DISABILITY, IDENTITY, AND THE LAW: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LIVING WITH ACQUIRED,
INVISIBLE IMPAIRMENT

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This study examines the social construction of disability, identity management, and everyday understandings of the law among individuals who have acquired non-apparent impairments, sometimes referred to as “invisible disabilities.” Given the fluctuating and unseen nature of many impairments acquired through accident, injury, or illness, these individuals may or may not view themselves as disabled. Using phenomenological and frame analysis, I address four primary research questions: 1) What are the shared experiences among people living with acquired, non-apparent impairment? 2) How do adults who have acquired non-apparent impairment conceptualize “disability”? 3) Why and how does a person choose to share that s/he has a non-apparent impairment to supervisors or colleagues? 4) Do people with non-apparent impairment invoke the law/ use rights claiming to obtain accommodations in work environments? My research demonstrates how different forms of disclosure are used to internalize or resist stigma and that key pathways to developing and deepening disability identity include practicing un/covering. This research also illuminates status hierarchies – not only between disabled and non-disabled, but also within disability communities – shedding light on the experiential and social effects of liminality, the tactics people use to manage liminal identities, and the power dynamics that underpin those negotiations.

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