Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Blurring the Boundaries: Reflections from Early Career Faculty during the COVID-19 Era

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	IDD-D-20-00099
Article Type:	Perspectives
Keywords:	early career; COVID-19; community; research; disability
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Manuscript Region of Origin:	UNITED STATES
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Blurring the Boundaries: Reflections from Early Career Faculty during the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

The last three issues of *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)* have featured perspectives from a diverse set of contributors on how the field of IDD is being impacted by COVID-19. As four newly-appointed faculty members with diverse backgrounds, the Editor of *IDD* invited us to share our experiences with beginning academic careers during this unique time. In making this request, he pointed out that approximately half the members of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) are those who have some type of affiliation with an institution of higher education. While the perspectives outlined in this article do not represent those of all early career faculty, we hope our stories resonate with *IDD* readers who may be facing similar circumstances. This article includes a series of brief essays addressing how the pandemic has affected our academic job searches, research, teaching, and service. Although penned by different authors, each section encompasses our collective experiences, concerns, and hopes for the broader IDD community. We close with guiding questions that might support more socially responsive and integrated approaches to traditional academic roles as faculty continue to navigate the repercussions of COVID-19.

Keywords: early career, COVID-19, pandemic, community, research, faculty, disability.

Blurring the Boundaries: Reflections from Early Career Faculty during the COVID-19 Era

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged at the end of December 2019 has already left a lasting impact on universities across the country, affecting over 80% of the world's student population and contributing to over 200,000 deaths in the U.S. as of October 2020 (Center for Systems Science and Engineering, 2020). In response to COVID-19, many educational institutions took several measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic. These ranged from university closures, travel restrictions, the cancellation of campus activities, workshops, and conferences, as well as physical distancing measures such as quarantine and self-isolation. Perhaps some of the greatest barriers to academic life came in the form of unprecedented challenges resulting from the shift to online classes, assessments and evaluations for students and faculty, and instructional barriers for students with disabilities, international students, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Along with existing barriers in managing our own research, teaching, and service, which can already be difficult for those entering academe, the COVID-19 pandemic presented new enduring challenges to our personal sense of safety, productivity, and well-being.

Amidst this new and rapidly shifting landscape, many unprecedented questions pertinent to the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) arose. With regards to research, questions related to human subjects research with vulnerable populations introduced roadblocks to providing essential clinical work and interventions in a contact-free environment. Instructional challenges presented issues related to accessibility standards for students with learning disabilities who required accommodations, flexibility, and technology to meet their unique learning needs. Educational inequities in the services institutions provided to students from

lower socioeconomic status and international students raised additional concerns about how prepared universities and faculty were to face the needs of our students in crisis. Faculty across the nation were also dealing with rising service requests and requirements in the wake of emerging needs in the field of IDD and extended members of our community (e.g., practitioners providing telepractice, special educators, paraprofessionals, and children, adults, and elders with IDD). As the 2020-21 academic year gets underway, however, everyone is confronted with the risks associated with COVID-19 and its effects on everyday life. We look forward to the day that the COVID-19 pandemic is relegated to the category of "historical event," but at the time that this article is being written we are still living our lives in the midst of it and questioning its long-term impact on the trajectory of our careers.

Who We Are

We are four assistant professors entering our first or second year as tenure-track faculty members at doctoral universities with very high or high research activity. We completed our doctoral training in the U.S., our focuses ranging from special education to disability studies to school psychology. Collectively, our research interests span diverse topics including the transition from adolescence to adulthood, career development, the sociology of medical and assistive technologies, supporting families, and school contributors to mental health risk in individuals with disabilities. We represent experiences of both U.S. citizens and international early career faculty from diverse cultural and class backgrounds, including Midwest American, Latinx, and Southeast Asian cultures.

Transitioning from Graduate Student to Faculty Member (Dr. Munandar)

Securing a job, even pre-pandemic, is stressful for doctoral candidates due to the pressures of completing the degree in a timely manner, conducting high-quality research, and

interviewing for a faculty position (Barry et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2007). I began applying for faculty jobs in November 2019. By early March 2020, my job applications submitted and invitations for interviews were 32 and 0, respectively. It was not until late March 2020 that I received three invitations to the second-round interviews, when most universities had implemented remote learning and travel restrictions. Therefore, this next step in the selection process could only be conducted through video calls.

I did not find participating in video interviews to be as challenging as virtually delivering research presentations and teaching demonstrations. I delivered my teaching demonstrations in a variety of formats: a real-time online session with real students, a real-time online session with faculty members playing the role of students, and a recorded video of me teaching on an online platform without an audience. Sharing audio files through video conferencing software was challenging , and anticipating technical difficulties was critical. For those who find themselves in similar circumstance, I highly recommend asking the search committee for a practice session with an information technology professional a few days prior to a virtual campus visit.

The next step in the transition process was moving, which is a stressful life event even when voluntary and expected (Magdol, 2002). Some newly minted Ph.D.s find jobs in the same towns where they completed their doctoral degrees, but others (like me) have to move to other states for new faculty positions. Fortunately, finding homes through online platforms was already a common practice even before physical distancing. However, the pandemic forced me to balance safety with budget in terms of travel and lodging, which was not an easy task.

Starting my academic career during the pandemic has reduced opportunities to attend social events, and thus limited prospects to build relationships with colleagues in person. Therefore, I needed to be proactive in creating my own opportunities to build these relationships.

This has included communicating moving plans and campus visits to the department chair, reaching out to fellow "*newbies*" in the department for a virtual social hour, and sending an email to colleagues following virtual conferences to replace in-person discussions. I suggest that employers consider providing platforms for new faculty to get acclimated to the new work environment by assigning faculty mentors and prioritizing relationship building.

Embarking on Research Agenda (Dr. Monteleone)

When imagining my research agenda as a first-year tenure-track assistant professor, my plans were ambitious. I envisioned embedding myself in my new city, building robust relationships both inside and outside the university, and establishing empowering and emancipatory research practices alongside community members with IDD. My research practices revolve around elevating the expertise of people with IDD, so forging authentic community relationships that do not exploit that expertise is imperative. As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, however, those plans were forced to transform alongside the changing world.

The pandemic has, in some ways, brought conversations about the discrimination and inequalities faced by people with IDD to the mainstream, from a disproportionate number of Do Not Resuscitate decisions applied in the United Kingdom (Learning Disability England, 2020), to COVID-19 triage protocols potentially causing individuals with IDD to be denied treatment in the United States (Silverman, 2020), to the critical recognition that people with IDD are more likely to experience severe COVID-19 outcomes when living in residential facilities like group homes (Landes et al., 2020). In the summer of 2020, I began a qualitative research project interviewing adults with IDD about their experiences with COVID-19 and social isolation. These interviews have all been conducted by phone or video chat, with consent forms collected digitally. While this method has enabled participation from interviewees across the country, I

cannot help but wonder who is excluded from these digital approaches. Previous research has suggested that individuals with IDD face societal and attitudinal barriers to accessing the internet, a fact no doubt exacerbated by economic, racial, and geographical differences (Chadwick, Wesson, & Fullwood, 2013). Whether from lack of access to necessary technology, from smartphones to a stable Wi-Fi connection, or a lack of support to access it, there will be exclusions during COVID-19 that may reverberate into the future, shaping research agendas and interventions.

As a researcher committed to feminist and critical disability studies conducting social science research, I have concerns about what continued research activity may mean during the pandemic era. I fear that as researchers are isolated within their ivory towers (or the home office equivalent), the social distance between them and individuals with IDD will continue to widen. As Mike Oliver (1992) wrote nearly 30 years ago, the stark division between the researcher and the researched creates critical power imbalances. Under social conditions that reinforce these divisions – including through necessary isolation during the pandemic – "disabled people…come to see research as a violation of their experience, as irrelevant to their needs, and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life." (p. 105). Thus, it is imperative at this time to maintain our community relationships and establish new ones in order to resist engaging in research *about* rather than research *with.*

Teaching Courses and Working with Students (Dr. Rodriguez)

For educators, the pandemic introduced more challenges than successes, particularly in the area of remote learning and accessibility. Both students and educators have had to navigate new technologies, methods of learning and integrating online content, and ways of engaging in a virtual community. Remote learning has also exacerbated inequities in education that existed

well before the Spring of 2020, such as the financial instability of our students, issues of accessibility to computers and reliable internet, and inequities in instructional support. These service gaps were particularly salient for students with disabilities, including those with IDD. International students from non-English speaking backgrounds also struggled with the instructional delivery of culturally-relevant modes of communication and learning accommodations. This digital learning divide widened the educational gap for our most vulnerable and marginalized communities, particularly students with disabilities, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students with emotional difficulties, and our communities of color.

As a first-year instructor, the rapid shift to online instruction left me minimal time to prepare while I navigated uncharted waters in the areas of training, supervision, and student assessment and engagement. At the personal level, I grappled with the uncertainty surrounding the assessment of student competencies and my capacity as an instructor to maintain positive student course evaluations (which, right or wrong, hold considerable weight in evaluations of faculty teaching). Given the online platform and the demands of online teaching, maintaining a work-life balance began to seem more like an aspiration than an actual option. It was a steep learning curve with the most difficult issue being the applied nature of my teaching which included clinical assessment of cognitive batteries. Publishing companies and trainers across the nation had no data on the reliability or validity of remote assessments and many were still figuring out how to even administer these measures remotely, let alone train students to administer them. I, along with other school psychologists and training programs, had to learn interactive batteries for COVID-19 adapted testing and consider hybrid models for test administration and remote “best practices.” Additionally, we had to develop creative ways of

training and instructing students with disabilities, who may experience more accessibility challenges in diagnostic screening and evaluation. Regardless of modality, we had to ensure the valid administration of tools and fair assessment practices. We could not rely solely on technology systems that were being invaded by "Zoom bombers" or contributing to Zoom fatigue. I learned to be flexible and strived to integrate hybrid models of teaching and assessment administration to ease the technological burden.

At the same time, I was concerned about the collective well-being of my students, many of whom expressed losing a sense of community. Many of my students were out of state or international students, who no longer had physical access to familiar spaces that gave them a sense of "home" or community. Varying personal circumstances made it difficult to prioritize school responsibilities over work, family, and their own self-care. Not only were we dealing with a global pandemic, but we were also wrestling with civil unrest from growing racial protests, social injustices, and institutionalized racism. Recent institutional policy changes and migration reform also affected my international students and those protected under DACA.

As a Latina, first-generation college graduate, and faculty member of color at a predominantly white institution, I felt the added weight of having to provide emotional support to students of color. By normalizing the impact of stressors on my career and sharing in their collective grief over a term lost, I was able to create and build a sense of community for students who felt isolated and anxious over the barriers impacting their academic progress. I had to step back and process my own vicarious experience of these traumas as an underrepresented minority and reassess my role as a faculty member in a position of power. I took the remainder of the term to create space for students, engage in meaningful conversations regarding racism and prejudice, and engage in culturally responsive pedagogy. For me, it was difficult to maintain a "business as

usual" mentality. My research and teaching had to shift to a social justice lens in how my work uniquely impacted students of color and individuals with disabilities, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

Making Service Contributions (Dr. Bumble)

Addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the IDD community calls for socially responsive academics. As the pandemic upends existing support structures, individuals with IDD and their families are noticeably absent from mainstream discussions about accessing education, employment, and health care. To me, being socially responsive means leveraging my privileged position in academia to share power and resources with the disability community. It means listening, taking action, and—when immediate needs arise—focusing on service instead of scholarship. Prioritizing service is essential to understanding the emerging needs of individuals with IDD and generating relevant, practical research to address ongoing inequities.

Entering my second year as a faculty member, I quickly learned what it meant to be overscheduled and overextended; however, the onset of COVID-19 made it difficult to say no to service. Students with IDD, particularly those in rural areas or from marginalized groups, were left with minimal instruction for months as school systems scrambled to purchase technology, secure internet access, and identify effective modes of instruction. It was heartening to see so many colleagues act to rapidly mobilize resources. Webinars, tech tool lists, and strategy guides seemed to emerge daily; with many professional organizations expanding their efforts to engage practitioners in the field.

At first, it was challenging to identify a clear path to action. Instructing one online course did not exactly qualify me as a digital learning guru. Though what I observed in my own classroom was a need for community—a space for educators to connect and share their

experiences, concerns, and expertise. As a board member with the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Career Developmwnt and Transition, I worked alongside my colleagues to coordinate a series of town halls and launched social media campaigns to curate tips and strategies provided by transition teachers. I hosted webinars on digital resource mapping and designed an ongoing workshop series for local educators to help them gain hands-on experience with common tech tools. Striving to support those who were not in a position to continue serving, I sought out any opportunity to pair my expertise with pressing needs throughout these challenging times.

As a new faculty member, additional service took a heavy toll on my work-life balance (establishing healthy boundaries between the two is next up on the agenda). Even so, engaging in service has helped me model for my students, future inclusive educators, what it means to be change agents in their own classrooms and communities. I gained new perspectives on the barriers facing the IDD community and I developed meaningful partnerships that could support future action and research. I recognize that service will look different for early career faculty members as they navigate new personal and professional responsibilities. Showing up for colleagues who need additional support—and protecting one's own health and well-being—are equally important. My hope is simply that academics continue to remain responsive—engaging, supporting, listening to, and advocating for the IDD community as we maneuver through these uncertain times together.

Moving Forward

In writing this article and reflecting on our recent experiences together, we have both identified resonances and recognized that the response to the current crisis has and will continue to be different for each of us. For Dr. Rodriguez, as a first-generation college graduate, scholar,

and person of color, the pandemic brought to light many of the gender disparities and systemic inequities in academia that were exacerbated for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) faculty given recent social injustices. The most important lesson for her came in the form of finding community and finding ways to engage her students during times of crisis. Dr. Bumble highlights the expansive meaning of service and aspires to a radical academy that embraces participatory approaches and the integration of research, teaching, and service. Similarly, Dr. Monteleone wishes to push beyond the traditional walls that insulate researchers, aspiring to new power structures that elevate marginalized experiences rather than falling into the comfortable patterns enabled by privilege. Dr. Munandar urges a remembrance of the humanity of faculty, encouraging social support, mentorship, and community-building, despite physical isolation. We recognize that our experiences, while diverse, do not encapsulate the experiences of all new faculty, especially faculty with children, contingent faculty, and faculty with complex personal or familial medical needs. While our perspectives here offer one reflection, we urge conversations to continue throughout academic communities.

Rather than closing with recommendations, we have chosen to offer some guiding questions to identify meaningful opportunities to remain socially responsive and integrate responsibilities for research, teaching, and service:

1. Does the opportunity expand my personal and professional network?
2. Does the opportunity align with my current research interests and values, such as participatory research and engagement with key stakeholders?
3. Does the opportunity help me identify new needs or research areas that are underrepresented in the literature?
4. Will the opportunity likely lead to improved outcomes for those I am serving?

This pandemic has forced us to reevaluate how we assess our students and how we assess ourselves. Our work, commitments, and contributions no longer map neatly onto traditional evaluations for faculty. The blurred boundaries of scholarship, teaching, and service can no longer be viewed as an aberration, but a characteristic of socially-responsible scholarship. This recognition provides an opportunity to reforge the profile of the career academic and rearticulate our paths to reflect the impacts we hope to make.

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