Constructing positive identities in ableist workplaces: Disabled employees' discursive practices engaging with the discourse of lower productivity
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Abstract
This article explores how disabled workers engage with the ableist discourse of disability as lower productivity in constructing positive identities in the workplace. Disabled employees inhabit a contradictory discursive position: as disabled individuals, they are discursively constructed for what they are *unable* to do, whereas as employees they are constituted as human resources and expected to be *able* to produce and create value. Our discourse analysis of 30 in-depth interviews with disabled employees identifies three types of discursive practices through which they construct positive workplace identities: 1) practices contesting the discourse of lower productivity as commonly defined; 2) practices contesting the discourse of lower productivity by redefining productivity; and 3) practices reaffirming the discourse of lower productivity yet refusing individual responsibility for it. The study advances the disability literature by highlighting how disabled speakers sustain positive workplace identities despite the negative institutionalized expectations of lower productivity both by challenging and reproducing ableism as an organizing principle.

Keywords

Introduction

Ableism has recently been advanced as a new lens to conceptualize the marginalization of disabled people at work (Corlett and Williams, 2011; Williams and Mavin, 2012).[1] Ableism refers to 'ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume able-bodiedness' (Williams and Mavin, 2012: 271) or non-disability as an normative organizing principle against which all are assessed (Campbell, 2009; Wendell, 1996), generating a collective understanding of disability as a diminished state of being human (Campbell, 2008). Applying this concept to workplaces, this emerging literature has started to document how disabled employees are discursively constructed as less capable, willing and productive workers and thus as less valuable for and/or employable by organizations (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Holmqvist et al., 2013; Lindsay et al., 2014; Vandekinderen et al., 2012). Resting on a Foucauldian understanding of power (Campbell, 2008), these studies have advanced prior understandings of disability in the workplace by unveiling the normalizing effects of discourses of disability. These discourses – structured collections of texts that bring objects and subject positions into being (Fairclough, 1992; Hardy & Phillips, 1997) – produce and maintain subordinate identity positions which become established over time as transparent, normative expectations (Abberley, 2002; Corker and French, 1999).

Aiming to underscore the disciplinary power of language (Foucault, 1977), the literature informed by ableism has focused on deconstructing how dominant representations of people with impairments disable them, paying relatively scant attention to how disabled subjects themselves engage with such discourses in the workplace (Williams and Mavin, 2012). Yet from the critical literature on employees' identity work in organizations, we know that subjects are not passive consumers of managerially designed discourses. On the contrary, they more or less actively and critically interpret, make own and enact such discourses to construct and maintain positive identities (Knights and Willmott, 1989), or identities that imbue the self with worth (Fine, 1996) and that are associated with a positive social meaning (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003). This is not only true for employees who have historically been cast as the norm, but also for those who have been constructed in subordinate terms in relation to that norm, such as women (e.g. Denissen, 2010), ethnic minorities (e.g. Van Laer and Janssens, 2011) and older workers (e.g. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009). In this perspective, the power of ableist discourses is predicated upon disabled employees' own self-positioning within such discourses, through the development of identities aligned with them (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Taking stock of these theoretical insights, this paper aims to advance the emergent literature on disability from an ableist perspective by analyzing how disabled employees discursively engage with the prevailing ableist discourse of disability as lower productivity in crafting positive workplace identities. We conduct a critical discourse analysis of the discursive practices through which speakers, in their identity work, deploy the discursive resources available to them to construct preferred versions of themselves (Choukiaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Kornberger and Brown, 2007). Our analysis is guided by the research question: How do disabled employees craft positive identities amid the ableist assumption of lower productivity? Empirically, we address this question by analyzing 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with disabled employees of three Belgian organizations.

Disabled employees are a particularly relevant group to gain a better understanding of how language exert power in subjects' own identity work because they inhabit a highly contradictory discursive position in the workplace. As disabled individuals, they are discursively constructed for what they are *unable* to do, a defining characteristic of the social

identity ascribed to them in all types of social settings (Davis, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006). On the contrary, as employees, they are hired for what they are *able* to do, as human resources creating value for their employer (Foster and Wass, 2013; Zanoni, 2011; Vandekinderen et al., 2012). In this sense, disabled employees represent an extreme case of a social group for whom the crafting of a positive workplace identity is exceptionally challenging and thus empirically more transparently observable (Eisenhardt, 1989), enabling theory development.

Ableism at work: Disabled individuals as less productive employees

Ableist ideas and practices produce a particular kind of self and body that is projected as perfect and thus 'fully human' (Campbell, 2001). Embedded deeply and subliminally within culture, ableism therefore reproduces a widespread collective belief that 'impairment is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or eliminated' (Campbell, 2008: 6).

Conceptually, the notion of ableism builds on a social model of disability which, since the late 1960s, has increasingly displaced traditional individualized and medical explanations for the economic and social deprivations encountered by disabled people (Barnes, 2000; Abberley, 2002; Goodley, 2010). In the social model, disability is not an individual trait but rather the effect of cultural, social and material structures of the modern world which create disability and marginalize individuals (cf. Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Barnes, 2000; Abberley, 2002; Roulstone, 2002). The social model literature highlights how industrial capitalism has historically oppressed disabled people by constituting them as inherently less productive or reliable individuals than the 'normal worker' (Foster, 2007), or as synonym for those who cannot meet the demands of the modern production systems (Galvin, 2006; Woodhams and Danieli, 2000). This negative representation continues on in contemporary capitalism where global competition constantly increases productivity demands (McMullin and Shuey, 2006).

Similar to the social model literature, the emerging literature on ableism points to the socially constructed nature of disability. Yet it highlights the key role of language in normalizing negative representations of disabled people as deviant, unproductive and unemployable, excluding them from paid work or subordinating them within organizations. This normalization becomes particularly striking in a neo-liberal context (Wilson and Beresford, 2002) in which workers are no longer simply seen as partners in the exchange relationship with the employer, but rather as living embodiments of human capital, which they need to proactively manage, as 'entrepreneurial subjects' (Munro, 2012; Foucault, 2007).

For instance, Foster and Wass (2013) show how, drafted with the ideal worker in mind, job descriptions requiring multiple-tasking, inter-changeability and teamwork reproduce an ideology of candidates with an impairment as unfit, disabling them. Similarly, Zanoni (2011) shows how lean production systems exclude disabled workers, fostering their discursive construction in the factory as either unable or unwilling to work. Recent studies about disabled jobseekers document how they are commonly discursively represented as lacking experience and soft communication skills which are essential in the service economy (Lindsay et al, 2014) and as passive and unable to meet the criteria of employability (Holmqvist et al., 2013; Vandekinderen et al., 2012). These studies share an emphasis on what disabled people *cannot* do and cast them as not entrepreneurial.

The pervasiveness of negative representations of disabled workers has also been documented by the social psychological literature. Focusing on individual cognitive and psychological processes, these studies show how bias and stereotypes of disability as lower productivity, incompetence, helplessness and dependency persistently disadvantage workers

in selection processes (Heslin et al., 2012) and hamper their social acceptance by others when employed (Colella, 2001; Ren et al., 2008; Stone and Colella, 1996). Common concerns are the additional costs of employing disabled individuals (Colella et al., 2004; Snyder et al., 2010) and expected lower levels of performance (McLaughlin et al., 2004; Vornholt et al., 2013). Accordingly, disabled workers themselves have been found to feel a constant obligation to disclose their impairment and to persuade both employers and coworkers that they can be productive (Von Schrader et al., 2013).

Whereas reasonable accommodations might alleviate some of the barriers encountered by disabled employees in their work environment (Kim and Williams, 2012; Roessler et al. 2011), reasonable accommodations do not challenge ableism as an organizing principle. Reflecting an individual, post-entry approach, they fail to remove barriers *a priori*, such as the physical inaccessibility and the disabling social organization of work (Wilton and Schuer, 2006). In addition, employers have been reluctant towards granting accommodations (Paetzold et al. 2008; Kulkarni and Valk, 2010) precisely because they potentially disrupt the institutionalized (ableist) hierarchy in the workplace (Harlan and Robert, 1998). Such 'special privileges' elevate disabled employees above able-bodied employees, which is considered out of proportion to their worth in the organization (Robert and Harlan, 2006).

These streams of disability literature have generated important insights into the multiple mechanisms through which negative symbolic representations of disability – variously conceptualized – contribute to the persistent marginalization of people with an impairment in contemporary workplaces. Much smaller is however our current knowledge on how disabled people themselves engage with such discourses in their attempts to craft positive workplace identities. In general, studies giving voice to disabled workers and their identity work are still sparse, likely due to the emphasis of social model and ableism studies on material and discursive structures (Foster, 2007). The studies that do (e.g Brown et al., 2009; Gupta, 2012; Kim and Williams, 2012; Roulstone and Williams, 2013; Värlander, 2012; Vick, 2012) approach their narratives as entry points into their workplace experiences rather than as ways to engage with powerful discourses. As the individual sense-making remains disconnected from hegemonic, macro-level discourses reproducing ableism, this approach fails to shed light on the key role of the own identity work of disabled individuals in the operation of power (cf. Thomas and Davies, 2005).

In this study, we would like to advance the extant literature through a fine-grained analysis of the discursive practices by which disabled employees justify their being in the organization and create positive workplace identities amid the negative ableist discourse of lower productivity. To our knowledge, only Corlett and Williams (2011) have to date examined individuals' discursive practices to investigate how disabled academics negotiate reasonable accommodations. While attuned to our theoretical perspective, the focus on reasonable accommodations only tangentially addresses the challenge encountered by disabled workers in developing positive identities compatible with the foundational idea of employees as *productive* human resources. This challenge is paramount in ableist workplaces in contemporary societies infused with a neo-liberal ideology (Vandekinderen et al., 2012).

Discursive practices, identity work and power
The identity work of people belonging to historically subordinated groups in the workplace has been widely investigated. The underlying idea is that not only class-based but also other social identities shape power relations in organizations (e.g. Collinson, 1988; Brown and Coupland, 2005). In this literature, identity is conceived as the precarious product of discursive

activity in which subjects themselves partake. Their identity work occurs through discursive acts, securing a sense of identity, which can express self-reflection or dissatisfaction with a specific identity position (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Mumby, 2005; Thomas and Davies, 2005). For instance feminist scholars have documented female employees' discursive acts resisting male privilege through irony (Trethewey, 1997) and humor (Martin, 2004), casting themselves as mother over younger male employees (Kondo, 1990), claiming to work extra hard (Dick and Hyde, 2006), suppressing gender difference by appealing to shared identities and beliefs (Denissen, 2010), and even graffiti (Bell and Forbes, 1994). Rumens and Kerfoot (2009) explored how gay men struggled with normative discourses of professionalism to maintain a positive identity. Slay and Smith (2011) and Van Laer and Janssens (2011; 2014) documented the struggles of ethnic minorities to construct professional identities in white dominated contexts. Other studies have shown how older workers, who are commonly discursively constructed as 'in decline' and less productive, can re-appropriate such discourses to craft resistant workplace identities (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Trethewey, 2001; Zanoni, 2011).

This literature shows how, in order to fully understand language and power, close attention is warranted to the ongoing discursive practices through which subjects constitute their sense of the self (Ashcraft, 2005). A focus on how speakers' discursive practices proactively co-shape subject positions for themselves by using available discursive resources (Thomas and Davies, 2005) reveals the productive dimension of power enabling possibilities of being, not only foreclosing them (Foucault, 1977; Mumby, 2005). Speakers enter a struggle with other social actors to fix advantageous meaning and definitions over who they are (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999), which might challenge, to various extents, existing power relations (Phillips and Hardy, 1997). As stated by Mumby, '[a]lthough certain grand narratives or Discourses frame the interpretive possibilities, the struggle over meaning remains open to alternative, resistant and counterhegemonic accounts' (2005: 33). Ultimately speakers may more or less explicitly resist, in their identity work, the construction of selves within managerially inspired discursive contexts (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown and Coupland, 2005; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). Taking this theoretical lens allows us to gain insight in how disabled people construct positive identities in ableist workplaces imbued with discourses of disability as lower productivity.

Method

The Belgian institutional context

The empirical study was carried out in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. Historically, the Belgian policy on disability has been one of segregation, both in education and on the labor market (Samoy and Waterplas, 2012). The Belgian employment rate for disabled people is significantly lower than the European average: 20 of the 31 European countries fare better (Samoy, 2014). Moreover, when professionally active, disabled people are often employed in state subsidized sheltered workshops (Samoy and Waterplas, 2012).

In the last two decades, the Belgian social welfare system has increasingly evolved towards a workfare system. Under impulse of EU labor market policies and legislation (European Commisson, 2010), paid work has become the main way for historically underrepresented groups to participate in society (Vandekinderen et al., 2012). More generally, social security benefits have increasingly been made conditional not only upon individuals' past employment but also on their efforts to regain access to paid work when professionally inactive. Recent measures have limited unemployment benefits in time and

increased the legal retirement age to 67. Long exempt from activation because considered unfit for work, disabled people are today increasingly being 'activated'.

In line with this paradigmatic shift, the Flemish regional government has invested in activation measures to raise the employment rate of disabled people from 40,4% in 2013 to 43% by 2020. This target is to be reached in the first place through integration in the regular labor market (Samoy, 2014) but also by means of a 3% quota on public administrations (Departement Bestuurszaken, 2014). Activation is pursued through free-of-charge employment support for unemployed disabled job seekers. Based on a medical assessment, this guidance is geared to measuring individual competencies and developing skills to enhance the fit between disabled candidates and employers' demands (cf. Vandekinderen et al., 2012).

This policy change reflects broader international trends of neo-liberal social valuation of human life characterized by strategically reduced social intervention (Roulstone, 2002), along an increased emphasis on individual self-actualization and flexibility (Wilton and Schuer, 2006; Yates and Roulstone, 2012). In line with what Foucault, in his later work, has termed neo-liberal governmentality, state intervention is today primarily aimed at developing human capital (Foucault, 2008; Munro, 2011) to reduce the distance between disabled people and the open labor market (Barnes and Mercer, 2005). Disabled citizens are recast from passive receivers of benefits or citizens entitled to a suitable job in a sheltered workplace to individuals who are themselves responsible for making active efforts to enter the labor market or return to it as soon as possible (Berghman and Lammertyn, 2005).

Despite the novel focus on activation, the Belgian policy also shows continuity with the past. Since 1965, a system of wage subsidies has provided financial incentives for businesses to employ disabled people by compensating estimated productivity loss caused by impairments and the higher risk incurred by the employing organization (Samoy and Waterplas, 2012). This measure compensates for wage costs ranging from 40% in the first year of employment to 20% in the third, fourth and fifth year. However, the employer may apply for up to 60% reimbursement if a higher productivity loss can be demonstrated. After a period of five years with the same employer, the subsidy can only be extended if an assessment of the worker's productivity in the subsidized job shows a continued need for it. The wage subsidy is important to our study because it institutionalizes the hegemonic discourse of disabled employees as less productive and less valuable employees into compensatory bureaucratic and organizational praxis.

Cases and data
This study is based on a total of 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with disabled employees in three large organizations: a regional public agency (13 interviewees; 2.3% disabled staff), a local public agency (eight interviewees; 2.0% disabled staff) and a private bank and insurance company (nine interviewees; 0.4% disabled staff). The data were collected during a larger, publicly funded project for the Flemish Policy Centre for Equal Opportunities Policies 2012-2015, which also included in-depth interviews with other actors: supervisors, HR staff, company doctors, and trade union representatives. The organizations were selected through purposive sampling (Jupp, 2006) because they employed sufficient numbers of people with a work-related disability, as defined by the Flemish government administration: 'every long-term substantial problem of participation in work due to an interplay of functional limitations of mental, psychological, physical, bodily or sensorial nature, limitations in performing activities, and personal and external factors' (Samoy, 2014: 6, own translation).

The first author contacted the human resources department of each organization, providing information on the objectives and the methodology of the study. They agreed to participate in the study and subsequently launched an open call to recruit disabled employees as interviewees. Common ethical guidelines concerning informed consent were followed (Creswell, 2012) and anonymity was stressed in all communication. The names included in this text are pseudonyms. Participants were 15 men and 15 women, had a broad range of chronic illnesses and impairments, covered a broad age range and were employed in a variety of jobs.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out following a questionnaire of open questions organized in five main sections: the nature of the impairment, the professional trajectory, the current job, social relations at work, and policy-related issues. To inductively identify relevant topics to be included in the questionnaire, next to those featuring in the disability literature, six pilot interviews were conducted (Turner, 2010) with three disability/diversity experts in the organizations, one disability expert of the public Service for Mediation and Employment and two professionally active disabled persons who were not members of the three organizations. From the pilot interviews, the issue of productivity emerged as a relevant theme. Therefore some specific questions on this topic were included in the interview guideline: Could you describe how your disability affects your job? Would you say you have a similar productivity compared to other colleagues performing a similar job? Do you think others in this organization (colleagues/supervisor) believe that you are less productive? The guideline was set up following the life course, yet the interviewer allowed the order to be altered by respondents to not disrupt the flow of the conversation and to pursue emerging themes based on the respondent's answers. The interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half, were all audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis of the data was conducted on the transcripts in the original language (Dutch), translating only the excerpts that were included in the findings sections once the interpretation had been written up.

Data analysis
The data analysis aimed at identifying and classifying the discursive practices through which disabled workers engage with the issue of productivity in their identity work. An overview of the steps in the data analysis, the full coding tree and the frequencies are provided in Table 1.

Step 1: Identifying fragments on productivity	Step 2: Positioning towards lower productivity discourse in identity work	Step 3: Discovering the underlying discursive practice to craft a positive workplace identity	Claim	Step 4: Identifying the discursive resources used
Fragments on productivity (109)	Contesting lower productivity (73)	Rejecting association disability – lower productivity (39)	Claiming equal productivity	Proactively managing the disability (15) Calling in objective measures (11) Questioning the need for wage subsidies (6) Calling in job fit (7)

		Generating alternative meaning to productivity (32)	Claiming higher productivity	More motivation/loyalty (17) Better understanding (7) More concentration (2) Superior handling of repetitive tasks (2) Superior verbal skills (3)
	Reproducing lower productivity (36)	Rejecting individual responsibility(36)	Complying with lower productivity + Questioning who bears responsibility	'Willing but unable' (27) Lack of accommodation (7) Wage subsidies (2)

First, the first author identified all fragments on productivity (109) in the interview transcripts, mostly but not exclusively resulting from answers to the above mentioned questions on productivity. In a second phase, we conducted a critical discourse analysis, focusing on the discursive and argumentative structure of the excerpts. Relying on axial coding (Wicks, 2010), the authors jointly identified two main ways in which the fragments related to the hegemonic discourse of disability as lower productivity. The majority of the fragments (73) contested the discursive construction of disability as lower productivity, while the remaining reproduced it (36).

In a third phase, we further examined the first set of 73 fragments, identifying two sub-categories: 1) excerpts in which respondents claimed equal productivity as able-bodied employees (39) and 2) excerpts in which respondents claimed superior productivity (32). We observed that while the former sub-category mentioned commonly used measurements of productivity, the latter redefined productivity in alternative ways. We then examined the second set of 36 fragments. Although we could not identify any further lower-level codes, we observed that in these fragments the idea of lower productivity was reproduced yet systematically followed by the speaker's rejection of individual responsibility for it. Our data analysis thus resulted in three main discursive practices, which featured in our data with similar frequencies.

Fourth, the first author initiated the open coding of each individual fragment based on the discursive resources featuring in it (e.g. proactively managing the disability, calling in objective measures). These third-level codes emerged based on the discursive resources through discussions with the second and third author in multiple rounds, to ensure inter-coder agreement (Creswell, 2012). To end our analysis, we checked how the three discursive practices were distributed across individual respondents and organizations. Twenty-six respondents out of 30 used at least two discursive practices, five respondents used only one practice and two respondents used no discursive practice. Although the small numbers do not allow to make conclusive statements, the first discursive practice was slightly more frequently used in the bank and insurance company, the second in the regional public agency and the third in the local public agency.

Findings

In speakers' narratives, the topic of productivity emerged both spontaneously and in articulated answers to the productivity-related questions asked by the interviewer. In their attempt to construct positive workplace identities, they positioned themselves towards the discourse of disability as lower productivity, casting them as slower, less flexible, more absent, etc. workers, by combining three discursive practices, which distinctively positioned them in relation to productivity.

Crafting a positive identity by contesting the discourse of lower productivity
Through the first discursive practice, speakers openly contested the ableist discourse defining them as less productive compared to a hypothetical 'normal' able-bodied worker by relying on a variety of discursive resources. Most frequently, they highlighted their own agency, their ability to eliminate potential productivity loss caused by their disability:

> I try to deal with the effects of my impairment. When I'm in a meeting and someone talks too softly for me to hear, *I just ask him to speak up*. I tell him also because I assume that others [non-disabled] might have troubles understanding him, too. But for me then of course the problem is more pronounced. But *I always look for an appropriate space to have the meeting, in advance*. A space that is as small as possible. (Adriaan, project manager with a hearing impairment)

> *To me it's really important that I work as hard and as good as anyone else. I have made it my personal point to never hide behind the fact that, for instance, 'I did not see it'*. To give an example: once in a while it could happen that when making slides, little errors sneak in. Little things such as a wrong alignment, or a small typo. I know that, so *I focus on this really hard to avoid it*. (Dieter, trainee with a visual impairment)

In these excerpts, respondents project identities as workers in full control, proactively and preemptively creating the conditions that ensure their own productivity.

A second frequently deployed discursive resource were past positive productivity assessments and outcomes of HR appraisals. The following quotes are illustrative:

> I don't think I suffer from productivity loss, *if that was the case they wouldn't have promoted me twice so far*. I work in a commercial environment, you've probably heard this from other colleagues, too. Here they are really not going to give you slack because of your disability. *Numbers are the only thing that interests them*. (Tom, financial advisor with a hearing impairment)

> I regret that we aren't paid *on a variable basis*. I think that if we were, I would *earn more*. (Dieter, trainee with a visual impairment)

Similar to these excerpts, other ones mention quantitative evidence such as the number of telephone calls handled, files processed or complaints treated as well as positive feedback on performance received from managers, colleagues or the HR department. These 'objective' measures enabled speakers to discount the alleged lower productivity and promote a more positive identity for themselves.

Another type of 'objective' evidence featuring in the narratives was the wage subsidy received by the company. Speakers deployed this resource to counter the dominant discourse of lower productivity indirectly. They questioned the ethical legitimacy of a financial compensation for productivity loss that did not occur:

> I believe that *it isn't fair that there is a wage subsidy for me*. I know I will prove myself and that *there is no need for financial compensation*. I am convinced that I do my work as well as anyone else and even better than some colleagues. (Dieter, trainee with a visual impairment)

> An employer would be stupid of course not to accept the wage subsidy. But *it feels wrong* somehow. *Why should you reward somebody for hiring people with a disability? I think it's a bit wrong*. A wrong attitude. It looks as if you should give a bonus to a company for hiring disabled people while most disabled people can perform their job correctly. (Eric, manager and wheelchair user)

Finally, some fragments highlighted the good fit between the speaker's competencies and the job requirements as evidence for his/her productivity:

> I dare to claim *that there is no single difference between my productivity and that of colleagues in the same business.* Why? My work is not affected by the fact that it takes me longer to move around. Most of my job consists of coordinating work, managing teams, yes sometimes travel, but okay that's just travel time. In the end, you are judged based on the results of your team and yourself, and I am confident there is no productivity loss. (Eric, manager and wheelchair user)

In this case, the speaker deploys the content of his job as manager as evidence to argue for the irrelevance of his disability. By circumscribing the job demands, he is able to craft a work identity as a fully competent worker. The claim is further strengthened by adding additional evidence pointing to his team's and his own performance.

In this first discursive practice, disabled employees explicitly contest the discourse of disability as lower productivity by constructing themselves as productive workers. To do so, they proactively draw on various discursive resources to create an identity as conscious managers and even as 'guardians' of their own productivity. Speakers thus leverage the neo-liberal discourse of subjects as entrepreneurs of their own human capital (Munro, 2011) to counter the discourse of disability as of lower productivity.

This discursive practice relates to ableism as an organizing principle in a two-fold, contradictory way. Though countering the discourse of disability as lower productivity, it also reaffirms the rightfulness of productivity as a key criterion for determining who can be a worthy organizational member. Hereby it explicitly uses able-bodied colleagues as a term of reference for assessing productivity. By stressing that they produce work output that is (at least) as high as the output of able-bodied workers, speakers resist a negative identity but reproduce dominant discourses of productivity valuation and the measures that enact them in the workplace, contributing to their taken-for-grantedness.

Crafting a positive identity by redefining productivity

Through this second discursive practice, speakers also explicitly countered the ableist discourse of disability as lower productivity. Most frequently, they constructed the higher productivity in terms of their inherent and superior dedication to work:

People with polio have the tendency to prove themselves. That's something really odd. I know a couple of other people like that. I once got a reaction of someone that came into my office looking for the office chief and he said: "You're the person in charge? You?". I said "Yep, sorry, you're going to have to do with me'. (Harold, project manager and a wheelchair user)

Last time I was placed, I was out for eight months… People should understand though, we shouldn't get fired on the spot because we are not capable. People with a psychological disability are not incapable. *They even want more, they are more motivated to perform well as soon as they are better*. They fight, they fight their illness. (Katherine, administrative worker with chronic depression)

Also common were constructions of one's disability as a source of superior understanding and empathy for ill colleagues and clients:

When I have a client in prison who could qualify for an [accredited] work-related disability, I tell him. Usually the reaction is: "Yes, but a people with a disability…". They are reluctant [to apply] because they expect they will get an extra negative label [on top of having been in prison]. When I then tell people that I am disabled myself and explain to them how it works, they'll go like: "Really? Do you also have a disability?" *and then that's one barrier less between us*. (Stefanie, counselor with fibromyalgia)

When people have something going on, I will more quickly defend them, because I know what it is like to be different. Even if it is only temporary. We're a close team and I am very helpful, if I can help out, I will. And people appreciate that. They respect me and my disability. (Karolien, financial advisor with a mobility impairment)

By focusing on specific qualitative dimensions of their own productivity, speakers create novel discursive possibilities to reconfigure their disability as enhancing their performance in the workplace directly or indirectly by contributing to a positive social climate.

Finally, one's disability was recast as the source of other valuable competences. The following excerpt constructing a hearing disability as a source of superior concentration is exemplary:

After my internship, I experienced a lot of problems during my search for work. Often jobs require being able to handle telephones or people just don't have too much faith in deaf people. They doubt very quickly whether you will be able to do the job. *But as a matter of fact, as a deaf person, you are able to completely focus on the administrative tasks. […] Because I can't hear anything, I don't have to pick up the phone and I can completely focus on the files*. For instance my colleagues

will be working on a file and then the phone rings and their work gets interrupted.
I don't have that problem of course. (Els, administrative worker with deafness)

Similarly, other respondents argued that they could better handle repetitive tasks or had better verbal skills due to their impairment.

Through this discursive practice, disabled employees contest the discourse of disability as lower productivity by generating alternative meanings of productivity and projecting an identity of more productive workers. Different from in the first discursive practice, disability is here highlighted, yet its negative evaluation reversed into a positive one. Echoing the business case for diversity (cf. Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), speakers infuse disability with economic value and thus as a valuable asset for the organization. In order to do so, they redefine productivity in selective ways, often stressing qualitative aspects.

The relation of this discursive practice to ableism as an organizing principle is again two-fold. On the one hand, this discursive practice powerfully counters the discourse of disability as lower productivity, by systematically associating disability with higher productivity. On the other hand, to do so it needs to reduce disabled workers solely to their productivity. Although this discursive practice enables speakers to craft powerful, positive workplace identities, this is achieved at the cost of downplaying their agency. In order to eliminate doubts surrounding one's competences, they are portrayed as 'natural' manifestations of one's impairment, with a strong self-essentializing effect. Similar to the first, this second discursive practices has self-disciplining effects: it produces docile bodies by 'quasi-fixing' their meanings, reifying the dominant social order (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1977; 1990).

Crafting a positive identity by refusing individual responsibility for lower productivity
Distinct from the previous two, the last discursive practice reproduces the ableist discourse of disability as lower productivity. However, speakers at the same time de-problematize lower productivity by rejecting responsibility for it. Most fragments rejected responsibility by referring to one's inability to be more productive despite one's will. The following quote is exemplary:

> You can make as many adaptations as possible, and I will be able to work faster, but I don't think I will ever be as fast as someone else. It works, it's not that I'm sitting there doing nothing. But I think *I'll always work at a slower pace.* […]. My previous supervisor did not want to accept that I indeed, at the end of the day, *whether I want to or not,* I can do my very best and all, I did try really hard to make her happy, but… (Dirk, administrative worker with visual impairment)

Other interviewees similarly described, in all honesty, how they worked at a slower pace, or could not handle as many tasks as they used to, or were unable to deal with stressful and complex situations demanding flexibility on their part. In all cases, they took distance from their disability casting it as a tragic event that could have happened to anyone, completely outside their control and thus something for which they should not be held individually accountable. A respondent told us:

> Sometimes people say: 'Well, I'd fancy working from the home as well'. That's very difficult for me. People that don't understand the situation and… well don't give pleasant reactions. You know… I am already struggling with it [my disability] so

much, because I want to keep up with the team, and I used to do all that, I used to really be an eager beaver, and now… Pfff… I really can't… [Laughs with despair]. *So yeah, you do less and less just because you can't do it anymore.* (Marjan, counselor with fibromyalgia)

This speaker expresses her deep regret about being less and less able to work due to the worsening of her impairment, casting herself as willing but unable to do more. This is often discursively achieved by stressing the lack of understanding from able-bodied people, as in the previous quote, or the incommensurability between one's situation and theirs, as in the following one:

I got some remarks like: "Oh, my back hurts, too" and "Others will get jealous [of your reasonable accommodation]". You know, if your back hurts that bad, then get it accredited [by the Flemish Service for People with a Disability]. And if others also want a day off in the week and a couch in their office, I'll tell them: "Fine! But then you'll have to carry a bag of poo around your waste 24/7, too. *We'll switch places. You can have it!* And I'll come to work 5 days a week! *You can have it all!* But that [stoma], you take with you!" And then it gets quiet of course. (Alice, data analyst with chronic illness)

A second discursive resource speakers deployed to explain their productivity loss was the lack of accommodations from their employer:

I am sure there is a loss of productivity. […]. I do compensate for a lot, if you ask me. I've been at this department the longest. I know how many things work around here, I handle them more quickly than others, but I lose huge amounts of time when I have to go through documents *because things aren't in an accessible format*. (Peter, web support manager with visual impairment)

I think it's a missed opportunity for the organization as well. Because, *say I had had the program installed from the beginning […], there would have been an increase in output,* I would have benefitted from it and so would they. I could have gone through two more evaluations yesterday for example. (Birgitte, personnel staff worker with dyslexia)

Here, the unsuitable work conditions are foregrounded to shift the responsibility for one's lower productivity to the organization.
A last discursive resource deployed by respondents was the wage subsidy, as illustrated by the following quote:

People should be respected as they are! If they are a bit slower, then let them be! It's not their fault, either. I always get the impression around here that if you get paid the same, you should perform the same. But that's just not how things work. I used to think that since I'm always sick, the company does not benefit from me at all, so *I decided to go and get my "disability label", now at least I'm worth a dash and a subsidy. That will compensate for what I give too little.* Somewhere you bear this sense of guilt […]. But they should just respect people and deal with them in a

normal way without pointing fingers and saying: "You over there, you don't perform enough". (Claire, instructor with chronic illness)

In this fragment, reference to a compensation by the state for the speaker's productivity loss allows her to claim a rightful membership in the organization independent of her productivity. By collectivizing the cost and thus the responsibility, the compensation relieves the individual from 'bearing all the guilt' for the productivity loss. In this way, an alternative positive identity is crafted by contesting the moral legitimacy of the organizational expectation of equal productivity.

Through this discursive practice, respondents reaffirm the discourse of disability as lower productivity, yet proactively draw on various discursive resources to construct the negative consequences as a collective rather than an individual responsibility.

Although distinct from the previous two, also this third discursive practice stands in an ambiguous relation to ableism as an organizing principle. On the one hand, at first sight it embraces the subject position offered by the ableist discourse of disability as lower productivity. On the other, it introduces a fundamental critique of productivity as a key criterion for individual disabled workers' valuation as worthy organizational members. Interestingly, here speakers simultaneously highlight the lack of control over their disability and reaffirm their own agency, claiming a legitimate place in the organization and legitimizing their refusal to strive to meet the norm of able-bodied workers. This discursive practice is radical in that it reclaims organizational membership based on ethics, undermining dominant instrumental understandings of employees as productive human resources. Fundamentally questioning the neo-liberal individualization of the subject (Foucault, 2008), it enables speakers to advance alternative metrics of valuation to construct themselves outside economic worthiness (Hall and Wilton, 2011) and to reaffirm a collective responsibility for their disability in the workplace.

Discussion

Taking stock of the critical literature on identity, control and resistance, this study aimed to get a fine-grained understanding of how disabled employees engage with the institutionalized discourse of disability as lower productivity. Whereas the literature on ableism highlights the disabling and exclusionary effects of disability discourses, we directed our attention to disabled employees' own discursive practices, engaging with the discourse of lower productivity in an attempt to construct identities imbued with worth. From our analysis, three discursive practices emerged through which disabled speakers distinctively positioned themselves vis-à-vis representations of disability as lower productivity. Despite the partially conflicting workplace identities these practices project, they were frequently combined in speakers' narratives, resulting in complex, multilayered identities which stand in ambiguous relations to the discourse of lower productivity and to ableism as an organizing principle. Below we first discuss how our study contributes to the extant literature on ableism in the workplace and then reflect on how, conversely, it speaks to the broader critical literature on identity.

A critical, identity-centered perspective advances current understanding of power in the literature on ableism in the workplace by highlighting how language exerts power by impinging upon the subject's own understanding of the self (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). As our findings illustrate, even hegemonic discourses of disability do not succeed in completely fixing the meaning of disability in subordinate terms, but are on the contrary re-appropriated,

as discursive resources, in creative ways that partially question subordination. By approaching disabled individuals' discursive practices as constitutive of discursive structures, we show how power, control and resistance are precarious effects of contested identity work (Foucault, 1986; Knights and Willmott, 1989), rather than structural outcomes. This articulation of macro-level discourses and micro-level discursive practice is theoretically appealing as it allows to recover individual agency within a social model of disability. The social model has increasingly been critiqued for its overemphasis on structure leading to overly deterministic accounts in which disabled individuals are absent (Shakespeare, 2006). While others are looking for ways to recuperate the subject outside the social, for instance through the notion of impairment effects (Williams and Mavin, 2013) or psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2002), our approach rather highlights the co-constitutive nature of the relation between the subject and discursive structures, re-balancing it. Our findings further add to the literature on ableism by shedding novel light on the relation between ableism as a principle of organizing and hegemonic workplace discourses of disability. Whereas this relation is currently conceptualized as a linear, one-to-one correspondence (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Holmqvist et al., 2013; Lindsay et al., 2014; Vandekinderen et al., 2012), our analysis points to complexity and ambiguity. In the first discursive practice we see how explicit opposition to the discourse of disability as lower productivity goes together with the re-affirmation of ableism. In the second, such opposition is rather paired with a rejection of ableism and through the redefinition of productivity. Conversely, the third practice reaffirms the lower productivity discourse, yet radically rejects productivity as a metrics for valuation, thereby rejecting ableism.

By simultaneously drawing on other hegemonic discourses, speakers further complicate this relation, with different implications on the dynamics of control and resistance. This is particularly manifest in the second discursive practice, which contests ableism by using the business case of diversity, yet by doing so inevitably reduces the disabled subject to a productive resource. This reduction deflates the political effect of this discursive practice, as superior productivity becomes an essential condition for the inclusion of disabled employees in the workplace, and thus also a legitimate ground for exclusion when unmet (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004). Future research could further develop this insight by investigating more systematically how specific organizational discursive regimes offer specific sets of discourses, which speakers can draw on when engaging with discourses of disability.

Third, the analysis of the discursive resources deployed by our respondents reveals that hegemonic discourses which commonly produce subordinate representations of disabled individuals – such as the medical discourse (Barnes and Mercer, 2005), the business case for diversity (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004) or neo-liberalism (Munro, 2011) – can be re-appropriated by disabled employees to construct positive workplace identities. This is a theoretically and politically important observation, as it points to the possibility for speakers to leverage negative hegemonic discourses, next to the social and legislative discourses (Corlett & Williams, 2011), to their own advantage. Combining them inter-textually, they can generate counter-hegemonic discursive practices to claim recognition on their own terms in the workplace (Foster, 2007).

This study also speaks to the broader critically oriented literature on minorities' identity struggles and resistance in the workplace. In line with this literature, our findings highlight the simultaneous compliant and resistant nature of the workplace identities crafted by members of historically subordinated social groups (e.g. Denissen, 2010; Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Van Laer and Janssens, 2014). Our analytical focus on discursive

practices, however, revealed speakers' simultaneous deployment of multiple discursive resources – e.g. representations of disabled workers as superior 'self-managers' and as 'victims of their impairment' – to construct even contradictory representations of the self. In this sense, the crafted identities do not appear to be particularly secure (cf. Collinson, 2003; Knights and Willmott, 1989) but rather diffuse. This diffuse character defers meaning, making it difficult to pin these identities down, decreasing the likelihood that they be re-appropriated by others to discursively reproduce disabled employees' subordination. These insights complement and qualify current understandings of compliance and resistance through subordinate subjects' identity work, which tend to focus on the struggle involved in resolving the incompatibility between organizational cultures based on the ideal worker's norm and social identities such as ethnicity, religion, age, class (e.g. Collinson, 2003; Denissen, 2010; Nkomo and Cox, 1996; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Future research might want to examine how speakers belonging to subordinate social groups combine a broader variety of hegemonic discourses, including but not limited to those constitutive of social identities, and to which extent these combinations result in coherent identities.

The observed re-appropriation of negative hegemonic discourses of disability by disabled employees to construct positive workplace identities is further important as it counters the idea, widespread in the critical diversity literature, that only representations of the subject resting on legal discourses such as equal opportunities, reasonable accommodations and anti-discrimination are conducive to more equality. Our study rather shows that subordinating discourses can also offer discursive resources from which subjects can create alternative, more positive identities and subject positions for themselves (Wrench, 2005).

Conclusion

With this paper, it has been our intention to provide a catalyst for research denaturalizing ableism and unveiling its disabling effects. Specifically, we have examined how people with impairments engage with the disabling hegemonic discourse of productivity and, by doing so, themselves co-shape the possibilities for alternative, non-ableist workplaces. Approaching disabled people as agents, we have attempted to recuperate their own role in the operation of power in ableist workplaces to re-balance the historical focus of the social model literature on social structures. Attention to disabled subjects' own discursive practice is theoretically and politically warranted. Theoretically, it is needed because the power of ableist discourses is predicated upon their self-positioning within such discourses. Examining this self-positioning is crucial for understanding how such discourses are reproduced and/or subverted and resisted. Politically, it is warranted because it advances representations of disabled workers as political subjects who can 'fracture' ableism, even if partially and temporarily, rather than as mere objects of policies by organizations and the state. This type of representations is vital to envision social change in the workplace respecting the principle of disabled workers' self-determination 'nothing about us without us'.

Notes
[1] A note on terminology is warranted here. Both the terms 'disabled individuals' and 'individuals with impairments' are currently used by scholars and activists working from a

social model of disability. Where disability has predominantly been approached as an issue of minority politics, as in the US and Canada, the term 'people with disabilities' is generally used to refer to a minority in society that is devalued, stigmatized, and marginalized. Where the emphasis has rather traditionally been on social barriers to inclusion, as in the UK, the term 'disabled people' is more common. This term highlights that it is society that disables and oppresses people with impairments, by preventing their access, integration and inclusion to all walks of life, making them disabl*ed*. Both approaches are social, as the cause of the disability is primarily located in society (rather than in the individual) and is problematized. As the literature on ableism in which this paper is positioned consistently uses the term 'disabled individuals' (e.g. Campbell, 2009; Foster and Wass, 2012; Goodley, 2011; Vandekinderen et al. 2012; Williams and Mavin, 2012), for coherence, we use this term.

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