
Book Review: Of Many Minds: Neurodiversity and Mental Health among University Faculty and Staff

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Drawing from exhaustive research analyses and personal narratives, *Of Many Minds* comes to us as a compendium of essays about neurodiversity and mental health in the world of academia with a focus on faculty and staff. The fresh new perspective is a volume of stories organized in four parts, with a Foreword, an Introduction, a list of bibliography, and an index. Edited by Rebecca Pope-Ruark and Lee Skallerup Bessette, the project was meant to be a platform for the members of faculty and staff who were willing to share their individual experience regarding the culture of mental health in US higher education. The main objective of this collection of essays is to use theory, disputation, and personal examples to address topics like stigma, ableism, and systemic barriers to seeking treatment. Short in format, the papers and the whole project are still replete with thorough research, factual statements, and original opinions.

The *Foreword* does an excellent job in introducing Katie Rose Guest Pryal, who shares her own issues with depression and antidepressants and points to the fact that a “stigma against neuro-divergent people has soaked into the fabric of our society that most people, including neuro-divergent people, fail to even notice it” (p. vii). When referring to neurodiversity in general, Pryal explains that “To have a brain that deviates from the socially constructed ‘normal’ brain means that you are made wrong. You are then stigmatized, that is, punished for your differences. And in higher education, where we live by Descartes’s *cogito, ergo sum*, if you cannot *think* properly, then you do not *exist* properly” (p. viii). The same stigma is deemed to make people uncomfortable, and the solution is masking, which basically means neuro-divergent people simply hide their traits to avoid facing negative consequences.

Anxiety, depression, and neuro-divergence constitute the main subjects of discussion in this vibrant and highly-revealing exposure of the teaching and learning spaces where students as well as instructors are faced with various challenges, one of which is *mental health*. Besides the shocking statistics regarding mental illness, the book brings its own flavor when the reader is presented with personal facts in the lives of educators: “The department colleague with borderline personality disorder; the librarian with autism; the English professor with severe anxiety; the faculty developer with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD)” (pp. 3-4). As the Introduction continues, the authors claim the original perspective that “our brains are our currency,” which also questions the place in the academic world where the afore-mentioned staff members are supposed to co-exist with everybody else.

In order to better understand mental health, according to the same authors, we need to approach the way faculty and staff function and how they deal with the current situation:

Many symptoms of mental and emotional distress among faculty can be masked by the very tendencies toward overwork and perfectionism that academic selects for, and faculty are often encouraged in this very behavior. The

messages many receive from mentors and colleagues about how to manage the stress, anxiety, and pressure associated with academic life often involve some version of ‘work harder,’ ‘focus more on productivity,’ or ‘be grateful for the flexibility of academia.’ In other words, such concerns are often minimized ... (Johnson and Lester, 2021; quoted on p. 5)

What that implies is the fact that faculty often neglect their own care just to function in the surrounding medium. That is the main reason why the current project offers narratives, which the authors might call, to use Brookfield's verbiage, *auto-ethnographies* or *scholarly personal narratives*. Since some of them are samples of lived experience they contain stories about medical diagnosis accommodation and wellness. The main purposes of the book would include giving space to neuro-divergent faculty and staff to share their stories and to offer case studies "to create space in organizations and ableism and exclusion" (p. 11). In simple terms, the authors want to write and tell their stories.

These stories are clearly displayed in Part I by Catherine J Denial, who argues that her research is designed to deal with the effects of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), which she deems to cause trauma, "which is not about a single event but rather about pervasive experiences - long term abuse, racism, misogyny, queerphobia, prolonged combat, poverty that undermine their basic sense of safety and dignity. That is when PTSD earns the prefix 'complex'" (p. 18). The author continues by saying that this PTSD comes from the need to survive terrible misfortune.

One of the main reactions to serious stigma, in the author's opinion, is masking. A poll conducted by the American Psychiatric Association in 2019 found that "half of workers were concerned about discussing mental health issues at their jobs. More than one in three were concerned about retaliation or being fired if they sought mental health care"(p. 20). The path chosen by the author of this essay was to tell others because she thought that was the key to her wellness.

Along the same lines, and dealing with masking and unmasking, David Dault refers to his Loyola colleague Devon Price, who in 2022 revealed masking as "any presentation of the disability that deviates from the standard image we see in most diagnostic tools and nearly all media portrayals,' as well as any time "suffering wasn't taken seriously for reasons of class, race, gender, age, lack of access to health care, or the presence of other conditions" (Price, 2022, p. 6; quoted on p. 31). As far as Dault is concerned, family was the foundation of his recovery and one of the techniques his wife and himself learned in couples counseling was *reflective listening*. The activity "is a practice in which one of us says that they are feeling, and the other person's goal is to repeat back, as close to verbatim as possible what the first person said without re-narration or editorialization" (p. 31). Reflective listening, in his view, probably saved his life.

A similar approach comes from Emily Van Walleghen, who acknowledges that "despite my frustration with the system I accept my responsibilities and I still do care, deeply. And in the end, I think that is more important than the (many) social missteps. The message somehow gets across" (p. 42). Recognizing that her struggle is not unique, Van Walleghen considers her inner turmoil worth sharing because that act seems like a human responsibility and therefore might be useful to others.

The term 'masking' is reiterated in Jim Luke's article, *Unmasking Autism*, whose subtitle is *The Body Knows What the Mind Denies*. Researching his own growing difficulties, Luke clarifies that "success in coping with the difficulties posed by my different mind enabled me to ignore or deny my actual neuro-divergence. I had effectively masked my neuro-divergence from myself until recent health challenges had ripped off that metaphorical mask" (p. 47). Discovering himself behind the mask, the author realizes that he still had the ability to concentrate under pressure and produce on deadline. And then a serious physical illness encouraged him to rip off the 'mask' and, instead, "engage with other academics, scholars and researchers about neuro-divergence and reflect on my own brain and mind" (p. 52). The consensus the author finds among similar different minds is that in fact they all contribute to their institutions with "creativity, insight, imagination, and different perspectives" (p. 53). That wonderful concept will eventually unmask their institutions, and in many cases lead to fruitful conversations that can benefit everybody involved.

Looking for meaning, engagement, and rewards constitute the corollary of Part II, which starts with an essay written by Jordan Cummings, who, although an accomplished college professor, realizes that he does not belong to academia for several reasons: "sexism, my values that disagree with exploiting and demeaning students, the incivility and bullying that should be unacceptable (but is an open 'secret' that never will change), others who outrank me taking advantage of me, my disabilities, and my gender nonconformity. Sometimes this gross brew came all at once" (p. 63). As a result, Cummings had to accept the idea that his path to academic success might be different, and figured his own way of fitting into the system. New paths and life-changing moments experienced outside the box led the educator to create a context within academia where he managed to be successful "even with chronic mental and physical illnesses" (ibid.) Following in the footsteps of Hayes et al (2016), the author resorted to using "play and creative hopelessness, a concept from acceptance and commitment therapy that means realizing that we do not know exactly how to solve a problem but that what we have been trying is not working" (pp. 63-64). The appeal of creative hopelessness opened a door to research, which made his professional labor more rewarding for himself and his colleagues.

In a similar vein of working and fighting with serious challenges, the reader finds Shannan Palma's contribution to the project, which elucidates one of the traits of autism: "a spiky cognitive profile. Allistic (non-autistic) people tend to exhibit their cognitive strengths and weaknesses within a fairly narrow range. One of the commonalities for autistic people is that our skills gaps are wider and less predictable" (p. 70). Going back in hindsight, Palma suspected that her constant questioning was the source of tension. When she asked for advice, she got confused because the administration did not like the idea that she kept minutes of her meetings with a mentor. Instead of taking charge of the situation, the professor found herself in the position of

not being able to dissipate the tension. Learning through the process of adjustment, Palma was able to make her own recommendations: “Respect boundaries, educate yourself about sensory differences, respect self-diagnosis, believe people when they tell you what they need, and implement evidence-based workplace practices” (pp. 76-77). Eight months later, the welcoming result was that Palma and her cofounder “started a tech company to develop assistive technology for autistic people,” (p. 77) which made the author aware of her strengths and simultaneously thrive.

From autism, the compendium moves to protective factors for bipolar prognosis in academia, where Darcy Gordon sheds light on her own mental health disability and finds that it was “affected not only by these other parts of myself but by the relationships, institutional supports, and cultural norms within academia” (p. 88) When she felt her bipolar symptom onset, she just went on with her frenzied work, only to find herself dealing with tranquilizers, anti-psychotics, and mood stabilizers which did not help much. Counseling services made Gordon realize that, according to Cassidy et al., (2001), “alcohol and substance abuse in people with bipolar disorder and queer youth (Hoots et al., 2023) are more prevalent than in the general public” (p. 91). Furthermore, when still in college, the author resorted to her favorite graduate courses: sensory neurobiology, phenotypic plasticity, and behavioral ecology. Outside of class, she found herself among academics who were also interested in their study systems and were facing similar challenges to manage their projects. Sharing experiences and emotional reactions uncompromisingly led to compassion for themselves and others.

One of the two editors of the book, Rebecca Pope-Ruark, also made a valuable contribution to the project with her essay entitled *Am I the Problem? The subtitle Anxiety, Ambition, and Belonging in Higher Education* encapsulates the main idea. Her personal experience teaching in higher education can be summarized in the following words: a “pattern of stressing out about an idea or paper or article, and having a full-blown panic meltdown followed by a brilliant rush of productivity would haunt me for years to come” (p. 104) Stressing out, in her opinion, must have been caused by her anxiety about her adviser, or by her “imposter syndrome,” or maybe her panic attacks. One way or another, she questioned herself and her ambitions and shortcomings. The author goes on and affirms that “My anxiety loved the predictability of higher ed, the turnover of semesters year to year, the preset hoops to jump through for promotion, and even the constant evaluation of my work by others – more people to tell me I am worthy (or not)” (ibid.) Her view seemed straightforward and gave her a good reason to work in higher education, teach the best she could, publish, and serve.

To validate her point of view, the same professor refers to a question asked by another researcher: “What happens when a professor has some form of invisible differentness that, if detected, would be considered a disability and therefore a potential liability to their reputation?” (Dolan, 2023, p. 689; quoted on p. 105) The so-called “invisible disability” is then defined as “a mental, cognitive, or physical impairment that is not easily detectable by an observer” (ibid., p. 690). The problem, Pope-Ruark opines, is that when an academic experiences issues like depression and anxiety, that person is “often perceived as incompetent, weak, or even dangerous” (Meluch, 2023, p. 35; quoted on p. 106) As a result of being aware of her predicament, she realized that she herself had to make some clear-cut decisions about the way she wanted to live her life.

Part 3 starts with an article written by Melissa Nicolas, an English professor who found herself as an associate dean in charge of academic support services for a small liberal arts college. When she gets home after a three-hour counseling session with one of her students, she experiences a crisis so severe that she had to see a professional social worker/therapist, who referred her to the Emergency Room in a hospital, where she spent two weeks to re-habilitate. The overall picture was obvious: she felt depressed, overstressed, and overworked. The scars of the whole experience led her to some drastic conclusions: that she was not going to keep quiet about her situation, that she had to tell her department chair, tell some of her work friends, and finally come out and tell her students. To her pleasant surprise, her students were “overwhelmingly supportive, caring, and concerned” (p. 117). However, the professor had to admit that in many similar cases, academia would not acknowledge such mental health issues.

Professional networks and professional advancement turn out to be the focus of a lively debate in Ronnie K. Stephens’s paper about neuro-divergence. After moving to a new location and changing jobs as well, the author and his family found themselves dealing with autism; first, it was one of their children, and then the father, Stephens himself. The diagnostician informed him that they offered the diagnosis of schizoid personality disorder, depression, and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). One of the suggestions mentioned in his diagnostic report was to avoid social interactions whenever possible. Difficult as it was, the social dynamics involved in dealing with people much younger or older made Stephens realize that he was “uniquely skilled at interacting with students but woefully challenged with regard to networking and developing professional relationships” (p. 125). Gaining insight into such findings led to further research into networking.

Catherine Armstrong, a senior lecturer in American history at Manchester Metropolitan University, explained in an interview with Claire Shaw of *The Guardian* that “networking on both a formal and informal level ... is vital for any academic who wants to develop his or her career” (Shaw, 2013) In the same vein, Christian Teeter (2020) emphasized the idea that “professional networks enhance the value of higher education degrees and improve socioeconomic status” in his essay *Professional Networks within U.S. Higher Education: Avenues to Foster Career and Institutional Success*. As such, the importance of networking can be reinforced in academia because of its learning and teaching context.

Building a robust network turned Stephens into an ardent supporter of networking, although his professional experience proved the opposite, that he felt drained by the myriad expectations of social interaction in order to just get through his professional and academic commitments. Bridging mental health with a successful career also brought the realization that mental health is relevant both to educators and students. A message of hope can be achieved, in this case, when the author confesses

that “One thing has changed, though: I have learned to give myself the same grace that I offer my students. I am learning to see myself, like my students, as someone with unique and persistent needs that make mundane social situations feel overwhelming” (p. 129). In the present situation, that message brings a much needed confidence in working against unseen and unexpected challenges.

When stress becomes unbearable, Lee Skallerup Bessette, the second editor and main contributor, she also becomes aware of another internalized issue like fat phobia when autism makes her feel she is a bad parent, a bad employee, a bad feminist – all already discussed in previous articles and blogs. And the overwhelming pressure comes as a shock when the professor starts feeling that she is drowning. What she needs is “to not have a major executive functioning disorder that makes it hard to do all the little things that must be done, like paying the medical bills; keeping track of what has been billed, been paid, or is outstanding; who needs a new doctor; what meds need refilling; what forms need to be filled out; where and when these forms should be submitted, on top of the ‘normal’ things a parent (okay, mother) needs to keep track of” (p. 132). Like many in higher education, she managed to shift her priorities and decided “to forcefully assert a work-life balance”, which might solve many problems. Fine-tuned to her responsibilities, Skallerup Bessette, aware of her accomplishments, started asking for what she needed, rather than forcing herself “to work in settings optimized for neuro-typicals” (p. 135). The mask of “everything is okay” eventually replaced the “look at how hard I am working” mask. The only thing left was to convince people that more conversations were needed to make everybody feel they belonged.

Circling back to autism, Dixie L. Burns acknowledges his struggles with autism that made him feel misunderstood and isolated. He knew he was different, he knew he had to fit in and understand the world around him. He had his first experience with autistic burnout and depression when he was 13, but he obviously did not know what it was at the time. An irrational fear motivated him to pretend he was normal and, as such, Burns focused on academics, participated in sports, and “projected the image of a geeky scholar athlete” (p. 138). Much as he tried to hide his autism, there came a point in time when he had to take some positive actions. Sharing parts of his own story with students and colleagues across the college was just the beginning. He realized his need for routine and structure was an autistic strength that posed as organization in his classes and his goal was to continue learning about neuro-diversity and mental health, about himself and his diagnosis, but at the same time to be advocate for the equity and inclusion of neuro-divergent people in the college environment.

In *Born under a Bad Sign*, with its subtitle *An African American Experience in Higher Education*, Kyle Younger shares his story in a sharp criticism of the culture of mental health in the United States. When he was diagnosed with bipolar II and generalized anxiety disorder, the author did not want to disclose the information to his employers and peers. Younger clarifies his decision when he says “Due to existing stressors related to being African American in mostly white-dominated spaces, I did not want leadership and dominant culture of academia to have additional reasons to disqualify or discredit my work, effort, or qualifications” (pp. 145-146). A quick reference leads to clear explanations about mental health stigma which is thought to manifest “when individuals or groups have negative thoughts and beliefs related to mental illness or mental health treatment.” (Defreitas et al. 2018; quoted on p. 146) Looking at the same issue through the lens of mental health struggles produces research results of low employment rates, poor/unsafe housing, and a reduction in mental health care. (ibid.) When mental health care is rejected, those who suffer might resort to self-medication through alcohol because it was easier for some to have a couple of shots of vodka before going to work.

After careful examination and thorough research, the author of this essay discovers Ward et al. (2013), Masuda et al. (2012), and Ward and Heidrich (2009), which revealed the fact that “the impact of social stress due to racism is an ever-present reality, even when it may not be overt” (p. 150). A tendency was found to undermine hard work and qualifications for the people of color. Although the academic environment was designed to foster learning and growth, the author’s thrust is to expound that the system fails to be affirming for individuals from diverse backgrounds. While African American faculty constitute a small number at most institutions, challenges are still to be recognized when they are related to teaching, researching, publishing, mentoring, and administrating. According to Mulzac (2022), challenges dealing with tension related to race are compounding. That being said, the African American educator still remains optimistic: “I see positive dynamics in society as a whole. For example, the commitment to diversity is at an all-time high. There is a general cultural and organizational underpinning that accepts strength in diversity” (p. 153). Furthermore, mental health struggles are more openly discussed and accepted, which brings another sense of normality, inclusion, and optimism.

Two bonus chapters make up Part IV, which centers on lessons learned during an educator’s life and professionalism as ableism. Katrina Swinehart Held provides her own story after teaching thousands of students and encouraging them by using one of her favorite phrases: Being human is hard. However, she never applied that adage to herself. That changed one day when she came back home from work after experiencing two different panic attacks. Among the reasons she experienced those unpleasant moments, in her view, must have been three lectures, meetings while functioning on only a few hours of sleep, all followed by grading and homework. That was the day the professor decided to get therapeutic help, and at the same time to share the lessons she had learned from her own experience as a neuro-divergent doctoral student and faculty member.

For Swinehart Held, the time spent as a doctoral student with identified neuro-diversity had both positive and negative experiences and helped the educator to work with students with mental illness and/or neuro-diversity in the classroom as an adviser. At the beginning of her mental health issues, she had attended a class that turned to be an alarming session, mostly because numerous students engaged in offending each other but the professor teaching that class did not interfere. Reflecting after the class ended, the author of the essay reached the conclusion that her views were not valued, her ideas not respected, and

therefore she felt discouraged and frustrated. Nevertheless, she found a meaningful hope: *the power of words*. To validate her view, she goes on to say that “I learned long ago in working with students that how you say things, not always the message itself, determines how feedback is received” (p. 160) And she added that “As a neuro-diverse person, I can purport how I would react to specific feedback, but I have also found that it can bias my understanding of how others could interpret my feedback” (ibid). Specifically, she discovered that practicing her feedback in a mirror to view her body language and facial expression was extremely helpful in conveying the right message to the students.

Imparting knowledge or advice using the appropriate verbiage is also well debated in the last essay dedicated to professionalism and ableism. However, Lee Skallerup Besette is now focusing on how certain people do not say and how they talk around what they mean. The central tenet of this essay is professionalism, which is defined as “our society’s acceptable way of saying ageism, sexism, racism, sizeism, and, in the context of this collection, ableism. Being labeled ‘unprofessional’ is not discrimination, even when we know it is” (p. 172), and, as a result, the advice given in this case was to “reflect” on how people sometimes react without knowing details about challenges and struggles of individual entities who suffer from neuro-divergence. In our institutions, when debating professionalism and ableism, several questions come to mind, in the author’s opinion, and she concludes by strongly affirming that “I am not sure anyone is ready for a chorus of us revealing who we really are and demanding what we need to feel like we belong” (p. 174). The message is clear: This undefined space of professionalism can at least be supported by all the individual entities (empowered and encouraged) that make up the whole.

In a nutshell, the collection of essays gives neuro-divergent teachers and staff a venue to voice their opinions, their personal stories, their pitfalls and challenges, sometimes obvious, and at other times hidden or masked. A fresh space is created by words spoken or written by those who are willing to have a conversation about listening and reflection, about providing valuable testimonies, and about sharing their personal stories in the world of teaching and learning. A very powerful message is coming from neuro-divergent educators and staff members, who clearly demonstrate that voicing opinions can find a viable path to reform and much-needed change in the American higher education.

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