Navigating and experiencing academia: perspectives from deafblind researchers

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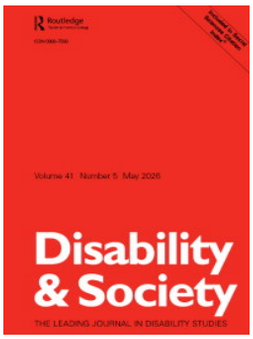

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Navigating and experiencing academia: perspectives from deafblind researchers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how deafblind scholars experience and navigate academia, exploring the structural, temporal, and spatial barriers they encounter and the strategies they develop to navigate them. While deaf and/or disabled scholars have critically examined academic access and accountability, the perspectives of deafblind scholars remain underrepresented. Drawing on survey responses from ten deafblind scholars across three continents, this paper asks: 'How do deafblind scholars experience and navigate academia?' Findings indicate challenges similar to those of deaf and disabled scholars, alongside practices that are specific to deafblind scholarship. Participants describe adapting research practices and reconstructing social dimensions of academic work, often prioritizing present-oriented, community-based engagement over linear career trajectories. In some cases, scholars selectively disengage from inaccessible structures in favor of self-determined and collaborative modes of working. These findings extend existing literature foregrounding deafblind scholars' epistemic contributions and highlighting the need for greater institutional recognition of access as relational, situated and ongoing.

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KEYWORDS
Deafblind scholars; crip scholarship; navigation strategies; embodied research practices; accountability; challenges and opportunities

Points of interest

- This study looks at how deafblind researchers experience academic life and do their work.
- Ten deafblind scholars from different parts of the world took part in a survey that explored the barriers they face in universities and research settings.
- Participants describe academic systems that often do not meet their access needs or expectations.
- They manage accessibility barriers by developing their own ways of working, adapting their research practices, and seeking out environments that are more accessible and supportive.
- Some researchers choose to step away from academic structures that are difficult or inaccessible and instead focus on collaborative and community-based work.
- This research highlights the importance of listening to deafblind perspectives and calls for universities to better understand access as ongoing and shaped by relationships.

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Introduction

Deaf and disabled scholars have challenged assumptions about disability, respectful research approaches, and academic productivity norms, demonstrating how conventional research norms often privilege nondisabled, sighted, and hearing bodies (Desai et al. 2024; Kusters et al. 2024; Mills and Sanchez 2023; Price 2024). This body of work advocates for conducting research in ways that are responsive to disabled embodiment, including the use of deaf, deafblind, and crip methodologies that may depart from established academic conventions. Such approaches foreground access and respect in research practice and offer critical insights that enrich scholarly knowledge production.

For clarity, this paper uses several related but distinct terms. Deaf refers to deaf scholars, often associated with signing communities. Deafblind refers to individuals who experience both hearing and vision differences; this term is further elaborated below in relation to communication methods and research practices. Disabled broadly describes individuals whose bodies or minds differ from dominant societal expectations of ability, differences that social and environmental factors often shape. The term 'crip' refers to crip theoretical frameworks and discourse and is used in a critical, activist-informed sense to foreground resistance to conventional norms of ability and practice within academic and research contexts. While crip frameworks are contested across disabled, deaf, and deafblind communities, this paper draws on crip theory not as a shared identity claim but as a bridging analytic – a critical vocabulary for articulating experiences across these traditions. These definitions are grounded in recent scholarship (Kusters et al. 2024; Price 2024) and provide a framework for the paper.

Additionally, the paper's structure intentionally challenges visual norms to support accessibility for all readers. To avoid privileging sighted modes of engagement, there are no images, and data are conveyed through text.

Building on these distinctions, the intersection of being deafblind and academic scholarship offers unique perspectives. While some studies have examined the experiences of deafblind college students (Arndt & St Fisher 2011; Wolsey 2017), the experiences of deafblind scholars themselves remain largely underexplored. This study brings together firsthand insights from deafblind scholars about conducting research and navigating academia. By analyzing these accounts, I aim to surface the individual contributions that, collectively, highlight the complexities of academic participation and the need for structural changes in accessibility and opportunity.

Communication in deafblind individuals

Understanding this study requires a brief overview of deafblindness and related communication methods, followed by a shift to the experiences of

deafblind scholars. Deafblind individuals experience both hearing and vision impairments, which limits the ability of these senses to compensate for one another (Soelgaard et al. 2024). Academic discourse includes multiple definitions and subgroup classifications (Wittich and Dumassais 2025), often based on residual vision/hearing and the age at which the individual became deaf and/or blind. These classifications typically result in the distinctions between congenital and acquired deafblindness, including deafblindness associated with aging. These distinctions shape communication methods, especially the transition – common among those with acquired deafblindness – from visual or spoken language to tactile communication methods such as tactile sign languages, protactile, and touch-based systems like Social Haptics Communication (SHC) and tactile spelling (see also: van der Mark 2023).

For instance, Emmorey et al.,(2009) demonstrate that deaf individuals with tunnel vision alter their signing space, bringing signs closer to the face to reflect their own visual field. In contrast, tactile signers do not rely on vision frames. In tactile signing, the listener places one or two hands on the speaker's hand(s) to follow shapes and movements. Backchanneling cues – nodding, smiling, and frowning – are conveyed through tactile feedback on the interlocutor's body, using methods such as tapping to indicate nodding, tracing a smile, or drawing a question mark (Mesch 2001).

Protactile similarly centralizes touch but extends signing beyond the shared space between interlocutors to the listener's body – using arms or legs as signing surfaces, alongside taps, squeezes, and strokes to convey meaning. The listener's body becomes integral to the speaker's narrative: limbs function as both receptive surfaces and props, facilitating meaning through touch and bodily experience (Edwards and Brentari 2020; Granda and Nuccio 2018). Social Haptics Communication (SHC) conveys environmental or visual information using tactile codes applied to the listener's body (Palmer and Lahtinen 2013).

The diversity of the deafblind population is reflected in research on tactile sign languages and protactile (Ali and Braithwaite, 2024; Edwards and Brentari 2020; Mesch, 2001), and in scholarly discourse on defining deafblindness (Wittich and Dumassais 2025). This diversity is also evident in the work of deafblind scholars, who consider the communication styles of both researchers and participants (Palmer et al., 2024; Watharow and Wayland 2022). These experiences may share commonalities with those of other disabled scholars, including deaf signing researchers and disabled scholars engaging with crip theoretical frameworks. Therefore, I draw on accounts by deaf and disabled authors to inform this perspective, beginning with scholarship informed by disability.

Crip scholarship: authorship, disability-informed practices, positionality, crip timespace, and access

Disabled and deaf scholars, such as contributors to *Crip Authorship* (Mills and Sanchez 2023), demonstrate how their disability-informed experiences and perspectives shape research practices, epistemologies, and engagement with academic institutions. The editors discuss how disability both informs and constrains scholarly expression, highlighting works that reflect disability alongside those that remain unpublished for not conforming to standard publication practices. For example, some authors in their book lack the legal right to sign contracts, limiting conventional publishing opportunities. These challenges prompt crip authorship to embrace non-traditional forms of publication, emphasizing expression shaped by embodiment. For instance, a protactile poem in their book demonstrates this (Clark 2023): its structure follows tactile perception, indicating that scholarly insight can emerge through disability rather than despite it.

This embodiment also informs research methods. In *Innovations in Deaf Studies* (Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien 2017) and *Deaf Mobility Studies* (Kusters et al. 2024), 'the experience of being deaf' (2017, 19) is central. Deaf signing scholars investigate deaf experiences across diverse contexts, developing methods grounded in visual engagement and close community ties, often benefiting from rapport based on shared deaf experiences. Lu et al. (2024) describe deafblind researchers using embodied ethnography with deafblind children, connecting through touch and co-presence. This approach captures interactional dynamics missed by sighted researchers, demonstrating the value of disability-grounded inquiry.

Building on these approaches, recent scholarship highlights the role of researcher positionality in shaping both methods and epistemology. Desai et al. (2024) show how a team of deaf scholars privileges deaf knowledge while critiquing sign language AI research led by hearing teams for embedding biases about sign language and deaf people. Similarly, Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien (2017) and Kusters et al. (2024) describe all-deaf research teams as a political and methodological stance. These teams encompass diverse positionalities, including gender, class, and ethnicity, fostering participant trust and richer interpretation. Such approaches foreground the multiplicity of deaf experiences, echoing Price's (2024) notion of a 'multiverse' of realities and illustrating epistemological pluralism. These perspectives also shape how scholars inhabit and navigate academic time and space, influencing the rhythms, access, and labor of scholarly work.

Another key dimension concerns the 'cripping' of time and space. Disabled bodyminds may interact with time and space in ways that conflict with dominant academic norms. While scholars may adopt crip methods, strategies

attuned to their experiences as disabled scholars, they face constraints imposed by rigid timelines, funding cycles, and publication demands (Samuels 2017; Price 2024). Within this framework, 'crip time' embraces slower, cyclical, or paused rhythms, while 'crip space' centers access over efficiency. In deaf academic contexts, deaf scholars sometimes organize in deaf-only spaces that support shared pedagogies and interactional rhythms. While these spaces often foster accountability and mutual support, they operate on deaf rhythms that may not align with those of deafblind or deafdisabled participants (De Meulder et al., 2026).

Alongside these temporal and spatial rhythms, disabled scholars navigate structural inaccessibility – physical barriers, inaccessible technologies, and administrative systems – that impose emotional, temporal, and mental burdens, often producing parallel labor alongside academic work (Hannam-Swain 2018; Price 2024). Deaf scholars have conceptualized these demands as a 'deaf tax': the ongoing costs of securing accommodations, confronting discriminatory attitudes, and navigating limited mentorship (Aldalur, Hall, and DeAndrea-Lazarus 2022). They emphasize that this tax stems from institutional arrangements rather than deafness itself. Together, this scholarship shows that accessibility alone is insufficient without accountability, emotional safety, and institutional affirmation.

In response to institutional barriers and rhythms that constrain scholarly labor, independent scholarship offers scholars a space to define their own methods, timelines, and priorities. While several deaf signing scholars and scholars engaged with crip discourse are positioned within academic institutions, some operate independently. Independent scholarship refers to research conducted without formal affiliation to academic institutions. Price et al. (2011) observes that little research examines the experiences of disabled independent scholars. She further notes that whereas independent scholarship may be a choice for nondisabled scholars, it is often constrained or imposed for disabled scholars. Consequently, disabled independent scholars must actively construct their positions in relation to academic institutions, navigating both the barriers and the potential affordances of independence as they pursue scholarly work.

This positioning raises the question of what motivates disabled scholars to engage in research. Scholarly motivations are rarely examined explicitly, leaving them to be inferred through reading. To frame these motives, I draw on Skakni's (2018) typology of scholarly 'quests': intellectual, social, and professional. The intellectual quest is driven by curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge; the social quest reflects the desire to meet the expectations of others, such as family members or supervisors; and the professional quest centers on career advancement. In disability scholarship, however, motivations tend to cluster around intellectual and political commitments rather than professional advancement. For example, Price's et al. work (2011) suggests that her

participants are motivated by self-actualization and the enjoyment of intellectual engagement.

Additionally, although not captured in Skakni's framework, her interviewees contribute their academic skills and knowledge to non-academic communities, which in deaf academic discourse are described as forms of accountability and 'giving back' (Ladd 2003; De Meulder 2017). Ladd, in particular, shows how Deaf scholars challenge deficit-based models of deafness by affirming cultural and communal values through their work. Together, these experiences highlight how disabled and deaf scholars navigate academic structures and advance epistemologies that reflect their perspectives and commitments.

In sum, these scholars critique traditional academic norms and propose a paradigm shift in scholarly practices. Crip theory thus becomes both descriptive and interventionist, contesting inaccessibility and imagining more inclusive academic futures. Deafblind and disabled scholars may share experiences of navigating disability within academic structures. Crip theoretical frameworks – particularly crip time, crip space, crip authorship, and crip methods – provide a precise analytical vocabulary for articulating these experiences across disabled and deafblind scholarly traditions, used here as a bridging analytic rather than a unified identity framework. Non-conformity – whether intentional or embodied – challenges normative assumptions about time, space, and scholarship, shaping how knowledge is produced and authored. Disability, in this sense, not only constrains but also generates alternative modes of scholarship. Crip theory provides a generative lens for framing these experiences within broader conversations on disability and knowledge production – one applied here analytically, with recognition that deafblind scholarly experience both overlaps with and extends beyond existing crip and deaf academic discourse – laying the groundwork for the study that follows.

As a deafblind scholar, I approach this research from a lived-experience perspective within academic structures. This positionality shapes the research questions, analytic attention to epistemologies, and methodological choices, grounding the study in reflexive engagement with deafblind scholarship and community knowledge.

How do deafblind scholars experience and navigate academia?

Grounded in crip frameworks, this study centers the experiences of signing deafblind scholars, foregrounding their perspectives and insights. It asks: How do deafblind researchers experience and navigate academia? This overarching question is addressed through sub-questions examining how deafblind researchers experience workspaces and navigate academic environments through strategies, methods, accommodations, and tools. What challenges do

they encounter, what opportunities arise, and how are these negotiated in practice? Additionally, this study explores the motivations that drive deafblind scholars to engage in academic research.

Methods

This section outlines the data collection process, including survey design, thematic structure, participant criteria, and recruitment. It then introduces the participants before describing the analysis procedures.

Data collection

Given the small global population of deafblind scholars, this study employed a small-scale questionnaire, enabling participants to respond at their own pace and across time zones. Accessibility was prioritized through an all-text format, avoiding scales, and using clear, plain language. Participants could alternatively respond in sign language *via* a video call with me. Visual accessibility was supported through clear lighting and high contrast between skin tone, clothing, and background.

The questionnaire was thematically organized, included 26 questions, and consisted primarily of open-ended prompts, supplemented by suggested responses to support clarity and reflection. Demographic questions were mainly multiple choice; however, the Word document format allowed participants to elaborate, which several participants did.

The first theme addressed demographics, including identity, communication methods (and any change over time), academic status, years of research experience, and research motivations. Open-ended questions invited participants to describe their research topics and geographic focus. To clarify the motivation question, example responses were provided, such as increasing employment prospects, passion for a topic, demonstrating a deafblind scholar's academic capability, or developing expertise in a specific field.

The second theme explored how participants navigate academia. Questions addressed research methods, perceived challenges, and benefits of being a deafblind scholar, and strategies for managing academic work. Participants reflected on energy management, tools and accommodations, and adaptations to their environments, including lighting, sound, office setup, and the presence of colleagues. Additional questions addressed types of accommodations used (materials, technology, human assistance), advocacy efforts, overall quality of work life (rated as satisfied, neutral, or dissatisfied), and factors shaping that assessment.

The third theme focuses on technology, examining tools in use, their perceived benefits, and areas for improvement. This section concluded with a

broader question about changes needed in academia to improve research infrastructure, networking, and conference accessibility.

The following section focuses on participant recruitment and eligibility criteria and introduces the participants who took part in this study.

Participant recruitment and eligibility

Recruitment occurred *via* social media, email listservs, and personal networks. The call included my university email, and interested individuals contacted me directly. I then sent the questionnaire and consent form to them as email attachments. Notably, respondents resided in or were affiliated with higher education institutions in high-income countries, where access to education, accommodations, and assistive technologies is more likely. Furthermore, the use of English-language listservs likely introduced sampling bias, disproportionately reaching scholars in Anglophone and affluent academic contexts. This bias informs both the scope and limitations of the study.

Participants were eligible if they met three criteria: self-identifying as deafblind; currently working in research as an independent scholar or in an academic position, PhD level or above, and using visual and/or tactile communication modalities. Notably, while functional definitions of deafblindness exist in the literature, I did not apply such criteria for inclusion. Instead, eligibility was based on self-identification, allowing inclusion of individuals who might not strictly meet those functional definitions. Additionally, some participants interpreted the third criterion broadly, leading to the inclusion of two participants who did not use (tactile) sign language or protactile but relied on tactile systems such as SHC and the tactile alphabet.

Participant profiles

Ten participants took part in the study, residing in countries in Europe ($n=3$), North America ($n=5$), and Oceania ($n=2$). Most identified as white or of European or Australian heritages, and one identified as Black. While most participants did not elaborate on their identifying as deafblind, two described shifting between identity-first and medical/adaptive framings depending on context. For instance, participant A describes 'low vision' as medically accurate but uses 'deafblind' within their community, while participant F notes that 'dual sensory impairment' was preferred in some research settings.

Participants also described changes in communication practices over time due to exposure to sign language, protactile, or changes in hearing and/or vision. Participant H recounts growing up with a signing system that follows the spoken-language grammar, switching to sign language in college, and later encountering protactile. Childhood communication norms sometimes conflicted with these shifts; participant F recalls 'lots of speech therapy' in a

home that was 'very anti-signing,' and struggled with visual and aural aspects of speech reading as an adult.

Notably, participants' preferred communication modes mirrored those of their workspaces. Sign language speakers had signing colleagues, those who did not use sign language worked with non-signing colleagues, and protactile speakers operated in environments that supported it. Participants also distinguish between communicating with those who share their language and those who do not. As participant A explains: 'With deaf people: visual sign language. With hearing people: writing.' These accounts highlight ongoing negotiation of societal expectations, personal ideologies, and changes in hearing and/or vision. The individual profiles below provide further contextual details.

Participant A: Despite a non-standard timeline, their work aligns with the second-year standards of their PhD program in Europe. A grew up hearing and sighted. They became deaf in their early twenties and started learning sign language. A, aged 21–30, later experienced changes in vision, which did not affect their mode of communication. Nevertheless, A anticipates learning tactile communication, such as protactile.

Participant B has been a PhD candidate in Europe for about 5–10 years. Raised using speech, B gradually transitioned to sign language in college. Currently aged 31–40, B uses speech, writing, and visual sign language, and is learning tactile sign language and protactile.

Participant C is pursuing an EdD in North America for 2–5 years. They grew up using a signing system based on spoken-language grammar. C learned sign language in college and, following vision loss, learned protactile. C is between 41 and 50 years old.

Participant D has worked as an independent scholar for several years and recently enrolled in a doctoral program in North America. They grew up speaking sign language, transitioned from visual to tactile reception, and currently communicates in protactile. D is between 41 and 50 years of age.

Participant E has been a PhD candidate in North America for 2–5 years. E has used visual sign language throughout their life without changes. At the time of participation, E was between 31 and 40 years of age.

Participant F is a postdoctoral researcher in Oceania with 5–10 years of research experience. Raised strictly orally, F relied on speechreading and writing. Learning sign language was an inaccessible experience due to the language's visual nature and the noise in the room. F later learned tactile spelling and discovered Social Haptics Communication through their research. Now aged 51–60, F uses a fluid combination of speech-to-text technology, tactile spelling, speech, SHC, and tactile and visual sign language.

Participant G is an independent scholar/researcher while pursuing a degree in Oceania and has 5–10 years of research experience. After slow visual loss

since preteen years and becoming deaf as a teenager, G transitioned from perceiving speech to tactile spelling. G is in the 41–50 age bracket.

Participant H is an independent scholar with a doctoral degree in Europe and over 10 years of research experience. Raised using speech until they were a young teen, H then learned sign language and now alternates between visual and tactile reception of sign language, depending on lighting and distance. At the time of participation, H was between 41 and 50 years old.

Participant I has been a PhD candidate in North America for 2–5 years. Raised using visual sign language and now, at 31–40 years old, primarily communicates in protactile.

Participant J has been an independent scholar for 2–5 years in North America. J grew up using a signing system based on spoken-language grammar and transitioned to sign language as a college student. J later encountered protactile, which, alongside writing, is their current primary communication mode. J is in the 51–60 age group.

The following section outlines the analysis process.

Analysis processes

Most participants completed the questionnaire *via* email attachment. When responses were incomplete or unclear, follow-up questions sought clarification. One participant completed the questionnaire in sign language; the interview was transcribed and shared with the participant for review.

Data analysis was conducted through an iterative and interpretive process involving repeated readings of interview responses. Responses were organized into main and subthemes, such as dimensions of workspace structures. The content was further analyzed using content-analytic procedures. These included summarizing demographic data, counting participants who responded similarly, and identifying contrasting perspectives. Illustrative quotations were then selected to support key findings.

The following section presents the findings, addressing the central research question: How do deafblind scholars experience and navigate academia? Results are organized thematically, beginning with motivations for engaging in research, followed by analyses of workspaces and accommodations, methodological choices, challenges encountered, and strategies developed. The final sections consider the epistemic value of conducting research as a deafblind academic and reflect on the overall quality of work life.

Findings

In accordance with Price's (2024) and Kusters et al. (2024) notion of a multiverse of realities, participants' responses reveal how communication modes,

personal histories, and institutional contexts shape individual strategies and perspectives. Despite this diversity, all participants advocate for access, exercising agency in defining what access means to them. The themes of communication, advocacy, and strategies are interwoven throughout this section, encompassing participant motivations to engage in research, a dimensional analysis of workspaces, and evaluations of their work-life experiences. Before examining the strategies that deafblind researchers use to navigate academia, the findings first consider a foundational question: what motivates participants to engage with research in the first place?

Motivations for engaging with research

Participants described their engagement in research as primarily motivated by a strong interest in their research topics and a desire to develop expertise. Many participants found research intrinsically rewarding and closely aligned with how they think and learn. Participant A explains: 'Researching matches how my brain works. I can quickly see connections and patterns between things,' while participant F described research as part of 'lifelong learning.' .

Several participants emphasize how academic pathways provided the resources and flexibility needed to pursue their interests. Participant D noted that doctoral study offered funding to support 'what I am already doing,' while H described academia as 'a good career in some ways to manage my time.' These accounts highlight how institutional structures enabled participants to deepen their expertise in areas already intellectually central to them.

Similar to deaf signing scholars (Ladd, 2003), participants also framed research as a way of contributing to deafblind communities and strengthening deafblind perspectives within academic and policy contexts. Participant F links personal adaptation to community responsibility, explaining that 'My career had to be adjusted to manage worsening impairments, and it was a way to give back to the deafblind community.' Others described offering a 'deafblind lens,' especially on deafblind education (participant E), using research 'to be taken more seriously by policy makers' (participant A), and serving as role models for other deafblind individuals (participant C).

Notably, despite career advancement often being presented as a rationale for doctoral study (Skakni 2018), none of the participants explicitly framed research as a pathway to professional mobility. As H observed, 'career progression can be harder' for deafblind individuals. Engagement in research was instead described as grounded in intellectual commitment and community responsibility. Across accounts, participants emphasized that these motivations were inseparable from the accessibility and design of the research environments they occupied, a theme explored in the following section.

Physical, practical, social, and structural dimensions of academia

Participants' motivations for engaging in research are closely tied to the physical, practical, social, and structural dimensions of academic environments, which are predominantly sighted spaces. This adaptation necessitates specific navigation strategies, which significantly impact their experiences as deafblind academics.

Physical workspace: the setup of an office

Most participants worked from home or institutional offices, while others described themselves as 'mobile,' moving between locations. Across settings, participants aligned with principles of crip space and time (De Meulder et al., 2026; Price 2024; Samuels 2017), configuring their workspaces to prioritize accessibility and energy management over efficiency. Devices, lighting, curtains, and furniture were adapted to meet individual needs.

Participants relying primarily on vision describe using large monitors, zoom functions, and inverted color schemes. Interlocutors were asked to position themselves against backgrounds that contrasted with their skin tone to support visual communication. Lighting was carefully managed through lamps and curtains, though not all participants had access to private spaces where such adjustments were possible.

Tactile-centered participants emphasized the importance of protactile environments, including room arrangement and interaction norms. One braille-reading participant described establishing a 'writing space' only when staying in a location for longer periods.

These accounts demonstrate how participants 'crip' their physical workspaces in relation to their sensory modalities. The following section examines how research methods are similarly adjusted regarding access, time, and energy.

Practical aspects of research: data collection and analysis

Participants similarly described adapting traditional research methods through disability-informed methodological approaches, including employing human accommodations to maintain accessibility, manage energy, and sustain core workflows (Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien 2017; Kusters et al. 2024; Mills and Sanchez 2023). Responses reveal contrasts between visual versus tactile approaches and direct versus mediated access. Participant H, for example, conducted interviews in visual sign language in an office 'where I could manage the setup to (visually) benefit me,' recording them on video for later analysis. In contrast, participant D excluded visual data entirely: 'I never use videos.' D collected data through gatherings and interviews using protactile methods, writing notes post hoc, and then shared them with a colleague

who reviewed them with participants to clarify responses and mitigate bias. Between these approaches, participant J combines visual and tactile strategies, using mediated access to video data: 'CN would view the video and feed what was happening to the DB researcher.'

Beyond interviews or ethnography, participants engaged with archival and textual materials as part of their data collection and analysis. Accessibility barriers frequently emerged, particularly when websites or databases were incompatible with screen readers. D explained: 'Most newspaper archives, by contrast, are mostly images of pages. If an archive site has built-in OCR features, the resulting scans are usually poor.' Consequently, D hired transcribers to 'dig out' specific sources and to 'clean up' or 'transcribe' materials to make them usable. Analysis tools also presented challenges. Participant C noted that software such as SPSS was 'challenging to read' without zoom features and should ideally be 'braille-friendly.' Participant F observed that tools 'missed out on the vibrotactile elements,' emphasizing the need to 'continue to think about those different ways of being, doing, and telling.' As a result, several participants preferred manual organization and analysis methods, finding them more accessible and less energy-consuming.

These accounts of data collection and analysis foreground individual strategies and workflows. However, research practices do not unfold in isolation. The following section examines the social dimensions of deafblind scholarship, focusing on collaboration, accountability, and the ways participants collectively sustain their research practices.

Social dimensions: accountability of colleagues

Participants emphasized the significance of supportive colleagues and peer networks in navigating academic structures and accommodations. Even when not directly prompted, many highlighted relationships characterized by collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability.

D's protactile workspace, for example, constitutes an accountable space, where interlocutors engage in ways comprehensible to everyone involved. Likewise, participant B implemented written meetings with non-signing colleagues, fostering relationships that felt 'more egalitarian' and reducing reliance on interpreters. Most participants, particularly those using protactile or signed languages, primarily worked in contexts with signing colleagues, which may prefigure a mindset for accessible and accountable communication practices. Price (2024) observed a similar dynamic in a disability-affirming environment, where collective responsibility for access was embedded in everyday practices.

Participants described supportive workplace relationships as enabling authentic engagement. Participant B reflected: 'It is very important to be able to share about my experiences and feelings with close colleagues, so that I

don't feel that I am trying to "pass" or perform as if I weren't a DB academic.' Participant F noted the 'relief' of colleagues advocating on their behalf, shielding them from 'ableist comments and refusals.' Together, these accounts demonstrate how participants construct collective resilience and maintain accountable practices within their research environments, which naturally lead to consideration of the structural supports and accommodations that shape accessibility.

Structures within workspaces: access and accommodations

In addition to the physical, practical, and social aspects of workspaces, many participants described using human accommodations – such as sign language interpreters, co-navigators, transcribers – to participate in meetings, field trips, and conferences. Securing these services often involved substantial access labor (Aldalur, Hall, and DeAndrea-Lazarus 2022; Hannam-Swain 2018; Price 2024), including advocacy, educating others, funding applications, scheduling, and training.

Participant B described how they searched for, applied for, and secured funding to hire classroom assistants. In this context, a classroom assistant provides the deafblind lecturer with tactile cues to convey visual information while teaching courses 'delivered in visual sign language.' Once B obtained funding, they searched, selected, trained, and scheduled the assistants into their teaching schedule alongside their regular work. Participant F characterized such processes as 'a constant struggle,' emphasizing the emotional and temporal toll of establishing 'working conditions that enable you to do great things, like your job!'.

Adjustments to the physical and communicative environment were similarly demanding. Participant H, after experiencing a sudden reduction in vision, requested adjustments at their workplace (a signing environment). The request included improved lighting and reorganizing meetings so speakers moved to the front, allowing H to focus on one place visually. Initial requests were denied, but following an advocacy person's intervention, the changes were implemented, resulting in 'much better' working conditions. Instead of visual accommodation, participant D organized their workspace around protactile norms, prioritizing tactile accessibility and reducing reliance on interpreters.

Nevertheless, D emphasizes that advocacy 'can be hard work,' particularly given the unfamiliarity of disability services with protactile practices. Geographical context shaped participants' ability to implement tactile norms. Participants in North America, where protactile practices were more established, appeared better positioned to assert such approaches. In contrast, participants elsewhere described uncertainty about how, or if, their academic environments could support tactile presence.

These accounts illustrate how participants negotiate structural constraints as they construct accessible and functional workspaces – securing accommodations that require persistence, creativity, and advocacy – highlighting the labor involved in shaping environments that support research and participation. The following section explores the challenges participants face in academia and the strategies they develop to navigate them. It also highlights how lived experience benefits their research.

Obstacles encountered, strategies employed to navigate them, and epistemological value of being a deafblind scholar

Building on the previous examination of the physical, structural, social, and practical dimensions of workspaces, this section specifically addresses the challenges, particularly regarding visual and aural norms. Participants developed various strategies to navigate these challenges and improve their working conditions. Importantly, the epistemological value of being a deafblind scholar is also acknowledged.

Obstacles encountered

Like themes found in crip discourse, participants describe navigating institutional infrastructures shaped by nondisabled norms. Tasks such as reading, data collection, and analysis often require significantly more time and energy. Participants also note that data collection and analysis can be 'tough' due to disadvantageous circumstances, such as light and distance during interviews or ethnography. Digital materials frequently remain inaccessible: braille display users encounter images of text and websites that are incompatible with screen readers, while analysis tools often fail to accommodate screen magnification, causing key features to fall out of view.

In addition to their regular responsibilities, participants engage in extensive access labor to secure accommodations for work, conferences, and field trips. This labor includes applying for additional funding to pay interpreters, co-navigators, and transcribers; educating disability offices and colleagues; and, in some cases, training and scheduling interpreters and co-navigators themselves. Beyond this practical labor, participants describe a substantial emotional workload. Some express fear of judgment when requesting accommodations, likening the experience to a 'seesaw': they are perceived as 'difficult' when asking for access, yet seen as 'incompetent' when attempting to work without adequate support.

Participant G situates these experiences within broader patterns of devaluation, pointing to the contrast between intentions such as 'conferences that state they are committed to accessibility' and meaningful action when they 'lack the funds to provide interpreting for deafblind attendees.' Diversity

offices may further reinforce this dynamic by closely scrutinizing accommodation requests while simultaneously expecting disabled scholars to engage with them to 'tick the box' of consulting with a disabled person.

Participants also emphasize tensions between individual access and institutional demands. They describe 'managing time' to 'recover' from access-related labor while being expected 'to perform at the same pace' as non-deafblind colleagues. Some respond through selective disengagement. For instance, two participants stopped 'dealing with' 'those supposed Q1' publishers, who rejected their proposals for not adhering to 'their preferred styles' or failed to acknowledge the author's in-text explanation that these papers are written to be accessible to deafblind individuals and screen readers. As one participant explains, approaching the PhD as an intellectual rather than a credential-oriented quest reduced pressure to meet institutional requirements and, in turn, to follow rigid publishing criteria.

Many of the challenges described are accompanied by strategies for navigating them, which the next section examines in more detail.

Strategies developed to navigate challenges

Participants describe a range of strategies for navigating academic demands, including 'strong communication,' 'critical thinking skills,' and advocacy, as well as situation-specific adaptations such as 'working with PROJECT at UNIVERSITY.' Participant G emphasizes the fluidity of these strategies, noting that 'they tend to change and evolve depending on what the situation calls for.'

Some participants describe practical adjustments, such as working with sighted collaborators on visual tasks or managing expectations around the workload. For example, participant B requested 'to spread' teaching hours over several days rather than teaching one full day. Participant F describes measuring the time required for research tasks alongside a colleague, noting that it 'took me two to seven times longer to do almost every task.' These accounts underscore the need to recognize different workflows within collaborative academic environments.

At the same time, balancing individual access needs with standard academic expectations remains challenging. Participants B, G, and F acknowledge relying on strategies they describe as unhealthy. Participant F notes 'working vast hours extra to ensure no one can complain I don't get work done.' Participant B described the ongoing effort required to avoid 'passing' or performing as if they were not deafblind, reflecting on the importance of discussing these dynamics with colleagues to safeguard against such pressures.

Despite retaining some decision-making power, participants note that academic structures offer little opportunity to adapt roles or expectations. Participant D observes that 'there is no position I want to apply for' given

that academic posts are unlikely to support protactile approaches. Rather than fully conforming to rigid guidelines, such as those governing publishing or funding, participants describe selectively engaging with resources that align with their values or interpreting guidelines flexibly. As D explains, they 'get a grant that usually (pays for X), but I use it to pay for transcribers.' Several participants described turning to independent scholarship to retain greater control over workload, pace, and accessibility. As participant H states: 'Being a freelancer gives me much more control over my workload, travel, and schedule.'

Together, these accounts show how participants actively negotiate academic expectations, combining adaptive strategies with selective disengagement; in the next section, participants draw on their deafblind expertise as a practical and epistemic resource.

Epistemological value of being a deafblind scholar

Drawing on their own experiences in a hearing-sighted society and academia, more than half of the participants emphasize the epistemic value of deafblind lived experience in their research. Their reflections echo debates in deaf and disability scholarship on positionality and community responsibility, illustrating how insider knowledge shapes both interpretation and ethical engagement (Desai et al. 2024; Kusters et al. 2024; Ladd 2003). Participant B notes that this insider position offers perspectives that 'can be interesting in my research.' Participant D explains that even hearing-sighted colleagues who collaborate closely with protactile researchers may miss important information in the data or fall for bias. Similarly, participant A reflects that their experiences within academic, deaf, and deafblind communities contribute to a critical and nuanced engagement with theoretical concepts developed by non-deafblind scholars.

This critical positioning is closely tied to an increased awareness of ethical responsibilities toward both research participants and broader communities. Participant F emphasizes how navigating both structural barriers and opportunities fosters a sense of responsibility to challenge academic structures and support peers, even amid personal struggle: 'Our presence is testament to our capabilities in the face of significant barriers, acknowledging for every one of us in academia, there are many, many more who don't get the opportunity because the social system fails them.'

Accountability is reflected in participants' emphasis on the potential impact of their work. Several describe their research as contributing to improvements in deafblind people's lives, particularly those working in the technology or education fields. Participant G explains that their reliance on tactile perception led to 'a very deep and natural appreciation for its uses and applications,' which could inform 'Deafblind assistive technology and often, more

generally, the wider community.' Participant J similarly stresses the importance of representation, stating that 'DeafBlind children should have DeafBlind role models who can teach them and share their lived experiences.' Alongside these commitments, participants also value opportunities to connect with other deafblind researchers. echoing Aldalur, Hall, and DeAndrea-Lazarus (2022) findings on the importance of peer mentorship, communal support, and the cultivation of accessible professional networks.

Taken together, these accounts show how epistemic insight, ethical responsibility, and accountability are closely intertwined in participants' research practices. The following section turns to how these commitments shape participants' assessments of their quality of work life.

Quality of work life

Although all participants report enjoying their work, slightly more than half rated their quality of work life as 'neutral,' due to the ongoing fight for accommodations. As F states: 'I love my work, so satisfied. But I am exhausted by the work to get my accommodations and the ongoing resistance of some parts of the university to being inclusive. So that's dissatisfied. So, I will go neutral!'

Echoing Price's et al. (2011) discussion of the affordances as a disabled scholar, the majority of the participants who indicated that they were 'satisfied' attributed this to a sense of control and autonomy. Participant A noted: 'I have a lot of control over how to manage my time and energy. Getting to work part-time also contributes to not having to over-extend myself.' Participant D similarly emphasized: 'It is strictly on my own terms that I am operating.' Participant H echoed this statement, stating: 'It's good, but I had to go freelance to make it sustainable.'

One participant highlights the benefits of being in academia, with strong social networks that help balance access-related stress. Though they nonetheless experienced moments of considering leaving academia altogether: 'The positive aspects of my work experience (fulfillment, satisfaction, intellectual stimulation) overcome the negative ones (access issues, stress, exhaustion). But the balance sometimes changes, and I have experienced moments when I wanted to drop out of my PhD.'

Participants experience the ongoing advocacy required to secure access and accommodations as repetitive, stressful, and exhausting. Nevertheless, participants emphasize that it is necessary to maintain research quality and keep doing the academic work they value.

Discussion

These findings extend current debates on academic accountability by foregrounding how deafblind scholars not only navigate barriers but also

co-construct supportive micro-environments that embody alternative logics of research practice.

While Skakni's typology provides a useful framework for introducing motivations for pursuing a PhD, participants' accounts do not fully align with its categories. Participants expressed strong personal quests, but none articulated explicit career-oriented motivations. Instead, participants' engagements with research are markedly present-oriented. This orientation is reflected in their recent involvement in academia (less than five years for most participants) and the time-limited nature of PhD trajectories. Research is approached as contingent, dynamic, and negotiated in relation to access needs, rather than as a linear or durable career pathway. Likewise, motivations shaped by 'others' were less connected to supervisors or family members and more grounded in community-based commitments. In this respect, participants' motivations resonate more closely with accounts by disabled and deaf scholars (Ladd 2003; Price et al. 2011), who describe scholarship as accountability-driven. Participants pursue research that challenges dominant perspectives, improves materials or pedagogy, and intervenes in inaccessible structures.

These motivations connect directly to how participants experience and navigate academic workspaces, like disabled and deaf scholars more broadly, deafblind scholars actively 'crip' their physical environments and research practices (Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien 2017; Kusters et al. 2024; Price 2024; Samuels 2017). Notably, however, participants do not always redesign research methods themselves. Instead, they often rely on human assistance to negotiate dominant methodological frameworks. These reports suggest that the services deafblind scholars need are not standardized, requiring participants to take on the labor of educating and training their collaborators themselves. This labor, while burdensome, is also innovative and uniquely tailored to deafblind research practices, reflecting both adaptive skill and creative problem-solving. This demonstrates a learning and experimental process shaped by hearing-sighted norms and raises questions about how authority over research design is distributed. At the same time, participants' epistemic experience materializes in research practices and insights that are not only individual achievements but also collective acts of reconstruction, reshaping both deafblind communities and academic knowledge production.

Persistence in academia despite structural challenges (Hannam-Swain 2018; Price 2024) appears to be linked to the social dimension of work: participants actively seek environments where they feel welcome, and communication modalities often align with those of colleagues or research contexts. Institutional accountability has been central in scholarship on deaf and disabled academics. Price (2024) and Aldalur, Hall, and DeAndrea-Lazarus (2022) highlight how formal structures can enable – or fail to enable – accountability toward disabled colleagues. Beyond institutional mechanisms, Price and De Meulder et al. (2026) emphasize communal accountability: ongoing,

reciprocal responsibility within immediate professional environments, whether across nondisabled/disabled divides or specifically within deaf contexts. Participants in this study report on similar experiences. In their workspaces, accountability manifests through attentive communication, support in research tasks, and responsiveness to access needs. Disability-grounded academic communities, or environments familiar with accessibility challenges, appear more likely to cultivate such practices.

One concrete expression of this communal accountability is participants' creation of disability-affirming 'bubbles,' understood not as isolation but as strategically cultivated zones of access and epistemic safety. These sustain authentic research practices and collective resilience within constrained academic environments. Maintaining these spaces requires sustained effort, including building supportive relationships, advocating within institutional structures, and negotiating environments that are not always accommodating. If institutions recognized and supported dedicated spaces for protactile and deafblind scholarship, such practices could be more easily sustained, reducing individual burdens while enabling mentoring, methodological innovation, and collaborative networks that enrich both deafblind communities and the broader academic ecosystem.

These dynamics also shape pragmatic responses to broader institutional limitations. As participant D notes regarding the absence of protactile-supporting structures, scholars often invest energy in environments that support their work, cultivating accessible spaces and collaborative networks while deprioritizing inaccessible contexts. Such choices do not signal passivity. Participants reclaim their marginalization by refusing to conform to institutional expectations that fail to recognize their value. For example, some publishing opportunities are deliberately rejected when they require compliance with inaccessible scholarship practices (Mills and Sanchez 2023). Some participants engage in PhD research primarily to pursue intellectual interests rather than credentials, while others work as independent scholars to break free from normative rhythms (Price et al. 2011). Others demonstrate creativity by repurposing available resources to develop accessible work practices. Taken together, these refusals represent a form of principled resistance, underscoring a broader tension between selective conformity where meaningful accommodations exist and assertions of autonomy when institutions fail to adapt. Examined together, these practices suggest that resistance and adaptation are not opposites but intertwined strategies within accessible scholarly work.

Given the disproportionately low number of deafblind scholars relative to the structural barriers they face, academic communities must not only acknowledge their work but actively engage with it. Doing so affirms its epistemological value, enriches academic knowledge production, and expands educational and collaborative opportunities for the wider deafblind community. Deafblind

scholars persist not because academia accommodates them, but because their work carries epistemic, ethical, and collective significance.

Future research should include deafblind scholars from non-English-speaking or less-connected regions to expand geographical and linguistic diversity. Additionally, the questionnaire format could be extended to elicit more in-depth responses, incorporating more interaction between researchers and interviewees. Finally, since most participants had relatively recent academic engagement (within the last five years), this raises questions about the impact of shifts in institutional access or inclusion over time. These recommendations underscore the need for follow-up studies that incorporate longitudinal and multimodal methods, as well as recruitment strategies that expand linguistic, geographic, and technological reach.

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Use of Generative AI

This research used Generative AI tools such as DuckDuckGo and ChatGPT for various purposes, including language improvement, feedback on text structure, searching for DOI numbers, and theme review to determine whether specific themes appeared in the literature.

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