IN/VISIBILITY OF IDENTITIES AND IDENTITY POLITICS: THE CASE OF INVISIBLE DISABILITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

A discussion of in/visibility of identity markers might provide the opportunity to understand how identities operate and to identify the problems overlooked by politics of identity. Focusing on the question of in/visibility means tackling an issue which is already at play, but often overlooked. The following paper investigates how people manage their non visible markers and invisible identities based on benefits and social stigma and suggests that bringing the locus of identity politics to visibility and invisibility can highlight the discussion of its restrictiveness and imprisoning nature, while providing an analysis of why being defined under different identity categories might affect personal experiences.
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INTRODUCTION

Identities are categories through which people make sense of the world, themselves, and through which they are perceived. The focus of visibility and invisibility of identity might not only be how the individual sees herself; but how she is perceived by others, including the state, the dominant group and/or the identity group to which she “belongs”. The issue of visibility and invisibility, therefore, raises the question of gaze.

The gaze might sometimes ignore clearly marked identities, and this is what makes the issue of in/visibility even more complicated. Samuels points out a distinction between invisible and nonvisible identity, stating that although they are used interchangeably, the term invisible has undertones of social oppression and marginality, whereas nonvisible describes an unmarked social identity. However, she also explores how these two meanings intersect, since “nonvisible disabilities remain largely invisible” (Samuels, 2003, p. 251). While acknowledging the metaphoric and literal interaction between its two meanings, for the purposes of this essay, the word invisible will be used to refer to unmarked-nonvisible identities, with a focus on its marginal undertone. Bringing the influence of in/visibility in to focus creates a new lens on the politics of identity because, as Schlossberg (2001) has stated,

Theories and practices of identity and subject formation in Western culture are largely structured around the logic of visibility… We are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty. (p. 1)
Focusing on the question of in/visibility means tackling an issue which was already at play, but often overlooked. As Alcoff (2006) undelines, “In our excessively materialist society, only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth” (p. 6). And so, not looking like what you are and not being what you look like (Walker, 2001) can destabilize the categories of identity. Inherent in this destabilization is the disclosure of a certain discourse of “we”, which the individual acts either as an insider or outsider, and at times as both. People with invisible (stigmatizing) differences may or may not choose to reveal their differences, depending on certain conditions, such as the discrimination they might face or the benefit they might receive (Beatty & Kirby, 2006, p. 32). Similarly, people with certain visible identities may want to be able to hide their identity markers and not to be identified accordingly. However, sharing one’s identity with the rest of the world is not always a matter of choice. Some more structural markers such as ‘race’, ‘sex’ or a physical disability might make it harder to conceal identities, whereas belief, nationality, sexual orientation and even age may sometimes be hidden or go unnoticed.

Nevertheless, the in/visibility of such markers of identity can be deceiving, as, in real life, people do not fit identity categories quite the same way they seem to. Many people might travel across categories, depending on the conditions they are faced with. Moreover, because such categories can never be separated with clear boundaries, and they are multidimensional and intersecting each other, in/visibility of identities make a difference for people and politics of identity. In/visibility changes the politics of identity to the extent that discrimination and politics of privilege are concerned. A discussion of in/visibility might provide the opportunity to understand how identities operate and to identify the problems overlooked by politics of identity through an analysis of individuals’, certain groups’ and the states’ motives in choosing or imposing identities. With this awareness in mind, I will first briefly discuss identity, in/visibility and disclosure or concealing of identities, and then use the specific case of invisible disabilities
to provide more detailed insight into the dilemma in choosing or acting upon in/visible identities. Ultimately, I hope to show that my analysis of in/visibility provides a useful framework to explore some problems with identity and its politics.
Identity as a Category

The term identity in political theory has various understandings that pave the way for either embracing or rejecting it as a category of analysis or action. It can be heavily laden with negative connotations that see identity as monolithic, oppressive, fragmenting; as well as positive ones that emphasize its fluidity, multidimensionality and emancipatory potential. In an attempt to achieve conceptual clarity, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) offer three different terms to use instead of identity for analytical purposes: self-understanding, identification and categorization. Through a discussion of the upsides and shortcomings of the term identity and these new terms, they provide insights into the problems associated with identity, which include a discourse of sameness and exclusion of difference, categorization and identification by particular identifiers and categorizers and reifying such categories through group-boundedness.

Notwithstanding the concerns raised by Brubaker and Cooper, for the purposes of this essay, the term identity will be used, but will seek to avoid certain formulations that can be, as Alcoff (2006) describes them, overly homogenizing, essentialist, reductive, or simplistic constructions of identity (p. 14). Such constructions might even include strategic essentialisms (Spivak, 1990, Alfred, 2005) when it is required to create a sense of belonging and/or political recognition.

Thus, this thesis embraces the view that identities are multiple, intersecting, and are not fixed but constructed based on power relations and circumstances, as well as material realities. Identities shape the way individuals make sense of themselves and experience the world. In all cases, how people see themselves and the world also depends on how they are perceived by others based on their identities. However, there might be cases where a discrepancy exists between the individual’s own perception of self and others’ categorization of her, rooted in intriguing interactions of visible and invisible identities. Beatty and Kirby (2004) explain how
such discrepancy may lead to fragmentation of the self and feelings of isolation common among many invisible social identities, when the individual has to separate the different domains of her life in order to conceal her identity.

The in/visibility of identities becomes more complicated in relation to the politics of identity within society. In his discussion of fixed and imposed identities, Calhoun (1994) writes that “identity politics movements are political because they involve refusing, diminishing or displacing identities others wish to recognize in individuals” (p. 21). However, he goes on to suggest that politics of difference, emerging as a critique of identity, does not refer to a transcendence of identity politics, rather, deconstructing and claiming identities always need to coexist and inform each other. I argue that at the very heart of this struggle over identity lies both visible and invisible identities. Thus, concerns attached to in/visibility of identities cannot be dealt with in isolation from essentialist, reductive constructions of identity, since such constructions operate on the assumed visibility of identities. A closer examination of the question of in/visibility will provide a useful framework in understanding what makes certain claims and impositions of identity problematic and may even suggest that discrepancies resulting from ambiguity of visibility are the rule rather than the exception with respect to the politics of identity. For a better understanding as to why in/visibility matters, it is necessary to look at how identity is perceived by various agents.
In/Visible to Whom?

Alcoff (2006) argues that “reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself” (p. 5). The issue of visibility, therefore, involves the question of gaze, simply because whenever the invisibility of an identity comes into question, it is usually to others, not to the individual herself that the identity is invisible. Being aware of an identity relies on where the subject is looking from, and who the subject is.

It is at this moment that Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) analysis provides us with insight into the role of visibility. They discuss the potential tension between self identification and external identification, which, apart from social and group gaze, include the “formalized, codified, objectified systems of categorization” (p. 15). The state, in that sense, categorizes individuals (usually according to their identity markers) and assigns to them new identity markers through passports, fingerprints, photographs and signatures. These identity markers may or may not be based on one’s own view of identity, and yet they definitely shape this view, overlapping with what Erving Goffman (1963) puts as one of the definitions of self identification: “…namely the individual himself establishing his personal identity through documentation or testament” (p. 128). The state can define certain identity categories and decide who belongs to them, and by doing so may shape individual’s identity, sometimes by contradicting her own self understanding, thus changing it. Attached to such categorization might be formal policies or informal attitudes, which gain significance in disclosure or hiding of identities by individuals, if the individual herself is in a position to control the expression of her identity through her in/visible markers of identity. That states have the power to define, label and categorize might depend on visible markers as well as invisible ones (such as blood and kinship), and thus create new markers of identity. In/visible identities arise as problematic when people, either do not identify with what has been assigned to them, or (even if they do) do not match the
marker assigned by the state with their own identity markers, not fitting the stereotypes, in that case.

Social identification is another type of external identification and it refers to one’s categorization by the members of the group she might identity with, and the rest of the society. The potential problem in such categorization is the essentialization of group identity, leading to recognition or rejection of the individual based on group norms and oppression of sub-identity groups. The impact of such categorization in choosing to disclose or hide identities can be both legal and social, which occupy a central place in one’s decision to share her identity with the rest of the group or society. As mentioned earlier, it is not usually one’s own decision whether to make her identity known or not; and yet there might be cases where this is an issue, through invisible identities. The following section will provide some background information as to how this is possible.
Identity Markers at Work

In her work “Anti-Anti-Identity Politics” Susan Bickford (1997) makes use of Anzaldua’s (1990) “face” metaphor in referring to identity, where she says “the world knows us by our faces” (Bickford, 1997, p. 122). Bickford draws attention to the “conscious expressiveness” and “inescapable concreteness” revealed by this metaphor, that is, one can to some extent compose her face to conceal what she wants, while one’s face is still her face with all its features. This explanation will prove useful in understanding context bound identification of self, as suggested by Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p.14). Before looking into when people choose to identify themselves differently, it is necessary to see how this is possible.

Some identities such as belief, nationality, sexual orientation, and disability may sometimes be hidden and go unnoticed or they can be rendered visible through clothing-accessories and other forms of external markers. Certain privileges, discrimination, social acceptance or exclusion play a central role in the expression or downplaying of such identities; which in turn give way to social construction of such choices. Some more structural markers such as ‘race’, ‘sex’ or a visible physical disability, on the other hand, might make it harder to conceal identities. Likewise, in the invisibility of certain markers one might run into difficulties in claiming such identities, as a result of the tendency to think that if one has an identity, it has to be marked visibly. Examples might include people of mixed races, immigrants, people with invisible disabilities, who, by not looking like what they “are” and not “being” what they look like, may travel across categories, thereby destabilizing them. Why is destabilization a problem? In order to explain this, we should explore first another feature of identities: how one identifies oneself might vary from context to context (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 14).
First of all, there might be some social stigma or discrimination attached to an identity in some contexts. In such cases, individuals might not be willing to make their identity evident. An example, which is by no means representative of all such cases; but still gives an idea would be a Turkish student in a xenophobic neighborhood in Germany, who, her appearance and language permitting (not fitting the “stereotypical” Turkish image the neighborhood residents have in mind), might want to keep her national or ethnic origin to herself. Here, the destabilization is evident to the individual herself, but probably not to those around her. However, her momentary denial or concealing of her identity might as well cause various reactions by other Turkish people with her or even in herself.

Now imagine the same student before a immigration or customs officer at a US or Canadian international airport, where her appearance as not “typically” Turkish becomes an issue, since her passport has been issued by the Republic of Turkey, the citizens of which, sometimes, if not always, have reported being mistreated or suspiciously questioned in their entry to these countries since 9/11. The ambiguity results from an assumed contradiction between two identity markers, the passport issued by the state and her appearance, which is interpreted as non-Turkish by the officer. Although the photograph and the signature of the individual on the passport (the marker assigned by the State) match her person, she is somehow detected as not quite fitting the category, leading to suspicion in the eyes of the authority, immigration officer. Labels, although there, seem to cause trouble when they do not match the expectations of various agents.

Other important cases include those where a privilege is involved. Privilege can be defined as an “unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic or into a particular class” (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 173). For the purposes of this
paper, privilege includes all kinds of special group rights, positive discrimination policies, benefits and adjustments that might make life easier for the individual. It is based on Rocco and West’s definition, and yet different in terms of who receives it and why, since privilege in this sense signifies benefits ‘given to the less privileged’. Consequently state, or certain other authorities, as the sustainers of such privileges, will want to categorize individuals accordingly and police these boundaries, so that they can ensure those rights are given only to the group in question – they may, therefore, impose certain obligations and engage in surveillance. Invisible identities often lead to confusion in claiming privileges as one seeks to prove entitlement to such rights as recognized by the state. The opposite case would be where an individual seems to comply with the identity by appearance, and yet does not identify with what is imposed upon her.

The issue of social stigma is yet another determinant in discussing why one would wish to downplay or disclose an identity. Goffman (1963) distinguishes between three different types of stigma: abominations of the body (physical disabilities or disfigurements), blemishes of individual character (ie. mental disorder), tribal stigma (ie. racial, cultural and religious minorities). He suggests such stigmatizing markers, as deeply discrediting attributes, negatively influence interaction between individuals. What leads to stigma in the first place or whether or not lived experiences of individuals would affirm Goffman’s statement is a different issue. The focus here is how stigma, which leads to social exclusion, racial profiling and other consequences, as opposed to privilege, operate as a factor in either the emphasizing, disclosing or hiding of an invisible identity.
EXAMPLES OF IN/VISIBILITY: THE CASE OF INVISIBLE DISABILITIES

The above examples should not present identities as exclusively negative or restrictive forces. Problems arise where there is less awareness about the flexibility of boundaries and thus more clashing of interests. Encouraged (or discouraged) by certain motives, people might (attempt to) move across boundaries. Inherent in the problem caused by destabilization is the disclosure of a certain discourse of “we”, which the individual acts either as an insider or outsider, and at times as both. While discussing how the ability of moving across categories might be both a pleasant and unpleasant experience, Alcoff (2006) underlines that, by being from a mixed race (or mixed categories), one most of the time hears the expressions “I thought you were one of us” to “You're an other”, “I didn’t know you were like us” (p. ix). Therefore, in one’s decision to come out as under a certain category and make her identity evident lies social acceptance (or rejection), as well. Although a very relevant point, whether one can fully identify oneself with an identity before coming out will not be discussed for the purposes of this paper.

As mentioned so far, in/visibility might cause confusion for the individual due to the contradiction between her own understanding of her external identification and also for the external categorizers, since she blurs the boundaries. At the root of such confusion lies the significance attached to visible identity markers, in the absence of which one is automatically assigned to an opposite category. When a person does not reflect what is expected from a certain identity group, she is therefore identified not to belong there by the external identifiers, and thus having the possibility to pass. Examples about such invisible identities will help clarify the issue better. What follows is an examination into a specific case study, namely that of invisible disabilities, since it provides insights into the impact of invisibility on politics of identity and sheds light on people’s choices to make their identity evident or keep it hidden in relation to both
stigma and privileges. The analysis, although in different ways, might apply to all invisible identities.

Exploring the impacts of visibility on disability politics provides a clear case study for the impacts of invisibility on overall politics of identity, since, as Bérubé (1998) states, “Disability is perhaps the most unstable designations of all, when compared to race, gender, and sexual orientation” (in Linton, 1998, p. xi). The instability of disability as an identity category is evident regardless of invisible markers, since, as disability circles underline, we are all TABs—(temporarily able bodied). Such designation is therefore already fluid, and nonvisible characteristics only increase its fluidity. Having external identifiers—authorities or the society—interpret the nonvisible markers differently than the individual herself might create dissonance and anxiety and raises questions about who defines identity and what we mean by the term identity itself. In presenting the impacts of invisibility on disability politics and indicating its accordance with politics of identity, I will first give an account of the different meanings attached to disability and how this impacts the issue of in/visibility. I will then explore the motives behind disclosing invisible disabilities or keeping them hidden and raise the question of agency in defining one’s identity, which will lead to further discussion of identity and impact of invisibility on politics of identity.
Different Meanings Attached to Disability

No matter how much we emphasize that identities are not solid, a priori structures lying in the individual, we cannot ignore the fact that they shape people’s experiences even when not in contact with other people, but in relation to the whole material world. After all, quoting from a women with an invisible disability, “my disability is not invisible to me” (Disabled Feminists). Or “Hidden disabilities, while not discerned by others in public are very real to the sufferer and present unique challenges to a sufferer” (Millen & Walker, 2000, p. 4).

It is important to recognize that the social model of ‘disability’ has largely replaced the medical model of ‘handicaps’ (in the United Nations definition of ‘disability’, as well as for many states and civil society organizations) (Handley, 2003). If disability under the medical model created the idea that disability was a deficit or deficiency wholly within the body or mind of the individual, the social model of disability suggests that whatever limitations the individual experiences must be seen in relation to the accessibility of his/her environment. Thus, disability is not simply something that exists within one’s body or mind, however understood but in the relationship between the individual and her environment. In his discussion of different meanings attached to disability, Davis (1995) explains that focusing on the ‘disabled’ as created by a ‘disabler’ “…involves the idea that in an ableist society, the ‘normal’ people have constructed the world physically and cognitively to reward those with like abilities and handicap those with unlike abilities” (p. 10). If taken too far, the social model might end up ignoring the very condition of the physical body or mind, hence disregarding the individual’s own experience. The feminist perspective on disability brings together the external conditions and one’s body together, creating a more realistic view of disability both for researchers and those who experience it. As Arneil (2009) argues, “disability … is constituted by the degree to which the
environment accommodates the variety of disabled person’s needs” (p. 18). She further emphasizes this should not reduce the issue to mere social construction, ignoring the experience of the person, though, since each individual experiences her identity uniquely. Such points add to the discussion as to whom and when identities are in/visible. But most importantly, by providing a definition that includes subjective realities and external material environment within which all of us navigate, they shed light on the meanings historically attached to disability and its perception.

Regardless of the medical origins of the word disability, most literature in disability studies regard disability as a marker of identity (Linton, 1998). And when a marker is not externally evident, the identity seems to disappear or at least change. “The visible cue that serves as a triggering mechanism for social categorization no longer operates the same way” (p. 12). When we think of the term "disability" we might assume it only refers to people using assistive devices such as wheelchairs. However, not everyone with disabilities use assistive equipment or “appears” to have a disability. The Federation of Invisible Disabilities defines invisible disabilities as an “umbrella term that captures a whole spectrum of hidden disabilities or challenges that are primarily neurological in nature” (Federation of Invisible Disabilities, 2010).

People with chronic illnesses make up the majority of people with invisible disabilities. In their study, Ironside, Scheckel et. al (2003) describe chronic illness as “a disease or injury that has lasted more than 6 months and has caused an individual to significantly alter his or her day-to-day activities” (p. 172). Although these people are not recognized as disabled at first glance, they experience the world differently than the able bodied; and yet are regarded as able

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1 See the Federation of Invisible Disabilities web site for a list of invisible disabilities: http://www.fidsbc.ca/index.php
bodied. In the absence of a visible marker, the issue might come down to either disclosing their disability or passing based on the context of privilege and stigma.
Disclosure and Concealment

Samuels emphasizes the centrality of coming out and passing in visibility politics, where “coming out is generally valorized while passing is seen as assimilationist” (Samuels, 2003, p. 245), for invisibility inheres passing as able bodied, which in turn creates the possibility of disclosure. Clair, Beatty, and MacLean (2005) divide the reasons to disclose or to hide into two categories: contextual conditions, which include organizational, professional, legal environments, as well as interpersonal relationships and individual factors, which include individual differences and personal motives. Although theirs provide a broad and useful categorization, the following will focus on the stigma attached to disability as a deterrent and potential benefits as an incentive for disclosure.

A useful question that can illuminate the issue is, what is it that brings disclosure into the question in the first place? Does invisibility (or nonvisibility of disability) lead to revelation on its own? Ann Davis (2005) has suggested that it is the needs arising based on the context that create the need for acknowledging one’s disability. Such needs range from physical ones to adjust the environment and rules to social and psychological ones that seek understanding and acceptance. However, intertwined with the dilemma of disclosure is also the self image and stigma. Ironside et. al. (2003) explain that stigma attached to chronic diseases partially results from the notion that such diseases are expensive to treat and a burden on society, and their incurability makes people dependant (p. 171). Therefore, people with invisible identities might not want to be identified as such, even though there are certain benefits attached to their disclosure, and “will often have more motivation to “pass” than to “come out,” which may imperil their well-being, exacerbate their disability, and deepen their invisibility” due to the
heavy burden of teaching others about one’s condition and the fear of being stigmatized even more prominently (Davis, 2005, p. 212).

Another issue is the interplay of one’s various identities or the question of intersectionality. As mentioned before, different markers of identity might be prominent depending on the context. Although this does not mean some identities are more powerful or important than others, focusing on only one of them, whether visible or made visible by disclosure, might strike an unrealistic image of the individual. Discussing the effects of different identities on individuals, Tom Shakespeare (1996) underlines that one’s class and gender are better predictors of one’s career pattern and income than her impairment. His perspective provides the awareness necessary in analyzing one’s experiences based on their identity, urging us to avoid reducing all outcomes to one identity in isolation. ‘Race’ and ethnicity would also be key intersecting factors that would likewise shape one’s experience.

Apart from fearing stigmatization, the person might already not fully identify herself with that identity, and once she has come out, she might fear being identified only as such, reducing her to only to her disability, which Goffman (1963) refers to as “perceived focus” (p. 66). Wilton (2006) also writes about the anxiety of disclosure in the workplace where workers are concerned that it might lead not only to stigmatization but also to dismissal, therefore accommodations, for which the individual has to reveal her condition may prove ineffective. Legislation can often do very little to change affective reactions and relationships between people in the workplace (Beatty & Kirby, 2006, p. 32). In the absence of social understanding, accommodation strategies, while aiming to remove barriers, might end up posing more boundaries for the disabled. Beatty (2004) explores the motives and results of disclosing chronic illnesses in the workplace and she
states, “the invisibility of illness, which at first seemed like such a benefit is actually a mixed blessing” (p. 6).

Because, while motivations to share her disability with the authorities might lead to adjustments and benefits that will accommodate the individual better in daily life, it might also put her social or professional life at risk. Beatty further explains that the individual might choose to conceal her invisible disability with the hope of protecting a competent image in the eyes of the co-workers. It can therefore be suggested that the desire to become visible depends on to whom the disclosure is made, whether there is any benefit or adjusted manner that will facilitate the individual, in the form of customized working hours, special quotas etc., or in the form of legitimizing one’s actions, which, judged by “able” norms might seem problematic, such as poor performance, taking too many sick leaves etc.

In her study about college students with mood disorders, Nawabi (2004) states that most participants decided on whom to disclose based on different motives. For instance, participants talked to their instructors to receive support and academic accommodations, as well as to be taken seriously and to justify their poor performance and to their friends in order to enhance their relationships or raise their awareness about such invisible disabilities.

The decision to disclose or conceal certain invisible identities rely on the pros and cons of doing so and thus on the perceptions of others about disability. Most of the time benefits and downsides are intertwined and give way to what is described by Goffman (1963) as the dilemma of whether “To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (p. 56). While acquiring certain social or material privileges, individuals risk being over-identified only under one category. This indicates a similar tendency for visible identities, which, until invisible identities are discussed,
might be ignored. Visible identities are not always embraced as identities by people who have them, again for the same reasons of benefit, discrimination and one’s unwillingness to be defined (only) under that category. In cases of discovery/disclosure of invisible disabilities, or any marker associated with social stigma, the current social situation and established relationships are prejudiced, and “the stigma and the effort to conceal it or remedy it become ‘fixed’ as part of personal identity” (p. 84).

Among other problems reported by people with invisible disabilities is that of failing to convince people that they might not be as able as they seem, when they are faced with the expression “But you look good?”

Invisibly disabled people “are in a sense forced to pass, and at the same time assumed to be liars” (Samuels, 2003, p. 242). Even when such people are recognized by the authorities to benefit from certain rights, i.e. given a disabled placard, they might still be questioned by those around them. Because they seem able bodied, in case of a revelation one is confronted with a dissonance: to prove that they are not lying, perhaps by using medical reports (Davis, 2005, p. 210). The following is an example to what Davis refers to as the ‘handicapped parking space challenge’ (p. 211), experienced by Lisa Lorden, the editor of the Fibromyalgia Aware Magazine:

As I got out of the car, a woman approached me. ‘I hope you feel good about parking there,’ she said sarcastically. I was caught off guard, and responded dumbly, ‘What?’ and looked at her, not sure if I had heard her correctly. ‘I hope you’re happy,’ she said, ‘taking a space that’s for the handicapped.’ My heart was beating furiously. ‘I do have a permit,’ I stammered. ‘Well,’ she said, disdain all over her face, ‘you look like you can walk fine to me—you're about as handicapped as I am!’ (Invisible Disabilities).

3 “But You LOOK Good!” is also a leaflet printed and distributed by The Invisible Disabilities Advocate, http://www.invisibledisabilities.org/booklet.htm
Samuels (2003) also gives accounts of disabled individuals who, frustrated with strangers for not believing in their visual and hearing impairments, start using identity markers such as white canes, even though they do not need them (p. 239, 241). In such cases, the disclosure becomes an ongoing process of proving one’s disability to live up to the stereotypes and the expectations of the able-bodied.

Even if disclosure itself is not a concern for an invisibly disabled person, having to claim, prove her identity might be problematic. As mentioned before, people are defined to have invisible identities depending on the gaze—where the identification comes from. The invisible disability of an individual can be legally defined by different authorities, starting with the medical sphere, making her eligible to receive the necessary accommodations and benefits. This could lead to similar situations to those where people with other invisible identities either pass as something else, or are troubled for not complying with the expectations. The whole issue of expectations by the dominant group—in this case able-bodied—about how the disabled should look, draws attention to defining one’s body and experience based on the standards of the able-bodied, that which is regarded as “normal.” Lennard Davis (1995) focuses on the construction of normalcy and suggests “To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body” (p. 23). He further explains that the “normal” gaze perceives disability through two modalities: function as the inability to do something, and appearance, where the disabled person is “brought into field of vision and seen as a disabled person” (p. 11, 12), which, in case of invisible disabilities, prove to be misleading.

The able bodied standards derive mainly from the medical model, where “normal” was equated with a particular understanding of ‘health’ and normalcy represented the opposition to the pathological (Taylor & Mykitiuk, 2001, p. 2), or as Goffman (1963) states, from “the
tendency of large-scale bureaucratic organizations, such as the nation state, to treat all members in some respects as equal” (p. 18). Referring to the lack of different values attached to the understanding of bodies, Morris (1991) writes, “Our self image is thus dominated by the non-disabled world’s reaction to us” (p. 28). Deborah Lisi (1993) also touches upon the issue of having the self image of the disabled dominated by the non-disabled world’s reaction to them (p. 6), which sets a good example to cases where external identification and categorization shape self understanding (Brubaker and Rogers, 2000). This is particularly important if, as Kittay (2005) and Arneil (2009) argue, one of the main images associated with disability within the able-bodied world, is that of ‘tragedy’. The negative self-images required if one adopts such an identity for oneself may push the individual to reject the label of disability even if there are privileges attached to it, since the able bodied world expects “…the cripple to be crippled; to be disabled and helpless: to be inferior to themselves, and they will become suspicious and insecure if the cripple falls short of these expectations” (Goffman, 1963, p. 135).

Titchkosky (2003) suggests that “marginalization from some ‘normal’ identity category” always involves some kind of knowledge work (p. 66). Therefore, in order to comply with the disabled image, it is inevitable for the disabled to learn what “normalcy” requires, thus the expectations and the stereotypes that shape one’s role as a disabled person. It should also be noted that stereotypes might, among other reasons, be the result of the need to categorize, and might be cherished by those inside the relevant group itself. Likewise, the possibility to pass prescribes knowing stereotypes attributed to both disabled and the ‘normal.’ Goffman (1963) names the behaviours fuelled by the desire to comply with expectations as “advocated codes of conduct” that provide the individual with ‘a platform and a politics’, with ‘instructions as to how to treat others’, but most significant of all, ‘recipes for an appropriate attitude regarding the self” (p. 135).
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Discussion

Although the issue of adopting appropriate behavior in relation to a particular identity is more evident in the case of nonvisible markers—since the need results from the question of whether to pass or not—it is ever present where an identity or a certain role comes into question. The case of invisible disabilities provide a useful point of reference in explaining invisible identities, because it captures not only the external identification imposed upon people, but also the unique experience of the invisibly disabled individual, whose physical reality and environmental conditions prove that coming out is not only an act of manifestation per se, although it can be. Along with privileges and accommodations to be acquired, “recipes for an appropriate attitude regarding the self” and others set forth different alternatives for people with invisible identities, each followed by various consequences. By laying out both objective factors such as material benefits, and more subjective ones as stigma in passing or disclosure, an analysis of invisible disabilities not only captures the issue of managing different identities, but also offers a fresh perspective to the discourse of coming out. It brings to attention the experience of the individual who acts upon her identity, and yet whose external identification reflects upon to her.

Concerns around external identification in the face of invisible identities are relevant to any case where individuals with visible identities might not want to be categorized based on their identity markers. As Verena Stolcke (1995) states, sometimes immigrants might carry their foreignness in their faces (p. 8). One does not need to be a new immigrant to carry her “foreignness” in her face, people of mixed races, or following generations of immigrants might as well look “foreign”, and yet not feel so. Of course one’s appearance might affect the way she
experiences the world, as Fanon (1967) eloquently puts, “I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (p. 116). Because the categories seem rigid, those “under” or “outside” such categories might act as gate keepers and definers, and people might not favor the idea of “declaring” their identity through their appearance. The person can be recognized mainly as black, where as she is also a queer woman from a mixed racial background. However, the moment there is a visible identity that is open to categorization, all other identities go unnoticed, until there is a chance to make them evident. The iceberg model (Kreps & Kunimoto, 1994) mentioned in the following section sheds light on how focusing on a single visible identity cancels invisible ones out, causing trouble for communication in society.

The case of invisible disability provides a useful perspective in discussing the influence of invisible identities on identity politics, as it makes evident not only the context boundedness of identities but also individuals’ experiences based on their own physical conditions and the environment they live in. It raises clear cases about who defines identities and how this shapes people’s own understanding of themselves. Problems that might become “visible” while discussing the in/visibility of identities are the very problems that are often overlooked in the scholarship on identity politics. The chaos that seems to be caused by in/visibility of identities and people not fitting certain categories is the rule rather than the exception, therefore a discussion of in/visibility and how it operates can benefit the politics of identity. There seems to be a constant need to categorize in order to make sense of the world through categorizing others in relation to our own categories. This sometimes indicates itself on the bus where one might find herself wondering whether the person next to her is male or female, because of the ambiguous identity markers; where one asks “why does it matter for me? Why do I try to categorize?” Then again, in another context, where one comes across one of these boxes which asks her to choose between the following categories to represent herself on paper; “Female-Male,
Able-Disabled, White, Hispanic or of Aboriginal Origin” categorization obviously matters for the reasons discussed. Brubaker and Cooper (2000), referring to Foucauldian analysis, explain the individualizing and aggregating modes of identification and classification as the core of “governmentality” in a modern state (p. 15).

It is assumed that if one has an identity it should be visible, and based on this visibility comes categorization, which makes in/visibility an issue of concern. Kreps and Kunitomo’s (1994, p. 6) iceberg model of multicultural influence on communication is used in intercultural communication studies to draw attention to already existing differences between parties sharing even the same ethnicity, nationality or language. It is suggested that race, gender, age and nationality are the immediately noticed features of parties to communication, and once we include language in the immediately visible tip of the iceberg model, all other differences may go unnoticed, as if it were only the language creating all potential barriers.

![Figure 1 Iceberg model of multicultural influence on communication](image-url)
Similarly, once an individual is identified through a visible identity, all other identities may be downplayed or ignored. This model is a useful tool to show that invisibility does not mean absence. A discussion of in/visible identities suggests in turn, visibility does not equal the presence of what is visible. All these categories might also be both under water and at the tip of the iceberg.

The iceberg model also encourages questioning when invisibility becomes visible. Looking into invisibility shows what is clearly there but is usually ignored while concentrating too much on visible markers. Identity categories can never be separated with clear boundaries, and they are multidimensional and intersecting each other, because people might have the ability to travel across boundaries. Therefore, faced with various situations and in different contexts, people might make their previously invisible identities evident. When they are asked to fit in one of the boxes in an official form, when there is a benefit that will make their lives easier, or when they simply benefit by concealing their identity (therefore suggesting they have the opposite identity-able-disabled etc.) and thus escaping discrimination, racial profiling and so on.
Concluding Remarks

The question that remains to be asked is, does having an invisible identity and not being able to make it evident, because one fears being judged only by the appearance of that identity cause feeling invisible? If that identity, in the previous case, disability, affects one’s immediate experience with the world, then maybe yes. A general suggestion could be inferred from such perspective, in order to lift the blame from identity itself: It might be necessary to look at differences and understand them rather than downplay and ignore them with the fear of fragmentation, which Alcoff (2006) eloquently argues,

The acknowledgment of the important differences in social identity does not lead inexorably to political relativism or fragmentation, but that, quite the reverse, it is the refusal to acknowledge the importance of the differences in our identities that has led to distrust, miscommunication, and thus disunity. (p. 6)

Whether one has a visible or invisible identity affects identity politics, because categories are usually defined based on visibility, and ambiguities inherent in this determining character cause destabilization and confusion. A discussion of the issue makes it possible to revisit the already acknowledged problems blamed on identity: essentialization, homogenization, fragmentation, however, this time through a different perspective. Within the framework of identity politics, more emphasis should be attached on the fact that people move between categories. If people’s motives in doing so are analyzed, not just based on politics of privilege but also on their hesitancy to be strictly identified and categorized, it will be apparent that visibility and invisibility lie at the heart of the issue. In/visibility makes it possible for people to conceal or express different identities, however, it is the reification of visibility that partially causes people’s hesitancy. Categorization based on in/visibility facilitates essentialization and
triggers other problems associated with identity, but it also gives individuals tools to go around these problems through destabilizing boundaries. An awareness of this tension will hopefully take the blame away from identity or identity politics as divisive, and pave the way for a new analytical perspective.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


