

Introduction: Disability and the Pandemic Daisy L. Breneman & Susan Ghiaciuc

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This issue of the *International Journal on Responsibility* is about the impossible and improbable production of knowledge through a pandemic.

The intersecting crises of 2020-2021, including the pandemic, racial and other forms of injustice, the climate crisis, economic instability, political and social division, and more, continue to disproportionately impact people with disabilities across the global community. While these crises may increase access for some, disability activists argue it is telling that it took a pandemic to fully recognize the universal importance of accessibility. The rapid pace at which problems were solved through innovations such as remote work, virtual events, or curbside services demonstrates that, when we devote effort and resources, we can create accessibility. That it took able-bodied people asking for access to make it happen highlights society's pre-existing ableism and points to our larger responsibilities to address inequities.

In truth, any gains related to improved adaptability are far outpaced by new and amplified barriers to access, including to public spaces, health care, education, and employment. In-person requirements on college campuses and places of employment, for example, create differential and inequitable access, furthering social isolation. Technology presents other barriers, such as fatigue from overreliance on screens, and lack of reliable captioning. And, the possible waning of the pandemic at the time of this writing, which remains threatened by factors such as dangerous new variants, high numbers of unvaccinated people, and relaxed prevention measures, has led many to want to just move beyond the pandemic, or, in some cases, return to a non-existent, and non-ideal, "normal." We feel it is our collective responsibility to pause, reflect, and take in the lessons from this terrible moment.

Our authors wrote under the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, and during a time when so many people continue to seek escape, these authors work to make sense of the senseless. We want to acknowledge and honor the challenges and grief, while also emphasizing it's not just about the grief—it's about what we're going to do with it. The surreal nature of this moment makes this a challenging time to be creating this journal, but also the perfect moment.

This special issue of the *International Journal on Responsibility* includes a compilation of five mixed genre works in which authors critically examine the issue of responsibility in relation to Covid-19, disability studies, disability rights, access, and equity. Intersectional approaches are illuminated here by authors engaging with such urgent considerations as gender, socioeconomic, racial, and disability justice on a national and international front.



In addition, this issue seeks to disrupt academic norms, patterns, priorities, and conceptions of time that have excluded so many. This issue was created in crisis and chaos, so we will not pretend things are “normal” (whatever that might mean). The author’s work presented here documents the ways the world has been disrupted, and the responsibility we all share in remaking it into something new and better. Late *IJR* founding Editor-in-Chief Terry Beitzel recognized in a June 2020 presentation on racial justice and the pandemic that “The greater the challenge, the greater the opportunity [. . .] the only time we can really do a huge change, like a social revolution, is when there is a huge challenge. [. . .] The irony of this is that there’s an incredible opportunity for change, and I think many people are trying to grasp that. That’s the very hopeful side of this incredible challenge.”¹

Building on Beitzel’s point, we want to acknowledge the kairotic nature of this issue of *IJR*. Ancient rhetoricians claimed the concept of *kairos* as a situational, opportune time to make an argument or initiate a discussion around a relevant issue. While it would be easy to suggest this special issue of *IJR* was chosen as a kairotic moment, or an apt time to address how the pandemic has disproportionately impacted people with disabilities across the global community, we think it’s equally important to note how the authors of this issue lend us their compellingly humanistic insights in a temporal moment, one that can facilitate moving us past a limited, ableist mindset.

While the Sophists believed every argument had at least one contrary argument, the work presented in this issue of *IJR* are arranged not as contradictory pairs, but as *kairos*-based exchanges of perspectives and experiences that engage readers in a variety of assertions that illuminate the complementary relationship between *crip-time* and *kairos*.

Just as *kairos* denotes an opportune moment, in *crip-time*, as Ellen Samuels explains, participants “break time” by adopting new rhythms, patterns of thinking, feeling, and moving through the world. As authors in this issue of *IJR* clearly highlight, everyone links to the concept of *Kairos*, but some reshape it and prioritize aspects of it that may have otherwise been unclaimed or unnoticed. Although *crip-time* challenges normativity and ableist conceptions of time, it notably underscores how socially accepted environments (mental and material) must change, instead of forcing the bodies of those with disabilities to change. We believe *crip-time* is essentially kairotic, not in the typical *Kairos*-based sense of a fleeting moment that will be lost if not seized in normative time, but in terms of the shifts and turns of attention *crip-time* creates.

In this destabilized moment--this destabilized *time*-- everyone is operating in *crip time*: it bends, moves forward/back, and is not only not a “normal” clock, but challenges and resists the notion of normal time. This pandemic has been a nanosecond, and it has been an eternity; as we try to recall an event, it could have happened last week or ten years ago. Without the rhythms of our habitual use of time, we have had the burden and opportunity of remaking time and refashioning our relationship to it.

And, yet, we also enter this conversation with a sense of urgency. We worked too hard during the pandemic, and lost too much, to ignore or forget the lessons learned. While the lessons might not be worth the loss, especially to human life, they happened, and we don’t want to lose the shifts we’ve made toward accessibility. This is not to reinforce false (white supremacist, patriarchal, ableist, neoliberal) notions of urgency, but rather to hold both the fierce urgency of now *and* the dignity, needs, and humanity of the people coming together to weave the stories of this experience into something we can use to create better stories. It is possible to respond to the exigence of the pandemic and its traumas with both swiftness and compassion.

As we talk about the challenges of the pandemic, we recognize how marginalized groups have been experiencing this same shit their entire lives. The pandemic stripped away the comforts that people with privilege used to experience. We should not recreate inequity and go back to a flawed and unsustainable “normal” that should never, ever have been normalized. This will require us to do things

¹ See also Terry Beitzel’s Introduction to *IJR* Volume 1, Issue 2, 20218, “Types of Responsibility: Challenges and Opportunities.

differently—something we tried to model in both the process and product of this journal, and something we can all do in our daily lives. Some lessons to take away might include:

Centering care, relationship and connection

The pandemic required a lot of improvisation, and expanded the possibilities of what can happen when we work together to solve crises. We all experience individual crises, but typically in a context where others around us are doing okay. The pandemic happened to all of us at once, albeit in different degrees and kinds. Because we experienced many things together (trauma, crisis, transition, destabilization, etc.), the challenges became more salient and demanded a collective, and compassionate, response. As/if the pandemic ends, let's keep that priority, and work, as Margaret Price (2021) emphasizes, to care for each other, and take collective accountability to ensure, as much as possible, everyone's needs are met. The collective grief of this moment should be used to fuel collective empathy and care.

Academic Communication and Collaboration

Academic processes and procedures became more transparent during the pandemic. In many cases, they were distilled, and higher education became even more invested in the most important parts of the academic venture, such as caring for the well-being of our students, which also helped remind us of our priorities. Faculty were invited, in some cases, into conversations about budgets and other administrative matters, spaces we don't often enter. Many faculty gained an appreciation for the challenges of keeping a university running, and administrators gained insight about the hard work of creating learning opportunities, potentially creating connections and opportunities for stronger communication and collaboration.

Increased access and equity

As well-documented by scholars such as Jay Dolmage (2017) and Margaret Price (2011), the academy pre-COVID has been, by design, a site of exclusion. The pandemic offers an opportunity, since many structures were torn-down, to recreate campuses that truly reflect, and serve, the wide variety of students, faculty, and community members who participate (or want to participate) in them.

Prioritizing life

Work environments, including academia, can be toxic and often value production over people. We center human beings, independent of what they make, do, write, teach, or serve. As emphasized by the overwhelming loss due to the pandemic (over 4 million individuals globally, at the time of this writing), more than our material output, we must honor our inherent value and prioritize our connections to one another.

Embracing (messy) process

While we are excited to share this finished product, we also want to affirm the value of the process, and what we gained from our conversations with each other, our contributors, and others about this special issue of IJR. We center relationship and process, and, in line with Robert McRuer's argument in *Crip Theory*, highlight how a focus on process can disrupt compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. Engagement with the process of making our way through a pandemic, and making meaning in it, is in itself significant.

Honesty and vulnerability

This year, many of us have learned to say “I’m not okay.” In meetings, we are taking time to be human together, asking how others are doing and expressing what we need. Deadlines have become flexible, and less important. We are being honest when we’re not in a mental/physical space to do something, and/or asking for what we need in order to be in that space, and helpfully receiving those same requests from others. Actively taking responsibility to create inclusive and caring spaces is a practice that should continue.

As we reflect on our responsibilities, we know that what we’ve learned isn’t something we can unlearn. We can’t have experienced this for nothing. However, at the time of this writing, we are witnessing a push to get back to a non-existent “normal”. For example, many companies and campuses are forcing workers back into physical workplaces, often without considerations for access. Many states and localities are abandoning safety protocols, even as new COVID cases continue. We invite the readers of this journal to explore with our authors both the tragic losses and injustices of the pandemic, but also the hopeful potential for more positive innovations. It will take all of us, together, bearing responsibility for creating this change.

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