
Othering, ableism and disability: A discursive analysis of co-workers' construction of colleagues with visible impairments

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Nanna Mik-Meyer

The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how able-bodied co-workers engage in the 'othering' of colleagues with impairments. Taking a discursive analytical approach, the article examines interviews with 19 managers and 43 colleagues who all worked closely with an employee with cerebral palsy in 13 different work organizations. The primary finding of the article is that co-workers spontaneously refer to other 'different' people (e.g. transvestites, homosexuals, immigrants) when talking about a colleague with visible impairments. This finding suggests that disability is simultaneously a discursive category (i.e. the discourse of ableism prevents co-workers from talking about the impairments of a colleague) and a material phenomenon (i.e. employees with impairments are a distinct category of employees in the eyes of the co-workers). Othering of employees with disabilities thus demonstrates contradictory discourses of ableism (which automatically produce difference) and tolerance and inclusiveness (which automatically render it problematic to talk about difference).

Keywords

ableism, colleagues, co-workers, difference, disability, discourse analysis, employees, impairments, managers, othering, work organizations

Corresponding author:

Nanna Mik-Meyer, The Danish National Centre for Social Research – SFI, Herluf Trollesgade 11, DK-1052 Copenhagen K, Denmark.

Email: nmm@sfi.dk

Introduction

I usually say that having a disability is like being famous, just without all the benefits. In the sense that I turn heads when I'm out and about ... Some days I don't mind that people turn around, you know, and stare at you like, 'Wow, what is making so much noise, and what is it with that weird walk?' While other days, it bothers me. And that's why I compare it to being a celebrity ... Because being famous – I assume without being famous myself – means that you receive a high level of attention whether you like it or not and in every possible situation. And that's our reality, those of us with visible impairments at least. (Social worker with cerebral palsy who uses crutches)

This quote by a social worker with cerebral palsy, a man in his 30s, captures the process of othering which is a central theme of this article – how visible impairments can lead to 'a level of attention' that differs radically from the attention received by most able-bodied people (except, perhaps, for celebrities, as the social worker suggests).

However, when researching disability, the existing literature has either taken a social psychological approach (focusing on stereotypes) or has focused on the exclusionary mechanisms of 'Big D/paradigm-type discourse studies' (Discourses, i.e. more at the macro level, as in ableism) (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). When the focus is on stereotypes, the negative connotations and effects are the centre of the analysis rather than, for instance, 'how' the othering occurs. Conversely, when focusing on Discourses, the key role of speakers in reproducing Discourses is underplayed. Yet, as we know, Discourses need to be reproduced and maintained (Mumby, 2011), which is why this current article analyses the othering of employees with impairments (Campbell, 2009; Oliver, 2004: 24–26) by examining how able-bodied managers and employees (co-workers) talk about their colleague with impairments.

This article thus deemphasizes the influence of organizational factors and individual attributes on othering processes. Central to the present article is, instead, the discursive constructions of disability by co-workers, i.e. the analysis of co-workers' spontaneous references to other groups of people whom they (also) construct as 'different' when talking about their colleague with cerebral palsy in interviews. By investigating the discursive constructions by co-workers, it is also possible to examine the workings of ableism in work organizations, i.e. the dominance of able-bodied norms, which, apart from the efforts of Campbell (2009) and Williams and Mavin (2012), still represents an underdeveloped area of research. The main research questions informing this article are therefore as follows: in describing employees with impairments, how do co-workers spontaneously engage in the 'othering' of employees with impairments, and how does their talk challenge or reproduce ableism?

Disability studies

Since the late 1960s, disability studies have praised a social model in investigating how impairment is transformed into disability (Barnes and Mercer, 2005, 2011; Berthoud, 2008; Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). The social model opposes a medical and individual approach to examining impairments (Oliver, 1983: 31) and captures the politicization of disabled people's situation (Barnes, 2000). In the 1970s and 1980s, this

politicization led to a shift in the analytical gaze from the individual body to society (Barnes and Mercer, 2005, 2011; Paterson and Hughes, 2002). From emphasizing the functional limitations of the person with impairments, the organization of society and of work now took centre stage, which led to a strong focus on how social environments can limit certain groups of people (Oliver, 1983), i.e. a focus on organizational, societal and cultural factors. From the 1970s onwards, this agenda was strengthened because people with disabilities were considered oppressed because of their exclusion from the labour market (Paterson and Hughes, 2002).

In the literature, however, both approaches have been criticized for being too narrow in their attempts to analyse the working lives of people with disabilities (Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Paterson and Hughes, 2002). Moreover, both models have been critically discussed as theoretically 'essentialist' (Söder, 1999 in Gustavsson, 2004: 59), meaning that both approaches offer frameworks that explain the 'disability problem' with sole reference to either the individual person with impairments (medical) or the specific context (social). None of the models analyses the subjective experience of disabilities or how such experience relates to the social context (Albrecht, 2002). Oliver, for example, who coined the term 'social model' in 1983 (Oliver, 1983), turned against this approach in his later work because of its inability to capture the subjective experiences of the 'pain' of both impairment and disability and its inability to adequately address the issue of othering (Oliver, 2004: 24–26).

Despite the critique of the social model approach, however, it must be acknowledged that much current research on disability and employment has focused on the social aspects of the situation of employees with impairments. These aspects range from general issues, such as broader societal barriers for persons with disabilities (Patrick, 2012), to research that specifically explores how actual impairments are discursively turned into disabilities. The former includes, for example, the following: (i) how dominating able-bodied norms exclude persons with disabilities from the workforce (Hall and Wilton, 2011; Schur et al., 2005), also discussed as 'ableism', i.e. how disability is constructed through able-bodied norms (Campbell, 2009); (ii) how a formal policy targeting employees with disabilities can be considered an empty-shell policy (Hoque and Noon, 2004); (iii) how the emergence of the flexible labour force and part-time work affect the work lives of employees with disabilities (Jolly, 2000; Schur, 2003); and (iv) how discrimination practices operate in organizational contexts (Fevre et al., 2013; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008; Robert and Harlan, 2006; van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Ward et al., 2012).

Examples of research addressing how impairments are discursively turned into disabilities include how different organizational cultures can lead to the inclusion or exclusion of colleagues with impairments (Samant et al., 2009; Spataro, 2005) and research that meets the critique raised by the social model's inability to address the issue of othering (Oliver, 2004) by exploring how disabilities produce stereotyping (and even stigmatizing) practices amongst colleagues and managers of the employee with disabilities (Jones, 1997; Kulik et al., 2007; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2011; McLaughlin et al., 2004; Naraine and Lindsay, 2011; Negri and Briante, 2007; Ragins, 2008; Stone-Romero and Stone, 2007).

This research on labelling, stereotyping and stigmatization practices has emphasized the negative effects on individuals with disabilities (Colella and Varma, 2001; e.g. Stone

and Colella, 1996) and has often done so through a cognitive-psychological approach to the analyses (Green et al., 2005) or, as Thanem (2008) states, a combination of a medical and stigma model approach. For instance, Stone and Colella's (1996) much-cited model of factors that influence the treatment of employees with disabilities has held a dominant position. This model illustrates how societal, cultural and organizational factors (e.g. legislation, type of firm/job, and length of time working with the employee with disabilities), attributes of the employee with a disability (e.g. type of disability, gender, ethnicity and social status), and attributes of the co-workers (e.g. gender, ethnicity and social status), individually and in combination, affect the treatment of employees with disabilities. Several American studies, in particular, have been inspired by this model when examining stereotyping and stigmatization processes in work organizations (e.g. Baldrige and Veiga, 2001; Colella and Varma, 2001; Florey and Harrison, 2000; Hunt and Hunt, 2004; Jones, 1997; McLaughlin et al., 2004; Ragins, 2008; Ren et al., 2008; Stone-Romero and Stone, 2007).

Current analysis also engages with the research agenda of labelling, stereotyping and stigmatization (see also Mik-Meyer, 2015, 2016). However, and as previously mentioned, this article seeks to contribute to this branch of research by examining discursive processes of othering and thereby contributing in particular to what Campbell (2009: 196) has coined 'studies of ableism', i.e. studies that cause us to reconsider how we think about bodies in, in this case, work organizations (Campbell, 2009: 198). In other words, co-workers' discussions of disability may not relate exclusively (or at all) to specific personal or organizational factors, as much of the aforementioned disability research suggests. As this current article will show, able-bodied norms, or 'ableism' (Campbell, 2009), inform how co-workers think about a colleague with impairments. Therefore, when co-workers spontaneously associate with people whom they (also) construct as 'different', when answering questions about their particular colleague with impairments (most likely in attempts to avoid reinforcing their colleague's status as 'other'), this may continue to be viewed as an othering process.

A discursive approach to othering

Disability is a term that – much like 'ageing' (Trethewey, 2001), 'heterosexism' (Speer and Potter, 2000) or 'sexism' (Dick, 2013) – is difficult to research because its contested nature makes it difficult to define (Albrecht, 2002: 26). Similarly to Dick's (2013) discussions of 'sexism', disability can be viewed as a social fact that is simultaneously constructed as an objective *and* subjective experience in interviews. For example, participants in the present article would agree that visible impairments are a social fact; however, as the analysis will show, their existence is discursively produced 'in the eyes of the beholder' (Dick, 2013: 646). As clarified by Mumby (2011: 1149), the key in organizational discourse studies is therefore not to differentiate between 'subjective (discursive) and objective (material) conceptions and explanations of human behaviour'. The key is to explore how 'experiences and objects are constituted in dialectical relationship to one another' (Mumby, 2011: 1149).

For example, employees with impairments are not solely defined by the work they do; they are also defined by their impairments. Their impairments make them different from

their fellow able-bodied colleagues, although their identity as 'impaired' or 'disabled' is neither a stable nor a self-contained identity over time (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996: 50–52). Nevertheless, many co-workers in the current article respond to questions on impairments uniquely, i.e. by associating with other people whom they (also) construct as different when being asked questions about their colleague with impairments. It thus appears that the discourse on disability is 'capable of embodying not only multiplicity but also closure' (Iedema et al., 2003: 18). This closure is exemplified by the fact that disability exists as a topic but seems to be somewhat off-limits and difficult for co-workers to talk about in interviews. The story of disability thus represents both a 'monologue' (the uniform pattern in which co-workers respond to questions about their colleague with disabilities) and a 'dialogue' (the diverse multiple meanings and inherent contradictions within/of co-workers' answers) (Keenoy et al., 1997: 149).

This circumstance makes it beneficial to situate the current article within both a post-structuralist *and* an ethnomethodological research tradition because this combination will ensure that analyses include a focus on both multiplicity (contradictions inherent in discourse) and closure (rules and limitations inherent in discourse) (Iedema et al., 2003; Wetherell, 1998) when exploring how co-workers discuss disability in interviews. At first glance, this combination may seem problematic because scholars from each tradition tend not to recognize the other approach as qualified (see, for example, the debate between Billig, 1999a, 1999b and Schegloff, 1997, 1999a, 1999b). However, other scholars have argued for the fruitfulness of this combination.

Dick's (2013) organizational study of sexism in the workplace is an example thereof. By combining what Alvesson and Karreman (2000) call 'small d/text focused studies' with 'Big D/paradigm-type discourse studies', Dick investigates discourses of sexism as simultaneously local achievements and dominant discursive practices, and thus shows how sexism is a discursive category with a distinct meaning that, however, does not have its own autonomy (Dick, 2013: 651). The quality of this framework stems from its ability to show how the discursive and the material are intertwined in a dialectical relationship with one another (Mumby, 2011). Another source of inspiration for this article is Iedema et al.'s (2003) discursive study of doctors' conflicting roles of doctor (profession-specific discourse of clinical medicine) and manager (resource-efficiency discourse) in a hospital setting. Their study also illustrates the fruitfulness of focusing on both multiplicity and closure when analysing the boundary positions of doctors (Iedema et al., 2003). Finally, Wetherell (1998) also exemplifies in her article the fruitfulness of combining a poststructuralist-inspired framework with a focus on subject positions with an ethnomethodological/conversational analysis (CA) framework that focuses on interpretative repertoires. In summary, this combination of research traditions ensures an analysis that may show how discourses are manifested in research participants' talk. The analysis thereby escapes the critique aimed at small d/ethnomethodological approaches for being too narrow (see, for example, Oswick et al., 2000) or the critique aimed at Big D/poststructuralist approaches for being too theory-laden (see, for example, Lukes, 2005: 99–107).

Disability in this article is thus addressed as a discursive phenomenon, i.e. a term that 'works as a structuring, constituting force, directly implying or tightly framing subjectivity, practice and meaning' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1145). The article has a particular interest in examining how participants identify, counter-identify and dis-identify

(Holmer-Nadesan, 1996: 58) with the various ways in which the identity ‘employee with disabilities’ is negotiated. ‘Employee with disabilities’ is, in other words, an example of an ambiguous identity that is both resisted and reproduced (Trethewey, 2001), which is why, in order to analyse a contested phenomenon such as ‘disability’, we need detailed analyses of actual talk and reflections (Dick, 2013: 649). To do so, the analysis focuses on the ‘interpretative repertoire’ of co-workers, i.e. the ‘culturally familiar and habitual line of argument composed of recognizable themes, common places and tropes’ (Wetherell, 1998: 400). Therefore, when examining one particular aspect of disability, as this article does – namely, the particular pattern in which co-workers reflect and talk about their colleague with impairments – it should not be falsely understood as indicating a stable and closed view of ‘disability’ by co-workers. The present article examines only a fragment of a disability discourse, and the current analysis is therefore by no means claiming to exhaust a more general meaning of practices, particular social acts or roles (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996: 52) in relation to disability.

In summary, concerning the Big D/poststructuralist framework, the present article draws on disability studies showing how able-bodied norms/‘ableism’ (Campbell, 2009) act as an ‘unavoidable present’ (West and Zimmerman, 2002: 21) in every social interaction, and informs how one can talk about and construct disability (e.g. Campbell, 2009; Galvin, 2006; Hall and Wilton, 2011; Schur et al., 2005; Williams and Mavin, 2012). Thus, to examine othering in relation to able-bodied norms, the present article from the outset has been particularly attentive to the role of the visible differences of employees with impairments. Concerning the small d/ethnomethodological framework, the current article is also situated in a research tradition with particular focus on how interviewees reflect and argue in interview settings and the interpretative repertoires used by them (e.g. Iedema et al., 2003; Speer and Potter, 2000; Trethewey, 2001; Wetherell, 1998; Woodilla, 1998). This focus allows for a detailed examination of the process of othering.

The research study

The following analysis is based on a 1-year research project (2012–2013) examining the work lives of employees with cerebral palsy in 13 Danish work organizations. According to the Danish Cerebral Palsy Association, there are approximately 10,000 persons with cerebral palsy in Denmark, of whom 6500–7000 are above the age of 18. How many of these are employed is unknown, but a register-based study from 1999 shows that 29 percent of persons with cerebral palsy aged 21–35 were employed compared with 82 percent of people in the able-bodied control group (Michelsen et al., 2005: 513). In Denmark, there are several compensatory arrangements that help persons with impairments to gain employment, including flex-jobs¹ and light jobs.² In this study, four of the participating employees with cerebral palsy were employed under regular conditions, eight were employed in flex-jobs, and one person was employed in a light job.

Although organizational and personal information about the participants plays no part in the analysis, some descriptions of the participants have been included in the analysis because this information might make the reading more vivid. The empirical point of departure for this study is interviews with colleagues (18 women and 25 men) and

managers (seven women and 12 men) of 13 employees with visible cerebral palsy in 13 work organizations.³ Both colleagues and managers reflected upon the role of impairments in their everyday work life.

To recruit participants for the study, we posted a notice on the Danish Cerebral Palsy Association's Facebook page, contacted the heads of several disability athletic associations, and used the social networks of the already-recruited participants (the 'snowball' method). An important aspect of this procedure was to secure a participant group that had a certain degree of complexity in their impairments in an effort to obtain as complex a dataset as possible. Cerebral palsy is a congenital brain injury that, to varying degrees, inhibits a multitude of motor and cognitive functions. A person with cerebral palsy may, for instance, have difficulty eating or controlling basic movements, or he or she may be largely unaffected by the condition. The employees with cerebral palsy in this study include individuals with severe paralysis of the legs and/or arms (for whom wheelchairs or crutches were necessary in everyday life) and individuals for whom minor squinting or a slight dragging of a leg were the only visible indicators of their impairment. We decided not to include employees whose impairment had no visible dimension because a key interest of the study was the role of visible impairments in a work context, as seen from the perspective of colleagues and managers. For ethical considerations, we first contacted the employee with the impairment; then, he or she would approach his or her colleagues and managers and ask if they wished to be interviewed. This method most likely resulted in the exclusion of colleagues or managers who may have had conflicts with the employee with impairments. Nevertheless, the interviewed co-workers addressed problematic and difficult aspects of having a colleague with cerebral palsy. It is therefore our impression that the study's dataset is less skewed than might have been expected.

All interviews conducted in this study were guided by an interview guide with 30 wide-ranging, open-ended questions adapted to colleagues and managers. The topics included the following: (i) information about the interviewee (How long have you worked at the company? What are your job assignments? How do you work with NN?); (ii) the recruitment process (How did you learn about NN and his/her impairments? Did you have any worries due to the impairments?); (iii) the first months at work (What were your expectations? How did you prepare? Did you change work assignments because of NN's impairments?); (iv) daily work life and career (Do the impairments influence the work situation of NN? Does NN ask for help? Do you discuss career possibilities with NN? How do you evaluate NN's work competencies?); (v) social life at the workplace (Does NN participate in social arrangements? Do the impairments of NN influence his/her participation?); and (vi) concluding the interview (Have you learnt something new after having worked with NN? Are there important topics I have not touched upon?).

I sought to provide a high level of openness in the interview situations and to include topics that fell beyond the scope of the interview guide but remained important for the interviewees. In other words, it was extremely central that the agenda of the research project did not marginalize particular topics of interest for the interviewed participants (Alvesson, 2003; Järvinen, 2001). Of the 62 interviews with co-workers in this study, approximately half of the interviewees from 12 of the 13 participating

work organizations mentioned and reflected upon people with other differences when talking about their colleague with cerebral palsy. In the one 'deviant case' (Seale and Silverman, 1997), in which none of the managers or colleagues made associations to other minority groups, the organization was a care institution for children with impairments. In this work context, the impairments of the employee did not give rise to stories about other minority groups, most likely because the employee with cerebral palsy was actually part of the majority group in this setting. It is important to note that we did not pose any questions that prompted the discussion of or associations with groups of individuals who differed from the norm. When able-bodied managers and employees referred to other 'different' people, they were individuals/groups they brought up in the interviews themselves (which is reflected in the interview excerpts presented; for more examples, see Table 1).

The coding process

The study's analytical point of departure is inspired by a constructivist interpretation of a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The entire dataset has been line-by-line coded (Charmaz, 2006: 50–53) using the software programme NVivo10. In this approach, specific hypotheses about the data were not formulated before the coding process. Instead, we sought to read the data openly to learn things we did not expect and gain an in-depth understanding of the empirical world.⁴ In an effort to avoid using the interview guide to govern the analysis, it was decided, for the first part of the coding process, to use only the interviewees' own words and concepts. After coding the first 16 interviews (eight interviews from each group), the issues interviewees talked about were grouped thematically. The rest of the interviews were coded using the 37 analytical categories developed from the line-by-line coding of the first 16 interviews.

The analytical category 'references to people with other differences', which is central to the present analysis, includes interviewees' statements about other different people. This topic was a recurring issue in the interviews. The topic – as mentioned – arose spontaneously from the reflections of the interviewees, with no questions prompting this particular topic. When we decided to analyse this particular topic, we decided to conduct a focused coding (Charmaz, 2006: 57–60) of the entire dataset for quotes/discussions of references to people with other differences.

Subsequently, when we were about to begin the reading of the code 'references to people with other differences' in its full length, we attempted to rid ourselves of any preconceived ideas and to read the code with the purpose of noticing dominant topics, surprising connections, and so on. Thereafter, we would compile a list of the predominant topics in the code, for instance, 'related to work experiences' or 'related to the sheer difference of the group/person mentioned' (see Table 1 for examples). These categories of topics would then be highlighted in the text, and this highlighting was the direct point of departure for the detailed CA-inspired analysis of the particular interview sequence (which always included the interviewer's questions and responses). For each interview extract, we would return to the actual interview to ensure that the talk about other groups of individuals was not prompted by the interviewer's question about other 'different' people.

Table 1. Data coding sheet excerpt.

Other 'different' people	Questions that led to talk about the minority group	Quotes about the other 'different' people	Connection to the employee with cerebral palsy	Othering
Old ladies	<p>Q for Christopher (colleague to Jasper): 'Have you learned anything from having Jasper as a colleague these past six months?'</p>	<p>Christopher: 'Well, I have in the sense that I actually haven't had a colleague with cerebral palsy before in that way. And very early on, I said to Jasper that I had no intentions of treating him differently than anyone else in here, and it's actually been really nice to have confirmed that I don't have to either. I don't see the thing about me giving him a hand for support and stuff like that as me giving him ... that he gets special treatment. I would do the same thing if it was an old lady who needed help, you know? So it's not ... or well, basically I'm actually just glad that I told him so, and that I could live up to it, and that he hasn't had special treatment. And that there hasn't been the need for special treatment. So it's primarily that'.</p>	<p>Similarity in physicality, way of moving, and perceived need of help (impairment is not related to work context)</p>	<p>Not related to work situation of CP-employee</p>
People who are extremely tall or short or thick or thin	<p>Q for Patrick (colleague to Chris): 'Do you think that one ought to write about the impairments in an application ...?'</p>	<p>Patrick: 'Well, I think so ... if I were to receive an application I'd actually like to, the things that might surprise me I'd like to know about in the application ... I think that it would be the most fair thing to do and that is also the case if you are extremely tall or short, or thick or thin, or have a different skin colour. But you can say it, maybe you should put a picture on your resume, for instance. If you are in a wheelchair or not, something that significantly stands out, I'd probably recommend that you point it out.'</p>	<p>Being strikingly different from the majority (impairment is not related to work context)</p>	<p>Not related to work situation of CP-employee</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Other 'different' people	Questions that led to talk about the minority group	Quotes about the other 'different' people	Connection to the employee with cerebral palsy	Othering
People with multiple impairments, Indian and German colleagues	Q for Lucy (colleague to Andrew): 'What was your first impression [of Andrew]?'	Lucy: 'Well, I think that my first impression was that when I ... I think that I'd heard beforehand that he had cerebral palsy and then I thought: "Wow, that's really well done", because comparing to my aunt, who also has it and she has multiple impairments and has no language and can't do anything at all really in relation to work or anything actually. She has no motor skills; none that are useful anyway. So I kind of thought: "Well ..." ... So I actually think that I was surprised at how well you can actually function when have cerebral palsy ... In the beginning it was incredible difficult to understand what he was saying ... Well, it's the thing that can be the greatest challenge ... And you kind of catch yourself saying – except that it's no different than working with our Indian or German colleagues ... but you catch yourself thinking: "Okay, now it's the fifth time you ask."'	Multiple impairments: Similarity in diagnosis. Indian and German colleagues: Similarity in communication issues	Primarily work-related othering; secondary not related to work situation
People who stammer	Q for Bridget (manager of Louise): 'Many people with Louise's impairments have a hard time getting a job – why do you think that is?'	Bridget: 'There are many with cerebral palsy where their speech is affected and that's a problem within psychiatry where communication is so important, but it's less pronounced with Louise ... You can tell that she sometimes stumbles a bit over the words, but it's not, well, other people stammer, you know? And I've just been at a meeting where there was a young research doctor who stammered like crazy, so bad, it was almost disturbing. You thought, how the heck, it must be difficult for her, you know, but well it had nothing to do with cerebral palsy, she just stammered, you know?'	Similarity in speech issues is presented (despite the fact that Louise only 'stumbles over the words')	Work-related othering

Table 1. (Continued)

Other 'different' people	Questions that led to talk about the minority group	Quotes about the other 'different' people	Connection to the employee with cerebral palsy	Othering
People who have autism	Q for Jennifer (colleague to Pavan): 'Studies show that people with Pavan's impairments have a hard time getting a job ... Why do you think that is?'	Jennifer: 'Well Pavan, he is absolutely no problem to have here. But I do appreciate that if you have something cognitive or, well, I'm a bit afraid to say it because I might be wrong. But ... we had someone ... we have had an autistic in here at some point who has to help me, and he had no sense of limit for when ... You see, he could talk about football scores from the 80s for 2 hours, and he would interrupt all of us. And then we had to try to explain him that it was just no good.'	Dissimilarities in the problems caused in the workplace and for the colleagues	Primarily work-related othering; secondary not related to work situation

Managers' and colleagues' associations with other 'different' people when talking about the five study participants with cerebral palsy (talk about the remaining study participants with cerebral palsy is presented in the article).
 Notes: Q = question; CP = cerebral palsy.

Analysis: Constructing employees with impairments as 'other'

Co-workers often referred to groups and individuals with limitations that, to a certain degree, resembled the functional limitations of someone with cerebral palsy. Examples include references to people who were (also) using a wheelchair or crutches or former colleagues who were (also) difficult to understand. These examples of othering resemble many findings of the more psychological cognitive studies that highlight actual impairments in the analysis of what they term 'stereotyping practices'.

However, this type of impairment-focused othering is not the focus of the current analysis because the dataset revealed that co-workers also made quite different and very surprising references to groups and individuals with no impairments at all.⁵ The interviews included, for example, many references to people who were considered 'other' in relation to their sexual orientation, skin colour, hair colour or choice of 'different' clothes. Co-workers referred to people with a different ethnic background than Danish, homosexuals, drunk people, children, transvestites, redheads, old women, pregnant women, blondes, people in grief, women in male occupations, drunk drivers, Germans and Indians with poor English skills, immigrants, marginalized people in general (non-disabled), and people who were inadequate at their jobs.

The commonality of these very different individuals was, in other words, exclusively their 'different' appearances, indicating the presence of a dominant able/normal-body norm (ableism) in the workplace that allowed co-workers to unite all visible differences as 'other'.

The dataset thus contained numerous stories about 'redheads' (Lucy, colleague to Andrew, who uses a wheelchair; Luma, colleague to Philip, who uses crutches; and Robert, manager of Jasper, who drags one leg and is slightly speech impaired),⁶ 'transvestites' (Alfred, colleague to Ed, who uses both crutches and an electric scooter), 'homosexuals' (Aaron, manager of Anthony, who walks slightly unsteadily; and Camilla, colleague to Jacob, who drags one leg), people with different ethnicities as well as 'immigrants' (Abdel, manager of Philip, who uses crutches; Camilla, colleague to Jacob, who drags one leg; and Paul, colleague to Anthony, who walks slightly unsteadily), and blondes (Karen, manager of Rita, who limps on one leg).

Below, we shall see how a colleague (Alfred) reflects on Ed's impairments. Ed is in his 30s and has worked since 2010 as a self-taught IT developer in a private technology foundation in which he holds a flex-job position of 20 hours per week. His cerebral palsy is confined to his lower body, and he walks with difficulty using two crutches. He also has an electric scooter as his means of transportation. His upper body, speech and cognitive abilities are unaffected by his cerebral palsy.

Interviewer: You said that your impression of him changed within the first few weeks or over the first period that you were working together?

Alfred: Yes. Well, in the beginning, you had to figure out what it was all about, what it meant, and you might say that me meeting Ed, who has a disability ... In the beginning, I mostly focused on the fact that he had a disability, you know? And on my own efforts to abstract from it, you

know? I had to say that I am talking to Ed – not a person with disabilities. I find that to be the case a lot. You know, if I meet something abnormal, I then become quite busy with persuading myself that ... How can I put this? ... To be frank, it's none of my business, and I really don't mind it, but I am very much aware of making sure that the person I perceive as abnormal doesn't detect that I find him or her abnormal, you know? ... It is like meeting a transvestite who you have to talk to; just sit and remember that this is not the important thing but that [something else] is, you know? Even if you really don't mind that the person is a transvestite. You're just having a conversation, you know? But ... I don't know if this makes any sense.

This statement shows how Alfred, within this one utterance, and thus without being interrupted by the interviewer, slips from talking about 'meeting Ed, who has a disability' to 'talking to Ed – not a person with disabilities' to 'meeting something abnormal'/'the person I perceive as abnormal' to 'it is like meeting a transvestite'. Alfred's chain of associations can be viewed as produced by an interpretative repertoire of disability that makes it difficult to talk about a colleague's impairments. Alfred is testing his perception of Ed as abnormal against the silent interviewer and most likely also the inherent conflicting discourse of 'ableism' (Campbell, 2009), which causes Ed to appear as 'different', and the discourse of tolerance, inclusiveness, and so on, which makes talking about Ed's impairments problematic (because Alfred risks being interpreted as intolerant and non-inclusive). These contradictory discourses might cause Alfred to soften his classification of Ed as initially belonging to 'something abnormal' and then to what 'I perceive as abnormal', i.e. Ed's classification might not be the case for everyone.

Still lacking explicit acceptance from the interviewer, Alfred finally introduces 'transvestites'. This shift can be interpreted as Alfred's attempt to cement the difference of Ed because transvestites can be viewed as a group in society that most people would consider abnormal. Note also how Alfred's choice of pronoun ('meeting a transvestite who *you* have to talk to') can be interpreted as implying that anyone, including the interviewer, would categorize the transvestite as abnormal. Note, moreover, how important it is for Alfred to be perceived as tolerant ('it's none of my business'; 'I really don't mind'; 'it's not the important thing' – statements that point to a discourse of tolerance and inclusiveness).

Thus, Alfred's chain of associations, reflecting the interpretive repertoire of disability, reminds us of what the social worker with cerebral palsy noted in the opening quote, i.e. that impairments such as cerebral palsy attract considerable attention and a constant level of scrutiny. The spontaneous association between Ed and a transvestite thus becomes meaningful when measured against discourses of ableism and inclusiveness/tolerance. Alfred's final rhetorical question (Woodilla, 1998) ('I don't know if this makes any sense') shows that it is unclear what being disabled means for Alfred and thus points to the multiplicity of the discourse of disability (Albrecht, 2002), which confirms the instability of the 'disabled' identity (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). As such, his chain of associations makes good sense, as his associations reflect the contested nature of disability.

In the next example, we shall meet a manager (Karen) who actively tries to avoid talking about her employee (Rita) with cerebral palsy as 'different'. They work in a convenience store where Rita is a sales assistant for 20 hours per week in a flex-job position. Rita is in her 20s and has spastic paralyses of her right side, which results in slight limping and minimal use of her right arm. Karen makes associations with blondes when answering a question of how she would introduce Rita to her team. Prior to the question, Karen discussed the importance of there being 'room for everyone' in the labour market. Again, no words have been left out in the presented dialogue extract.

Interviewer: If you were to get a new apprentice tomorrow who was to become a part of your team, how would you introduce Rita?

Karen: Only by saying, 'This is Rita, and she is also one of our permanent employees', you know? I wouldn't say that Rita has a disability or something like that straight away, not at all. I wouldn't, and I wouldn't do it to any of my other employees either. Plus, they don't actually discuss it [the disability]. They just take her as she is, like she's just an ordinary employee, you know? Just like all the others and on equal terms. There's no walking around with a huge sign [laughs] and being labelled, not at all. We don't do that.

Interviewer: No, and I know that it may sound like a silly question, but I've never managed people in that way, so would you mind explaining to me why that would be a wrong thing to say?

Karen: Well, you know, it's like, well ... It would be equally wrong for me to say, 'Well, this one is dumb' or 'she's a blonde' or something like that. You know, then she's kind of labelled, Rita, you know, and we don't label people. We don't. You know, Rita is Rita, and my apprentice is Apprentice-Peter, right? And I am me. You know, and I wouldn't start saying, 'Rita, she has a disability. That one over there, she can't lift things, and this one, she can't do this and that'. Then you're kind of labelled, you know, and she's not. That's why I wouldn't go over there and say, 'She can't do this and this and this'. Because she can. So for me, she's not disabled.

Similarly to Alfred, Karen states that she does not wish to label or mark her colleague with disabilities. Judging by the number of times she repeats this, it seems fair to assume that Karen does not wish to appear as someone who 'labels' other people. Her laughing after saying 'there is no walking around with a huge sign' could suggest that this is quite important to her. This could stem from the fact that this opinion – not labelling people – confronts neither the discourse of tolerance/inclusiveness in the organization nor the norms of the interviewer who is researching 'disability'. From Karen's statements, we understand that Rita is 'an ordinary employee', but as Karen slips into talking about dumb employees and blondes, we detect a discourse of ableism, which automatically positions Rita as different – this despite Karen's explicit statement that Rita is an 'ordinary employee [...] on equal terms'. As in the case with Ed, we might understand the

impairments of Rita as embedded in what Dick (2013) terms a ‘politics of experience’, which positions Karen in the midst of two different ‘reality claims’: Rita’s impairments exist simultaneously as an objective (one can see it) and a subjective (but one should not talk about it) phenomenon. Karen ‘solves’ this problem of not feeling she is on safe (moral) ground by discussing the impairments of Rita by referring to people who are unintelligent or blonde. This ‘solution’ thus makes it possible for Karen to talk implicitly about the difference of Rita.

In the next example, we shall meet a manager (Aaron) who refers to his homosexual friend when he discusses the work situation of his employee with cerebral palsy (Anthony). This reference also seems surprising, as homosexuality, similarly to being a transvestite or blonde, does not seem to relate to cerebral palsy. Anthony is in his 30s and has, since 1998, worked as an IT employee in a municipality in an ordinary position 37 hours a week. His cerebral palsy is primarily expressed visibly by him having difficulties walking and problems with performing fine motor tasks.

Interviewer: So, how would you assess the effect of Anthony’s impairments on his work situation?

Aaron: Well, at this point, I don’t really think about it. I did in the beginning, I’ll freely admit, and that was more a question of if there is any, you know, special attention [I should give him]. Is there anything I should do? But he is also really good at signalling that he is just an ordinary employee and equal to everyone else. And he doesn’t make a big thing of it, and he doesn’t make, you know, an issue of his disabilities. And not to compare in any way, but I know a bit about it from my friend. The fact that he is married to a man; he doesn’t make an issue of it. That’s just how it is. And it’s a bit the same with Anthony; that’s just how it is. [Aaron continues to reflect upon the situation of his good friend who is homosexual].

From this uninterrupted answer from Aaron, we understand that Anthony is good at ‘signalling that he is just an ordinary employee’. Again, we see how impairments simultaneously exist as an observable phenomenon (‘he doesn’t make an issue of it’) and as a subjective experience, stating that one, in this case Anthony, should not act on it. The ableism of the organization – and perhaps Aaron’s interpretation of the norms of the interviewer – thus provides a particular interpretative repertoire that guides how Aaron ought to think and talk about disability; to avoid endangering the valued norms of equality and ordinariness (‘he is just an ordinary employee and equal to everyone else’), Aaron must not overemphasize Anthony’s impairments.

The final example of a group in society that is used to illustrate the construction of employees with impairments as ‘other’ is immigrants, because several co-workers made this association in the interviews. One manager (Abdel) draws parallels between his employee with cerebral palsy (Philip) and his own experienced difference as a dark-skinned person of an ethnic origin other than Danish. Philip is in his 30s and is an educated social worker who has worked in a municipality in an ordinary position for 37

hours a week for 1 year. Philip uses two crutches and walks with his feet apart and with his upper body bent forward. Abdel makes the following associations with his own situation as 'someone with a different ethnicity' when asked whether he thinks Philip works extra hard because of his impairments:

Abdel: Well, sometimes you have to. And that's me answering from my own perspective as someone with a different ethnicity, you know? [Abdel then talks in some length about how former student colleagues have expressed that they think Danes are often being racists towards them]. When I was a student at university, I also had ... There were a few foreigners as well – not many at that time – and they said to me, 'They [the other students] are racist, and they don't want to be in groups with us' and so on. And I told them, 'Maybe I'm naïve, or maybe I'm stupid, but I don't see it because we work together in groups, and I really don't care because my focus is on my academic skills', you know? And that is what I think we should strengthen. Those who are lacking or worse off, they should focus on their professional competencies, you know?

Here, a question about whether Philip works extra hard because of his impairments is turned into a conversation about how you must focus on your professional skills if you are 'lacking or worse off'. Again, we see how a discourse of ableism places Philip, the employee with cerebral palsy, and Abdel, the ethnically 'different' manager, together in the category of people 'lacking or worse off'. Despite their differences in both situation and status – one is impaired and an employee, and the other is not an ethnic Dane and is a manager – Abdel automatically places them in the same category of 'other' ('those who are lacking or worse off').

Discussion

Taking a discursive analytical approach, this study has investigated how co-workers spontaneously engage in 'othering' of their colleague with impairments when they talk about him/her in interviews. The analysis revealed that contradictory discourses of ableism (which automatically produce difference) and tolerance and inclusiveness (which automatically render it problematic to talk about difference) produce a particular type of othering process. The analysis thus found that visible differences of employees with impairments existed; however, co-workers were not socially permitted to talk about them. In line with organizational discourse studies showing how talk in organizations reflects discourses defined by inherent 'multiplicities, uncertainties, and contradictions' (e.g. Iedema et al., 2003: 18), this study has also emphasized how co-workers manage the inherent contradictions of discussing 'disability' and, hence, the employee with impairments. The study has shown how the contested nature of disability can result in processes of othering by co-workers (even though they most likely try to avoid reinforcing their colleague's status as other).

Othering practices in the workplace are by no means phenomena exclusively related to employees with impairments. Many workplace studies have examined how particular groups of employees are ‘othered’ based on their appearance, behaviour, or other visible or social differences from the majority. These studies examine, for instance, ‘different’ appearances due to overweight (Levay, 2014), age (Riach, 2007), colour (Tomlinson et al., 2013) and gender (Pullen and Simpson, 2009), or they examine ‘different’ social behaviours in work organizations (Denissen, 2010; Essers and Benschop, 2009; Ozturk, 2011). Furthermore, these workplace studies represent a multitude of theoretical frameworks. Some focus primarily on the intentions, motives and experiences of the participants (Hatmaker, 2013; Kenny and Briner, 2013; Simpson, 2004; Slay and Smith, 2011; Taub et al., 2004; Tomlinson et al., 2013), whereas others focus primarily on dominant discourses in the workplace or in society (Dick, 2013; Levay, 2014; Ozturk, 2011; Pullen and Simpson, 2009; Riach, 2007; Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Ward and Winstanley, 2003; Willis, 2012). However, none of these aforementioned studies – nor studies that focus primarily on the perspective of the co-workers (as in the present study) (e.g. Foster and Fosh, 2010; Konrad et al., 2010; Perry et al., 2000; Snyder et al., 2010; Stevens, 2002; Tomlinson and Egan, 2002) – examines how the othering or stereotyping of employees who ‘differ’ from the norm may be done through co-workers’ associations with other people who are (also) constructed as ‘different’.

By investigating this particular process of othering, the current study thus tries to expand our knowledge of, in this case, how disability is constructed as difference (Williams and Mavin, 2012) in ‘ableist’ organizations (Campbell, 2009), placing great value on inclusiveness and tolerance. By combining the analytical frameworks of post-structuralism/Big D studies and ethnomethodology/small d studies (Dick, 2013; Wetherell, 1998), as done in this study, it is possible to examine disability as simultaneously objective (material) and subjective (discursive) experiences (Mumby, 2011). The current study’s framework thus enables an analysis showing that the othering of employees with impairments is not contingent solely on (problematic) organizational factors and/or the individual (negative) attributes of co-workers or employees with impairments, which is often how disability studies examine processes of stereotyping (the process of othering in this study) (e.g. Colella, 2001; Colella and Varma, 2001; Hunt and Hunt, 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2004; Ren et al., 2008; Stone and Stone, 2015; Stone and Colella, 1996).

The present study identified an othering process in which co-workers talk about the impairments of their colleague in an implicit manner by referring to other ‘different’ people. When co-workers mention other ‘different’ people – who aside from their visible differences from the norm have nothing in common with their colleague with cerebral palsy – they thus downplay the difference of the employee with cerebral palsy. This practice renders the specific differences of the employee with cerebral palsy unarticulated, which suggests that being explicit about such differences is an illegitimate social practice. Thus, employees with impairments have an ambiguous identity (Tretthewey, 2001), which reflects the multiplicity and contradictions inherent in discourses (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Iedema et al., 2003) – in this case, the discourse of disability (Mik-Meyer, 2016).

Concluding remarks

This article documents how co-workers spontaneously 'other' their colleagues with impairments by comparing them with people whom they also construct as different, such as redheads, transvestites, non-ethnic Danes and homosexuals. Thus, despite co-workers' efforts to not regard or represent colleagues with impairments as 'other', they actually end up othering them and reinforcing the same discursive representations that they in fact were trying to de-emphasize. This illustrates precisely how differently the colleague with cerebral palsy is viewed to be by the co-workers (and, thus, the strength of the discourse of ableism) because the only commonality between these diverse groups and the colleagues with cerebral palsy is that their appearances differ from the norm. However, because co-workers refrain from talking about the difference of their colleague with impairments, ableism cannot be the only discourse at play. The unwillingness to talk about the impairments of their colleague points to the existence of another strong discourse of inclusiveness and tolerance, which makes it off-limits to talk about differences such as visible impairments because this may be construed as the interviewee being non-inclusive or intolerant.

This finding calls for further research. First, by combining different research traditions that allow for a detailed analysis of (discursively produced) othering processes, as done in this article, one can accommodate the critique of the social model's inability to address the issue of othering in relation to persons with disabilities (Oliver, 2004). Second, by analysing the spontaneous classification processes of co-workers, in which quite diverse groups of 'different' people are placed into one category of 'other', this article points to the existence of powerful discourses of ableism and inclusiveness/tolerance in work organizations. These discourses cast individuals who are visibly 'different' as 'other', and simultaneously restrict co-workers from talking explicitly about this difference.

As with any other study, the present article also has its limitations. Its chosen analytical framework means that one cannot generalize the findings. However, the current article points to a hitherto overlooked topic of interest for scholars researching stereotyping and othering practices in work organizations, namely, that the inclusion of new categories of differences can be an approach to talking about issues that, according to dominant discourses, are out of bounds or illegitimate to discuss. The findings of the current article also point to the importance of researching how ableism operates in work organizations because ableism apparently prompts co-workers to spontaneously place a wide variety of 'different' individuals within the same category despite their only commonality being their visual difference from the norm.

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Notes

- 1 A 'flex-job' is a job in which the hours are tailored to the individual's capabilities and the employer receives a subsidy from the employee's residential municipality.
- 2 A 'light job' [in Danish, 'skånejob'] is a category that is used for early retirees who are under 65 years old and who are unable to hold a normal job, even one that has reduced hours (such as a 'flex-job').
- 3 The larger study includes interviews with the 13 employees with disabilities, but these interviews are not part of the present analysis (for analysis where these interviews are included, see Mik-Meyer, 2015, 2016).
- 4 By 'openly reading the data', I am only describing an ideal; I am, of course, aware that knowledge of prior research and so on is inevitably part of any coding process.
- 5 To my knowledge, this type of othering – co-workers referring to people with other differences – has not been examined in the existing disability research (or workplace studies in general), which is why the present analysis will shed light on this type of othering process.
- 6 The type of impairment is mentioned in the presentation of the employee with cerebral palsy to explicate the differences the co-workers spontaneously place in the same category.

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Nanna Mik-Meyer is Professor at The Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI). Mik-Meyer's research includes studies of encounters between citizens and professionals in welfare organizations as well as encounters between employees and employers in work organizations. She has a particular focus on processes of otherness, power and gender in these encounters. Mik-Meyer is the author of *Power and Welfare: Understanding Citizens' Encounters with State Welfare* (with Kaspar Villadsen, Routledge, 2013). Her recent work has appeared in journals such as *Work, Employment & Society*, *Gender, Work & Organization*, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, *Social Theory and Health* and *Journal of Political Power*. [Email: nmm@sfi.dk]