

Special Issue Editorial: An Invitation to Reorient and Reimagine

By Sarah Caston, PT, DPT

“Change never happens at the pace we think it should. It happens over years of people joining together, strategizing, sharing, and pulling all the levers they possibly can. Gradually, excruciatingly slowly, things start to happen, and then suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, something will tip.” — Judith Heumann¹

Now more than ever, the illusory societal lines differentiating spaces for the sociopolitical, philosophical, ethical, professional, educational, and humanistic are dissolving. This change is affording us opportunities for reimagining cultural identity and value systems within society.

The permeability between and among these spheres of thought and influence can also introduce threats to those same cherished values and identities. In these times, it is the simultaneous recognition of opportunities for growth as well as the need to protect our core values of benevolence, equity, inclusion, and justice that will serve us best—as fellow humans, community members, and global citizens.

NUANCED CRITICAL THINKING

Healthcare practitioners and educators have a particularly consequential fiduciary responsibility to the public to serve, commit to excellence, and advance

our skills and knowledge. As the profession evolves to keep pace with dynamic societal landscapes, practitioners would do well to engage in more nuanced critical thinking.

It is time to adopt a philosophical approach to healthcare in addition to the critical reasoning already emphasized in health professions. This type of critical reflection, explained by physical therapist and bioethicist Barbara Gibson, encourages individuals to “commit to questioning the taken-for-granted.”²

This approach is particularly relevant to this special issue of the *Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation*, which centers the voices and lived experiences of student, educator, and clinician advocates for Disability inclusion within Physical Therapy.

HARD TRUTHS REVEALED

At first glance, this may seem like a non-essential or possibly redundant topic to highlight within a caring profession. Don’t rehabilitation professionals demonstrate inherent inclusion of people with disabilities given the nature of their work? Healthcare practitioners, often altruistic by nature, would unlikely be complicit in perpetuating inequity and lack of access

for the disabled community. Correct?

Through the powerful experience of speaking at and attending the American Council of Academic Physical Therapy (ACAPT) Inclusive Horizons Summit, it became clear to me that these oft taken-for-granted notions do *not* reflect the current realities faced by patients with disabilities—as well as practitioners, educators, and healthcare students living with a disability. The summit revealed hard truths—and suggested paths forward for rehabilitation professionals to better promote disability inclusion and equitable access.

LEADERS FORGING CHANGE

Choosing a path forward requires moral courage. Thankfully, we have many voices within the Disability community—as highlighted in the compelling student narratives and the Disability resource section within this issue—to guide us. There are scholars such as Dr. Gibson—and Dr. Lisa Meeks, and Dr. Amanda Sharp, showcased herein—who continue to lead in these spaces, and invite others to join them in this important work.

Because of the perseverance and diligent work of advocates, positive change is happening. Despite unanticipated turns and disorienting switchbacks along the journey, (which has been the case throughout history) the path toward access, inclusion, and justice continues in a benevolent direction. The foundational elements of critical inquiry will serve as guideposts for practitioners endeavoring to become anti-ableist in their practice and individual lives.

A THREE-STEP PLAN

Actualizing Dr. Gibson's framework in the context of Disability inclusion may involve three key steps:

Questioning the taken-for-granted.

Approaching with curiosity the notion that being in a healthcare field inherently leads to Disability inclusivity and justice.

Attending to power dynamics. Recognizing the power inequities often present in practitioner-patient and/or non-disabled-disabled relational dynamics, and actively seeking strategies to empower and collaborate vs. instruct and dictate.

Critiquing the dominance of positivism.

Challenging the notion that all scientific realities and lived experiences (including those of Disabled individuals) can or ought to be measured in objective and neutral ways, decontextualized from time and place, and detached from the realm of emotions, subjectivity, and sociopolitical influence. Upending this narrow notion invites one into a space of humble reflection and encourages a broader way of viewing the world.

There are many entry points to this path toward greater Disability inclusion within healthcare professions. We hope that this special issue of *JHR* invites our readers into such contemplative spaces—encouraging a sense of curiosity, of vulnerability with oneself and others—and inspires the moral courage needed to continue the vital and necessary work of caring for each other.

References

1. Heumann JE, Joiner K. Being Heumann: an unrepentant memoir of a disability rights activist. *Beacon Press*; 2020.
2. Gibson B. Author Reflection: Rehabilitation: A Post-Critical Approach. *J Hum Rehab*. 2018. <https://www.jhrehab.org/2018/04/30/author-reflection-rehabilitation-a-post-critical-approach/>

About the Author



Sarah Caston, PT, DPT is an assistant professor and assistant director of clinical education at Emory University's Doctor of Physical Therapy Program. Dr. Caston is an alumnus of Emory University's DPT Program, and received her bachelor's degree in Rehabilitation Science from the University of Pittsburgh. She serves on the American Council of Academic Physical Therapy's Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics and Professionalism, and chairs its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee.

As a clinical educator, Dr. Caston weaves a humanities focus and narrative reflections into her teaching of geriatric and neurologic rehabilitation. She has a deep interest in helping students explore their perspectives, and challenge biases, through the incorporation of narrative reflections and humanities-based creative work. In a course co-developed with colleague Dr. Sarah Blanton, *Beyond the Diagnosis: Psychosocial Topics in Rehab Through the Lens of the Humanities*, Dr. Caston promotes self-exploration and professional formation utilizing narrative and engagement in the humanities. She co-directs Emory DPT's Learning Community Program, which promotes student-faculty connections, and directs research on practical methods for improving student well-being.

Dr. Caston's scholarly interests include the intersection of the lived experience of individuals with rehabilitation education and practice, ethics in rehabilitation, and DPT student well-being. She is passionate about social justice, and promotes humanities practices and student self-reflection around the lived experiences of individuals in marginalized populations.