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**The identity regulation of disabled employees:
Unveiling the ‘varieties of ableism’ in employers’ socio-ideological control**

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Abstract

Conceptualizing organizational representations of disabled workers as a form of socio-ideological control, this study investigates the identity regulation of disabled employees. The comparative analysis of a bank, a labour market intermediary organization and a local public administration unveils distinct ways in which the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy is used to regulate disabled workers’ identity in function of organizational goals and the work organization: by subsuming them into the ideal employee, by constructing them as the negation of the ideal employee, and by constructing the disabled and the able-bodied employee as distinct and mutually dependent ideal workers. These ‘varieties of ableism’ produce specific understandings of disabled employees that give them differential access to an ideal worker identity and are resisted in multiple and surprising ways, including reclaiming the ideal worker’s identity and the promised rewards associated with it, and disclosing or hiding one’s embodiment and disability. The study advances extant knowledge by showing how ableism variously functions as a principle of organizing shaping whom disabled workers are (not) allowed to be.

Key words: disability, identity regulation, identity work, ableism, control, resistance.

Introduction

Despite a formal right to work (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007) and a widespread expectation to ‘contribute to society’ through engaging in paid work, disabled people still face enormous barriers today in accessing jobs and having their competences recognized and valued. Over the last few years, a body of literature has emerged that documents the struggles of these individuals against widespread discourses constructing them as inferior employees, ‘unable to do demanding work’ (Elraz, 2018), ‘less productive’ (Jammaers, Zanoni & Hardonk, 2016) or essentially ‘other’ than their able-bodied colleagues (Mik-Meyer, 2016; 2017). Other studies have rather shown how even employment programmes set up to support access to paid work end up discursively disabling them by infusing their self-identity with a sense of unemployability (Holmqvist, Maravelias & Skålen, 2012; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013) and ‘worthlessness’ (Vandekinderen, Roets, Vanderplasschen & Van Hove, 2012).

Although the current literature has well documented society-wide ableist discourses, and disabled people’s struggle in dealing with such negative constructions in the workplace, to date, we still have limited insight into how employers give meaning to disability and to which aim. This is surprising, as the diversity literature has convincingly shown that organizations do not simply reproduce (negative) representations of social identities present in their environment, but rather proactively produce their own through their discursive and material practices. Such representations instrumentally constitute employees with specific socio-demographic profiles in distinct ways, which commonly reflect the competences (dis)associated with them in relation to the organization of work (e.g. Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013; Zanoni, 2011; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004), the organization’s business logic and strategy (e.g. Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013), the type of services offered (e.g. Janssens & Zanoni, 2005), and the organization’s need for legitimacy with specific constituencies (e.g. Dobusch, 2017b; Prasad, Prasad & Mir, 2011).

From the broader critical organizational literature, we moreover know that how organizations represent employees plays a key role in processes of managerial control. To elicit desired behaviour, contemporary organizations attempt to regulate workers’ identity by enjoining them into developing ‘self-images and work orientations that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 619). This type of socio-ideological control thus occurs through individuals’ self-reflective narrative crafting of their identity (Bousseba & Brown, 2017). While language is pivotal in this modality of control, as it provides a legitimate vocabulary to craft one’s identity, discourses—structured collections of texts that bring objects and subject positions into being (Fairclough, 1992; Hardy & Phillips, 1999)—typically enforce control in combination with social and material practices that variously sustain the regulation of workers’ identity (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Michel, 2011; Paring, Pezé & Huault, 2017; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007).

Taking stock of these insights, this paper investigates the identity regulation of disabled employees in three service organizations. Empirically, we draw on the cases of a private bank, a semi-public labour market intermediary organization and a local public administration with relatively large numbers of disabled employees and a formal disability policy. While widespread, identity regulation is considered a particularly important form of control in contemporary service organizations, where employees are expected to retain some degree of discretion and make situation-bound choices in interaction with other actors based on shared understandings of what is desirable, rather than mechanically apply abstract formal rules (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

This study contributes to the extant literature on the discursive construction of disability in relation to paid work by comparatively showing that organizations deploy the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy in multiple ways to regulate disabled workers’ identity and as a principle of organizing. The observed differences in the modalities of socio-ideological control—

which we call ‘varieties of ableism’ –reflect both distinct organizational goals and how these are achieved through a specific organization of work. Our analysis also extends the literature on socio-ideological control by unveiling that organizations may regulate the identity of workers with different embodiments in distinct ways, and even control some by imposing a negative, organizationally undesirable identity. We could moreover identify multiple forms of resistance by disabled workers, including the re-appropriation of the ideal worker identity when denied such identity, claiming the rewards promised with the ideal worker identity imposed by the identity-regulatory discourse, and through the disclosure or hiding of one’s embodiment and disability against the organization’s socio-ideological control.

The discursive disablement of people with impairments work

In recent years, a number of studies have started to examine how discourses of disability disable individuals with impairments, hampering their labour market participation. Although contemporary societies increasingly expect all citizens to participate in paid work, and formally recognize their right to it, disabled people often remain excluded from this domain of life. Next to material barriers, such as inaccessible office space or job design (Beatty et al., 2019), exclusion is caused by pervasive discourses of disabled individuals as unable to conform to the neo-liberal norm of the individualized, self-governing, active and entrepreneurial subject who responsibly manages him- or herself to maximize his or her human capital, employability and productivity (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Roulstone, 2002; Vandekinderen et al., 2012).

Studies of activating labour market programmes for instance emphasize how obtaining and keeping employment is turned into disabled individuals’ own responsibility, rather than one of governments and organisations (Goodley, 2014) in the spirit of the neo-liberal market agenda. Such programmes mould jobseekers’ subjectivity through a disabling process of work capacity assessments enforcing able-bodied standards of normalcy (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013). Typically, these assessments draw on medical power (Holmqvist et al., 2012,) to impose identities centred on paid work, blaming those participants who are unable to adopt such identity as ‘lacking self-management’ (Vandekinderen et al., 2012). Ultimately, welfare providers classify individuals into able-bodied and disabled, deserving and undeserving, sorting ‘worthy and respectable’ subjects from ‘welfare fraudsters’ (Grover & Piggott, 2013; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012).

Only a handful of studies have examined the discursive representation of disabled employees in regular employment. Mik-Meyer’s research (2016, 2017) documents how co-workers construct disabled employees as other by drawing on a vast, collectively available vocabulary of subordinated differences including transvestites, homosexuals and immigrants. Dobusch’s analysis of diversity managers’ discourses of diversity concludes that disability is constructed as ‘individually embodied, negative deviance’ (2017a, p. 493). Few other studies rather focus on how individuals with impairments themselves engage with these disabling workplace discourses. For instance, Elraz (2013) shows how employees with mental health problems hide their disability and sacrifice their health in an effort to align with neo-liberal expectations of an ‘employable’ subject. Jammaers and colleagues (2016) and Elraz (2018) rather examine the disabled employees’ discursive strategies to construct viable identities amidst dominant assumptions of disability as a state of inability and lower productivity. Although highly informative of the pervasive negative representations of disabled individuals and their own struggle to deal with them at work, the extant literature has to date left discourses of disability produced by employing organizations outside the scope of analysis.

Studying organizational discourses of and material practices on disability as a form of socio-ideological control

In this study, we conceptualize organizational discourses of disability as a key modality to exert socio-ideological control on disabled employees. Interest in this type of control originated in the late 1980s, when some scholars drew attention to the understudied role of organizational culture and symbolism in the management of employees’ ‘insides’ – their hopes, fears and aspirations – (Deetz, 1995; Knights & Willmott, 1989). Different from control through bureaucratic, formal structures and regulations, socio-ideological control is exerted *through* the employee’s self rather than imposed upon it. It rests on identification – the ‘self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organization with which they may become more or less identified and committed’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 620) – as a powerful mechanism ensuring the alignment of behaviour with organizational goals.

Identification effectively steers workers by reducing the range of possible behaviours to those seen as compatible with one’s sense of the self and the organization. Relying on self-monitoring, it represents a particularly cost-effective modality of control especially suitable for jobs requiring the worker to retain a certain degree of discretion, such as professional and service-oriented jobs (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). As a mode of control, identity regulation thus uniquely rests on individuals’ proactive implication in their own self-constitution as subjects through their own identity work. In such identity work, individuals continuously shape and revise their identity to grapple with questions such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘who do I want to be?’, and to author coherent, positive and distinctive understanding of themselves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Identity work is not merely an occasional activity triggered by changes in the work environment, but rather a key way for human beings to deal with existential insecurities (Collinson, 2003; Knight & Willmott, 1989).

While crucially resting on discourses, organizations’ socio-ideological control of workers ‘are constrained as well as enabled by material conditions, cultural traditions and relations of power’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 628; see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of materiality, space and the body in socio-ideological control, showing the complex relation between organizations’ discursive and material practices and how they jointly shape workers’ identity work and (embodied) resistance (Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019; Symon & Pritchard, 2015). Whereas in some cases discursive and material practices align to regulate identity in clear-cut ways (e.g. Paring et al., 2017; Våland & Georg, 2018), in other ones, they appear to contradict each other, leaving it to individuals to solve such contradiction (e.g. Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Michel, 2011). At the same time, reliance on subjects’ proactive engagement entails that organizations’ identity-regulatory attempts might fail because their identification is unlikely to ever be complete, due to inconsistencies between discourses and/or these latter and material practices, which produce gaps and provide possibilities to craft and maintain alternative preferred versions of their selves (Boussebaa & Brown, 2016; Knights & McCabe, 2003; Musson & Duberley, 2007; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). Individuals who resist regulation are however likely to pay a price, ranging from marginalization within the organization to expulsion (Willmott, 1993).

According to the typology advanced by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), organizations can regulate identity in various discursive and material ways³. They can define the organizational ‘scene’ or the context, for instance through words, space, and technology, and the established ideas and norms about the ‘natural way of doing things’, which indirectly indicate the kind of subject and identity that fits within it. Or they can convey workers’ ideal behaviour, or ‘appropriate work orientations’ and ideal characteristics. Finally, organizations can define a worker directly by using specific words and expressions, or indirectly, by defining him or her as different from a worker or group of workers which is defined directly. In all cases, social identities such as gender, dis/ability, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity provide commonly used vocabularies, symbols and images through which organizations shape idealized

and normalized notions of the organization and workers, often with exclusionary effects (e.g. Acker 2006; Ashcraft, 2013; Liff & Wajcman, 1996; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019).

Taking stock of these insights, our study investigates the identity regulation of disabled workers by addressing the following research questions: 1) Through which discourses and material practices do employers regulate the identity of disabled workers? And 2) How do disabled workers engage with such socio-ideological control?

Methodology

Research context

Based on the cases of a private bank, a semi-public labour market intermediary organization and a local public administration in Belgium (see Table 1 for more details), this study was conducted as part of a large, publicly funded project on the employment experiences of disabled people for the Flemish Policy Centre for Equal Opportunities Policies 2012–2015. In 2015, Belgium had an employment rate for disabled people of 38.5 %, significantly lower than both the European average of 47.4% and the national employment rate of people without disabilities of 72.9% (Samoy, 2016). When professionally active, disabled people have historically largely been employed in state-subsidized sheltered workshops rather than in regular workplaces (Samoy & Waterplas, 2012). The Belgian state supports the employment of disabled individuals through employer-based wage subsidies meant to compensate for estimated productivity loss caused by impairments. Compensation ranges from 40% in the first year to 20% in the third to fifth year. Afterwards, the employer needs to demonstrate the worker’s persistent lower productivity to retain the subsidy. For public administrations, there is a non-binding 3% quota, which is however seldom reached. ‘Activation’ is further pursued through free guidance and support for disabled job seekers aimed at developing skills to enhance the ‘fit’ between disabled candidates and employers’ demands (Vandekinderen et al., 2012). Despite these initiatives, work-related discrimination of disabled people remains widespread in the country (Unia, 2019).

Study design

A multiple case-study design allows to investigate identity-regulatory processes of disabled employees comparatively, identifying similarities and differences across organizational settings (Yin, 2009). The organizations were selected based on three criteria: they largely employed personnel in qualified, service-providing jobs entailing some degree of discretion, which increased the relevance and likelihood of identity regulation as a mode of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000); they employed a substantial number of employees with an impairment, increasing the likelihood of obtaining access to respondents; and they had formal disability policies and practices, a key data source to reconstruct organizational identity-regulatory efforts and with which interview data could be triangulated (Creswell, 2012).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Data sources

As common in case study research (Creswell, 2012) as well as in research on identity regulation and identity work (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Boussebaa & Brown, 2016), we collected qualitative data from multiple data sources. Our main empirical material were 65 extensive in-depth interviews of which 30 with disabled employees with a wide variety of impairments ranging from visual, mobility, hearing, psychosocial, to various chronic illnesses, two of whom held a managerial position; 23 with able-bodied managers of disabled employees; four with HR able-bodied managers; two with able-bodied occupational doctors; and six with able-bodied

trade union representatives. Four-teen of our disabled respondents were men and 16 women, and they were employed in jobs ranging from administration to sales, consultant, instructor, marketing, project coordinator and product design (see Table 1 for an overview). This empirical material was complemented with secondary data from the organizational websites (3), annual diversity reports (3), job vacancies (30), industry reports (3), marketing materials (4) and newspaper articles (2).

To recruit disabled employees for the study, all employees with a disability – officially defined as ‘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, 2016) – in each firm received an email by the personnel office asking whether they wanted to be interviewed in the context of a study on the employment opportunities and experiences of disabled people.² The interviews with disabled employees were based on an interview guide organized in five sections concerning the nature of the impairment, professional trajectory, current job, social relations at work, and policy-related issues. Managers of disabled employees and trade union representatives were asked to participate through a similar procedure. The interview guide for interviewing these organizational actors similarly followed five section: own professional trajectory, the experience with, the support given to disabled employees by the organization, the support received from the organization to deal with disabled employees, and policy-related issues. All interviews were carried out in Dutch by the first author, mostly during office hours and occasionally during lunch breaks or after work and lasted on average 51 minutes. Common ethical guidelines were followed and anonymity guaranteed (Cresswell, 2012). All names used are pseudonyms.

Taking a critically oriented, social constructionist approach, we are aware that identities are not only constructed within a specific organizational discursive context but also empirically co-constructed in the dialogue between the respondents and the first author during the interviews (Alvesson, 2003), a dialogue into which each brings his or her own lived experiences (Coupland, 2001). The first author’s embodiment – young, white, female, middle-class and able-bodied – has undoubtedly affected the data collection process (Cunliffe, 2003). For instance, able-bodied managers might have been more open to discussing the ‘hardships’ of employing disabled employees. Or, disabled interviewees’ might have stressed certain aspects while downplaying others, assuming an able-bodied interviewer would not be fully able to grasp their experience.

Data analysis

In a first exploratory phase, both authors read a sample of interviews with different types of respondents to get acquainted with the material. Already from this early reading and discussions, we shared the impression that the organizations regulated disabled employees’ identities through quite different discourses and material practices. In a second phase, to address the first research question – Through which discourses and material practices do employers regulate the identity of disabled workers? – texts reporting instances of organizational identity regulation were identified from all data sources. This generated a total of 475 fragments including texts: 1) defining the ideal worker through ‘setting the scene’ or defining the context, 2) defining the ideal worker, and 3) directly and indirectly defining disabled employees (as individuals or as a group).³ We then comparatively interpreted the relation between the constructions of the ideal worker and the disabled workers across the cases as reflecting the specific combination of competences (not) attributed to the disabled workers and the organization of work. From this analysis the distinct relations of subsumption, negation and mutual dependence emerged.

In a third phase, to answer the second research question – How do disabled workers engage with such socio-ideological control? – we analysed the 30 interviews with disabled employees more in depth. We checked how each organization-specific relation between the constructions of the ideal employee and the disabled employee informed the identity work of the disabled employees. This analysis generated a total of 299 fragments. In BankCorp, disabled employees largely constructed an identity which subsumed them into the ideal worker; other identities were rare. In EmployOrg, disabled employees did construct an identity as embodying the negation to the ideal worker, yet more often crafted other identities resisting this identity regulation. In LocGov, disabled employees constructed an identity as different and dependent on the ideal worker, yet other identities were almost as frequent. Illustrative fragments for all codes are presented in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

BankCorp: Identity regulation through subsuming disabled workers into the ideal worker

BankCorp, our first case, is a large company providing retail, corporate banking and insuring services employing almost 15 000 people, of whom only 0.4% with a disability, in a variety of jobs in finance and accounting, marketing, sales, and ICT. Issued from a takeover by an international bank in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, it aspires today ‘to be the reference among European banks with a global reach, the preferred long-term partner to [its] clients, and a contributor to responsible and sustainable global development’ (organizational website).

BankCorp was permeated by a strong identity-regulatory discourse centered on ‘*brains, heart and guts*’, a slogan which was frequently used in formal communications to construct the ideal worker as an individual possessing a very broad set of competences ranging from ‘knowledge and reasoning ability’ to ‘empathy towards clients’, ‘negotiating skills’, ‘stress resilience’, and a ‘competitive attitude’ (Kate, diversity manager). Vacancy advertisements for all kinds of jobs similarly characterized suitable candidates as ‘ambitious’, ‘assertive’, ‘hardworking’ and ‘dynamic’, while managers stressed the importance of ‘not simply following the crowd’ (Chelsey, manager), having ‘an X-factor’ and ‘wanting to get somewhere in their lives’ (Charlotte, manager). Interviewees further emphasized that the bank was a highly demanding, fast changing environment where ‘simple’ jobs were disappearing due to digitalization and outsourcing. Against this scene, BankCorp controlled workers through a competitive evaluation system awarding individuals yearly bonuses based on ‘merit’, including the expectation that they invested in lifelong learning, international mobility, and long (unpaid) working hours.

In this context, disabled employees were largely discursively constructed by managers as employees who simply ‘happen to have an impairment’ (Maddy, manager). For instance, the diversity manager told us that ‘the best people are chosen, and statistically now and then one of those best people has a disability’, and line managers emphasized disabled workers’ similarity with non-disabled ones:

The quality and expertise of people that is the number one thing around here. And if those people happen to have a disability or not, that’s less important. (Cody, manager)

Respondents consistently discursively minimized disabled employees’ ‘difference’, subsuming them into the ideal of the highly selected, competent BankCorp worker.

Disabled employees’ enactment of the ideal of a broadly competent worker was facilitated by a material accommodation policy providing ‘arrangements so that they [disabled employees] can perform the job’ (Nicolas, manager), ‘integrating them in the business, providing all possibilities to minimize the impact of the disability [...], taking care of all technology, phones,

adapted software...’ (Wout, union representative). In line with the discourse of the ideal worker as an individual in control of his or her career, this policy expected disabled employees to independently ‘manage’ their disability by requesting material adaptations through an intranet application or by arranging themselves support when in need, to avoid the risk of ‘being patronized’ (Nicolas, manager).

At the same time, to reduce organizational barriers that could curb disabled employees’ capacity to identify with and embody the ideal worker, BankCorp implemented anti-discrimination trainings for all managers and a periodical systematic random test on job applications to investigate whether discrimination had occurred in prior recruitment processes:

We want to ensure that, also for outsourced recruitments, there is never a risk that a person with talent but with a ‘difference’ – a disability, a different accent, a different look – falls out. They [external recruiters] have to know: “Be aware, this is a BankCorp file! No discrimination is tolerated here, focus only on competences!”. We also came up with a full e-learning course with typical cases in the banking sector. All managers and all HR managers have taken it. (Kate, diversity manager)

Overall, BankCorp regulated the identity of disabled workers by constructing disability as a non-issue and subsuming them into the ideal worker, whilst providing material arrangements to reduce the barriers they might encounter in crafting the desired identity and enacting the desired behaviour. Of all respondents, only the diversity manager additionally constructed disabled employees as ‘bringing in unique perspectives helping the organization better service diverse customers’, relying on a business-case-for-diversity discourse emphasizing their specific value because of their difference.

The socio-ideological control effects on disabled workers were highly visible in their own identity work, in which they largely drew on and embraced BankCorp’s ideal:

When I applied for a job here [...] the policy was like: “We board on disabled people too, if they are as good workers”. [...] my brain works as fast as my colleagues’, I only type a bit slower, but in fact I often have to ask my boss for more tasks. (Ella, mobility impaired accountant)

When your outlook on life is positive and you have a ‘can do’ attitude and handle things creatively, then there are only solutions and no problems. I never complain about my wheelchair. (Eric, mobility impaired manager)

In line with the company’s normative expectations, these speakers craft identities centered on their own individual ability and competence, proactivity and self-management and by stressing similarity to other employees both in how the organization sees them and how they see themselves.

Some respondents mentioned how the enactment of BankCorp’s ideal worker required them to continuously keep their embodiment and its (potential) disabling effects out of sight:

The bar was set high there. [...] Yes, BankCorp is open to diversity [...] once you’ve proven yourself, you get extra credibility, they [managers] know it’s not easy. They will never ask me questions about it [the disability] though, it’s taboo. (Dieter, visually impaired campaign evaluator)

I’ve always acted like everybody else. [...] I know I have to work hard, sometimes harder than someone else, but that’s the only option for me. I don’t talk about it [my disability] to other people. (Tom, hearing impaired sales advisor).

These disabled employees portray themselves as taking individual responsibility for containing their own embodiment and fitting in the bank’s self-managing, hyper-performative ideal worker. Within this organizational identity-regulatory discourse, these subjects are enjoined to craft a valued, ideal worker self, yet this clearly comes with the erasure of their body, in which

their disability is not only made ‘irrelevant’, but even to fall outside the speakable, as an abject form of otherness or a ‘taboo’, to use Dieter’s words.

In this context, an ideal worker’s identity was however also occasionally used to resist when the material practices were experienced as contradicting the discursive control, such as instances in which disabled workers were treated as incompetent or unworthy of advancement on the ground of their disability:

I had been unemployed for 8 months, so I took the job they offered. But I didn’t feel good about it, I was overqualified. [...] I heard they put me in that office just because there was another deaf woman there! They gave me the simplest job, pushing two buttons [...] I went to the diversity manager and threatened to quit, I’ve not studied so long and so hard to be treated like this! (Julie, hearing impaired marketer)

Before I became ill, I was promised a promotion. When I came back to work, they told me the deal was off, because I ‘no longer had potential’. [...] I now do my hours and that’s it. (Maarten, visually and mobility impaired officer business loans)

While resistance to socio-ideological control commonly occurs through the rejection of the identity imposed by an organization, here, disabled employees resist from the subject position of the ideal employee, with whom they identify. Speaking as ideal employees, they hold the organization accountable for treatment received on the basis to their embodied difference, which denies them the possibility to subsume themselves into the ideal worker and obtain the rewards promised for its enactment. This finding reveals that aligning one’s identity with the organization’s socio-ideological discourse cannot categorically be seen as a manifestation of compliance, in particular when the organization’s material practices are experienced as incoherent with such discourse.

Collapsing the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy by discursively erasing embodied difference and materially attempting to neutralize its effects, BankCorp’s socio-ideological control through subsumption both rests on and reproduces an understanding of disabled workers as essentially similar to able-bodied workers (Liff & Wajcman, 1996) and thus as (potentially) possessing competences which allow them to similarly function and contribute to organizational goals (e.g. Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013). This type of socio-ideological control makes valued subject positions in principle accessible to disabled workers, both discursively and through the availability of material accommodations that attempt to equalize opportunities, yet on condition that they are able to live up to a norm that was not written on a disabled body (see Ashcraft, 2013 on gendered norms). The exclusionary effects of such control are reflected in the very low percentage of disabled workers of 0.4% in this organization, despite its proactive disability management.

EmployOrg: Regulating the identity of the disabled worker as the negation of the ideal worker

Our second case is EmployOrg, a regional public labor market intermediary employing around 5 000 people, of whom 2.3% with an officially recognized disability. Although this figure does not reach the mandated 3%, it reflects the historical expectation that public administrations set an example concerning the employment of the most vulnerable groups on the labor market, leading to a substantial number of disabled people in the organization. Reflecting two decades of labor market ‘modernization’ and increasing focus on individuals’ activation, EmployOrg’s mission is today formulated as ‘helping citizens to develop their careers (with special attention to disadvantaged groups) and creating a better labor market and welfare for all’ (organization website). Core functions to fulfil this ambition are job coaches, who guide jobseekers – ‘clients’

– towards employment, and instructors, who teach skills to jobseekers to increase their ‘employability’.

In their interviews with us, EmployOrg’s managers as well as other respondents very consistently constructed the ideal worker as someone who ‘flexibly and immediately picks up the tasks of others in case someone is absent’ (Victor, manager), ‘proactively asks for additional tasks as soon as he or she has a free spot in his or her agenda’ (Rutger, manager) and ‘lies well in the team and is trusted by the other team members’ (Sandrine, disability expert). This construction was also produced by job advertisements stressing candidates’ ability to ‘adapt well to changing circumstances, work well in teams and be good with social contacts’. This ideal employee was discursively delineated against an organizational scene characterized by ever more demanding jobs due to recurrent personnel cuts, the introduction of a team-based organization of work, new technology and open-landscape offices exposing individuals to co-workers’ demands and surveillance. Importantly, EmployOrg was pervaded by a strong New Public Management discourse of efficiency and accountability as captured in various KPI’s including the number of individuals reached, ‘activated’, and sanctioned for insufficiently searching employment.

EmployOrg regulated disabled employees’ identity by offering them one that was in many respects the very opposite of the highly productive and flexible team worker ideal. Official documents, such as the organizational website and diversity report, the vast majority of managers, and even trade union representatives and the disability expert constructed disabled employees in highly negative terms:

Others don’t take into account that this is not a fully functioning team [because of disabled team members]... They have standard expectations of me, but don’t realize how limited I am in a number of things. (Rutger, manager)

Say a wheelchair user is at one of these desks here, and he or she needs to go to the toilet. The toilet for disabled people is downstairs. That person, I am sure, will be away from his desk for 40 minutes. Well then, that person has not been productive for 40 minutes, right?! (Sandrine, disability expert).

Along these same lines, the absence of disabled employees in higher positions was commonly attributed to their own lack of competences and flexibility in terms of the tasks and ‘jobs they are able to perform’ (Sarah, HR manager).

EmployOrg’s regulation of disabled employees’ identity as inadequate, incompetent workers was also enforced through material practices. The organization had a disability policy centered on the ‘integration protocol’, an administrative document which officially categorized an individual as disabled and described in detail one’s bodily impairment(s), the estimated productivity loss, related subsidy requests, and the accommodations granted by the organization. Originally introduced to formalize reasonable accommodations and protect disabled workers from arbitrary decisions by managers, the integration protocol however clearly also played a key role in controlling them. The following fragment from an interview with a manager well illustrates the conflict involved in the practice of administering the protocol:

Filling out the integration protocol was very time consuming, partly because Serena [disabled employee] had trouble accepting it. She was like: ‘You’re not really writing down all that stuff about me’. It required a whole conversation every time about each tiny aspect, it was exhausting for both Sandrine [disability expert] and me... (Diane, manager)

Along these same lines, managers labeled positive discrimination through reserved jobs, used by other public organizations, an ‘unwise’ policy in a setting such as EmployOrg, which was ‘under strong pressure to increase the efficiency and productivity’ and where disability thus needed to be contained (Sarah, HR manager). Our analysis indicates that EmployOrg controlled

its disabled employees by discursively constructing them as unproductive and inflexible and through material practices such as broad, team-based jobs, the disability protocol and inaccessible office spaces. These modalities of socio-ideological control did not simply deny them access to the ideal worker identity, but rather imposed an identity that was its very negation, the alter ego of the ideal worker.

Such control constituting them as the negation of the ideal worker was clearly reflected in their own identity work. Some crafted an identity as ‘unfit’ to work and expressed a sense of deep guilt for failing superiors, coworkers and clients:

I think I’ve become quite incapable of being a valuable member of my team. And my boss, she complains [...]: ‘You have your [protocol], a task reduction, but for your productivity loss, I’m not given any substitution.’ Yeah, so I have less tasks to do, but it’s at the expense of my colleagues. And I feel that this is not right. I am left with so much guilt, unbelievable. (Marjan, physically impaired job coach)
If I were a ‘real’ consultant, [I would have to] register people who come in and look for work, go over files and stuff. No, I believe I couldn’t do such a job. I always think to myself, would that be fair for the client? No, I think I should not be in such a position. (Marco, visually impaired receptionist)

Engaging with EmployOrg’s explicitly negative identity regulation, these employees craft identity narratives centred on what they cannot do and how they (would) represent an unfair burden for others around them.

In EmployOrg, disabled workers’ resistance against the socio-ideological control exerted on them often occurred through the crafting of an ideal workers’ identity as a highly committed team-player:

Even if I’m way behind with my own work I’ll be like: ‘Well then, come on, hand it over’. I’ll take it on anyways, because that’s what I’m like. [...] My boss should be happy that I’m on the verge of a burnout, because it means I care about my job. [...] It’s not in my nature to give up easily. (Jean, physically impaired consultant)

Tellingly, this respondent points to his imminent bodily breakdown – being on the verge of a burnout – as a ‘proof’ of his embodiment of the ideal worker. Others rather emphasized how their disability enabled rather than hampered them to do their job, for instance because they could be role models for disabled jobseekers:

When I explain to the convicts [her clients], whom I suspect might have an impairment, that they can have their disability certified [in order to get additional support], they are hesitant, they think: ‘Yet another label’. But then I tell them that I also have a disability and then they start thinking: ‘Well okay, she works in a regular job, doing the same job as her [able-bodied] colleagues’. And this motivates them to reintegrate into society. (Stefanie, job coach with fibromyalgia)

Although through distinct identity work, both speakers reclaim competence and their ability to contribute to the organization, re-appropriating the positive identity of the EmployOrg valuable ideal workers which was not meant for them.

EmployOrg’s socio-ideological control deploys the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy to discursively and materially construct the disabled worker as essentially different from and inferior to able-bodied ones (Campbell, 2009; Shildrick, 2009; see also Liff & Wajcman, 1996). Disabled workers are made to embody the very negation of the ideal worker, its lesser alter ego and accordingly denied the valued identity of ideal worker. Such discursive identity regulation is materially enforced through a bureaucratic practice which, although developed with good intentions (cf. Romani, Holck & Risberg, 2018), classifies workers as disabled (e.g. Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013) and requires disclosure of their bodily impairment and its disabling effects, imposing a negative disabled worker identity onto them. EmployOrg’s deployment of disabled workers as the negation of the ideal worker is remarkable as it contradicts the assumption that

socio-ideological control operates through the attractiveness of *valued* identities. We interpret this finding in the light of the contradiction in its mission. On the one hand, as a public organization, it is expected to operate as a ‘representative bureaucracy’ reflecting the diversity of the population and as a role model for the employment of vulnerable individuals (Coleman, Brudney & Kellough, 1998). On the other, it is subject to increased accountability for the ‘activation’ of the unemployed, as part of a New Public Management discourse emphasizing effectiveness, as reflected in the intensification of work through teams of interchangeable, highly flexible workers (Randle & Hardy, 2017; Zanoni, 2011) and increased co-workers’ gaze (Van Laer, 2018). In this ‘heterogeneous space’, to use Dobusch’s (2017b) term, the construction of disabled employees as the negation of the ideal worker appears to simultaneously cater for both organizational goals.

LocGov: Regulating the identity of the disabled and the able-bodied worker as mutually dependent ideal workers

Our third organization is LocGov, a local public administration employing 1 000 people mainly in administrative jobs and project coordination. With 3% disabled workers, LocGov is one of the few Belgian organizations meeting the official target for the public sector. In charge of developing regional policies and providing a wide array of services including regional planning, the promotion of tourist attractions, and the social well-being and health of the inhabitants, the organization presents itself to the public as ‘a modern regional government that actively ensures the sustainable development of its region’ and highlights the importance of ‘improving the wellbeing and quality of life for all its residents’ (organization website).

LocGov’s identity-regulatory discourse consistently constructed the ideal worker as caring, respectful of others and diversity-minded. For instance, various respondents constructed the organization as ‘wanting to be an example to society’ (Ted, labour union representative), setting the scene for an ideal employee ‘who is sensitive to social issues’ (Jozef, manager), ‘wants to make a valuable contribution to society’ (manifesto) and ‘has respect for co-workers and clients’ (website). LocGov further broadly communicates a commitment to ‘employing a diverse workforce that reflects the region’s population’ (manifesto), as diversity is ‘good for everyone’ and ‘adds a new and valuable perspective to things’ (Helen, manager), allowing the organization to better serve a diverse population. Managers emphasized how all employees are different and how some differences – e.g. ‘a difficult personality’ (Jos, manager) – are ‘a lot worse than someone taking up a few extra sick days [due to an impairment]’ (Marie, manager). The importance of being a nice co-worker, who ‘contributes to a good atmosphere at work’ was also underlined (Helen, manager), as was being someone ‘who really enjoys his workplace’ and promotes it to others (Henk, labour union representative). In this non-competitive organizational scene, ensuring a high quality of life for both citizens and employees was the main performance indicator.

While this discourse of the ideal employee targeted all LocGov personnel, disabled employees’ identity was simultaneously also regulated through a second discourse constructing disabled persons as individuals deserving a place in the organization despite the possibility that this might entail a loss of productivity for the organization:

I think an able-bodied person would be able to do more work in that job. But I also think that [the disability] has to be taken into account if you decide [as an organization] to employ disabled people. He has a disability and of course that will have an impact somehow. But no one makes a problem out of it because it’s a choice we made long ago to employ disabled people. (Annelies, manager)

The employment of disabled people is presented as a choice and a commitment of LocGov, rather than a legal imposition. Other respondents reconnected the inclusion of disabled individuals to LocGov’s mission of promoting inclusion in the broader community. They

discursively built a ‘social’ business case for employing disabled workers to fulfil a role model function in the community:

I think people have to learn to deal with differences anyways. The outside world has to know that there are people in our society who have a disability and that these people work, too. (Nancy, manager)

The identity regulation of disabled workers was further enforced through a well-developed disability policy including material practices such as a reserved recruitment system for disabled applicants, the ambition to reach a 4% target of disabled personnel, and the use of wage subsidies to provide tailored guidance to disabled employees:

We try to be reflexive about the policies we have introduced and the accommodations we have provided. In the past, we gathered to discuss these things together with all disabled employees and we focused especially on cases that went wrong. We try to readjust our policies based on negative experiences that were reported [by disabled employees], we started focusing a lot more on specialized guidance [by an external organization]. (Wim, disability expert)

This fragment on the organization’s attempts to continuously improve its inclusive policy at once sets the scene for an ideal able-bodied employee that cares for his or her disabled colleagues. This ideal was reflected in a manager’s complaint about colleagues who had ‘not yet made the mind switch’ towards embracing diversity and emphasizing how ‘that mentality has to go’ (Annelies, manager). The emphasis on a relationship of care between able-bodied and disabled employees performs a mutually dependent set of ideal workers, who are reliant on each other to fulfil the goal of serving society by reflecting its diversity. The disabled employee is here accepted and cared for by virtue of the right to be included, independent of his or her ability.

In their identity work, disabled workers commonly constructed an identity aligned with such socio-ideological control:

There is a place for me in this department with my disability. It’s taken into account in the tasks and the evaluations, so I’m really happy here. I really feel there is space for who I am. (Robin, psycho-socially impaired administrative worker)

I had a conflict with a colleague and I relapsed. I was confined to the psychiatric hospital, again, but I must say, my line manager visited me there twice! I thought I would certainly lose my job again, but instead he said: ‘Your desk is still there, it will be ready for you for when you return’. And that actually really gave me a boost.

(Katherine, psycho-socially impaired administrative worker)

These interviewees, as many other ones, portray themselves as vulnerable individuals whose different embodiments are treated with respect and care by management and able-bodied colleagues.

Yet not all interviewees identified with LocGov’s ideal disabled worker. Some crafted identities rather centered on their competence and ability to manage their disability and give back to the organization:

I have to drive around for projects now and then, go to meetings and stuff. Until now, that has not posed any problem for me, because I make sure in advance that the locations are accessible. Other than that, I have to produce the same output as anyone else, of course [laughs]! [...] I’ve never really experienced discrimination, I have a way of going about things. (Harold, physically impaired coordinator)

They have tried to give me tasks as much as possible in line with my knowledge and talents. They are indeed very flexible in that regard. I can’t complain about that really. But I have to admit, I have been very flexible towards them too in the past and do believe I reap the benefits now. (Ann, physically impaired product designer)

Resisting the imposed identity as vulnerable and in need of care, these respondents emphasize their own control, flexibility, and performance. By doing so, they construct themselves as deserving a place in the organization by virtue of their contribution, rather than their disability.

In LocGov, socio-ideological control occurs through the use of the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy to define two distinct ideal workers that are relationally defined through mutual dependence. In this relation of care, the hierarchical element is downplayed by emphasizing the centrality of care for the diverse others in the organization’s inclusive mission. Such identity-regulatory discourse is further sustained through material practices such as affirmative action at selection (e.g. Noon, 2010) and specialized guidance to retain disabled staff, resulting in 3% disabled employees and an ambition to reach 4%. Rather than promoting only a ‘species-typical individual citizen’ (Campbell, 2009), LocGov socio-ideologically controls its workforce by making space for a citizens’ diversity, in order to gain legitimacy with the broader public (Dobusch, 2017b; Orlieb & Sieben, 2013; Prasad, Prasad & Mir, 2011) and fulfil its mission as a ‘representative bureaucracy’ (Coleman et al., 1998).

Discussion

This study has investigated the regulation of disabled workers’ identity through the discourses and material practices of three service organizations to address the lack of research on employers’ production of representations of disability (Dobusch, 2017a; Elraz, 2018; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013; Holmqvist et al., 2012; Jammaers et al., 2016; Mik-Meyer, 2016, 2017; Vandekinderen et al., 2012). Approaching the representations of disabled employees as a form of socio-ideological control, our comparative analysis has allowed to identify what we have called ‘varieties of ableism’, that is, constructions of the disabled worker which distinctively relate it to the ideal employee through the able-bodied/disabled binary in order to promote workers’ identities and behaviour functional to attain specific organizational goals. Ableism refers to the ‘beliefs, processes and practices that produc[e] a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, essential and fully human’ (Campbell, 2001: 44). By pointing to how disability stands in a binary, mutually constitutive hierarchical relation with able-bodiedness, ableism unveils how it is not solely about the othering of some, but rather also inherently about how such othering is constitutive of what is ‘normal’ (Campbell, 2001, 2009; Goodley, 2014; Shildrick, 2012).

Our comparative analysis illustrates how ableism variously operates as a principle of organizing the workforce (Williams & Mavin, 2012), whereby the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy is deployed in distinct ways to regulate disabled workers’ identity, and by so doing sustain specific understandings of the ideal worker. The first organization erases the disabled pole to subsume disabled workers into the able-bodied ideal worker, stressing their essential similarity (Liff & Wajcman, 1996). While this modality of socio-ideological control at first sight makes the valued ideal worker identity accessible to disabled employees, and thus appears particularly favourable, it does require them to hide their disability and take responsibility to meet expectations and standards grounded in able-bodiedness and does not guarantee access to the rewards associated with the ideal worker identity. The second organization deploys the ableist dichotomy to construct disabled workers as embodying the negation of the ideal worker. This modality of socio-ideological control is surprising, as it does not merely deny the valued identity of the ideal worker to disabled workers, but rather assigns to them the function of embodying its lesser alter ego, enacting a form of explicit ableist exclusion within the organization. Finally, the third organization downplays the hierarchy in the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy to define two distinct, mutually dependent ideal employees. Even in this relatively favourable regime of control, disabled employees still often resisted being defined as receivers of care representing diverse citizens, rather than as able-bodied ideal workers. These findings point to the need for more fine-grained analyses that embed

representations of disability at work in specific organizational rationales, further qualifying and nuancing current broad-brushed, one-sidedly negative accounts.

The socio-ideological control regimes we observed suggest that organizations may deploy discourses and material practices that distinctly regulate the identity of workers with different embodiments, rather than steering all workers towards embodying the same normative ideal of the employee. Extending current knowledge on the key role of social identities in the (re)production of idealized and normalized notions of workers, often with exclusionary effects (e.g. Acker 2006; Ashcraft, 2013; Liff & Wajcman, 1996; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019), these findings point to the need to address the complexity of identity regulation regimes targeting specific groups of workers, defined not only in terms of their occupation (e.g. managers in Thomas & Davies, 2005), tenure in the organization (e.g. trainees in Brown & Coupland, 2005), or career ambitions and geographical location (e.g. expatriates in Lai, Morgan & Morris, 2019), but also their embodiment.

The observation of socio-ideological control providing disabled employees with an overtly negative identity, and their own identification with it despite its negative character, is particularly surprising, as it contradicts the fundamental assumption that socio-ideological control operates by imposing a desirable identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Unwanted disabled workers (whom cannot be dismissed) are in this way rendered ‘useful’ as a negative example to sustain the ideal worker norm. Their own identification with this negative identity points to the possibility that disabled workers be willing to accept even tainted, non-valued identities to stay in paid work, out of a societal pressure to do so and/or financial necessity. In this sense, this finding qualifies the literature on socio-ideological control by indicating how identification might not (only) fulfil a psychological need. Especially in contemporary neoliberal societies in which paid work has become an essential condition of citizenship (Foster & Wass, 2013; Vandekinderen et al., 2012) and to access sufficient income, individuals might feel they need to stay in employment at all cost, including the cost of embodying the negation of the ideal worker. Despite the evidence of paradoxical approaches to identity regulation and the identity tensions they entail (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis & Ingram, 2010), the imposition of a clearly non-valued, ‘non-performative’ identity has hitherto remained unexplored. More insight is needed on how organizations proactively contain disabled workers’ expectations to access a positive identity, reproducing ableist misrecognition (Jammaers, Zanoni & Williams, 2019).

The analysis of disabled workers’ own identity work reveals the effectiveness of the studied socio-ideological control regimes in shaping disabled workers’ possible selves. At the same time, however, multiple instances of resistance were present in all organizations. Resistance commonly occurred through crafting identities not aligned with the (able-bodied) ideal worker, for instance making a business case for one’s disability, a discursive strategy which prior research has shown to ‘turn ableism on its head’ by assigning positive meaning to an otherwise marginalized identity (Baldrige & Kulkarni, 2017; Jammaers et al., 2016).

Resistance also however commonly occurred through *reclaiming* the ideal worker identity, in particular when disabled employees were denied access to it in control regimes differentiating between workers based on their embodiment. This unexpected modality of resistance is in line with the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the dynamics of control and resistance, as theorized and empirically documented in the literature (e.g. Mumby, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005). It points to the necessity to consider disabled workers’ identity work simultaneously in relation to the regulatory attempts directed at them and at employees with other embodiments in order to fully understand its power effects. While prior literature has interpreted a compliant identity in the workplace as a strategy for workers belonging to subordinated groups to emancipate themselves in a society that marginalizes them (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007), this finding indicates the possibility that this strategy might be adopted to

advance *within* the organizational context. Importantly, the inscription of the self into the desirable (able-bodied) ideal worker might enable individuals to access this valued identity and the rewards associated with it. However, importantly, it ‘may have the unintended consequence of reproducing dominant forms of power’ (Mumby, 2005, p 31), paradoxically assisting the organization in attaining organization goals through disabled workers’ (self-)exploitation.

When disabled workers have access to the ideal worker identity, resistance occurred by leveraging this identity to reclaim the rewards associated with it. In this case, the effective control through identity regulation is used to hold the organization accountable for organizational practices that are (perceived as) not aligned with it and to advance individual claims (e.g. a promotion). This finding reveals that compliance on the plane of identity does not exclude resistance on the plane of the individual terms of employment, pointing to the difficulty for organizations to enforce full control over workers. Future research is warranted that examines the inconsistencies and contradictions both within regimes of socio-ideological control and in their relations to the conditions of employment.

Lastly, another important modality of resistance was enacted through the deployment of one’s body as a political object to affirm a preferred self-view (Courpasson & Monties, 2017). Not putting any effort into hiding and even speaking of one’s impairment and disability in an organizational context where it is taboo, although rare in our data do constitute a strong form of embodied resistance against control through subsumption into an unencumbered ideal worker (Brown & Coupland, 2005). Conversely, hiding one’s disability from the organization’s view represents a clear form of resistance in the face of socio-ideological practices forcing its exposure (Musson & Dubberley, 2007). To date, the disclosure of one’s disability has mostly been studied in relation to the nature of one’s impairment or one’s need for accommodations (Baldrige & Swift, 2013), or as the outcome of anticipated stigma in a specific organizational context (e.g. Baldrige & Veiga, 2006; Elraz, 2018). Future research might however want to investigate further the role of the body and embodiment in strategies of resistance and in particular of disclosure as part and parcel of the organizational attempts to socio-ideologically control and to resist such control.

Taken together, our analysis shows how organizational representations of disabled employees should be understood as part of organizing norms established around able-bodiedness (Williams & Mavin, 2012). Such norms clearly reflect organizational goals and how they are currently achieved, for instance through the organization of work (e.g. teamwork), technical innovations (e.g. digitalization), reward systems (e.g. individual, performance-based), and systems of external accountability (e.g. citizens’ representation in personnel, KPI’s), as well as the legacy of past organizational policies (e.g. prior commitments to meet a quota). The adopted cross-sectional research design and the purposive sampling of the cases however does not allow us to fully account for the complex dynamics leading to these organization-specific modalities of socio-ideological control of disabled workers. Nor is a theoretical approach focusing on the operation of organizational control through the workers’ own identity work the most suitable to establish the causes of the observed modalities of control, as it merely posits their instrumental relation vis-à-vis organizational goals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Janssens & Zanoni, 2005; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). Other approaches with a stronger explanatory commitment might be more apt to this aim, for instance because they conceptualize disabled workers as possessing (or not) certain critical resources for the organization (e.g. Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013), or more thoroughly theorize control as part and parcel of the exploitative relations between capital and labour for capital accumulation (e.g. Zanoni, 2011). Future research is warranted that investigates the employment of disabled workers by foregrounding the underlying business rationale, as opposed to the modalities of their control.

Conclusion

We investigated the socio-ideological control of disabled employees through the discourses and material practices imposed onto disabled workers by three service organizations and their own identity work to construct more or less compliant identities. Our analysis unveils varieties of ableism, in which the able-bodied/disabled dichotomy distinctively structures the relation between organization-specific representations of disabled workers and ideal workers, operating as a principle of organizing to attain specific organizational goals. Research shedding light onto the heterogeneous nature of disabled workers’ identity regulation at work is crucial to gain a better understanding of the terms on which disabled workers are employed and in particular whether employment provides access to valued identities and, if so, which ones and at which ‘price’. This type of power-sensitive knowledge is paramount to envision strategies to negotiate better terms of inclusion for disabled individuals within inherently instrumental employment relations.

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Notes

1: For clarity, in this paper we have given preference to the term ‘disabled people’, to stress, in line with a social model of disability, that people are disabled first and foremost by society, not by their individual, biological impairment. To us this term most clearly highlights that it is society (and possibly organizations) that disable and oppress people with impairments, by preventing their access, integration and inclusion to all walks of life, making them ‘disabled’.

2: We are aware that this (or any other) definition of disabled employees is problematic, as it constitutes in itself an ‘imposition of epistemic power’ (Shildrick, 2012, p. 34), preemptively defining subjects along the disabled/able-bodied binary and thus reproducing it. However, following Shildrick (2009), we consider this a ‘strategic necessity’, as avoiding this imposition would have hampered the investigation of ableism in the workplace.

3: Alvesson and Willmott (2002) identified a fourth way of regulating identities, through social relations, more specifically, by referring to hierarchal location, group categorization or affiliation. Being a member of a particular team for instance, may then become a significant source of one's self-understanding and self-monitoring. This type of regulation hardly featured in our data, likely because our research design is suitable to identify identity-regulatory discourses at the organizational level yet much less to conduct an intra-organizational analysis, both in terms of sample and interview guide. Accordingly, it was left out of the analysis.

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