

## Gender and Disability

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# Gender and Disability: Feminizing Male Employees with Visible Impairments in Danish Work Organizations

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# **Gender and disability: Feminizing male employees with visible impairments in Danish work organisations**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine how stereotypical gender perceptions relate to employees with physical impairments. This is done by investigating how employees and managers in 13 Danish work organisations draw on stereotypical perceptions of femininity when they talk about their colleague with cerebral palsy and by examining how these stereotypical perceptions influence the work lives of the participating employees with cerebral palsy—as seen from their own perspective. The empirical point of departure is an interview study conducted in 2013 with 14 employees with cerebral palsy, 43 colleagues and 19 managers. In contrast to the findings of much research on gender and work, this study finds that stereotypically feminised perceptions of employees with cerebral palsy as weak, in need of help, etc., are linked to the impairments of the employee rather than his or her biological sex or the specific gender norms of the particular industry. The analysis of this article thus contributes to increase our understanding of gender processes in work organisations. More specifically, the article shows how impairments intersect with gender perceptions; in this case how the study participants with cerebral palsy are expected to relate to and reproduce stereotypically female behaviour—regardless of their biological sex.

## **Keywords**

Disability, impairment, stereotypical gender perceptions, masculinity, work organisation, employee-employer relations

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore how employees with physical impairments<sup>i</sup> are perceived by colleagues and managers in work organisations, paying particular attention to stereotypical gender perceptions. A recent review on disability and difference finds that the way employees with impairments are construed as different in work organisations is currently inadequately theorised (Williams and Mavin, 2012: 160). According to Williams and Mavin (2012), there is a lack of research that examines how able-bodied norms shape assumptions in work organisations, i.e., research that can grasp how disability is ‘construed within a category of social relations with non-disability, [why disability today is perceived as] ... essentialized individual problems’ (Williams and Mavin, 2012: 166). The present study attempts to help fill this gap by investigating how the able-bodied stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and femininity organise processes of difference in work organisations (West and Fenstermaker, 1995), which, in turn, marginalises employees with impairments (see also Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Foster and Wass, 2012).

There are of course studies that investigate the intersection (Holvino, 2010) between disability and work with a particular focus on how observers (abled-bodied managers and employees) perceive their colleague with impairments. Stone and Colella (1996) have, for example, developed a model of factors that affect employees with impairments in work organisations, which sheds light on the many ways in which observers perceive their colleague with impairments. Other studies examine how impairments give rise to a variety of compensation strategies amongst employees with impairments (Cohen and Avanzino, 2010; Ren et al., 2008) who attempt to conceal, minimise, or ‘downplay’ their impairments as much as possible (Taub et al., 2004: 175) by ‘think[ing] about everything’ they do whilst at work (Dyck and Jongbloed, 2000: 344). However, research that examines the intersection between impairments, work *and* gender is sparse, i.e., how

employees' impairments and biological sex affect how they are perceived as different at work and consequently are expected to behave differently by their colleagues and managers.

Therefore, the aim of the study is to examine how stereotypical gender perceptions intersects with physical impairments in work organisations—as seen from the perspectives of employees with impairments and their colleagues and managers.

### **Gender and work**

Gender is a relational, symbol-based interactive phenomenon that organises both organisational work and human interaction (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2004). Studies show, for instance, how stereotypical male norms in work organisations lead to strategies of over-performance amongst female workers in a number of different industries (Butler and Charles, 2012; Casey et al., 2011; Clerc and Kels, 2013; Powell et al., 2009) such as the 'patriarchal' wine industry (Bryant and Garnham, 2014), the engineering industry (Hatmaker, 2013; Miller, 2004) and the fields of law and accounting (Haynes, 2012). Often, these studies examine how female employees must compensate for their biological sex when working in an industry dominated by stereotypical male norms in order to gain acceptance, etc., in the workplace. Naturally, there are also studies that examine the role of male workers in stereotypically feminised work organisations (Buschmeyer, 2013; Hall et al., 2007; Lupton, 2000; Simpson, 2004), such as nursing and primary school teaching, where male employees have to manage their 'otherness' (Pullen and Simpson, 2009). Finally, there is a branch of work and gender studies that examines how both men and women (in particular industries) use different strategies to 'undo' the gendered perceptions that arise from their 'wrong' biological sex in efforts to achieve a better fit with the culture of their work organisation (Connell, 2010; Devine et al., 2011; Ely and Meyerson, 2010; Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; Kelan, 2010; McDonald, 2013) or with its archetypical 'ideal worker' (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2004: 677).

In the present study, this relational approach to gender probes the examination of how gendered stereotypical opposition pairs such as strong/weak, helper/helpless, efficient/emotional, etc., affect the interaction between people (Gherardil, 1994) and—specifically—how these gendered binary relations (Butler, 1999) are constructed in relation to employees with physical impairments. These binary relations are not stable, of course. Their meanings stem from cultural and other contextually derived stereotypical perceptions of how, for example, one behaves as a man in a given cultural context (Eng, 2001; Spitzack, 1998). However, it is the ‘idealized’ and stereotypical perceptions (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2004: 132) of masculinity that are of particular interest to the present study because stereotypical perceptions automatically frame how observers perceive their colleague with impairments (Goffman, 1974). In the case of masculinity, these idealised and stereotypical perceptions emphasise strength, rationality, competitiveness, etc., as descriptive factors of the male biological sex (Edley and Wetherell, 1995), which—needless to say—do not always correspond to the actual physical appearance or behaviour of men. In practice, gender categories are stretched quite a bit to include real men in the idealised and stereotypical category of masculinity.

However, in relation to the male employees with cerebral palsy<sup>ii</sup> in the present study, the question is whether the idealised and stereotypical category of masculinity can be stretched sufficiently to also include them. Because gender processes can be regarded as organising work (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2004), the present study examines how stereotypical gender perceptions organise the opinions and work evaluations of employees with impairments. That is, do observers’ stereotypical gendered perceptions—and the related expectations of appropriate behaviour—first and foremost relate to the biological sex of male employees with cerebral palsy, to the specific gender norms of the industry, or to the physical impairments of the employee? The case of employees with cerebral palsy may serve to illustrate just how far it is possible to stretch

stereotypical gender categories, particularly the idealised gender category of masculinity as the strong, controlled and assertive male body.

### **Gender and disability**

To the extent that disability studies have applied a gender focus in researching the situation of people with impairments, this focus has primarily reflected how women with disabilities may be seen as ‘twice penalized’ due to their gender *and* their disability (O’Hara, 2004: 27) in a process also conceptualised as ‘the double impact of being female and disabled’ (Nosek and Hughes, 2003: 224). A critical feminist approach has furthermore developed a perspective that tries to ‘reimagine disability’ (Garland-Thomson, 2005: 1568) and the effects of disability on gendering processes, such as how women and men with disabilities ‘enact gender’ (Gerschick, 2000: 1263). In contrast, how the male biological sex intersects with impairments has mostly been investigated in a more indirect manner. Studies have shown, for example, that employees with impairments are often stereotyped as ‘quiet, honest, gentlehearted, nonegotistical, benevolent, helpless, hypersensitive, inferior, depressed, distant, shy, unappealing, unsociable, bitter, nervous, unaggressive, insecure, dependent, unhappy, aloof and submissive’ (Fichten and Amsel [1986] in Stone and Colella, 1996: 358). As the list shows, the stereotypical expectations of the behaviour and psychological constitution of people with impairments coincide with stereotypical expectations of women and female behaviour. Consequently, it seems fair to assume that the gender perceptions of male employees with impairments are profoundly different from the gender perceptions of their male, able-bodied colleagues and managers.

When employees with impairments perform particular work identities (Adkins and Lury, 1999), they are responding to stereotypical able-bodied notions of what it means to be both impaired and man or women, which together create a corresponding set of expectations of what

appropriate workplace behaviour entails. The ‘institutional identity’ of this group of employees, i.e., the institutionally guided expectations of how to act in a particular organisational setting (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000), is of a specific type. If observers, for example, perceive impairments as associated with being weak, emotional and helpless, as found in previous research (Stone and Colella, 1996), then this perception will likely affect how employees with impairments makes sense of their own work situation (Jenkins, 1996; Mead, 1959).

However, when employees compensate for their impairments and—of particular importance in this paper— their biological sex, this compensation is not necessarily more difficult for male employees than for female employees. Some women may accept the stereotypical expectations that arise from their biological sex (and their impairments), whereas others may not. Similarly, some men may find it unproblematic to have female gender stereotypes imposed upon them, whereas others may find it difficult. The following analysis draws exclusively on interview excerpts with male participants with cerebral palsy and their colleagues and managers. Similar to their male counterparts, the interviews revealed that female employees with impairments were also subjected to stereotypical female expectations. However, they have been omitted from the analysis because this observation is arguably less extraordinary (examples of data excerpts concerning these female participants are presented in Appendix 1).

### **Data and methodology**

The main study includes data from interviews with 14 employees with cerebral palsy (four women, 10 men), 19 managers (seven women, 12 men), and 43 colleagues (18 women, 25 men) in 13 Danish work organisations. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed and lasted an average of 50 minutes. However, the analysis of present article draws exclusively on the interviews with the 10 men with cerebral palsy and their 40 colleagues and 14 managers, as the focus of the paper is



how stereotypical expectations of masculinity intersect with the stereotypical expectations of having impairments. Of these 10 men with cerebral palsy, four were employed under regular conditions, five were in a flex-job<sup>iii</sup> and one was employed in a light job<sup>iv</sup>. Five of the participating work organisations were public and five were private. Their size and areas of expertise were quite diverse as well, ranging from a private foundation with 25 employees to a mid-sized municipality with 5000 employees. The men with impairments worked within the fields of IT (6), technical documentation (2), social work (1), and teaching (1) (see also Table 1). A total of four to six interviews were conducted in each workplace by a research assistant and myself. Additionally, I did six weeks of fieldwork in the work organisations of two employees with cerebral palsy (Philip and Anthony), who both worked full time and under regular conditions. Here, I was able to observe the interaction between the employee with cerebral palsy and his colleagues and managers, as well as conduct approximately 15 interviews per organisation including interviewing the two employees with cerebral palsy multiple times.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Cerebral palsy is a congenital or early-manifesting brain injury that, to varying degrees, inhibits a multitude of motor and/or cognitive functions. A person with cerebral palsy may, for instance, have difficulty eating or controlling basic movements, but he or she may also be largely unaffected by the condition. The 10 participating men of this study all have physical impairments, ranging from severe paralyses (necessitating wheelchairs, canes, or walkers) to a slight squint or the dragging of a leg being the only visible indicators of impairment. In regards to speech impairments, some

participants were very affected while others were not at all. The vast majority of participants, though, were fully comprehensible albeit with some enunciation problems. In terms of cognition, it was difficult for us to assess whether the participants were affected by their condition, as cognitive impairments cannot be heard or seen. However, some participants did mention having specific cognitive problems, such as difficulty assessing distances, etc. Colleagues and managers often spoke of particular ‘mental’ or personality-related features of the employees with cerebral palsy but were generally unsure whether these traits should be attributed the impairment or other factors such as upbringing, social circumstances, etc.

In efforts to recruit participants for the study, we chose a multifaceted strategy of posting a notice on the Danish Cerebral Palsy Association’s Facebook page, contacting the heads of several disability athletic associations and finally using the social networks of the already-recruited participants (the ‘snowball’ method). An important goal was to secure a participant group with a certain degree of complexity in terms of impairments in order to obtain as complex a dataset as possible. Another important aspect was that the employees with impairments had daily collegial contact. Due to ethical considerations, we contacted the employees with impairments, and then they would ask their colleagues and managers if they wished to participate in the study by being interviewed. This method probably resulted in omitting colleagues or managers who may have had conflicts with the employee with cerebral palsy. Nevertheless, the interviewed managers and colleagues both spoke about problematic and difficult aspects of having a colleague with cerebral palsy. It is therefore our impression that our dataset is less skewed than expected.

In the interviews, we sought descriptions of how the employees with impairments experienced their work situation and, conversely, how colleagues and managers experienced having a colleague with impairments. We strove to provide a high level of openness in the interview situations in efforts to allow for recollections that fell beyond the scope of the interview guide but

nevertheless were important to the interviewees. All interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide to ensure that the conversation touched upon a number of predefined (yet wide) topics; chief among them the role of impairments in the work situation. Our interview guide thus included questions to prior work experiences, job assignments, the recruitment process, the first months at work, the daily work life and career ambitions, the social life at the workplace, and the relations between colleagues, managers and the employee with impairments. In the two work organisations in which fieldwork was conducted, I had the opportunity of inquiring about particular observations I had made during the stay.

The entire dataset was coded using the software programme NVivo10. Our coding was inspired by a constructivist interpretation of the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). By doing so, specific hypotheses about the data were not developed prior to the coding process, but instead we sought a very open reading of the data<sup>v</sup>. In efforts to avoid having the interview guide govern the analysis, we decided to only use the interviewees' own words and concepts during the initial coding process. After having coded the first 24 interviews this way (eight interviews from each group), the issues talked about by the interviewees were grouped thematically. The rest of the interviews were coded using the 37 codes developed from the line-by-line coding of the first 24 interviews. The code 'gendered descriptions of the employee', which is central to the present analysis, reveals that this was a recurring topic in the interviews with colleagues and managers (and also to a certain degree in the interviews with the employees with impairments), which arose spontaneously from the reflections of the interviewees with no questions prompting this particular topic (we did, in other words, not ask any questions about gender). Since reflections on gender issues occurred so frequently in the dataset, we decided to conduct a 'focused coding' (Charmaz, 2006: 57-60) of the entire dataset for quotes/discussions on this topic. Subsequently, we developed a list of the predominant ways in which participants discussed gender issues, for instance

‘stereotypically feminine descriptions’ or ‘stereotypically masculine descriptions’. These categories would then be highlighted in the text and became the direct point of departure for the analytical work. For each interview extract, we would return to the actual interview in order to ensure that the talk about gender, femininity, masculinity. etc., was not prompted by the questions of the interviewer.

We found stereotypically feminised ways of perceiving employees with impairments in 34 of the 40 interviews with colleagues and in 10 of the 14 interviews with managers. In one ‘deviant’ organisation (Seale and Silverman, 1997), the dataset did not include any stereotypically feminised talk about the employee with impairments; neither from colleagues and managers nor from the employee with cerebral palsy himself. The reason for this deviation was probably that this particular employee worked in an institution for children with impairments, which is why his own impairments in this context were considered ‘normal’ and hence did not automatically result in a stereotypically feminised evaluation of him or his work performance.

Beyond general strict rules for data storing, processing and participant acceptance, no formal ethical approval is required in Denmark to conduct a research project of this nature. We have, however, followed the guidelines of the British Sociological Association on ethically responsible research. Before commencing the interviews, we made sure to explain to our interviewees (yet again) that they could withdraw from the study at any moment and that their participation was anonymous. We stressed our prerogative to change any significant contextual conditions if we found that a given analysis could be of harm to them, their colleagues, or their work organisations, as it was essential that the parties involved would not be recognised by others, especially when analysing conditions open to criticism. Furthermore, we have to a lesser extent altered the spoken language to written language to prevent perceptions of interviewees as being less

intelligent, as the unaltered written presentation of spoken language may often have such consequences.

## **Analysis**

### *Compensating for the impairment*

Similar to other studies showing how various minority groups tend to over-perform, for instance in efforts to prove their worth (Herman et al., 2013) or to disprove negative expectations on account of them standing out from the norm (Essers and Tedmanson, 2014), this study also touches on this topic. For example, the interviewed employees with cerebral palsy, their colleagues, and their managers all talk intensely about the over-performance of employees with cerebral palsy: for instance that they work from home in their spare time (Pavan and Philip), take fewer breaks than their colleagues, or try to be an ‘ideal worker’ by having a very technical vocabulary (Anthony and Phillip) (see also Hatmaker, 2013; Toyoki and Brown 2013). Other compensatory strategies include sitting down when talking to someone and thus hiding the impairment (Anthony), adapting one’s coffee intake to the difficulties of walking with a filled cup (Daniel), talking as little as possible because of a loud voice (Chris), and even eating only particular types of foods in efforts to eat less messily at lunch (Philip). All of these strategies aiming at neutralising or downplaying the visibility of the impairments are similar to strategies found in other studies. For example, UK mothers who hide their motherhood at work (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014), or working selves in the Irish educational system being regarded as ‘elastic’ and adjustable to the culture of the work organisation (Devine et al., 2011: 632).

However, the present analysis will approach the topics of compensatory and neutralising strategies in the workplace in a slightly different way. The analysis will thus show how colleagues’ and managers’ stereotypically feminine expectations of the employee with cerebral

palsy actually result in the expectation that the male employees with impairments downplay or avoid stereotypically masculine behaviour, such as being proactivity, efficiency, or being emotionally detached.

### *Feminising male employees with impairments*

The following analysis will explore how stereotypical perceptions of masculinity strengthen observers' perceptions of their male colleague with cerebral palsy as different. The dataset show that vast majority of the employees with cerebral palsy seem to be evaluated according to stereotypically feminine perceptions. From the interviews with the male employees with cerebral palsy and their colleagues and managers, the employees with impairments are, for instance, described as 'too dutiful', 'very talkative ... and nervous about big assignments' (two colleagues and one manager talking about Jacob and Ed), 'too emotional and irritated', 'too dedicated and eager ... and unable to set limits', and having a 'low self-esteem' (three colleagues talking about Andrew). There are also stories about how a colleague with impairments 'needs comfort' and 'a less hectic work environment ... so he will not be frightened' (a colleague and a manager talking about Jasper).

### *Transforming stereotypically masculine behaviour into weaknesses*

During the fieldwork in the workplaces of Anthony and Philip, there are several instances of childish interaction, i.e., cases where colleagues and managers speak to the two employees as if they are children or persons who need extra attention and special care. Expressions such as 'there comes the vacation-child', 'that's a large piece of cake you took there, Anthony', and 'how are you feeling' (said in an emphatic, worrisome way) are all examples hereof. Observations also include a

(too) frequent use of their first names in conversations; a gesture which do not apply to others in the workplace.

In the upcoming analysis, we shall take a closer look at colleagues' and managers' expectations and assumptions of Anthony and Phillip regarding their behaviour in the workplace – the 'institutional identity' available to them (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000)—and we shall see how they react to the stereotypically feminised perceptions of their managers and colleagues.

Anthony is 35 years old and works full time in a regular position in a male dominated IT-department in a municipality. Anthony's managers and colleagues hold him in very high regard and consider him professionally as 'clearly one of the best in the team', as Ken, one of Anthony's managers, explains. However in many interviews, he is also described in very stereotypically feminine terms: as a guy who does not 'approach others much', who 'worries more than most', and who has a 'self-destructing mind-set' (referring here to self-criticism and low self-esteem). Ken explains:

His impairment might contribute to him becoming stressed more quickly but another thing is his self-destructing mind-set. ... He is very talented, though. But he doesn't put it to use and he almost tears up when I tell him [that he is good], and I think that he gets very touched by it. 'Don't believe it if people tell you otherwise because you are [very good]!' And he is.

Another manager characterises him as a 'sensitive bloke who easily becomes depressed'. However, from Anthony's own perspective, this stereotypically feminine profile is rather a question of

professional behaviour. According to him, he has a ‘perfectionist’ personality and a ‘particularly high work ethic’:

I may have a hard time dealing with things from time to time, but that’s because I’m such a perfectionist, you know? If things don’t work for me the first time, well then I get mad and angry with myself. You know, I can’t stand making mistakes.

Notice, though, that being a ‘perfectionist’ is largely a personality trait associated with a stereotypical perception of femininity, which thus supports his colleagues and managers’ stereotypical feminised evaluation of his personality. He thus seems to be very much aware of others’ stereotypical feminine perceptions of his character and how he comes across in the workplace:

Often, I can hear people saying: ‘Is he angry today?’ ... And, you know, I get it, but it just makes me angry that I’m being perceived as angry because I basically don’t think that I’m an angry person in general, you know? ... I can be very focused at times. ... And then I might appear to be a bit angry.

We see how an able-bodied, stereotypical gender expectation of a male IT specialist as a person who is focused, is somewhat withdrawn, and minds his own business is being transformed into a moody, stereotypically feminine character, which makes Anthony angry. His quintessential masculine ‘IT’ personality is transformed into a stereotypically feminine (and for him, problematic) character. He is expected to get ‘touched’ by personal evaluations, and be the ‘likable’, ‘emotional bloke’ that colleague and managers ‘know’ him to be.



In the next case, we shall meet Philip, who is 27 years old and also works full time at a regular job as a social worker in a municipality. As with many of the participants with cerebral palsy, the story of being a male employee with impairments is quite ambivalent. On one hand, Philip seems to have easy access to social interaction with his same-aged female colleagues. On the other hand, the reason for this accessibility is, paradoxically, that they actually do not consider him a normal man, i.e., a person who could potentially be of interest to them. Here follows an interview excerpt with his colleague Donna, who is approximately the same age as Philip.

Donna: I don't think that he's actually realised that he is impaired. He flirts and he charms. ... Often, he says that thing about 'I can do it myself'. He doesn't actually need to do it himself all the time. It's perfectly okay to ask for help.

Interviewer: Why do you think that he feels that way? That he can do it himself and that he doesn't want help?

Donna: Well, I think that he wants to be normal and be considered normal and not have that extra care. One time, we were actually sitting down here in the garden smoking and having a good time, us girls: Audrey, Luma, myself, and Philip, where it's a Friday and we had a bit of a weekend vibe going on from sitting down there, and of course there was talk about how he should go out and meet some ladies and stuff like that, you know? And you can tell that, ugh, he got a bit, you know... I think that he'd really like to be normal.

From Donna, we understand that if Phillip actually realises that he is impaired, then he will know that he is actually in a position where he cannot flirt with and charm his female co-workers. He is, as Donna tells, a natural part of the ‘girls’ despite the fact that his biological sex is male. His impairments thus seem to neutralise his stereotypically masculine behaviour (flirting and charming, etc.). When she says that Philip wants to do things himself and is consequently asked why by the interviewer, she again draws on his perceived lack of stereotypical masculinity: he wants to be considered ‘normal’, she says. In this interview context, ‘normal’ can refer to both ‘a normal employee’ and ‘a normal man’—in either case, a person who does not need the extra care. If we consider Donna’s statement that Philip flirts and charms as if he is not impaired and her reference to the time where ‘the girls’ suggested that he go meet some ladies, it thus seems fair to assume that ‘normal’ in this context actually implies ‘normal man’.

As for Philip, he is very much aware that he has a particularly active social role at his workplace (which also became obvious during the fieldwork period), exemplified by the fact that most colleagues and managers come by his office many times throughout the day to chat. In the following interview excerpt, this social role is mentioned, and Philip admits that it sometimes bothers him. It is especially the origin of the attention that seems misguided to him:

I’ve had situations where I’ve asked for help with something [work-related, not practical] and then they’ve helped me way too much—out of kindness. It was mostly in the beginning but I think that I made my point pretty quickly. ... If Mike [colleague] said that there’s something I can’t do, I’ll bloody well show him. And it could be that misunderstood kindness in relation to my impairments and the misinterpretation of ‘well, if Philip asks for my help, it’s probably because his unable to do it himself’.

Where in my mind it's more: No, I ask for your help because I want to be knowledgeable, I want to be informed so that I can make the best decision.

Notice how important it is for Philip—as it is for most of our participants with impairments—that the help offered is not too much. He relates what he calls ‘misunderstood kindness’ to having impairments and this way problematises the stereotypically perceived feminine caring relation that colleagues and managers impose on him.

### *Making sense through a stereotypically feminine lens*

In the next part of the analysis, we shall take a closer look at the help or the ‘misunderstood kindness’ Philip talks about, which most participating employees with cerebral palsy are offered (and about which many expresses scepticism). Having impairments can, according to another employee with cerebral palsy (Ed), imply an expectation of ‘intimacy, which doesn't help’ and which he finds problematic because he, as he says, has ‘a hard time letting people in’: once again, we see both stereotypically feminised expectations of colleagues and a stereotypical feminised self-evaluation. According to Jacob, another employee with cerebral palsy, impairments can also result in one becoming even more ‘nervous’ than others because of the extra attention. Although some participants with cerebral palsy describe how their colleagues are ‘very, very helpful’ (Andrew) in positive terms, most of them, however, problematises the help received due to their impairments, which ranges from help assessing an adequate and manageable workload (Jacob, Pavan) to help getting dressed properly (Christian).

In a sports union, the well-meaning ‘help’ of colleagues is not necessarily received as such. In this union Pavan, who is 45 years old and has cerebral palsy, works in a light job 37 hours per week as an IT manager. Pavan is believed to be ‘too hardworking’, ‘too efficient’ and ‘too

focused' when he works, according to his colleague Jennifer. He 'pushes and pushes through', which, according to her, is in stark contrast to how she and her colleagues expect him to work:

With Pavan it can be difficult because he just pushes and pushes through. ... My colleague has... also told him 'now, you need to stay at home', you know? And he would come in a few times and I sensed that it annoyed him that he was always being reprimanded. ... I would be annoyed as well if I felt like I had a situation under control and someone would keep telling me that I didn't. ... I try to have respect for him being responsible for his own work life and then still take care of him without anyone knowing, you know?

Although well-meaning, Pavan explains in his interview that he does not appreciate the 'help' and interference because it has actually led to a reduction in his professional responsibilities. He tells:

I used to have performance reviews with my staff. But now my boss has taken over that task because he'd like me to worry less. And that's a consideration I've never experienced before. But I just have to work through it and see what I can make of it. I've told my boss and my HR-contact that I disagree with their decision, that I accept that it's what they've decided, but that I don't agree.

Similar to Anthony and Philip, Pavan does not appreciate the stereotypical feminine lens through which he is perceived, and he actually finds the extra care and interference unjustified. Nevertheless (as explained in parts of the interview not presented here), his work effort and efficiency clearly disharmonise with his colleagues' and manager's notions of having an impairment. This might

explain why his stereotypically masculine behaviour (efficiency, high workload and long work hours) becomes problematic in the eyes of his colleagues and manager.

However, this stereotypically feminised way of relating to the employees with impairments is not always a problem or seen as something negative. As previously stated, the dataset also contains examples of participants with impairments who find the constant interest in their personal situation very positive and actually value this ‘institutional identity’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). This situation is, for instance, seen in the case of Christian.

Christian is 43 years old and works in a flex-job 17 hours per week as an IT employee in a public office. In the interviews, Christian’s manager Eric recounts having ‘quite a few talks with Christian that made Christian very relieved afterwards because he realised that he could come to me and talk to me; about personal things as well. ... One thing is the work, another thing is the social aspect of being in a place like this’, as Eric explains. This value on Christian’s social wellbeing is also touched upon by one of his colleagues, Michael, who admits to the organisation being ‘the kind of workplace that gives a helping hand’. Christian himself also talks about the value of this help and consideration, which in his eyes allow his colleagues and managers to ‘be something for someone else’:

Christian: There are people who walk around and keep an eye on me, checking if I’m okay, without being asked to at all but they can’t help it.

Interviewer: How do they keep an eye on you?

Christian: Well, they ask me how I am. Both parties want it to work out well, you know? Because I think that what makes a person the most happy is often to be something for someone else. And if I can't get someone to help me get a cup of coffee, then this person isn't [something for someone] and I strongly assume that he'd want to be. They'd like to show that kind of energy. And that's something we all want to convey.

Christian seems to be accepting the 'in need of help'-identity; apparently not only because it helps him but also—as he states—because he then helps a colleague 'be something for someone else'. Another example of an employee with impairments who engages positively in the institutional identity as someone in need of help and attention is Jasper, who is 30 years old and works in a flex-job 16 hours per week in a water service company. Jasper believes that his colleagues consider him the 'gold nugget' of the company, and he enjoys the fact that he is being 'taken very, very good care of':

I don't know if it's too cheeky to say so, but I kind of think that I'm perceived a bit like a gold nugget. Meaning that I'm taken very, very good care of. ... I've gone through a tremendous development; not only professionally but definitely also personally. I've learned to be myself in a safe environment because I have some great colleagues who know when to support and when it's not needed.

Being the centre of attention is found in many interviews among the employees with cerebral palsy and often involves reflections about what they think about the way their colleagues and managers perceive them and their impairments. Thus, with regards to impression management, i.e., efforts to

try to control others' impressions of you (Goffman, 1990), Andrew and Chris bring focus to this topic. They are 37 and 38 years old, respectively, and are both employed full time under regular conditions within the field of IT. In the following quotes, they talk about first impressions:

Andrew: When you first listen to me, you probably think that something is wrong up here [and points towards his head]. ... I am very much aware that I don't make the best first impressions. So those everyday situations where it's a constant string of first impressions, they can be a bit rough. ... The first time I might be perceived a bit differently than I am, but that's because people don't have the full story.

Chris: People who meet me for the first time... Well, the most important thing isn't whether you have impairments or not, but rather how you as a person are towards new people, right? You know, whether you're accepting and friendly or keep a distance.

According to Andrew, having visible impairments is often equated with being mentally impaired as well. To correct this perception, colleagues and managers need 'the full story', as Andrew puts it. Chris uses slightly different terms ('accepting and friendly') but nevertheless points to the same issue of impression management, which often activates stereotypical feminine norms.

## **Conclusion**

The present article's analysis contribute to illuminate how stereotypical perceptions of masculinity reinforce observers' assumptions that male employees with impairments are different (see also Stone and Colella, 1996), or, in other words, that able-bodied stereotypical gender perceptions in

work organisations (unintendedly) strengthen the marginalisation of particular groups of people (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2004; Williams and Mavin, 2012), in this case employees with impairments.

Furthermore, the analysis of the present study show that the stereotypical gender perceptions of employees with impairments is not related to the norms and culture of the particular industry as found in other studies (e.g., Bryant and Garnham, 2014; Buschmeyer, 2013; Clerc and Kels, 2013), for instance how stereotypically masculine perceptions create a particular work environment that causes female workers to compensate for their ‘wrong’ biological sex, typically through strategies of over-performance or neutralisation (Butler and Charles, 2012; Claringbould and Knoppers, 2008; Herman et al., 2013; Irvine and Vermilya, 2010; Miller, 2004). Rather, the current study offers an alternative way of researching how stereotypical gender perceptions organise how managers and colleagues think about and perceive their colleague with impairments.

By exploring the case of impairments, the current study shows how stereotypical perceptions of people with impairments as weak, helpless, and emotional (Stone and Colella, 1996) coincide with stereotypical perceptions of femininity, which result in male employees with impairments’ stereotypical masculine behaviour becoming problematic—even in male dominated industries such as IT. The stereotypical perception of employees with impairments can, in other words, not be comprehended by examining the dominance of stereotypically masculine or feminine norms within a given industry, as the aforementioned studies do when examining the gender processes of other minority groups. In the case of impairments, the stereotypical feminisation of male employees with impairments seems to illustrate a mutually enhanced process between stereotypical assumptions and perceptions of people with impairments and stereotypical assumptions and perceptions of femininity.

The analysis of this article thus sheds light on two important issues found in the dataset of the study. Firstly, the analysis shows how stereotypically male behaviour, such as being



an introvert, focused, withdrawn and efficient IT-worker, or a flirting social worker, is automatically regarded as inappropriate by able-bodied managers and employees, if the stereotypically male behaviour belongs to a male colleague with impairments. Thus, being a man with impairments automatically makes masculine behaviour an illegitimate practice. Secondly, the analysis shows how impairments automatically transform the male employee into a person in need of help—help that reaches far beyond the professional context—and that this stereotypically feminised ‘institutional identity’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001) automatically makes sharing personal stories and being friendly and kind a ‘natural’ and expected way for the male employees with impairments to behave in the workplace.

Furthermore, the findings of this study show that these stereotypically feminine perceptions, which are imposed on employees with impairments, must be understood as the result of a process that ‘silences’ particular types of behaviour (Metcalf and Woodhams, 2012). There is, in other words, no reason to suspect that colleagues and managers purposely seek to belittle or harass their male colleague with impairments by imposing stereotypically feminine norms on him. When a colleague states, for instance, ‘I don’t think that he’s actually realised that he is impaired, he flirts and he charms’, she pinpoints the disconnection between impairment and stereotypical perceptions of masculinity without noticing the potential conflict that this statement may produce for her male colleague with impairments. Or, put differently: the process of perceiving the colleague as different is so ‘natural’ that the stereotypically masculine behaviour of a male employee with impairments is actually in conflict with the institutional identity given to him, i.e., to behave in accordance with stereotypically feminine norms.

The perceptions of others—the external gaze from colleagues and managers—validate certain identities (e.g., someone who shares personal stories) while disproving others (e.g., someone who flirts and charms female colleagues). The current analysis’ focus on the stereotypical

feminisation of employees with impairments as imposed by managers, colleagues, and (to some extent) employees with impairments themselves show how identities are co-constructed (Jenkins, 1996; Mead, 1959). Employees with impairments themselves also appear to integrate the stereotypical perceptions of femininity in their self-perception when negotiating normalcy once their male sex has been rendered inapplicable.

This study thus illustrates how gender intersects with impairments in surprising ways. Relating to former studies of the work situations of people with impairments, the present study shows that being ‘twice penalized’ (O’Hara, 2004) or experiencing the ‘double impact of being female and disabled’ (Nosek and Hughes, 2003) is not reserved for female employees with impairments. Men with impairments automatically dislodge the stereotypical perceptions and assumptions of the male body as strong (Edley and Wetherell, 1995), which is why he may also be regarded as ‘twice penalized’, first by his impairments—his weak and imperfect body—and second or consequently by his ‘wrong’ biological sex. In this case, it might not be women who appear as ‘visibly gendered “others,” while men are erased as the genderless norm’ (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2004: xiv). In this case, the male sex is not erased. Rather, the male sex is transformed into stereotypical perceptions of femininity.

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### **Biographical notes**

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.

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<sup>i</sup> When using the terms 'impairment' and 'disability', I follow the definitions proposed by Shakespeare and Watson (2001: 17): Impairment is an attribute of the individual body or mind, and disability is a relationship between a person with an impairment and society. Impairment is hence a bodily difference and disability a social creation. However, when referencing other literature, I use 'disability' because this is most often the choice of concept.

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<sup>ii</sup> The participating employees with impairments all have cerebral palsy because the study was financed by a private foundation for people with cerebral palsy. The foundation wished to gain insight into the work lives of people with cerebral palsy, in particular how the majority— i.e. the colleagues and managers to employees with cerebral palsy—experienced having a colleague/employee with cerebral palsy. This request from the private foundation probably reflects the fact that most research in Denmark takes a minority perspective in examining the work situations of employees with disabilities. Aside from this general interest of the foundation, they did not set any limits for the research design or the analyses of the present study.

<sup>iii</sup> A ‘flex-job’ is a job in which the hours are tailored to the individual’s capabilities and where the employer receives a subsidy from the employee’s residential municipality.

<sup>iv</sup> A ‘light job’ [in Danish ‘skånejob’] is used for early retirees under the age of 65 who are unable to hold a regular job (even at reduced hours, as in a ‘flex-job’).

<sup>v</sup> By ‘open reading of the data’, I am only describing an ideal. I am, of course, aware that knowledge of prior research, for example, is an inevitable part of any coding process.