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## DISABILITY, GENDER, OR SOMETHING ELSE? IDENTITY-BASED INTERPRETATIONS OF INEQUALITIES OVER THE LIFE COURSE IN FRANCE

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----- Author accepted manuscript -----

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### Author/s Biography/ies:

Célia Bouchet completed a PhD in sociology at CRIS and LIEPP in 2022. Her research draws on mixed methods to investigate the measures and mechanisms of social inequalities, particularly in relation to disability and gender. Her recent publications include:

Handicap et genre dans la formation des couples. Des ressorts sociologiques classiques ? [Disability and gender in the forming of couples: Classical sociological drivers?] *Revue française des affaires sociales*, n°1, 2021, pp. 43-68. In French.

*Handicap et destinées sociales : une enquête par méthodes mixtes [Disability and social destinies: a mixed-methods study]*. PhD Dissertation in Sociology. Institut d'études politiques de paris - Sciences Po, 2022. In French

Enquête Handicap et destinées sociales : entretiens (1/2) [Disability and social destinies survey: interviews (1/2)], 2022, <https://doi.org/10.21410/7E4/IIQYAR>, data.sciencespo, V1. In French

Enquête Handicap et destinées sociales : exploitations statistiques (2/2) [Disability and social destinies survey: statistical analysis (2/2)], 2022, <https://doi.org/10.21410/7E4/SY7APQ>, data.sciencespo, V1. In French

Mathéa Boudinet started her PhD in sociology at CRIS and LIEPP in 2019. Her thesis focuses on disabled women's positions on the labor market in France, and uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. Her previous research was on sheltered workshops in France. Her recent publication include:

(with Anne Revillard). « Politiques de l'emploi, handicap et genre [Employment policies, disability, and gender] », *Travail, genre et sociétés*, vol. 48, n°2, 2022, pp. 71-87. In French.

(with Anne Revillard) *Portraits de travailleuses handicapées [Portraits of disabled women workers]*, Québec: ESBC, 2022. In French.

« Sortir d'ESAT ? Les travailleur·ses handicapé·es en milieu protégé face à l'insertion en milieu ordinaire de travail » [*Leaving the sheltered workshop ? French disabled workers in sheltered employment and the question of integration in the mainstream workplace*], *Formation Emploi*. 2021 n° 154. pp. 137-156. In French

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper draws on biographical interviews to analyze identity-based interpretations of inequalities by disabled people in France, as these understandings are formed and transformed over the course of their lives. We combined the material from two different studies to create a corpus of 65 life stories from working-age people with contrasting impairments in terms of type, degree, and onset, as well as various profiles in terms of gender, race, and class. When talking about the inequalities they face, respondents commonly made use of identity labels (gender, class, race, disability), among those available in their micro and macro environments. They usually presented these categories as separate and cumulative, and only a few upper-class disabled women developed reflections in line with an intersectional model. This fragmentation of identity categories translated into the framing of each inequality encountered through a single lens. Respondents mentioned race, class, or gender mainly when evoking topics and contexts that the public debate highlights as problematic, while their references to disability covered a variety of disadvantages. Although the interview situation might have fuelled this framing, we also showed that certain earlier socialization processes led people to believe that their disability was the source of the inequalities they encountered. Lastly, we identified three turning points that encourage shifts in the interpretation of inequalities, these are the availability of a new label to qualify one's experience, a competing identity-based interpretation for a mechanism, and access to a different, intersectional model of inequality

**KEYWORDS:**

1. disability
2. reflexivity
3. identity
4. inequality
5. intersectionality
6. turning points

### **Main Body:**

According to the Handicap-Santé Ménages survey carried out in France in 2008, more than a third of people with a disability officially recognized by the French administration<sup>1</sup> report having experienced some form of unfavorable or stigmatizing treatment in their lifetime, such as insults or denial of rights (Bouvier & Jugnot, 2013, p. 203). This proportion is more than double that of able-bodied people and 40% higher than the average for people with lasting health problems or limitations. However, this result only reflects the fact that this population frequently mentions negative treatment “related to health or disability.” By contrast, they declare fewer instances of negative treatment related to other causes than people without administrative recognition of a disability, who share similar socio-demographic characteristics (Bouvier & Jugnot, 2013). This result suggests that interpretations of inequalities are influenced by an association with the “disability” label. However, the prompt only calls for disabled respondents to participate in an overall retrospective assessment, it does not seek to grasp how people have come to these perceptions and framings of inequalities, or the way they have reproduced or questioned them, over their life course.

Based on biographical interviews from two different studies, this chapter looks at identity-based interpretations of inequalities by disabled people in France, as they are formed and transformed over the course of their lives. We analyze how disabled people come to mention their affiliation with different social groups as explanatory factors for negative experiences, as well as the turning points that may shift their perceptions. For this purpose, we propose original connections between various fields of literature, from subjective accounts of identities and inequalities to life course actors and processes.

We will present these theoretical frameworks, and then describe the empirical protocol used to implement them. By combining two studies, we built a corpus of 65 biographical interviews with disabled people with contrasting impairments in terms of type, severity, and onset, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> People recognized by French law as legally entitled to employment under the disability employment quota.

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various profiles in terms of gender, race, and class. Based on the life narratives of the respondents and the reflexive analyses they provided, we show how they interpret experiences of inequality using the identity categories and analytical grids available to them in their micro and macro environments. Interpretations in terms of race, class, and gender are highly dependent on the content that has been highlighted as discriminatory or injurious by public debate. Disability proves to be a more widespread and transversal angle of understanding. This assessment might have been fuelled by the methods employed, notably as the advertisements used the term “disability.” However, it also reflects certain socializations experienced earlier in life by respondents who were publicly labeled as disabled. Finally, we identified three types of turning points where people reshape their conception of the inequalities they encountered, these are self-identification with a new identity label, exposure to an alternative interpretation of inequality, and introduction to an intersectional model of inequalities. In all these circumstances, both macro structures and micro-interactions contribute to widening the field of reflexive possibilities.

### **Subjective accounts: from identities to inequalities**

Our analysis of identity-based interpretations of inequalities envisions identities as relatively stable, although context-dependent. Nevertheless, the research has yet to address peoples’ own perspectives on multiple identities and engage more directly with the literature on subjective inequality.

### **Disability Among Salient Identities**

Whether identities are circumstantial or enduring is a controversial issue in the social sciences. Some authors emphasize the fluidity of identities, showing how they are shaped in interactions (Goffman, 1956; Dubar, 1992), while others emphasize how social structures condition the way people are seen and how they see themselves. With the notion of master status, Hughes (1945) underlines that certain labels systematically override others in the eyes of observers. Building loosely on this legacy, identity scholars noticed that certain identities are more “salient” than others, meaning they are likely to affect how people present themselves and act in a variety of contexts

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(Stryker, 1980). We rely on a mixed conception of identities, which allows for both relative stability and forms of adjustment.

Since Goffman's (1963) seminal text, a large body of work has emphasized the importance of disability in categorizing others, if not in self-identification. Like gender and race, disability can function as a master status, operating permanently, conditioning access to other statuses, and shaping their content (Barnartt & Altman, 2016). People with visible impairments are likely to be directly stigmatized, while those with invisible impairments might be depreciated by other judgmental labels (e.g., stupidity, laziness; Engel & Munger, 2003). A few studies have noted that disability could even overshadow the categories of gender (Lorber, 2000) and race/ethnicity (Rohmer & Louvet, 2009) in labeling processes.

In contrast, self-identification of disability appears to be mixed. While pioneering research in the United States has shown the obstacles preventing disabled people from identifying themselves as a minority group (Davis, 1995; Hahn, 1988), empirical research indicates that in France, self-identification with the disability label and feelings of affiliation with a disability community vary widely (Ravaud, Letourmy, & Ville, 2002). Overall, the visibility of the impairment, the timing and circumstances of its onset, and the social and legal recognition within the field of disability influence the way people qualify themselves (Barnartt & Altman, 2016; Engel & Munger, 2003).

### **Multiple Identities: From Interactions to Self-Perceptions**

While the notions of "master status" and "identity salience" imply multiple identity labels, the links between these labels have yet to be documented. The intersectional approach is useful for this and could serve the study of self-perceptions.

The notion of intersectionality was created in North America by Black feminists, to refer to the specific disadvantages faced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1990). It was subsequently widely adopted across the social sciences, expanding into a broad agenda to study social processes for individuals and groups based on their multiple belongings (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Historically,

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intersectionality has focused on the links between gender, race, and class, but recent academic work emphasizes that disability also contributes to intersectional processes (Barnartt & Altman, 2016).

Existing studies of intersectionality provide valuable insights into the dynamics that co-construct inequalities. In contrast, individuals' own accounts of their experiences remain insufficiently studied. It seems however that intersectional logics are used by people unfamiliar with the theoretical concept. A rare study of subjective experiences described by members of multiple minority groups (Black gay or bisexual men) noted that many participants present their Blackness and sexual orientation as intertwined and inseparable (Bowleg, 2013). Yet, a few of the interviewees felt that race predominates and generates most of the disadvantages they would encounter (*ibid*). The sources of heterogeneity in their representations are yet to be analyzed.

### **Connections between Self-Identifications and Subjective Inequalities**

The links between identity labels and inequalities are obvious. On the one hand, identity-based categorizations foster inequalities, given that when gender, race, or social class are salient in a social context, they are often subject to bias, ultimately resulting in social hierarchies (Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). On the other hand, inequalities fuel identities. Only members of disadvantaged groups must conceptualize an identity for themselves whereas privilege, white privilege for example, often acts as an unquestioned norm, (McIntosh, 1989).

Despite these obvious connections, there has been little dialogue between studies on identity labels and studies on subjective accounts of inequality. Multiple studies have examined minority groups' views of, and responses to, adverse treatment and inequalities (e.g., Dubet et al., 2013; Lamont et al., 2016). However, these studies focus on the identification of inequalities rather than their qualification. People's interpretations of inequality drivers and their use of identity labels for this purpose are not questioned.

Taking identity categories as a starting point, we see that they are likely to play a role in the way members of disadvantaged groups interpret the inequalities they encounter. But what are these reflexive analyses, and how do they link multiple labels? To address these issues, it is important to

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acknowledge first that reflections develop in relation to the influence of social environments and second, that they can shift over time. A life course perspective provides significant contributions in both these areas.

### **Reflexivity through a life course perspective**

The concepts of a life-course approach are particularly useful when it comes to capturing the interrelationships between agency and structural influences over the lifetime, as well as in capturing the dynamics and evolutions of situations. After presenting this conceptual toolkit, we will expand on the terminology of evolutions, explaining why we focus on turning points, in contrast to the rich literature on life cycle ages and life transitions for disabled people.

### **Use of Agency and Structural Influences**

“Agency” and “Linked Lives” are two cornerstones of the life-course concept developed by Elder (1985), a pioneer in this literature. By combining these two notions, Elder surmounted a major challenge, by linking people's intentions and their capacity for action to the social circumstances imposed on them. The author also emphasized that such social circumstances operate in different domains (e.g., family, professional, organizational) and at different levels (interpersonal relationships, national institutional frameworks, etc.)

Several French studies have echoed this view. As Santelli (2019) noted, much of the existing French research on life paths (“parcours de vie”) shares common ground with Elder's model, even if it does not cite it. Research on socialization also offers some related contributions, and although top-down views within this literature led Elder to abandon the concept, other work addresses the interplay of agency and structural influences over a lifetime (Dubar, 2015).

### **Turning Points in Disabled People's Lives**

Another major advantage of the life course approach is documenting processes in a dynamic way, by reporting evolutions over time. This perspective has allowed for instructive analyses of the lives of disabled people, raising the challenges presented by life-cycle age norms (Heller, 2011;



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Priestley, 2003) and/or transitions to typical adult statuses (Janus, 2009; Wells, et al., 2003; Gibson, et al., 2014).

The temporal concept of turning points has been less used in disability research. While transitions designate the entry and exit of predetermined social statuses and roles (e.g., school, employment, conjugality), turning points cover non-codified evolutions either in material situations and/or in representations (Elder, et al., 2003; Wethington, et al., 1997).

However, the notion of turning points has the potential to account for a range of transformative episodes in the lives of disabled people, while avoiding a framing that would consider disability itself as a personal and tragic turning point (Barnes & Oliver, 2012). Far from reproducing a self-pitying discourse, we intend to document the conditions that encourage a sharpening of reflexivity.

### **Methods**

The paper is based on 65 biographical interviews with disabled people from two different studies, respectively led by Célia and Mathéa in France. Biographical interviews were particularly useful for our investigation, as they provided both subjective narratives and life course perspectives (Caradec, et al., 2012).

The two studies share some similarities (Table 1). They were both conducted in French in France, over close time periods. The two authors have similar profiles (being perceived as women, white, in their 20s, university educated, and non-disabled). The two surveys also complement each other as their target groups differ to some extent. Both focus on working-age people living in mainstream housing, but they differ in terms of gender, type and onset of the impairment, and self-identification as disabled people. Célia targeted people with visual impairments or early onset specific learning disorders (SLD) such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia, while Mathéa focused on women with mobility impairments, visual impairments, or chronic diseases. Subsequently, the two advertisements also produced different framing effects. Célia referred to specific impairment

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groups and specified the timing of onset, whereas Mathéa referred to women with specific impairments. Both included the term disability, but it was not central in either case.

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*TABLE 1 HERE*

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Both authors collected data on social class, gender, race, and the role individuals attribute to these factors in relation to their life course. Mathéa also openly asked the person to reflect on the specificity of their life course as a “disabled woman” at the end of the interview, while Célia most typically captured the episodes of inequality (and their identity-based interpretations) through follow-up questions, asking for clarification of terms such as “devaluation.”

The samples include diverse profiles in terms of education, race, and (for Célia's study) gender and disability self-identification. College graduates are however slightly overrepresented, compared to the composition of the French disabled population (Vérétout, 2015).

The first analyses of the data were carried out separately by each author. They both created their own codebooks based on their research questions and treated their materials on different CAQDAS (RQDA, Atlas TI). Each author started to code deductively their material according to the themes they had selected for their interview questions. They then added inductively new thematic codes as they read the transcripts of the interviews. They shared their main results concerning intersectionality and perception of inequalities, by comparing the codes from their respective analyses. During this triangulation process, the team noticed a number of similarities in the two datasets, such as the overwhelming role of self-identification to disability in the interpretation of inequalities. They also found that their results complement each other, with Mathéa's interview featuring more perceptions of racial discrimination and Célia's interview, perceptions of discrimination due to socioeconomic background. Last, each author selected the cases from their study that illustrated best each chosen theme, and they designed together the global structure of the paper.

## Results

### Separate Identity Labels to Describe Inequalities

Our respondents noticed inequalities in their daily lives, interpreted them, and reflected on their origins, often building on identity labels (gender, class, race, disability).<sup>2</sup> Overall, the identities of disadvantaged groups are more remarkable than those of privileged groups. The respondents could not always obtain official “disability” status, as this is dependent on the legal and social framework. Furthermore, most respondents framed the categories they employed as mutually exclusive: they typically aggregated them in a cumulative (e.g., “double penalization”) or analogical manner (e.g., “like women”). Only a few highly educated, disabled women (3 to 5 years of higher education) developed reflections implicitly or explicitly rooted in intersectional theory.

In their biographical accounts, people intertwined identities and inequalities, mentioning their self-identifications as they recalled the inequalities they encountered. Members of multiple minority groups, who knew they were exposed to various types of inequalities, were likely to refer to several identity labels. On the contrary, people who, apart from their disability, belonged to privileged groups (White, male, heterosexual, upper-middle class), only cited “disability” when describing their life course and the disadvantages they encountered. For instance, Jean Kieffer,<sup>3</sup> a blind music teacher, presented the factors involved in hiring decisions in a binary way. He distinguished his skills from prejudices about disability.

I had a hard time getting a job! Because it doesn't depend on the skills you possess, it also depends on the openness of the different protagonists! In particular, the director of the music school, for example. Who says yes or no, depending on whether he has prejudices about disability. And that goes for any job... "Yes, the person - I'll give it a shot, I'm open, I'll give it a shot, I'll give it a shot, the person is suitable to teach." And

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<sup>2</sup> A minority of people considered that none of the categories (gender, class, race, disability) had played a role in their life paths. This group is composed of people with very heterogeneous profiles, both in terms of class, generations, types, and onset of impairments.

<sup>3</sup> All first and last names are pseudonyms.

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then you have people who are closed-minded. And I've experienced that! People who tell you, "No, a blind person can't teach." So as a result, because a blind person can't teach for them, there is no openness, so there is no possibility of being hired. (Jean Kieffer, visual impairment)

As a White heterosexual man who inherited significant economic resources from his parents, Jean Kieffer did not think of any identity label other than disability that influenced the "openness" of potential employers. By extension, over the entire interview, disability was the only category of self-identification to which he referred.

Being part of a disadvantaged group is not enough to activate an identity label, self-identification is also necessary. This is strikingly evident for self-identification with disability. In Célia's sample, almost half of the respondents with an SLD never used the term "disabled person" or the term "disability." This result can partly be explained by the fact that French disability legislation has only addressed this condition since 2005,<sup>4</sup> and social representations have not evolved in a corresponding manner. We will expand on this result in the last section.

A second important framing effect was that most respondents treat the identity labels available to them (i.e., identities that are both disadvantaged and socially prevalent) as separate. In their view, each label represents an alternative explanation of the inequalities they experienced. The case of Karima Nadin, a woman with a mobility impairment, illustrates this. She was required to do an internship to obtain her technical certificate (French "Brevet d'études professionnelles"). She described poor working conditions, as her boss refused to give her meal vouchers and commented frequently on her inability to get work done. During the interview, she tried to determine which of her identities led her superior to treat her badly: "At first I thought, 'Because I'm an intern.' Then I thought: 'Well, because I'm a Rebeu [slang for Arab].' And then I thought, 'I have no idea. Is it because I'm disabled? Actually, I don't really know, um... I know he didn't like me.'" (Karima Nadin,

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<sup>4</sup> Act No. 2005-102 of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunity, the participation and integration of disabled people as fully fledged citizens.

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mobility impairment). She did not think about the interconnection between labels and perceived them as distinct.

This type of reasoning follows an additive and cumulative logic. In Mathéa's study, as many as a quarter of disabled women (7 out of 28) used the term “double penalization,” especially when asked to reflect on the specificity of their experience as disabled women. While Célia's study did not include the same question, a few respondents came up with metaphors based on the same idea of an accumulation “for me, it [discrimination] is like a mille feuille:<sup>5</sup> dyslexia, epilepsy, non-binarity...” (Jackie Raynal, SLD).

This view of identities and identity-based inequalities also favors the use of analogy: one label works “like” another, and there is little reflection on the possible connections between them. During the interviews, four White disabled respondents drew an analogy between disability and race or ethnicity, assuming similarities (community belonging) or differences (level of exposure to discrimination). Strikingly, a disabled woman even drew an analogy between disability and gender.

Once we're in a relationship... we basically lose all our rights [reference to the method used to calculate disability welfare benefits under French law]. It's not quite that simple, but that's about it. (In an agitated tone) So... what's this bullshit? That is to say, the other partner in the couple becomes responsible for you! But why should it be so? It means that we're not a whole person... I don't know... [...] It somehow gives the other person power over you! Sort of, like before, over women who stayed at home... it's, almost the same thing, practically. (Carolina Mendoza, visual impairment)

Carolina Mendoza drew a parallel between two asymmetrical forms of economic dependence among (implicitly heterosexual) couples. On the one hand, between able-bodied men and able-bodied women who “stayed at home” in the past (based on the idea that this type of situation would no longer exist today); and on the other hand, between disabled people and their

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<sup>5</sup> A mille feuille pastry is made out of layers of separate pastry sheets.

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able-bodied partners. She used a “we” that placed her on the side of disabled people, without indicating the same affinity towards the group of women (“like before, the women who stayed” rather than “like before, we stayed”). She thus connected the two labels using an analogy.

Finally, while the vast majority of our sample shared the idea that identity mechanisms were separate and cumulative, this view was not hegemonic. A few highly-educated disabled women (3 to 5 years of higher education) developed a rhetoric consistent with the intersectional framework, referring to a unique configuration between gender and disability. For example, Lucile Morin, a graduate with a master’s degree, with both visual and hearing impairments, successively compared her income to that of her colleagues, able-bodied or disabled people, men or women. In doing so, she emphasized the uniqueness of her position as a disabled woman.

In terms of... disabled people, disabled women, I'm in the 1%. Because first, very few disabled people work. Even fewer women. To start with, women work less than men, in terms of the employment rate. Disabled women work less than... than disabled men. And on top of that, disabled women... Well, disabled people are less qualified. With 5 years of higher education... Among the general population, people with 5 years of higher education are not the majority. And among the disabled working population, people with 5 years of higher education are even less the majority. And if they are women... you see the funnel! (Lucile Morin, visual and hearing impairments)

In this example, Lucile Morin framed her situation in an intersectional way, even though she did not actually refer to intersectional theory *per se*. She ended up specifically comparing herself to disabled women, as she considered that this group faced unique challenges. Relying on statistics, she presented the range of difficulties that these women face, using a “funnel” metaphor instead of an additive approach.

The fragmentation of identity labels results in most, although not all, respondents seeking to identify the mechanisms of each inequality they faced through a single lens. As we will see, the

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identity category they selected for their interpretation depends on the context in which the episode took place, as well as their socialization earlier in life.

### **Race, Class, Gender: The Social and Political Salience of Identity-Based Inequalities**

Interpretations of inequality in terms of race, class, or gender are strongly shaped by the topics and contexts that public debate highlights as problematic, such as racial segregation or the gender wage gap. These framings facilitated our respondents' detection of such inequalities and their qualifications in terms of identity. In other words, the social and political focus on certain modalities of identity-based inequalities contributed to making identities salient to people in those specific circumstances.

Let us consider race first. In our samples, forced spatial division between racial groups and stereotypes tied to racial labels were both perceived as manifestations of racism. Karima Nadin, whom we mentioned earlier, described how she was shocked by the racial segmentation of workspaces when she entered one of her previous offices.

When I entered the facility, there was a door and ..., so it's like platforms and there was... I promise you it's true, there was... they had... they had put them by color! By color! By skin color! And I promise you... No, but I promise you...[...] I turned my head to the left, there were people who were from Overseas France. So they were pretty brown. On the right, they were more white. And they had red hair. And there, next to them, they were more from the Maghreb. I promise you it's true! (Karima Nadin, mobility impairment)

A few respondents also identified stereotypical comments about them as racist. Marion Corbin, a visually impaired second-generation Asian masseuse, reported being regularly mistaken for a prostitute: "It's true that clients often ask me if I am 'that kind of masseuse'" (Marion Corbin, visual impairment).

The second form of identity-based interpretation of inequalities, through the lens of social class, was particularly invoked in the case of exclusion or bullying at school. These reflections came

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from people who had experienced diverse modes of schooling (mainstream or specialized). Thierry Bernat, a blind man, and Alison Todd, a woman with SLD, both had parents who were small shopkeepers. They each described being excluded by other children because of their social class in mainstream schools: "In that neighborhood, there were mostly bourgeois, upper-class people. And so it was... it was a bit complicated, this... hanging out with them. Because I didn't have their codes at all, I didn't speak like them" (Alison Todd, SLD). As they noticed a contrast between the other students' lifestyles and their own, both respondents identified it as a driver for their exclusion.

Finally, women adopted a gender perspective to interpret certain inequalities that received particular attention in the academic world and in public debate over the past few decades. For example, vertical and horizontal divisions in the labor market, wage gaps, and violence against women. Several respondents mentioned the concentration of women (whether able-bodied or disabled) in specific sectors and/or in low-level positions. Peggy Toullec combined both these aspects in her reflexive statement.

Gender discrimination, no, I can... I can describe it, well, through the lens of the gender determinism that I experienced. Because all the [other] women in my family uh... had... no or little education. When they had some, it was in the domestic arts. [...] Above all, I have worked in professions that are very strongly gendered, with a low gender mix, and which, curiously, pay very little! (Peggy Toullec, chronic illness)

Drawing on the sociological concepts she learned during her university years, Peggy Toullec analyzed her own employment disadvantages and those of the women in her family in terms of "gender determinism." Unfavorable influences acted both vertically (obstacles to further education for women in the context of the 1970s) and horizontally (orientation towards typically female sectors that are given little market value).

Furthermore, the respondents recurrently emphasized one specific aspect of gender inequality in employment, the wage gap.



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So actually, in terms of wages, compared to women...in...in the company, I had no...I never had any problems with my disability, right. But compared to men at the same level - uh... at the same level, since I was... a supervisor and an executive - I faced a big wage gap. (She smiles) [...] Afterwards, they tried to explain to me that, no, I wasn't doing the same job as the uh... well the... the title I had in the company, and so on. I think that's pretty much what all women hear. (Martine Fabre, mobility impairment)

Martine Fabre clearly identified the gap that separates her from her male colleagues, and she was not convinced by the justifications her superiors put forward. She believed her situation mirrored a systemic problem and was “pretty much what all women heard.”

Finally, many of the women in our samples reported violence in a wide variety of forms, ranging from harassment at school and in family settings during their adolescence, to sexual harassment in a professional context, or the order to undress for a medical examination in a room.

A notable difference from other identity-based interpretations of inequality is that when the women we interviewed referred to such violence, they did not systematically evoke the role of gender, although their vocabulary was gender-specific. They dismissed other influences, such as disability: “[This depreciation wasn’t] about my disability! It was about my appearance. [...] it bothered them that I, who... had a great figure, didn't use it to please the boys” (Audrey Rolland, SLD). The counter-interpretations were most explicit when the context might have pointed to these other factors. For instance, Mélodie Garcia, a woman with a visual and hearing impairment, immediately specified that “disability has nothing to do with it” as she finished explaining how, as a young adult, she was sexually assaulted at a vocational center for visually impaired people.

### **Invoking Disability: from the Interview Context to Socialization Effects**

During the interviews, the respondents most often shared analyses of inequalities in terms of disability, at least among those who self-identify as disabled people. Nevertheless, we analyze some situations they interpreted as being exclusively linked to disability from an intersectional standpoint. For instance, Nathalie Petit, a woman with a mobility impairment, explained that she

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was “categorized [by her colleagues] as... [...] someone unstable, uh, a crazy person... and all, yes, all the clichés about disability”. She believed her colleagues called her “crazy” because of her disability, stating clearly in the quote that it is a “cliché about disability.” However, it can be argued that this term also originates in gender. We interpret this example as a demonstration of intersectionality, Nathalie Petit was called crazy because she was a disabled woman.

Among the interpretations expressed by respondents, the predominance of disability over other labels can be explained, in part, by the interactional context of the interviews. Both Célia and Mathéa mentioned disability in their advertisements for the survey, and while Mathéa also referred to gender, Célia did not cite any other labels. Race, class, and gender might have seemed irrelevant to some respondents, even though Célia repeatedly emphasized that she was interested in the diversity of life courses. Moreover, when people did talk about labels, the degree to which they were explicit might have depended on how they categorized Célia and Mathéa. Here, the contrast between gender and disability is explicit: it is taken for granted that as women themselves, both authors are familiar with women, but not with disability. Seven respondents (either men, women, or non-binary people) addressed Célia using a collective “you” that includes sighted people or able-bodied people in general; and 10 respondents openly questioned her level of knowledge about disability. This asymmetry might have led people to consider it more important to detail disability-related issues, including interpretations of inequalities.

Nevertheless, these interaction dynamics do not explain all the framing effects we observe. Life course analyses also provide evidence that people categorized by others as disabled learned to prioritize the disability label over time. As this single label was repeatedly assigned to them, they ended up assimilating that it supplants any other.

Lola Joly grew up with a visible mobility impairment, which matched the stereotype of disability (e.g., a person in a wheelchair, Engel & Munger, 2003). She explained that she has always been primarily perceived as a disabled person. Using the recent wedding of a close friend as an example, she recalled with amusement: “I asked him, ‘Well, is your wedding going to be fancy or

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not, I'm thinking about my dress, all that stuff,' And he said 'No, but who cares, anyway... it's not your dress we're going to see.' Okay... [She laughs]" (Lola Joly, mobility impairment). With his remark, her friend tactlessly informed her that her impairment would be more salient than her femininity, regardless of what she wore.

This labeling had a lasting influence on the way Lola Joly conceived her identity and, by extension, her identity-based interpretations of her experiences. This was particularly evident when she described her confusion when invited by another friend to design a conference as a woman entrepreneur.

I said to him, "Oh, that's great, let's do it... I'll sell you a... I'll sell you a conference on disability in the workplace, etc." And he said to me, "No, no, I don't give a damn about disability, I don't give a damn about disability, uh... I want to hear you talk about... what it means to be a woman entrepreneur." [...] I said, in fact... "I'm not... I don't know what it is to be a woman. You want me to talk about... about, about... being a woman entrepreneur, but I don't know what it is to be a woman. Because I'm disabled. So... we can't... I'm not... a woman". (Lola Joly, mobility impairment)

Lola Joly's response shows that she felt legitimate to describe and reflect on her professional career as a disabled person, but not as a woman. With this, she indicated that she felt as if she had mastered the professional issues related to disability but not those related to gender. This result sheds light on how she framed her professional history throughout the interview as, in her reflective analysis, she never referred to gender and only cited the disability category.

### **Turning Points in Interpretations: Structural and Interpersonal Components**

Although repeated labeling by others in early socializations encouraged respondents to read inequalities through the lens of disability, their interpretations did sometimes change upon secondary socializations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). We identify three turning points in the understanding of inequalities over the life course. These are the extension of the pool of labels available to qualify one's experience, alternative identity-based interpretations for a mechanism,

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and the discovery of an intersectional model of inequalities. These three transformations depend on structural parameters (such as the evolution of public policies) as well as interpersonal dynamics.

The first type of turning point occurs when respondents acquired an additional label to qualify their experiences. This is particularly common among those in the sample with SLD. In France, the increasingly widespread diagnosis of this disability at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then its connection to disability policies at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reshaped the labels disseminated in society. On a micro-scale, this information then reached people through significant interactions.

Four respondents were diagnosed with SLD in adulthood. All of them described their diagnosis as a major life changer. For example, when he was in his late thirties, Yacine Kasmi's wife encouraged him to consult a speech therapist. His account shows how his diagnosis led him to a serious reinterpretation of the difficulties he had encountered during his schooling. While he previously blamed his "school failure" on his "stupidity," following a meritocratic paradigm, he came to speak of legitimate "issues" linked to an "illness." Subsequently, he underwent speech therapy and decided to change profession: "It allowed me to say to myself "But there is still time, there is still time to do things... there are still things to do, there are also other jobs, maybe" (Yacine Kasmi, SLD).

In some cases, people self-identified as disabled after such a late diagnosis. This could also occur long after a childhood diagnosis that was not associated with the disability label at the time (typically among people who were educated before the 2005 law). In both situations, the disability label could either be a stigma that people reject, if they already had arrangements that compensate for their difficulties or an asset to account for the disadvantages they experience. Audrey Rolland, a low-income single mother, wavered between these two views. She described how she learned that SLDs were covered by disability legislation after her son's diagnosis, three decades after her own.

I was always told that I had SLD. I was never told that I was disabled! It was when my son was... a... when I had to ask for my son [funding for occupational therapy]. We have to ask for it, from the Caf [Caisse d'allocations familiales, the public organization that

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provides social benefits related to family, housing, and disability]. And there, I saw "disability benefit"! And that's when I saw that they [SLD and disability] were associated. And then... it's quite recent, you know! And... and, yes, it gave me a shock! (She laughs) Well, yeah, it was a shock. And... I think "Well, if they want." And so I said to myself, at one point (In an animated tone) "They pissed me off so much with this... that, yeah, for sure, I'll ask them! Because... because at some point, screw it!" (Audrey Rolland, SLD)

Raised in a family where she was exposed to a lot of mockery and criticism, Audrey Rolland immediately spotted the risk of stigmatization that accompanies the term disability. It is a "shock" to be "look[ed] at like that." But she also made use of this label as a tool to gain recognition of the unfair treatment she faced: people have "pissed [her] off so much." Finally, she also contemplated using the label to obtain material compensation for this prejudice.

The second turning point in the interpretation of inequalities is the replacement of one assumption of identity mechanism by another. The political and social visibility of certain modalities of inequality based on race, class, and gender (see above) provided counterpoints to disability-related interpretations. Here again, as the case of Nolwenn Dubois illustrates, interactions are an essential feature of these secondary socializations. Early in the interview, Nolwenn Dubois, a blind woman in her thirties, mentioned that people touch her on the street to help her. She immediately connected this with the fact that she is a woman and clarified that she did not think it would happen to a disabled man. When asked to explain what "in [her] personal experience" made her think this way, she elaborated:

What made me aware, it's not so much what I experienced, it's more the discussions I had with sighted people. Men who - or women, men or women in fact who tell me, "If you were 6'3", maybe people... people would protect you less." Because I've lived it. I've done [internships], and... being the only blind person...actually most of them

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protect me. And then it's (she mimes someone grabbing her to guide her) "It's this way," or whatever. (Nolwenn Dubois, visual impairment)

In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of gender stereotypes in society, including the belief that women need to be protected. This information fed the reflexivity of some of Nolwenn Dubois' intern colleagues. As they shared their perspectives with her, they broadened her understanding of the inequalities she encountered.

The third and last turning point is the following. A few women respondents changed their interpretations of inequality after acquiring an intersectional perspective, either through academic material (such as social science courses) or cultural media (podcasts, cultural programs). Exposure to these vectors of highbrow culture was selective as all the women who experienced this turning point had received a higher education.

I think that in ten years, I will be a full-fledged woman! [...] I think that disability and... and femininity, well for me it has been... We are so infantilized with this disability that it is difficult... I didn't feel like a woman for a long time. I didn't feel equal to others. [...] And I heard a woman on the radio, her name is Rokhaya Diallo, who talked about... intersectionality. She is an intersectional feminist. I said to myself, "What is that? And in fact it's... it felt good. Because in fact, I didn't recognize myself in the feminist discourse. And they never talked about me either. And she said, "Well, you see, a Black woman is not going to experience the same discrimination as a Black man. A disabled woman will not experience the same discrimination as a non-disabled woman." And there, I recognized myself, you know. (She slaps the table to emphasize her point) I said to myself: she's awesome, this girl. (Émeline Lemaire, visual impairment)

Like Lola Joly, Émeline Lemaire grew up with the repeated experience of being labeled solely on the basis of disability, and this identity category came to trump all others in her eyes. As a law graduate, she often listened to cultural programs on the radio to "educate herself." Listening to the journalist and activist Rokhaya Diallo, introduced her to the intersectional approach to inequality,

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which transformed her reflective thinking. As she understood that she could experience womanhood differently to able-bodied women, she reconnected with the gender label and learned more precise labels for the inequalities she faced.

### **Discussion**

The results of this research demonstrate that the interpretation of inequalities varies according to the different kinds of social categories they relate to and are related to, throughout the life course. Being part of a disadvantaged group is not enough to activate an identity label, self-identification is also necessary. Yet, self-identification with disability is not systematic among people with long-term limitations: it is shaped by the way they are perceived by others, depending on the visibility of the impairment and the criteria of what counts as a disability in various times and places.

Connecting identities with perceptions of inequalities, we show that our interviewees often followed a cumulative logic, contrary to the intersectional approach and its refusal of mathematical metaphors (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Although the importance of intersectionality in social sciences analyses, our study shows that this kind of framework is not the main way of analysis for the disabled people we interviewed - unlike Bowleg's Black gay respondents (2013). These results complete the existing literature on intersectionality and disability (Barnartt & Altman, 2016; Naples et al., 2019; Iqtadar et al., 2020), by shedding light on how individuals come to understand inequalities.

Digging into the interpretation of inequalities, the study highlights that macro factors such as public policies, debates, and media coverage indirectly influence perceptions at a micro-scale - i.e., the way our interviewees make sense of inequalities. For instance, the visibility and political significance of gendered income inequalities in France since the 1950s (Laufer, 2014; Revillard, 2016) allows some of our interviewees to interpret their situation as being an effect of gender inequality. Along the same lines, the historical model of racial segregation is a point of reference when it comes to understanding separation by skin color in the workplace. Although this has never been legal in

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metropolitan France,<sup>6</sup> the interviewees mention it when describing their work experiences. The visibility of such subjects in the public sphere enables people to critically analyze their life experiences and relate their individual inequality experiences to social structures.

In contrast with other identity-based interpretations of inequalities, our respondents invoke the role of disability in a variety of circumstances. While the context of our interviews might have encouraged this framing, we show that people who have been labeled by others as disabled over a long period, encounter certain socializations that convey to them that this identity is more salient than other categories. Last, the life course approach allows us to consider reflexivity and evolutions and the role of macro and micro contexts in such dynamics. Using the concept of secondary socializations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), we describe how people come to reinterpret the underlying causes of inequalities. Their change of perspective is influenced by their environments, both at the macro level (*e. g.* public policy and social framings) and in the micro-interactions (*e.g.*, links with their family and friends, occasional encounters).

### Conclusion

This chapter contributes to understanding how people perceive inequalities in relation to their identities, how their perceptions change over their life course, and the conditions that allow them to adopt an intersectional type of perspective. The disabled people we interviewed in France typically perceive gender, race, class, and disability as independent cumulative components. They attribute disadvantages to a single factor, which they identify based on context and their socializations earlier in life. Yet, several turning points may lead individuals to analyze their experiences in a new way. These results help gain a better understanding of disabled people's interpretations of inequalities, and the way these interpretations change (or not) over time. Future research will benefit from examining the impact of turning points, not only on people's representations but also on their practices. Moreover, an international comparison would allow for a

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<sup>6</sup> In Algeria, from the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, the colonial rule concerning the attribution of French nationality generated a form of apartheid.



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better global understanding of the way identities—and notably disability-based identities – are constructed and function in combination with other identity labels depending on national contexts (Lamont, 1992).

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**Table 1.** *Comparison of the two studies*

	Célia	Mathéa
<i>Methods</i>		
Number	37 biographical interviews	28 biographical interviews
Dates	December 2019 - June 2020	August 2020 - December 2021
Questions	“Current situation;” educational, professional, marital and parental backgrounds, other unpaid activities. Follow-up questions concerning terms such as “success,” “good/bad situation” or “devaluation” to explore conceptions of inequalities and hierarchies	Free presentation; educational background, work experience, periods without work and unpaid activities, specificity of life as a disabled woman. Follow-up questions concerning events related to marital and family history and the health sphere; use of public action mechanisms.
Average length	2h10min	2h10min
Interview format	Face-to-face (22), videoconference (11), phone (4)	Face-to-face (1), videoconference (14), phone (13)
Recruitment	Advertisement, snowball sampling, personal network	Advertisement, personal network
<i>Criteria</i>		
Timing of onset	Birth, childhood, or teenage years	Unspecified
Types of impairments	Visual impairments; specific learning disorders (SLDs)	Mobility impairments; visual impairments; chronic diseases
Age	30-55 years old	25-65 years old
<i>Characteristics of samples</i>		
Gender identification	20 women, 15 men, and 2 non-binary people	28 women
Education	5 years or more of higher education (4), 3 or 4 years of higher education (9), 2 years of higher education (11), high school degree (7), technical diploma (5), secondary school degree or no diploma (3)	5 years or more of higher education (13) 3 or 4 years of higher education (7), technical diploma (3), secondary school degree or no diploma (5)
Characteristics of impairments	Birth, childhood or teenagehood onset (37) Visual impairments (14), SLD (14), multiple disabilities (9)	Adult onset (15), birth, childhood or teenagehood (12). Mobility impairments (12), chronic diseases (9), visual impairments (4), multiple impairments (3).
Identification with disability	24 with “disabled people,” 6 “with a disability,” 7 don’t use the term	28 with “disabled people”
Race (declared or assigned by us)	White (31), Arab (4), Latino (1), Asian (1)	White (18), Arab (4), Black (2), unknown (4)

Source: Corpus of interviews conducted by Célia Bouchet and Mathéa Boudinet