Article

Intersectional Praxis and Disability in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article explores whether intersectional praxis can be discerned in the provision of disability/accessibility resources in higher education in Sweden and the United States. Analysing interviews with administrative staff based on hypothetical scenarios (vignettes) that could qualify as situations of disability discrimination, this article identifies several situations of (missed) opportunities for intersectional praxis. It then proceeds with a discussion of participants' conceptions of disability and organisational possibilities for collaborations with other offices at their university or college. Although opportunities for intersectional praxis are generally absent or missed in both countries, the article argues that American participants were closer to such critical praxis because they tended to consider disability in terms of barriers and as a structural issue, and advocated for the recognition of disability as diversity. By contrast, the Swedish participants seemed further away from an intersectional praxis because they tended to view disability as a difficulty that requires individualised support measures and as a situational issue regarding the learning environment. The article proposes that these differences are connected to differences regarding disability and anti-discrimination politics in both countries. In the US, disability politics have been characterised by a civil rights and social justice approach, while in Sweden disability politics have been conceived in terms of welfare services and a relational approach to disability. This article concludes that the conception of intersectionality as a critical praxis offers an original lens to gain new insights into how disability inclusion is promoted in different contexts.

1. Introduction

Addressing this thematic issue's call to consider disability in relation to the intersectional nature of social inclusion, this article explores whether intersectional praxis (Collins, 2015; Townsend-Bell, 2011) can be discerned in the provision of disability/accessibility resources in higher education in Sweden and the United States. Higher education is an interesting case for analysis because it is an area where social inequalities are produced and reproduced but also combatted and potentially evened out. Yet little is known as to whether and how disability is included as a matter of social justice in higher education, and the existing research usually focuses on one national context (Aquino, 2022; Shallish,

2015, 2017). Since axes of inequality are considered differently in different settings, it is relevant to adopt a comparative approach (Montoya, 2021; Townsend-Bell, 2011). The choice to study Sweden and the United States is motivated by the contrasting legacies of disability and anti-discrimination politics in the two countries, which reflect differences regarding both how disability has been conceived and how social inequalities have been addressed.

This article starts by asking how intersectionality is related to disability in higher education (Section 2). It proceeds by outlining the processes through which disability anti-discrimination laws were passed in Sweden and the United States, and highlighting differences in conceptualisations of disability in the two countries (Section 3).

Section 4 contextualises the organisation of disability resources in Swedish and American higher education. Section 5 presents the research design and Section 6 the findings of an empirical study of the implementation of disability anti-discrimination laws in Sweden and the United States. The study is based on interviews with staff working with disability/accessibility resources at universities and colleges, who were asked to describe their work and comment upon hypothetical scenarios (vignettes) of situations that could qualify as discrimination based on disability. The findings of the research are further discussed in the final section of this article (Section 7).

This article does not aim to provide a systematic comparison between Sweden and the United States. The comparative approach is used as a heuristic tool to gain new insights into current practices and the potentiality of intersectional praxis regarding disability in higher education.

2. How Does Intersectionality Relate to Disability in Higher Education?

Emerging from the work of US Black feminist communities in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of intersectionality was outlined in a position paper by the Combahee River Collective in 1982, which argued that Black women's experience could not be grasped by race-only or gender-only frameworks because it is shaped simultaneously by race, gender, social class, and sexuality (Collins, 2015). This critical idea was subsequently coined as the concept of intersectionality by Crenshaw (1991). Thirty years on, intersectionality has been adopted by a range of disciplines and has been used by scholars employing different definitions and methodologies (Collins, 2015; McCall, 2005). Some of these developments have been criticised for losing their critical edge. Reviewing the intersectionality literature in higher education studies, Harris and Patton (2019, p. 361) observe that "higher education scholars consistently focused on the intersections of social identities, while missing Crenshaw's…call to connect these everyday identity specific experiences to intersecting structures of oppression." Moreover, although researchers have demonstrated the significance of conceptualising disability as an axis of social inequality (Shifrer & Frederick, 2019), it is often missing from intersectional research. This article positions itself in the body of research that examines intersecting structures of oppression in society from a social justice perspective and seeks to place disability at the heart of intersectional inquiries.

Next to being an analytical strategy and a field of study, intersectionality can be approached as a form of critical praxis, which "sheds light on the doing of social justice work" (Collins, 2015, p. 16). The concept of intersectional praxis was developed by Townsend-Bell (2011), who observed that the axes of difference that matter in intersectionality are contingent on a certain context and are deployed differently by different activists. Building on these insights, Montoya (2021, p. 9) suggested that "comparative analysis may be helpful for determining the conditions that constrain or facilitate intersectional praxis." This article asks whether and how disability matters as an axis of intersectional praxis in Sweden and the United States. While previous research on intersectional praxis has examined social movements (Evans, 2022; Montoya, 2021; Townsend-Bell, 2011), this article scrutinises the work of administrators implementing disability anti-discrimination law in institutions for higher education. It asks whether disability/accessibility resources staff consider disabled students' positionalities regarding different axes of inequality, how they understand disability, and how they report on organisational opportunities for intersectional praxis at their institutions.

Most studies on disability in higher education are concerned with disabled students' experiences of barriers and discrimination or with the attitudes of faculty and staff regarding disability (Moriña, 2017). This literature tends to be limited to one national context. A notable exception is the study of Järkestig Berggren et al. (2016), who compared the experiences of disabled students in Sweden, the Czech Republic, and the United States. Scholars have also highlighted faculty's experience of disability discrimination and criticised ableism in academia (Dolmage, 2017). Further, some research examined disability/accessibility services in higher education. However, a review of this literature pointed to a general lack of conceptual frameworks that would enable a critical examination of these services (Madaus et al., 2018). This article addresses this research gap by drawing on intersectionality as a critical conceptual framework to analyse whether and how social justice informs praxis in the context of service provision in higher education.

Scholars have claimed that intersectionality is paramount to realise justice for disabled students (Kim & Aquino, 2017; Knoll, 2009; Liasidou, 2013; Peña et al., 2016). The few studies that use intersectionality in empirical research on disability in higher education highlight that disability is generally perceived as different compared to other characteristics (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Kimball et al., 2016; Shallish, 2017). Examining disability as identity, Kimball et al. (2016, p. 92) show that "disability is all-too-often treated as distinct from other college student identities." Abes and Wallace (2018) report that students with physical disabilities experience "intersectional erasure" because their disability is only viewed as a need for an accommodation, which negates their other identities (Abes & Wallace, 2018, p. 551). Other studies investigate whether disability is viewed as part of student diversity at universities and colleges. A key observation is that disability is largely absent from diversity policies in higher education aiming to promote the inclusion of students from minority and marginalised groups in society (Aquino, 2022; Shallish, 2015, 2017). Based on interviews with diversity workers at six college campuses in the northeast

United States, Shallish (2017, p. 19) observed that disability and diversity "continue to remain separate concerns," but that some administrators fight to recognise disability as part of diversity (Shallish, 2017). Similarly, Aquino (2022) found that postsecondary administrators working at a private, medium-sized university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States tended to forget disability when asked to define student diversity, but that, "when asked if disability should be included in postsecondary diversity, all participants expressed the importance of including it" (p. 1568). These studies suggest that disability remains overlooked or treated as a different category but that efforts are made to place it more clearly within the scope of diversity work in higher education. This article adopts a comparative perspective between Sweden and the United States that further elucidates the importance of considering a critical intersectional praxis in the study of service provision in higher education.

3. Disability Models and Anti-Discrimination Rights in Sweden and the United States

In the United States and the Nordic countries, disability studies developed as research fields in the 1990s. While there have been dialogues between the two regions, American and Nordic disability studies have remained distinct fields, which developed in relation to their social, cultural, legal, activist, and academic contexts (Traustadóttir, 2009). Both fields are grounded in social perspectives on disability and reject the conception that disability is an individual and medical issue. In the United States, this social perspective took the shape of a "minority model of disability," which conceives disability in terms of discrimination and positions disabled people as a minority group (Hahn, 1996). By contrast, the Nordic countries developed a "relational model of disability," defining disability as a situational misfit between the individual and the environment (Tøssebro, 2004). While both perspectives can be considered as variations of the social model of disability (Traustadóttir, 2009), they are also different: The American minority model presents disability as an issue of social injustice that can be combatted through civil rights and anti-discrimination measures; the Nordic relational model views it in terms of situational disadvantages that can be compensated through welfare measures and changes in the environment. The relevance of using different models of disability has been much discussed in disability studies (Shakespeare, 2006). Although recent disability research tends to adopt more complex definitions of disability, the original models arguably reflect differences in how disability studies developed in the two contexts. The findings of the study presented in this article suggest that they continue to inform how disability is conceptualised in Sweden and the United States.

Since anti-discrimination laws provide the legal basis for disabled students' right to accommodation in higher education in Sweden and the United States, it is worth looking at the ways in which they were adopted in the two countries. In the United States, anti-discrimination laws were pushed by the activism of the Black Civil Rights Movement and other citizenship movements, including the disability rights movement (Scotch, 2001; Skrentny, 2002). As such, the adoption of American anti-discrimination laws followed a bottom-up process. The first American federal law banning discrimination based on disability is the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits disability discrimination in services and programs receiving federal funding. The scope of this prohibition was extended through various laws and, in particular, through the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, which was the world's first comprehensive civil rights law concerning disabled people. By contrast, the adoption of anti-discrimination laws is a more recent phenomenon in Sweden, where disability politics has traditionally been focused on social welfare rights. The first Swedish anti-discrimination law regarding disability concerned discrimination in the workplace and was passed in 1999. The main driver behind the passage of this law was the European Union Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997 and the anticipation of the EU Employment Equality Directive of 2000, which urged EU member states to strengthen their protection against discrimination in employment (Lappalainen, 2020). Hence, the passage of anti-discrimination laws followed a top-down process in Sweden. In the following years, Sweden adopted other laws banning discrimination on various grounds and in different areas of society. These laws were merged into the Swedish Discrimination Act in 2008, which prohibits discrimination on seven grounds, including disability. Since the 2014 amendment to the Discrimination Act, lack of accessibility is recognised as a form of discrimination. This amendment was advocated for by the Swedish disability movement, which started promoting the use of anti-discrimination legislation as a tool for social change after the passage of the 2008 Discrimination Act (Sépulchre, 2021; Sépulchre & Lindberg, 2020).

4. Disability Resources in Swedish and American Higher Education

In Sweden and the United States, students with disabilities have the right to accommodation and support measures to access higher education. This right is stipulated by the main disability discrimination laws in both countries—the Americans With Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in the United States; the Discrimination Act in Sweden.

Disabled students represent an important part of the student population: Nineteen percent of undergraduates in the United States reported having a disability in 2015–2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), and this number amounted to 26 percent of all students registered at a Swedish institution for higher education in spring 2016 (Universitets- och högskolerådet,

2018). However, reports show that many students needing support related to disability refrain from asking for such support (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). It is also true that all disabled students do not need accommodations in higher education—for example, a wheelchair user does not need to use disability resources regarding physical access if the campus is accessible.

Universities and colleges typically have specialised staff concerned with accessibility and accommodations for disabled students. In the United States, this staff is part of administrative offices that are commonly called "accessibility resources" or "disability resources." Most of these offices are located under divisions of student affairs, but they can also be part of other divisions, for example, divisions focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Swedish equivalent of accessibility/disability resources staff are commonly called "coordinators for targeted pedagogical support" and are also included in divisions of student affairs. For reasons of readability, this article refers to staff in both countries as disability/accessibility resources staff.

The general task of disability/accessibility resources staff is to administer different types of support and accommodations. The practical procedure varies between institutions, but it follows a similar pattern. It starts with a student requesting accommodations or support measures based on disability. Unlike other anti-discrimination statutes, legal protection from disability-based discrimination only applies to individuals who qualify as disabled people. In higher education, this qualification is established through affiliation to a disability/accessibility resources office, which often requires a medical certificate or equivalent documentation by an expert. In the United States, this requirement has been relaxed since the 2008 Amendment of the Americans With Disabilities Act, which specifies that, rather than focusing on whether an individual qualifies as a person with disabilities, legal investigations need to concentrate on whether disability-based discrimination has occurred. By contrast, presenting a valid certificate of a lasting impairment is an essential requirement to obtain accommodations and support in higher education in Sweden.

Once the student is affiliated, the disability/accessibility resources staff meet with the student to discuss their experience and needs in the context of higher education. During these meetings, staff recommend, in dialogue with the students, the type of support measures and accommodations that may be appropriate. Anti-discrimination law in both countries stipulates that support measures and accommodations cannot lower the level or modify essential requirements of a course. Disability/accessibility resources staff can suggest a series of accommodations but the final decision regarding academic accommodations is taken by the course's instructor.

Three further contextual aspects regarding the organisation of higher education in the two countries are worth mentioning. First, students must pay tuition and fees to access higher education in the United States. In Sweden, higher education is free of charge for individuals with a permanent Swedish residence permit and citizens of the EU and the European economic area. However, disabled students in Sweden report having financial difficulties to finish their education, among other reasons because they do not have the time to engage in paid work during their studies or because they do not manage to take enough courses to be eligible for a study loan from the Swedish Board of Student Finance (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2018). A second aspect relates to the scope of disability/accessibility resources. In the United States, these resources concern the overall campus experience of disabled students, ranging from accommodations in the classroom and the dormitories to parking permits and dietary requirements. In Sweden, the disability/accessibility offices are only concerned with students' learning experience in the classroom and examinations. Finally, many American institutions of higher education have cultural centres, which are spaces for community building and activism centring on various cultural minorities. A few American institutions also have disability cultural centres (Chiang, 2020). By contrast, cultural centres are not typically found on Swedish campuses, but Swedish students organise into student unions.

5. Research Design

Following the methodology of intersectional research that acknowledges its social construction, I would like to start the presentation of the research design with a disclosure of my positionality. I identify as a white, cis-gender, non-disabled, woman, who is committed to social justice. I am a European immigrant who has been doing research and teaching at various Swedish universities and was affiliated with an American university during the time of this study. This positionality implies that I am familiar with the context of higher education but that I also have an outsider position because I did not grow up in Sweden or the United States.

The data for this study were generated through vignette interviews. Vignettes are hypothetical situations that are presented to the participants during the interview. Vignette interviews are well-suited to examine how people in different contexts reflect about a given topic (Križ & Skivenes, 2013; Saguy, 2000). Five vignettes describing common situations pertaining to the implementation of disability rights in higher education were constructed for this study. The following excerpt of one vignette exemplifies the type of scenarios that were brought up in the interviews:

> A student with ADHD asks a teacher to make their PowerPoint slides available before the lectures because that helps them to focus. *What do you think the teacher will answer?* The teacher says that they

understand but that, unfortunately, they cannot provide the PowerPoint slides beforehand because they have no time and because they often need to make last-minute changes in the lectures. *How do you interpret this reaction?* (Vignette 1)

The vignettes focused on interactions between students and teachers. They did not include any background information about the participants, except for the disability-related characteristics concerning the need for a particular accommodation. In addition to the vignettes, the interview guide comprised questions about the participants' professional role, the procedure to request disability resources, and the relation between the disability/accessibility resources offices and other offices at the university or college.

A pilot interview was conducted to test the interview guide. Thereafter, 16 interviews were realised (seven interviews in the United States and nine in Sweden), with a total of 18 participants (one interview included three participants). The participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to interview staff members working at institutions of higher education of different sizes and geographic locations. This limited sample is not representative of all disability/accessibility resources staff in Sweden and the United States, but it includes participants from five different American states and nine different Swedish counties. In the United States, most participants held the position of assistant director or director of a disability/accessibility resources office, and one participant was working at the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In Sweden, disability/accessibility offices have a flat structure and there are no directors. One of the Swedish interviews included three participants and one interview was with a participant working as a legal advisor for an institution of higher education. In the two countries, there is no formal education to become an administrator of disability/accessibility resources. Participants had degrees in various academic disciplines, such as occupational therapy, rehabilitation sciences, higher education, sociology, psychology, and law.

All the interviews took place via Zoom between November 2021 and May 2022. Online interviews via Zoom are considered a good way to collect data (Archibald et al., 2019) and this digital tool was particularly advantageous for the realisation of interviews with individuals located thousands of kilometres from each other towards the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2,5 hours. They were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim.

Qualitative thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) was used to analyse the interview material. The analysis followed a combination of inductive and deductive steps. Step 1, I (the author) wrote down initial analytical reflections during the process of conducing and transcribing the interviews. Step 2, I annotated each interview transcript with open codes. Step 3, to get an overview of the interviews, I summarised each interview in a memo, together with quotes and analytical reflections. Step 4, I returned to each interview transcript to inquire about intersectional praxis more specifically. This second round of coding was guided by the following analytical questions:

- Do staff working at disability/accessibility resources consider disabled students' positionalities regarding different axes of inequality?
- How do staff working at disability/accessibility resources offices understand disability?
- How do staff working at disability/accessibility resources offices consider the role and position of their offices within the organisation of the university or college?

6. Findings

Overall, the analysis indicates that the disability/accessibility resources staff rarely referred to intersectionality in their interpretation of the vignettes. While this finding may have been influenced by the design of the research—which did not prompt the participants to reflect on intersectionality—other factors seemed also to have played a role, including the participants' conception of disability and the organisational features of their institution of higher education.

6.1. Looking for Traces of Intersectionality

Five traces of intersectionality were identified in the interviews, alluding to inequalities pertaining to socio-economic and geographic background, transgender identity, parental responsibilities, status of foreigner (international students), and race and ethnicity. The first trace concerns the difference between students with and without documentation of their impairment, which gestures towards the intersection between disability and socio-economic disparities regarding social class. Affiliating to the disability/accessibility resources office generally requires medical documentation but, as one American participant noted, obtaining a diagnosis is influenced by access to socio-economic resources:

A lot of students [are not affiliated to the disability/accessibility resources office], and, in order to even get a diagnosis, that also can mean time and money. (US, interview 6)

As mentioned previously, this requirement has been relaxed in the United States in recent years, but providing documentation of an impairment is a critical condition to request disability accommodations in Sweden. Consequently, the students who do not possess such documentation do not get access to these resources:

I have many [students] who contact me who want to get support without having an impairment…then I often have to explain that: This support is based on having documentation [showing] that you have a lasting impairment. (SE, interview 15)

Some participants remarked that access to medical evaluations varies between different Swedish regions. They stated that they consider this geographic inequality when assessing the documentation provided by the students, for example regarding neuropsychiatric diagnoses:

We approve [the documentation] even if you are waiting for an evaluation…then you use your referral as a certificate [of your impairment]. (SE, interview 14)

A second trace of intersectional praxis was found in an interview with an American disability/accessibility resources staff member who mentioned that they had acquired more knowledge about transgender expression and identity to improve their service to disabled students:

There is so much more in that conversation with students than just the disability piece…several students that have either transitioned or are in the process of transitioning or, you know, like we talked about, this is a place where the students can be themselves and maybe need different pronouns. I have quite a few students in that realm and so, as a professional, I had to get more comfortable having these conversations and learning more of these resources to be a better ally and support for the student. (US, interview 1)

The three remaining traces of intersectionality identified in the interviews suggest missed opportunities for intersectional praxis. One instance concerns the situation of disabled students who are parents and sought accommodations during the pandemic. A Swedish staff member explained that they denied the requests regarding "care for sick children" (which in Swedish takes the acronym VAB) because they estimated that these were not based on an impairment. The Swedish acronym VAB refers to the possibility for parents to stay at home to care for their sick children and get financial compensation from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency:

Another thing I thought about with the pandemic is this eternal caring-for-sick-children for some students…mainly those who perhaps have had [difficulties with] with concentration, planning or when they have a lot of emotions and such…students who have felt stressed because they cannot put that time on the studies because they have to stay at home with their sick children…which has put them in quite a stressful situation, which in itself may have caused them to ask for support. And then I may have felt: uhm, but in a situation like that, we are not talking

about an impairment, it is not because of an impairment that you have ended up in this situation. And then I can feel that it sucks that I can't offer more support, but at the same time, it's not your impairment that is decisive here. But then I understand that it is a contributing factor. (SE, interview 14)

The quote suggests that the staff member felt torn about this decision because, although they had decided that disability was not the main factor causing the need for support, they recognised that it did play a role in the situation of the student. As such, this situation can be interpreted as a missed opportunity for intersectional praxis regarding the resources needed by disabled students who have young children.

Another missed opportunity for intersectional praxis concerns international disabled students who do not receive adequate resources because the Swedish offices of disability/accessibility resources in higher education are limited to learning situations, that is, studying, classroom interactions, and examinations:

I also meet many international students with disabilities…and I have actually had many students from the US….From the students' perspective, it is worse here….When it comes to housing, when it comes to healthcare. It doesn't work well at all in some cases…but that kind of lies outside of the university….We must at least inform them properly about how it works when you come here. (SE, interview 11)

The quote suggests that the Swedish participant identified the need for intersectional praxis because they observed that the difficulties experienced by international students were caused by a lack of attention to their particular situation.

Although disability/accessibility resources have a wider scope in the United States, the American participants deplored that disabled students often remain excluded from some spaces on campus. In the following quote, a staff member observes that disabled students may be excluded from ethnic and cultural community centres because of inaccessibility:

If the students went to the Native American house or you know, in the multicultural student affairs or that sort of thing, those may not be accessible, or maybe only the first floor is accessible. That is a major way that, unfortunately, a lot of schools like ours discriminate, I mean, we can get pretty close with their housing usually, and their dining and their classes. But their day-to-day experience? Probably not! (US, interview 7)

This quote highlights the lack of consideration of the intersection between race or ethnicity and disability. The next section digs further into actual and potential intersectional praxis regarding disability by analysing

how disability/accessibility resources staff in both countries conceive of disability.

6.2. Understanding Disability: A Situational Disadvantage or Structural Inequality?

The analysis suggests that there is a difference between the conceptions of disability among the Swedish and American participants. In Sweden, the disability/accessibility resources staff tend to view disability as a situational difficulty that needs to be compensated for through individual measures, which highlights a relational model and deficit model of disability:

> I usually say to the student: "You must all go to the finish line." Or: "You must all jump over this bar." This is the course goals or the finish line, it will never be pulled closer to you, it will never be lowered, but your impairment implies that you start behind them [the other students] in a, shall we say, 100 m race. You start 10 m behind, and it's not fair. So, then I try [to tell the disabled student] in this conversation, that we aim to close this gap as best as possible so that you come up as close as possible...but we can never lower that bar. In this case, we are a public authority and there must be a legal certainty in how we evaluate students, and we can never jeopardise that. (SE, interview 8)

As illustrated by this quote, "legal certainty" was viewed by many Swedish participants as a key principle guiding their work, indicating a procedural justice approach to the provision of disability/accessibility resources. This position differs from the following quote in which an American staff member explains that they take a social justice approach to their work:

> I see disability...as part of human variation and the structure that we create is very ableist. Essential work that I do is anti-ableist work. (US, interview 2)

Although not all the American participants referred to ableism, the interviews in the United States suggest an overall understanding of disability in terms of structural inequality. By contrast, the Swedish participants tended to use a relational understanding and endorse a deficit view of disability. This appears in the following quote, in which a Swedish participant explains their perception of the attitudes of non-disabled students towards disability resources.

> Most people seem to understand that these students [disabled students] do not get advantages. It is to compensate for difficulties. (SE, interview 15)

This understanding of disability as a difficulty in need of compensation is also reflected in the following quote, in which a Swedish disability/accessibility resources staff states that they use the term "functional impairments"

rather than "functional variations." The term *funktionsnedsättning* (functional impairment) is used to refer to disability in the Swedish Discrimination Act. The term *funktionsvariation* (functional variation) is a more recent addition to the Swedish language. Since it refers to "variation" instead of "impairment," it is considered less stigmatising and has been introduced as the politically correct way of speaking of disability in the last decade. The Swedish disability/accessibility resources staff were aware of this terminology but explained that they commonly use the term "functional impairment" because the purpose of their work is to tackle students' disability-related difficulties in higher education:

> We speak about functional impairments and it concerns, well, we are speaking about [that] when it is an impairment in relation to the studies, it is actually a difficulty in that case. (SE, interview 11)

It is noteworthy that there is no equivalent for the term "ableism" in the Scandinavian languages (Lid, 2022), which arguably affects their possibilities to signify disability in terms of social justice. Overall, the Swedish participants viewed disability as a difficulty that arises in relation to the students' learning environment. They recognised the importance of improving the general accessibility of universities and campuses but typically added that this was not the role of their office because they had to take care of individual accommodations first. This focus on a narrow aspect of disability/accessibility resources, which is encouraged by the organisational structure, can be interpreted as limiting opportunities for intersectional praxis in higher education:

> Individual support always comes first. It is the exercise of public authority, we must handle things quickly, the students have the right to their accommodations. So, meeting with departments and talking [about the need to improve accessibility], unfortunately, comes in second place. It is a wish, I would perhaps wish that there were more resources for the accessibility work itself. (SE, interview 10)

In the United States, the disability/accessibility resources staff similarly described individual measures as the most important task of their office. However, rather than speaking of individual difficulties in need of compensation, they generally used the language of eliminating barriers. The reference to barriers suggests an understanding of disability according to the social model, which posits disability as a dimension of structural inequality and oppression, in line with the language of intersectionality. This shows in the following quote in which a participant explains why they meet with each student:

> A lot of the work that we do is about identifying: what is the actual barrier of access?...We can't get that information from, you know, a letter from a doctor

that says a student has ADHD or anxiety or whatever, even if you get a psycho-educational evaluation from a student who has a learning disability, that can tell you quite a bit about their mental functioning but it doesn't really tell you about their experience and that's really an important aspect to understanding what they may need or would work. (US, interview 3)

The interviews with the American staff show a difference between offices focusing on disability and those focusing on accessibility. In the following quote, an American participant explains that they changed the name of their office to "accessibility resources" to make it more inclusive of all people needing accommodations:

Our name is just adaptability and flexibility and meeting folks where they're at and some people very readily identify as a person with a disability or disabled person, however they choose to identify. And some folks are just not there yet on their journey, or they say "nope, I just need accommodations in the moment because I had a car accident," or "I'm having a surgery," so, for us, it's about meeting folks where they're at. (US, interview 5)

As exemplified by this quote, many American participants viewed disability as an identity that people can have and, which some participants added, should be celebrated on campus. In the same vein, many American disability/accessibility resources staff argued that disability should be considered as diversity:

We endeavour in our office to work through a disability justice model or social justice model, but I would, I wouldn't be…universally it's still very much working through a compliance, you know, compliance model: What do we have to do? We're working hard to try to kind of try to shift that perspective and shift the perspective of disability as deficit to disability as part of diversity, innovation. (US, interview 2)

The interviews suggest that disability is not recognised in terms of diversity in most institutions of higher education in the United States, but that some disability/accessibility resources staff push for this recognition, which is further evidence of the potential for intersectional praxis. This appears in the following quote, in which a participant was asked about the advice they would give to new faculty members:

I would advise them to think about disability as an aspect of diversity and to think about, you know, how the choices that we make in designing our courses can contribute to access and equity. (US, interview 4)

Besides promoting the conception of disability as diversity, American disability/accessibility resources staff emphasised the (intersectional) need to improve the overall accessibility of higher education, for example by encouraging faculty members to create their courses according to the principles of universal design for learning (UDL).

You may want to think about the next time you offer this course, making these changes so that you don't need to make accommodations anymore. (US, interview 4)

This idea was also found in some Swedish interviews, although they did not commonly refer to the terminology of UDL:

There is something called, perhaps, universal design for learning, I think, universal design for, well, something like that, how do you think, how do you get them [disabled students] into teaching from the beginning, I think. Because then I think we will get those exceptions to be much fewer….Prepare so that you don't have to deal with all the exceptions. (SE, interview 11)

It is worth noting the contrast between the wording of the American and Swedish quotes, referring to the need to make "accommodations" and deal with "exceptions," respectively. The former relates to a social model conception of disability, while the latter refers to an individual and problem-based deficit approach to disability. The argument that disability should be recognised as diversity was not present in the Swedish interviews. Instead, the dominating conception was that disability requires support or accommodations to compensate for difficulties. Viewed in this light, UDL was understood as a practical measure in Sweden because, as argued in the quote above, it reduces the number of "exceptions" that need to be made. By contrast, the same principle of UDL seemed to be perceived in terms of social justice and as a tool for structural change in the American interviews that were underpinned by a more intersectional social model of disability.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the Swedish disability/accessibility staff used a relational model and deficit model of disability, and that procedural justice was the main principle guiding their work. By contrast, the American disability/accessibility staff conceived of disability through a social model and minority model, placing their work in the intersectional realm of social justice. Because it centres social justice, the work of the American disability/accessibility resources staff can be interpreted as laying closer to intersectional praxis compared to their Swedish counterpart.

6.3. Contrasting Organisational Possibilities for Disability/Accessibility Resources Offices

Taking another step in the analysis of intersectional praxis, this section sheds light upon the ways in which the disability/accessibility resources staff viewed the place

of their office in the broader organisation of their university or college. In general, staff from both countries stated that they had few contacts with other divisions, except for other offices providing learning support for students. Yet the participants recognised the potential and/or need for collaborations with divisions working with equality, inclusion, and diversity:

> Formally, like our offices, we report to separate people…even at a small university we still have these silos and still like, work in our own little bubble. (US, interview 6)

> It's a bit unfortunate that those roles, perhaps, are not closer to each other at our university because I see a lot of synergy, that we could collaborate in a better way and I think there are conditions for that, but unfortunately, it's not like that at the moment. (SE, interview 8)

The interviews suggest that some universities and colleges in Sweden and the United States are moving towards increased collaboration between the disability/ accessibility resources offices and other offices on campus, because of organisational changes and because the disability/accessibility resources staff are increasingly invited to represent accessibility issues in various committees:

> It feels more like we were a small, isolated island in the beginning, but we have tried to kind of get out there, so that people know what we do, that we collaborate and sit in some reference groups….Just to include the accessibility issues. (SE, interview 15)

Similarly, American participants mentioned an increased interest in accessibility by faculty and other staff at their university or college. Besides accessibility, some American participants referred to changes regarding the recognition of disability as diversity, for example in the policy documents of their institution:

> Disability at [name of the university] is actually considered part of diversity itself. In our definition of disability, in our diversity strategic plan, disability is considered part of that and so has a seat with all the other types of diversity groups. (US, interview 3)

Next to formal structures, some participants pointed to the organisational culture at their university or college and explained that a small institution, with people who know each other, facilitates collaboration between offices and divisions, which enables a broader consideration of disability.

In sum, the interviews suggest that disability is typically considered an issue separate from other social justice concerns at Swedish and American institutions of higher education, but that this situation is changing in some places. A main change in both countries concerns an increased interest in accessibility, among others, through universal design, which mainstreams disability in various domains of higher education. In addition, some disability/accessibility resources staff in the United States noted an increased recognition of disability as diversity. While both developments—in terms of accessibility and diversity—address the inclusion of disabled students in higher education, it is the framing of disability in terms of diversity that mostly opens avenues for intersectionality as a critical praxis. This is because, as the following quote suggests, it makes the link between disability and other efforts toward social justice apparent:

> People are very excited about diversity and inclusion and social justice and, I think, once they realise disability can also be part of those efforts and part of that work it's like: "Oh, of course," and, like, they want to learn more. (US, interview 4)

7. Conclusion

This article explored whether intersectional praxis can be discerned in the provision of disability/accessibility resources in higher education in Sweden and the United States. The empirical analysis suggests that, although opportunities for intersectional praxis are generally absent or missed in both countries, the American participants were closer to such critical praxis because some of them placed their work in the realm of social justice and advocated for the recognition of disability as diversity. Recognising disability as diversity opens the door to intersectional praxis because it positions disability on par with other dimensions of structural inequality and oppression. By contrast, the Swedish participants seemed further away from intersectional praxis because they tended to view disability as a difficulty in need of compensation through support measures and as a situational issue regarding the learning environment.

To understand these differences, it is useful to consider the context of disability politics in both countries. In the United States, disability politics have been characterised by a civil rights and social justice approach; in Sweden, disability politics have been conceived in terms of welfare services and a relational approach to disability. As described in this article, anti-discrimination rights were adopted through a bottom-up process in the United States and followed a top-down process in Sweden. The empirical analysis indicates that these different approaches to disability politics and anti-discrimination rights are reflected in the ways in which American and Swedish disability/accessibility resources staff members talked about their work. While American participants referred to social justice and the importance of countering inequalities resulting from ableism, Swedish participants highlighted the importance of procedural justice and legal certainty. The latter suggests that the right to non-discrimination based on disability is interpreted in

Sweden as a means to determine access to welfare provisions rather than as a tool to combat structural inequalities rooted in ableism. This interpretation would benefit from future research on intersectional praxis and the implementation of anti-discrimination rights in Sweden and other European countries whose disability politics have traditionally been organised through the welfare state, as well as on the consequences that these different approaches have in practice.

This article highlighted the role of organisational structures. In line with previous research (Aquino, 2022; Shallish, 2015, 2017), this study found that disability is often considered a separate issue in higher education, which offers few organisational possibilities for intersectional praxis. Yet the interviews indicate that changes are occurring in some places. The first change concerns increased attention to and a mainstreaming of accessibility issues at Swedish and American universities and colleges. Whether various initiatives regarding accessibility strive toward social justice and imply intersectional praxis are important questions for future research. The second change, which was only mentioned in the American interviews, regards the promotion of disability as diversity. This article argued that this perspective opens avenues for intersectional praxis because it facilitates the inclusion of disability in other work concerning social justice in higher education. The American participants remarked, however, that the recognition of disability as an issue of social justice is far from established in higher education in the United States, suggesting the need for more research in this area.

The findings of this small-scale explorative study cannot be generalised, but they offer insights that are worth exploring further. This article proposes that, besides scrutinising different conceptions of disability, we need to examine how social justice in general and anti-discrimination laws in particular are understood in different national contexts because these understandings arguably influence opportunities for intersectional praxis and disability inclusion in higher education and other societal arenas.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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