me from [my racial group], ‘cause we are the same color here. So [my disability] don’t bother me from here to there.”

A second participant suggested she experiences less discrimination from members of her racial group:

*Tamika:* “Some of my African American instructors seem a little bit more sympathetic with my disability than my White sisters and brothers ... that’s just my experience.”

The less support she notes receiving from Whites may be due to the presence of two negative narratives operating in these interactions (those related to her race and her disability). One participant shared a different experience of his learning disability within his racial group:

*Samuel:* “In my own race I’m discriminated against, too ... I don’t want to sound racist, but I am just saying out of my own, an African-American instructor that I had was the worst one ... She told me I was wasting my time in college. She told me she don’t think I’m qualified. My own race. I could see if that was coming from a White person, then I could say, well that’s racism but ... I don’t feel accepted too much ... We had to fight for civil rights. And I feel like I still have to do that on my own, too, even among my own, among Black people, too.”

Samuel felt that his disability placed barriers between him and other African-Americans; from within his minority racial group, he encountered negative narratives about his disability and was told he was unacceptable. Of all the participants, Samuel had the most developed awareness of oppressive cultural practices and was the most openly identified as an individual with a learning disability. His keen awareness in tandem with his budding identification with principles of the Disability Rights Movement may make him more susceptible to and/or perceptive of subtle discrimination due to his status as a disabled person, or ableism, within his racial group, especially when he does not work actively to hide his disability.

*(1c) Learning disability detracts from positive gender expectations and exacerbates negative ones*

Male and female participants identified negative narratives related to their gender and having a learning disability. While participants of both genders largely agreed on many of these linked narratives across genders, they disagreed about which gender had more negative narratives and consequences of those narratives. Male participants discussed expectations for their gender and how a disability directly challenges those expectations:

*Samuel:* “I have to play a role that I’m able to learn all this material and comprehend every-

thing. I’m supposed to be able to comprehend everything and be strong, and it’s supposed to be easy for me because I’m a man. I’m supposed to be good at math and things like that. But then, obviously I’m not. I feel less than a man ... men are expected to compete. ... Like ‘you should know this stuff’ ... ‘maybe you should try a little harder’. They felt I should know this stuff and pushed me to be more independent ... telling me to be a self-learner”

A few male participants noted that narratives about the inabilities of individuals with disabilities informed narratives that suggested men with learning disabilities cannot live up to gender narratives that emphasize male’s facility with learning and ability to compete with others. Participants’ perceived these characteristics linked to their gender positively. Female participants shared that cultural narratives about disabilities further exacerbated already pejorative narratives about women:

*Tamika:* “Being a female, they take pity on us, because we don’t know ... they expect him to know everything because he’s a man.”

Narratives about women suggest that they are less competent than males. When disability is added, increased assumptions about incompetence are found within these narratives.

While recognizing the narratives linked to both genders, participants of each gender believed the experience of disability was less difficult for the other gender. Males related that females received more help naturally, perhaps due to decreased assumptions about their abilities based on their gender:

*Samuel:* “They were more open toward females ... But when it came down to me, ‘hey, ... You should know this stuff. But they’re more easy when it comes to females.”

*Bryant:* “Harder for a man ... [women] get more help.”

Females, however, did not see this situation as desirable or positive. Female participants did not view positively these increased assumptions about their lesser ability and need to sympathize with their misfortune. These women also felt that people are more willing to assist men with learning disabilities since men may be less likely to seek help of their own accord:

*Charletta:* “More pity for us than for a man.”

*Tamika:* “Some of my ... male classmates with learning disabilities, [my professors] would probably

take that into consideration a little bit more than they do me. Because they think of boys, boys are hard-headed... so they probably look out for them a little bit more than they look out for me.”

Male and female participants experienced the social consequences of having a disability negatively yet differently. For men, the disability seemed to detract from the perceived benefits of their masculinity. For women, the disability often seemed to augment the perceived negative aspects of their femininity. Both genders believed that the experience of disability was easier for the opposite gender. These paradoxical perspectives may not be contradictory: each gender may benefit and be disadvantaged to a degree. Interestingly, only Samuel and Alejandro felt that having a disability made them less acceptable within their own gender. Although other males indicated their learning disability challenged their ability to be “masculine”, they did not explicitly feel excluded by their male peers because of their disability.

*(1d) Gender and racial/ethnic narratives are relevant for individuals with learning disabilities*

Our central foci in this study were to identify disability narratives and the influence of these narratives on gender and racial/ethnic narratives. However, findings also revealed that gender and racial/ethnic narratives were relevant to participants in their own right, distinct from their relationship to learning disability. When asked about their gender and race/ethnicity, participants had distinct insights into how society perceived a particular gender within their racial/ethnic group without explicit reference to their disability. African-American participants expressed a general belief that African-American females are at an advantage relative to African-American males with respect to cultural narratives. As Tamika said,

“African-American men would probably have a little bit more difficulty in society than I do, because ... [of] stereotyping ... They think all [African-American] men sell drugs ... have 15 babies running around the city, they’re not paying child support, they’re lazy, they don’t want to work, they don’t want to do this.”

Samuel added:

“[African-American females] are not as threatening [to society] as me.”

In discussing the rampant stereotypes for African-American females, Tamika further noted:

“they think we got a lot of babies running around and that’s not true either.”

However, she did not feel that this negative stereotype about African-American women was as negative as those about African-American males. Whereas females articulated the negative stereotypes that persist for each gender, males only identified the negative stereotypes for their gender.

In contrast to the less pejorative narratives of African-American females, Latino/a participants noted a general belief that Latinos are at a greater advantage relative to Latinas. The male advantage stems from the pervasiveness of *machismo*, broadly defined as the idea of a man’s right to power, which, while not unique to Latinos/as, is nonetheless a prominent cultural narrative. As Bernadette said:

“In my family being a woman ... it’s not [that] you don’t achieve anything by being a woman. You achieve more by being a male. I think my father looks at my brother, he wants my brother to be the one to succeed and for me to be the, you know, the housewife kind of thing.”

Although there were only two Latino participants, most Latino/a participants voiced opposition to *machismo*. One Latino participant voiced his desire to cross into roles traditionally ascribed exclusively to females (e.g., take on some household responsibilities). Latina participants wanted to be successful, independent women, not simply homemakers.

Participants’ status as individuals with learning disabilities, perhaps due to the less readily apparent nature of their disability, did not decrease the salience of cultural narratives about the status of males and females within their racial/ethnic group without reference to their views of disability.

*(2) Individual-level responses to oppressive cultural narratives*

In response to oppressive cultural narratives about their social identities, participants employed their psychological resources to resist internalizing pejorative messages about their character. Developing proactive strategies to offset the negative effects of belonging to multiply marginalized groups reflects individual resilience, and perhaps in the best situations a potential for thriving, in the presence of oppressive cultural narratives. Participants’ use of individual resistance was demonstrated through four distinct processes, three of which are linked by a shared response of reformulating the pejorative narrative. No participant discussed

belonging to or being active in any larger group or organization that addressed cultural oppression linked to disability, gender and/or race/ethnicity.

*(2a) Remove self from oppressive environments*

One form of individual resistance used by participants was that of physically removing themselves from situations in which they were not being treated respectfully. In these denigrating situations, participants recognized that they neither deserved this type of treatment nor had to remain in its presence, and so did not. As Bryant simply stated his response to peers that were taunting him because of his disability:

“I walked away.”

Or from Anthony and Samuel’s perspectives:

*Anthony:* “I pick and choose carefully the people that I associate myself with”

*Samuel:* “That’s why I left. I dropped the class.”

These participants demonstrated their ability to persevere in the presence of pejorative narratives by working to lessen their direct exposure to it.

*(2b) Reframe dominant cultural narratives*

Other ways participants remained positive was to reconceptualize the validity or effect of the stereotype or replace the cultural narratives with opposing personal narratives. Participants reported three ways of reframing cultural narratives.

*(2bi) Discount validity of dominant narrative.* First, many participants resisted internalizing oppressive narratives by discounting the validity of external evaluations of their abilities. Participants emphasized that other people were not able to tell them or determine for them what they are and are not capable of achieving. Participants felt that they were the sole persons able to make such a determination. As Anthony said,

“Nobody else can tell you, only you can tell yourself what you are going to accomplish.”

Mari further noted:

“Only you are the architect of your life. Only you can shape it. Only you can say what you can or cannot do ... messages around you can lie to you.”

*(2bii) Turn discouragement into motivation.* Participants also shared that they resisted internalized oppression by reversing the intended effect of negative external messages. Instead of receiving these messages and allowing them to reduce their own belief in

themselves, some participants instead used the pejorative narratives as sources of motivation. For these participants, negative messages gave them extra desire to prove to the people who sent those messages, as well as to themselves, their fallacy. Alejandro shared the kinds of assumptions people had made about him because he was a person with a learning disability and the effect these had on him. He stated:

“[Going to college], it’s just something that, as an LD student, when I was in grammar school... that many people, teachers mostly, told me that I won’t get that far. And now I just set my goal to it.”

He refused to permit success-thwarting statements to influence him negatively; instead he motivated himself to demonstrate their inaccuracy. Bernadette used this strategy in response to negative narratives about having a learning disability and also being a Latina. As she stated,

“I think that the way [my father] puts me down in order to not go to school makes me want to go to school. But I think that has created something in me to become something, to prove that theory wrong. To prove, not really that I have to prove that to my dad, but [to] a point I did. But I didn’t get nowhere thinking that way so I felt the one I had to prove is myself ... I think [my learning disability, ethnicity and gender] make me want to prove something, that everybody labels me as, ‘cause I’m Hispanic, I might not accomplish certain things. Or ‘cause I have a learning disability, I’m not going to be somebody in life. Because I’m a woman, I’m not going to be somebody in life.”

*(2biii) Replace pejorative narratives with positive personal narrative.* A final way that participants resisted internalizing oppressive narratives was to replace external negative narrative with internal positive messages. These participants regularly and frequently told themselves that they were indeed capable of succeeding, regardless of what those around them were articulating about their abilities. Charletta shared a daily exercise she used:

“Everyday when I wake up, I just say to myself, you can do it. And you will do it. And when I say something, when I speak it, it always comes into existence.”

Or, as Alejandro simply stated, he tries:

“to think positive”

For these participants, and others, it was critical to believe in their own potential for success. For partici-

pants who did not receive many, or any, positive messages about their potential from others in their lives, this strategy allowed them to nonetheless receive positive messages.

Participants in this study routinely encountered negative assumptions about their capabilities based upon their learning disability, race/ethnicity, and gender. To thwart problematic ramifications of these cultural oppressors, participants developed individual strategies to offset internalizing beliefs about incompetence and reduced self-worth. Although we did not specifically question participants on how they developed these strategies for resilience, it became clear that these emerged over time and were positively influenced by a variety of sources. For some individuals, it was a parent or grandparent that planted an idea of or personally modeled positive possibilities. For others, it was a teacher, friend, or service provider who provided encouragement and believed in the participant's potential.

## Discussion

Conceptualized ecologically, with a focus on self-society interactions, this exploratory study seeks to contribute to our understanding of human diversity. More specifically it seeks to add disability to the dialogue on human diversity and consider the multiple layers of diversity that individuals experience. We investigate self-society interactions in the presence of oppression and present dominant cultural narratives of learning disability, race/ethnicity and gender identified by men and women of color with learning disabilities from low-income families. We describe their strategies to combat the integration of oppressive narratives into their self-concepts. These findings are diagrammed in Fig. 1.

### Placing findings in context

In general, findings were clarifying and informative yet not surprising. With respect to disability, participants discussed perceptions that learning disabilities may not be a legitimate impairment and that people with learning disabilities may be of lower intellectual ability, different and of less value. These themes of disability are similar to those articulated in sociopolitical analysis (Fine & Asch, 1988; Charlton, 1998; Linton, 1998) and these oppressive narratives appear to persist across forms of disability, gender, and racial/ethnic groups. The finding of an apparent decreased emphasis on being perceived as weak due to their disability may be unique to people with learning disabilities, and perhaps

other less visible disabilities. Similarly, individuals with learning disabilities may encounter challenges establishing the legitimacy of their impairment and gaining the trust essential to securing necessary supports and accommodations. These findings highlight the pejorative misperceptions of disability that persist more than a decade after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and some three decades after the beginning of the Disability Rights Movement, the civil rights movement concerned with achieving justice for individuals with disabilities.

Examining the interplay between learning disability and race/ethnicity, the invisibility of learning disability may protect individuals from exclusion from their racial/ethnic communities resulting from disability stigma, lessening the tension between the two. Sociopolitical analyses derived from a focus on physical disability (Stuart, 1992; Vernon, 1999) may have not yet considered how other forms of disability lessen the marginalization of people with disabilities from their racial/ethnic groups. By concealing their disability, individuals with learning disabilities may build connections with their racial/ethnic group, but the choice may entail negative consequences. Among these negative consequences may be the integration of disability shame into their self-concept, rather than disability pride, thereby reducing the individual's ability to develop a positive self-concept that fully incorporates all their personal characteristics. As importantly, in concealing their disability as they mature and not accessing disability-related services, individuals may become disconnected from sources of support for their disability. As African-Americans and Latino/as with less visible disabilities build their identification with the Disability Rights Movement, their disability status may begin to exclude them from their racial/ethnic group as the tension between the two social identities increases. They may also find that their race/ethnicity challenges their ability to secure support within the Disability Rights Movement. Encountering both disability and racial/ethnic discrimination can make it difficult for these individuals to find an accepting group. These findings are consistent with the struggles, fractured identities and weakened social ties identified among many ethnic minority and disabled LGBT individuals (Harper, 2005; Shakespeare, 1999).

Findings largely affirm theoretical postulations about cultural narratives of disability and gender (Morris, 1993). In support of Morris' (1993) views, men felt that their disability prohibited them from living up to society's images about being a man. In partial support of Morris' views, women felt that they received more pity than women without disabilities. Women

with learning disabilities did not, however, identify cultural narratives that excluded them from expectations of sexuality, work and motherhood as a result of their disability. It may be that invisible disabilities do not suggest that these women cannot participate in these roles. Women with physical disabilities may be more likely to be perceived as asexual due their obvious impairment that denotes their differentness. Conversely, women with learning disabilities bear no physical markings that easily identify them as different from individuals without disabilities and thus their sexuality may not be similarly discounted. Interestingly, in this study, each gender felt their experience of disability was more difficult than it was for the opposite gender. This finding may reflect the phenomenon of people at the bottom of a hierarchy comparing themselves to and noting the minor relative advantages of others in similar positions (Kanter, 1977). Such comparisons may focus attention away from more negative dominant cultural narratives which seem daunting and divide those who otherwise could provide one another support for addressing these difficult challenges. Similarly, our cultural may be more accepting of gender comparisons than it is class comparisons.

Although findings on the interaction of racial/ethnic and gender narratives should be interpreted with caution due to our small sample size, these findings suggest that narratives unrelated to individuals' status as people with learning disabilities remain salient to them. Some theorists have posited that the experience of disability may override other experiences of social identities (Stuart, 1992; Vernon, 1999). This may be true for physical disabilities and less true for those with learning disabilities, particularly when individuals do not readily disclose their disability status. Our findings indicate that African-American participants perceive cultural narratives that advantage women over men. Theorists on race and gender, in contrast, emphasize the persistent role of sexism in disadvantaging African-American women relative to African-American men (Hooks, 1995). However, African-American women may be achieving more positive outcomes in relation to educational and employment achievements than African-American men. The increasing disagreement Latino/a participants voiced with traditional Latino values of machismo may be linked to their adaptation of different gender expectations due to their experience with and adoption of U.S. culture.

In the presence of oppressive narratives about their social identities, participants reported strategies used to ward off the integration of these narratives into their self-concept. With these responses to oppression and pursuit of higher education, participants demonstrated

their resilience and potential to thrive in a world that doubts their aptitude to do so even with little connection to the Disability Rights Movement. The prevalence of these strategies may reflect a heightened need for resistance in the presence of multiple forms of oppression (Harper, 2005; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Although we probed for responses that might occur at multiple levels, no one reported engaging in any organized, collective activity aimed at group, organizational, community or societal change. Working at the individual level is likely a critical first step towards claiming one's dignity and a positive sense of self (Balcazar, Keys, Bertram, & Rizzo, 1996). This individual focus may be necessary and perhaps unavoidable when confronting multiple forms of oppression without belonging to communities that positively respond to their multiple sociopolitical minority statuses. Working towards a framework that holds society accountable for oppression and demands social change rather than individual adaptation may, in some instances, rely first on the development of one's inner strength before connections to those facing similar injustices can be constructed and a social movement initiated. That is, developing a framework that liberates the oppressed individual from individual blame for social inequalities may initiate a larger individual and collective journey towards social justice (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Ryan, 1971).

Implications for future research, policy, and practice

These initial findings from a small sample make clear the need for additional research into human diversity and self-society interactions in the context of oppression and social action. In considering the intersections of our multiple identities, there are a wide array of sociocultural influences on behavior. We encourage other researchers to build on these beginnings and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of cultural narratives and responses to oppression. For example, although financial resources were an ongoing practical concern for participants, the absence of discussion related to social class suggests a tendency not to explicitly address class that is consistent with other research and social commentary in the United States (Bond & Keys, 2000; Hooks, 2000). Future research may engage larger numbers of participants, examine additional elements of human diversity (e.g., sexual orientation), and take different approaches to inquiry (e.g., comparative, quantitative). Future research may also examine contextual factors that facilitate justice and positive responses to injustice at multiple levels.

This study also demonstrates the need to amplify perspectives in research that are not commonly heard. Including multiple perspectives and voices in all their complexity in our quest for understanding social conditions and attaining social justice will strengthen our ability to understand problems and solutions to those problems. While the identification and recruitment of diverse research participants can be challenging, it is worth the effort. As Rappaport (1981) notes, solutions to many social problems are divergent rather than convergent. That is, social problems often reflect a diversity of guiding paradigms offering clear, logical answers that may be opposites of one another. One way to encourage multi-faceted solutions to complex social problems is to understand them from multiple perspectives.

Findings of this study highlight the need to continue to work towards social change, particularly among multiply marginalized groups and those whose needs may be less visible. This work should be undertaken at multiple levels. At the individual level, we can work with multiply marginalized youth to help them develop critical awareness. This critical awareness would eventually lead to more positive self-concepts and personal stories that triumph over pejorative dominant cultural narratives about their identities. As Freire (2001) has argued, such awareness can lead individuals to seek to transform their social reality and in turn transform society. Exposing youth to the socioecological model of disability, creating advocacy clubs where these youth can learn from and support one another, and connecting them to successful adults with similar disabilities may help achieve these goals (McDonald, Balcazar, & Keys, 2005). Building a deeper understanding of learning disabilities and the effects of pejorative cultural narratives among professionals who serve these young adults may also help to counter the distrust and lack of awareness of and knowledge about accommodations that persists in many settings. We professionals need to develop a critical view of our role in perpetuating the oppression of the individuals with whom we work. Are we challenging victim-blaming approaches to treatment and rehabilitation and institutional practices that under-treat and over-control people of color with disabilities? We all need to be more critical of our roles in maintaining the status quo and keeping oppressed populations content with and constrained by their reality.

Attending to social change at the institutional and cultural levels is also critical. Given the increasing importance of community colleges to educate these and similar youth, it is highly problematic that they have few resources with which to accomplish this

important responsibility. Future efforts to examine and develop the capacity to community colleges to serve their communities should be undertaken (Balcazar, Keys, Ortiz, & Garate, 2005). Currently, there is less support for group action and solidarity to address societal conditions for those facing multiple forms of marginalization than for those addressing solo oppressions. We need to build social movements around multiple identities. A concurrent focus on fighting discriminatory policies and socialization channels that continue to advance pejorative narratives of sociopolitical minority groups is essential. Research may be an effective tool in pursuing these goals.

### Limitations

This study has a number of limitations which we succeeded in addressing to varying degrees. First, this research was conducted primarily by researchers whose own personal characteristics differ in many ways from participants. It is difficult to identify how the first author's sometimes shared (e.g., gender, student) and other times unshared (e.g., disability, gender, race/ethnicity) identities affected the research. At times, the researcher's personal characteristics may have induced participants to be more forthcoming as they felt comfortable or recognized an increased need to explain their perspective. These characteristics may have also made some participants reluctant to discuss some of their experiences. We proactively sought to minimize negative consequences of these identified differences by building on past work and relationships, engaging in a sustained period of reconnaissance, implementing methods that reduce the influence of the researcher, establishing egalitarian relationships with participants, continuously using extant literature and colleagues to discuss the research, and remaining close to the data. Member checking was used as an additional tool to increase the credibility and integrity of individual stories. Unfortunately, methods of member checking may have been less successful than desired. Although we attempted to implement a form of member checking that was responsive to participants' busy lives, this method may have been less sensitive to their lack of access to supports and accommodations to fully comprehend the content of their transcript.

This research also relied heavily on self-report data centered on challenging questions. This placed the burden to identify and articulate their experiences on participants. It is possible that some participants were unable to completely express their views, thereby perhaps limiting the comprehensiveness of these findings. Lastly, this small sample included young adults with

learning disabilities who were willing to acknowledge their disability to the researcher. The themes of oppression and acts of resistance of those who conceal their disability status will need even more concerted recruitment of participants in future research.

## Conclusion

This research is part of larger efforts to study psychological phenomenon with sociocultural contexts intact, focusing most explicitly on issues of self-society interactions in the presence of diversity and oppression. This research provides one small example of how to empirically examine complex issues of social importance. This research demonstrates how community psychology and disability studies can inform and enrich one another, and it suggests the need to use an empowerment model of disability to work towards social change on multiple levels simultaneously when a group faces numerous layers of oppression (Block et al., 2001). As we work to end discrimination and stigma, it is heartening but hardly sufficient to know that individuals develop resources to counteract some of the negative repercussions of oppression. For some these acts may become the first step towards the development of a critical analysis of their situation and more collective action against it. However, oppression is a challenge for all members of society to overcome, not only those affected most directly by it, to attain a society where are all equal.

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