Disability, Sameness, and Equality

Able-bodied Managers and Employees Discussing Diversity in a Scandinavian Context

Mik-Meyer, Nanna

Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research

DOI:
10.1080/15017419.2016.1224201

Publication date:
2017

SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF DISABILITY RESEARCH, 2017
VOL. 19, NO. 2, 129–139
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1224201

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Disability, sameness, and equality: able-bodied managers and employees discussing diversity in a Scandinavian context

Nanna Mik-Meyer

SFI – The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Copenhagen K, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to research examining the work situations of employees with disabilities. This is performed by demonstrating how able-bodied norms affect the work lives of employees with cerebral palsy in Danish work organizations. Thus, this article investigates how able-bodied managers and employees talk about their co-workers with cerebral palsy and examines the narratives of diversity among able-bodied managers and employees when they discuss the work situation of their colleagues with cerebral palsy. The empirical point of departure is 6 weeks of participant observations in 2 work organizations along with interviews conducted in 13 work organizations with 19 managers and 43 colleagues who work with an employee with cerebral palsy on a daily basis. The article finds two dominating narratives regarding diversity that have to do with being either 'different but the same' or 'just different'. These two narratives relate to the highly praised value of equality in Scandinavia.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 October 2015
Accepted 10 August 2016

KEYWORDS
Cerebral palsy; co-workers; disability; equality; sameness

Introduction

The Nordic welfare states are known for both class and gender equality among their citizens (Lister 2009). Gender equality has been argued to be an integral part of 'Scandinavian citizenship' (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006, 7), which is also defined by homogeneity and a sense of 'sameness' among citizens. Research has found that this sense of sameness automatically makes differences between citizens appear to be a threat to society (Larsen 2011), as also shown in this paper. Furthermore, equality has a particular meaning in Nordic countries because the distinction between 'equality' and 'similarity' in the English language does not exist in Nordic languages in which 'lige' or 'lik' can refer to both being equal and being alike. Therefore, in a Scandinavian context, one can argue that one must be alike to achieve the highly praised characteristic of equality (Gullestad 1992; Larsen 2011). When engaging with analyses of diversity issues in work organizations, as this article does, one needs to be aware of these particular cultural values in Scandinavia, as they offer a possible framework for understanding the reasons that colleagues and managers systematically attempt to downplay the differences of their colleagues with visible disabilities in interviews; this occurs despite their continuous focus specifically on the ways and extent to which their colleague differs from the able-bodied employees.

Therefore, the research question that has informed this article is the following: how do the organizational values of sameness and equality affect the ways in which able-bodied managers and employees discuss their colleague with cerebral palsy? This article thus seeks to examine the

CONTACT Nanna Mik-Meyer nmm@sfi.dk SFI – The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11, DK-1052 Copenhagen K, Denmark

managerially and organizationally preferred perceptions of a diverse employee, that is, someone whose 'difference constitutes a threat to society' because of the valued homogeneity of Scandinavia.

A number of recent studies have examined the work situations of employees with disabilities by showing how able-bodied norms affect their work lives (Foster and Wass 2012), for example, how able-bodied norms may unintentionally result in a reluctance to help a colleague with disabilities due to a fear of stigmatizing the co-worker (even further) (Balser 2000; Kulkarni and Valk 2010; Vickers 2012) or the ways in which it may result in 'glass partitions' for managers with disabilities (Roulstone and Williams 2014). This article contributes to these studies by investigating specifically how organizational norms of sameness and equality produce a particular type of stigmatization process. As was done in the aforementioned studies, this article employs a social model approach (Barnes 2000; Oliver 2004; Barnes and Mercer 2011) that emphasizes the social environment in its analysis of the work situations of people with disabilities. In this current article, the focus is on the ways in which the social environment, that is, the organizational norms of equality and sameness (Gullestad 1992; Larsen 2011), affects the work lives of employees with cerebral palsy in a number of Danish work organizations. Similar to other studies (e.g. Unger 2002; Holmqvist 2008; Luecking 2008; Fraser et al. 2010; Gustafsson, Peralta, and Danermark 2014), this article takes on the perspectives of the able-bodied employers and colleagues, as it draws on 62 interviews with able-bodied managers and employees due to its focus on the ways in which they manage diversity (see also Mik-Meyer 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

A number of studies outside Scandinavia have also shown the ways in which being alike in work organizations is expressed as a key value, which is why managers often attempt to normalize diverse employees (Mamman 1996; Swan 2010; Zanoni 2011; Ghorashi and Sabelis 2013). Thus, these studies show how managers and employees who address workplace diversity are often engaged in a predominantly negative enterprise because these diversity initiatives often lead to stigmatization, inequality, and discriminatory practices within the organization (Kalonaityte 2010; Zanoni 2011; Sharp et al. 2012; Hatmaker 2013). Furthermore, research on diversity also includes studies that show the ways in which the mere presence of diverse employees may result in ambivalence among co-workers or managers who hold contradictory attitudes towards workplace diversity and diversity practices (De Los Reyes 2000; Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010; van Laer and Janssens 2011). Therefore, in an effort to explore how able-bodied managers and employees discuss difference in Danish work organizations, this article also applies a relational approach that focuses on the 'big story' (Gubrium and Holstein 2009), that is, the organizationally preferred story of sameness and equality, and the ways in which this story is reworked into the narratives, or 'little stories', of managers and employees concerning the employees with disabilities (Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

Data and methodology

The following analysis is based on a one-year research project (2012–2013) that examined the work lives of employees with cerebral palsy in 13 Danish work organizations. The reason for this focus was twofold (1) the research interest of the author concerning the ways in which physical impairments (such as cerebral palsy) were negotiated by the employees with disabilities as well as their managers and colleagues in Danish work organizations and (2) the possibility of available funding from a private foundation that supports research on cerebral palsy and explicitly wished to fund a study examining the perspective of able-bodied managers and employees in work organizations. The study thus contributes to the few sociological studies of the work situations of people with cerebral palsy in Scandinavia (e.g. Michelsen et al. 2005; Törnbom et al. 2011).

The main study includes interviews with 14 employees with cerebral palsy (4 women and 10 men), 19 managers (7 women and 12 men), and 43 colleagues (18 women and 25 men). However, due to the research focus of this article, the present analysis only draws on the interviews with managers and colleagues of the employee with cerebral palsy (in Mik-Meyer (2015) and Mik-Meyer (2016b), the voices of employees with cerebral palsy are included). In addition to the interviews, the article also

includes observation notes from six weeks of participant observation in two of the participating work organizations. During this time, the author was able to observe the day-to-day interactions between an employee with cerebral palsy and his or her colleagues and managers and ask questions regarding particular observations she made during the stay. In the 2 organizations in which the fieldwork was conducted, the author did approximately 15 interviews per organization (as opposed to the approximately 4 interviews that were performed in the other 11 work organizations). In these two organizations, she was also able to interview the two employees with cerebral palsy multiple times.

Locating employees with cerebral palsy who fitted the demands for participation (e.g. that they had a visible impairment and worked closely with colleagues and managers) was a challenging task because there are only a total of 10,000 persons with cerebral palsy in Denmark. Consequently, a research design was developed in which all types of work organizations and, in particular, job assignments of the employees with cerebral palsy could be accepted. The study culminated with participants from eight private and five public work organizations. The sizes of the work organizations and their areas of expertise were very diverse, ranging from a private foundation with 25 employees to a medium-sized municipality with 5000 employees. The able-bodied managers and employees worked within the fields of IT, social and psychiatric services, service, and technical documentation.

After conducting pilot interviews with an employee with cerebral palsy, a colleague, and three disability experts, an open-ended interview guide was developed to ensure that the conversation touched upon a number of predefined (yet wide) topics. The topics of the interview guide included (1) information about the interviewee (How long have you worked at this work place? What are your job assignments? How do you work with NN?), (2) the recruitment process (How did you learn about NN and his/her impairments? Did you have any worries due to those impairments?), (3) the first months at work (What were your expectations? How did you prepare? Did you change work assignments due to NN's impairments?), (4) daily work life and career (Do the impairments influence the work situation of NN? Does NN ask for help/Do you ask for help? Do you discuss career possibilities with NN? How do you evaluate NN's work competencies?), (5) social life at the workplace (Does NN participate in social arrangements? Do the impairments of NN influence his/her participation?), and (6) concluding the interview (Have you learned something new after having worked with NN? Are there important topics I have not touched upon?). In conducting the interviews, the author and her research assistant strove to provide a high level of openness in an effort to allow for recollections that fell beyond the scope of the interview guide but were nevertheless important to the interviewees. It was, in other words, key that the agenda of the research project did not marginalize the experiences of the participants (Alvesson 2003). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed and lasted an average of 50 minutes.

An important aspect of recruiting participants for the study was, as mentioned, that the employees with disabilities had daily collegial contact. Due to ethical considerations, the author and her research assistant contacted the employees with disabilities first and then asked their colleagues and managers whether they wanted to participate in the study by being interviewed. Put differently, the choice of which colleagues and managers to interview was solely the decision of the participants with cerebral palsy. This method – due to ethical considerations – has likely resulted in the omission of colleagues and managers who may have had conflicts or problems with the employees with cerebral palsy. Nevertheless, both the interviewed managers and the colleagues spoke of problematic, difficult aspects of having a colleague with cerebral palsy. It is therefore the author's impression that the dataset is less skewed than expected. The employees with disabilities who were the focal points of the interview conversations all had visible impairments, ranging from severe paralyses (necessitating wheelchairs, canes, or walkers) to a slight squint or the dragging of a leg.

The overall research design of this study is quite unique because of the three participating groups, one party (the employee with cerebral palsy) is the explicit subject of discussion in the interviews. This methodological decision is merited by the aim of the study, which was to gain insight into the work lives of this particular group of employees as observed from the perspective of their managers and colleagues. However, this design also raised a number of ethical issues. Most importantly, this choice

of research design made anonymity a key concern. As it was absolutely paramount that there would not be any negative consequences from participation in the interviews, the author and her research assistant stressed that they would change any significant contextual conditions if the author found that a given analysis could be of harm to the participants or their relations at work. It was, in other words, of greatest importance that the parties involved not be recognized by others, especially when discussing conditions that were open to criticism. The author was aware that the interviewees might be able to recognize their own quotations and consequently would be able to deduce the origins of other citations, which is why some relevant citations were actually omitted from the analyses as their publication and possible recognition would be detrimental to the work lives and relations of the participants.

Because the interviewed persons spoke about working with a colleague with cerebral palsy from their own point of view, the knowledge generated by this study can neither be considered factual knowledge nor actual representations of reality. Rather, it is observed and interpretively constructed knowledge that paints a picture of how working with a colleague with cerebral palsy is experienced and negotiated by a particular person, at a particular time, and in a particular (interview) setting. Nonetheless, it must be noted that there was an apparent congruence between the stories told in interviews and the observations made in the two work organizations, which in turn gives merit to the combination of the two chosen research methods. The disability of the employee with cerebral palsy was, in other words, a central theme in the field notes as the author noted several episodes of how the difference of this particular employee was negotiated in a culture of sameness and equality.

The entire dataset was coded using the software program NVivo10. The coding was inspired by a constructivist interpretation of the grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006). Thus, specific hypotheses regarding the data were not developed prior to the coding process; instead, the author and her research assistant sought a very open reading of the data. However, due to the author's observations of the many incidents in which the difference of the employee with cerebral palsy was negotiated, this issue had special priority. Despite this pre-interest in a particular phenomenon, the author and her research assistant still strived to conduct an 'open' reading of the data. Thus, in an effort to avoid having the interview guide govern the analyses, the author decided to solely use the interviewees' own words and concepts during the initial coding process. After coding the first 24 interviews in this manner (8 interviews from each group), the issues discussed by the interviewees were grouped thematically. The remainder of the interviews were then coded using the 37 codes developed from the line-by-line coding of the first 24 interviews. The codes 'difference' and 'sameness', which are central to this analysis, revealed that these issues were recurring topics in the interviews with colleagues and managers, which is why a 'focused coding' (Charmaz 2006, 57–60) of the entire dataset for quotations and discussions on 'difference' and 'sameness' was conducted. Subsequently, the author developed a list of the predominant ways in which participants discussed diversity issues such as 'difference and sameness' or 'sameness and equality'. These categories were then highlighted in the text and became the direct point of departure for the analytical work. Discussions on diversity issues were found in all of the interviews with able-bodied managers and colleagues, and in most of the interviews, these discussions related to reflections on sameness and/or equality.

Aside from general but strict rules for data storage, processing, and participant acceptance, no formal ethical approval is required in Denmark to conduct a research project of this nature. Nonetheless, the author has followed the guidelines of the British Sociological Association on ethically responsible research. Furthermore, she has, to a lesser extent, altered the spoken language in quotations to written language in an effort to prevent the perception of interviewees as being less intelligent because the unaltered written presentation of spoken language may often have such consequences.

Organizational diversity

To obtain a better understanding of the work situations of employees with disabilities, this article has, similar to other studies (e.g. Vedeler and Mossige 2010), investigated the narratives of able-bodied

managers and employees when they discuss their co-worker with cerebral palsy. The majority of the participating work organizations have written policies, which, by various means, position inclusiveness and diversity as central values, as explained below by two managers (Eric and Tim) in two different work organizations. They both regard inclusiveness and diversity as valuable to the department or work organization.

Interviewer (to Eric):	I also think that because he's such a happy and fun person, you know, it's a positive thing [to have him here]. … Does the fact that he has disability contribute to the workplace in other positive ways? Can it be an advantage?
Eric:	From an employer's perspective, there is a clear signalling value in us being inclusive, that we also take care of people who have shortcomings of some type. So for me, it's definitely a … I certainly don't see it as a limitation. I actually think it's an advantage to have him [the employee with disabilities] because it gives my department the impression of being an inclusive workplace.
Interviewer (to Tim):	Why is it important for you as a work organization to prioritize inclusiveness?
Tim:	We spend substantial resources to be as close as possible to the society we are in. And in society, there are simply all types of different people, which is why we would like our employee composition to reflect society. … This applies to both people in flex jobs and, what's the name for it … trainees, and we have many elderly people on payroll here as well. So, our range is quite broad in our efforts to act in accordance with the society we are in.

These statements by the two managers point to two quite different ways of thinking about inclusion and diversity, which also represents the range of ways in which diversity and inclusiveness are discussed and articulated in the other interviews in the study. In the quotation by Eric, inclusiveness and diversity become a matter of 'signalling value' or a means for his department to achieve 'an impression' of inclusiveness. Held against the quotation by Tim, who discusses in a more neutral manner the importance of being inclusive and the values behind diversity, the quotation by Eric gives the impression that being *perceived* as an inclusive workplace is a strong motivator for inclusion and diversity. The quotation by Eric furthermore reflects a general narrative in the interviews in which diversity and inclusiveness were frequently discussed as strategic organizational values rather than altruistic ones.

Most often, policies of inclusiveness and diversity are formulated at a high organizational level, such as the municipality that manages the work organization or the people who own the company. However, these policies typically target immigrants, sexual minorities, or other minority groups and in only a few of the participating work organizations did they explicitly address persons with disabilities. In these cases, the inclusion of this group of employees was presented as one of several parameters addressing the ways in which the organization might become a socially responsible work organization. Although research has documented that formalized policies increase the likelihood that work organizations employ persons with disabilities (Mandal and Ose 2015), the interviews in this study revealed that only a few work organizations had official HR policies hereon. Additionally, in those that did, the policies had minimal (if any) impact on how inclusiveness towards employees with disabilities was practised. Thus, the obvious question is what then motivates managers and their employees to consider inclusiveness if not the organizational HR policies. An able-bodied employee, Camilla, provides a common answer to this question:

Interviewer:	What does it mean in practice [that there be room for everyone in the organization]? I mean, what does it actually mean?
Camilla:	Well, I think that it makes it a bit more exciting, the more different we are in one way or another. I think so. It's also fun to have some personalities that are a bit off, you know? It's not only disabilities or being different in that way, but there are certain people who just are a bit different. I think it's wonderful.

This particular quotation and the example about how 'wonderful' difference is recurs in many of the interviews of the participating able-bodied colleagues and managers in the study. Paradoxically, however, these opinions were often accompanied by statements about how it is actually our

differences that make us all 'the same'. Thus, in the following analysis, the two narratives that dominated the interviews are (1) that the difference of their colleague with cerebral palsy actually makes this group of employees the 'same' as all of the other diverse employees in the work place and (2) that the difference of their colleague with cerebral palsy makes this group of employees very different from the rest of the employees in the work place.

Narrative: different in the same way

Managers and colleagues stressed, for instance, that everyone is 'a bit offbeat' in the work organization (Harry, colleague), that the employees with disabilities were 'different just like we are all different' (Allan, manager), or that there are 'many … very special types of people in this company' (William, colleague). In other words, difference is interpreted as a characteristic of all employees in the workplace; thus, it also applies to the colleagues with disabilities. The following quotations are characteristic of this narrative of difference that emphasizes sameness. A manager in a public organization thus answers a question concerning whether being the manager of an employee with cerebral palsy has led to any changes in his management style:

> Ken: Well, the field I manage is largely occupied by nerds, specialists, you know, who all have their own unique ways of being and thinking and acting. So there's quite a bit of psychology involved in communication to begin with. So I don't really think about it as being any different with him [the colleague with disabilities]. I think about what is unique about him, just as I do with the others.

Thus, in relation to 'nerds' and 'specialists', the management of an employee with cerebral palsy requires no particular or different methods of management. Nonetheless, talking about this particular employee makes this manager automatically think of other 'different' employees. A colleague in a private work organization also stressed that her employees were, in general, quite different.

> Interviewer: How do you think the other employees perceive her [the colleague with disabilities] [at social events at work]?
>
> Julie: Well, she is just a part of the group down here, you know? She really is, and I don't think that it's out of pity or anything like that. We just have a great camaraderie down here. I think that we're a good team down here, especially because we have many different people … We also consider the other's needs, what they can do and can't do, and I think that is exactly what causes us to be very flexible, both at work and when we're having a party (…) that no one is better than anyone else. So in that way, I think we just see her as, well, just her, you know?

Note how this colleague with the same breath talks about difference ('we have different people down here') and sameness ('no one is better than anyone else'). In another private work organization, a manager reflects on how all people are, in fact, different when answering a question about what had gone through his mind when discovering that he would be the manager of a person with cerebral palsy:

> Robert: Because, you know, I believe that we're all different. Hell, I've probably got my own special quirks and ways of being every now and then. And in a way, you must be able to address that as a manager, that people are different in different ways, you know? That's just how it is.

This narrative, supported by a number of other statements, makes the difference of the employee with disabilities 'normal' by emphasizing that the other able-bodied employees in the workplace are quite the motley crew. An employee with a disability is thus described as 'normal' when, for instance, he is compared to tech-nerds, who are also 'normal' in a certain way. As the quotation by Robert illustrates, people are all of the same in the sense that 'we're all different' and that even able-bodied persons have their 'quirks and ways of being'. However, the quotation by Robert also captures the second narrative of this analysis: that although 'we're all different', some people are actually 'different in different ways'. The larger story of diversity thus seems to include both a narrative of difference and thereby sameness and a narrative of difference with a message that although all people are different, some are actually different in ways other than everyone else.

Narrative: differently different

The previous narrative regarding the ways in which the difference of employees with disabilities makes them the same (and hence equal) to the other 'different' but able-bodied colleagues and managers (as observed in the quotations of Ken, Julie, and Robert) can be considered as reflecting a dominant discourse of ableism (Campbell 2009). This discourse, which positions the able body as the 'normal' body, may cause able-bodied managers and employees to automatically perceive their colleague with disabilities as different. The presence of ableism can furthermore be considered as meriting this current research project on how able-bodied managers and employees think about their fellow colleague with cerebral palsy and thus affirms it as an important research objective. However, the discourse of ableism does not stand alone because values of sameness and being alike (and thus equal) are also dominant values in the work organizations. As the quotations of the previous section demonstrated, the sameness narrative was quite strong and was even expressed in interviews by managers' and colleagues' categorical rejection of the notion that the disabilities of their colleague have any impact on, for example, their work performance or social relations. Nonetheless, it was also evident from the interviews that the narrative of sameness is challenged. Or put differently, the narrative of sameness seems to fall somewhat short when the difference in question is physical disability.

As the following interview excerpts from three different private work organizations will show, the narrative of the difference of employees with cerebral palsy can also lead to a quite apparent story of a difference that in no way is connected to sameness. First, let us turn to a colleague in a private work organization who emphasizes etiquette when she attempts to downplay the difference that characterizes people with disabilities. She is the colleague of an employee who is difficult to understand due to his speech impairments:

> Interviewer: You say that 'you can't possibly' or you had a feeling that you couldn't…?
> Lucy: [Interrupts] No, but it's common decency that the more often you ask… the more times you say 'I didn't understand, what did you…?', 'I didn't understand what you said', the more I think that you show that he has a disability, and I don't think it's a very nice thing to do because he's the same as the rest of us. And I think that it's because I grew up with a disabled relative that it… it was always important in my family that my cousin wasn't any different just because she was disabled, and it is important that you treat all people the same. And I think that that's what I mean when I say that I don't think you should [focus on the disability]. It's kind of like pointing a finger at something they can't help.

In other words, Lucy's colleague is 'the same as the rest of' them but she nevertheless makes conscious efforts to not draw attention to his difference (the speech impairment), which seems to make him so different that it causes her think of her disabled relative.

A colleague from another private work organization, Christopher, also addresses difference and sameness when discussing his colleague with cerebral palsy. However, his statement also shows the ways in which his co-worker might not be equal to the other co-workers despite Christopher's explicit wish for his equality. When answering a question about whether he has learnt anything from having a colleague with cerebral palsy, Christopher voices his desire for sameness (and hence equality) by talking about treating the colleague with cerebral palsy as he does everyone else:

> Christopher: I don't regard lending him a hand for support or stuff like that as me giving him special treatment. I would do the same thing for an old lady, you know? So basically, I'm just glad that I told him that I could help… that he didn't receive any special treatment and that there hasn't been a need for special treatment. (…) Actually, I'm just pleasantly surprised that I am in fact able to treat him like any other colleague without feeling guilty about anything.

Note the paradox of this statement: Christopher says that his colleague neither needs nor receives any special treatment, but these statements are accompanied by clear indicators that his colleague is in fact different, as Christopher does not compare his colleague to other able-bodied co-workers but to an old lady in need of help. Peter, a colleague from a third private company, emphasizes the

physical abilities of his colleague with cerebral palsy when arguing in favour of her as 'a normal employee' and no different from 'everybody else':

> Interviewer: How do you think your other colleagues perceived her [the employee with disabilities] after having worked with her for a while? Was their impression the same as yours—that she surprised in a positive way?
>
> Peter: I don't regard her as different in that way; I just see her as a normal employee like everyone else, so…it's not something I walk around discussing. You know, I actually think that they [the other colleagues] have had the same experience as me – that she's independent – and we think it's really cool. She also does every type of exercise, running and stuff like that. She's more active than I am…almost. (…) She is very independent.

In other words, all three interviewees are saying that the colleagues with cerebral palsy are, in fact, perceived as different from the able-bodied colleagues. As illustrated by the quotations, the central issue is that whenever the sameness between colleagues is emphasized, it then contains an indirect acknowledgement of the fact that the disabled colleague is different. Lucy's story regarding her cousin who 'wasn't any different just because she was disabled' shows that it was precisely because the cousin was different that the family developed strategies to minimize her difference. In addition to Christopher comparing his offer of help to that given to 'an old lady', his description of himself as 'pleasantly surprised' (when realizing that he was 'able to treat his co-worker "like any other colleague without feeling guilty"') reveals that Christopher actually does perceive his colleague as different; otherwise, this statement would be redundant. Similarly, Peter expressed a degree of astonishment over the fact that his colleague was able to do normal, everyday things such as exercising and being 'independent', which presumably would not have been noted if he was discussing a colleague without disabilities. In other words, it does not make sense to discuss the mundane as something special unless you are, in fact, confronted with something different. Thus, there is a difference between a person with disabilities and other people doing something as ordinary as exercising.

In the following analysis, the narrative of sameness is once again challenged by the narrative of differently different in the reflections of a manager (Robert) in a private company. Robert considers the relation between 'treating equally' and 'treating differently' when answering a question regarding his first meeting with the employee with disabilities.

> Robert: My approach is that I don't treat him [the employee with disabilities] differently than anyone else, but then again, I do. However, as a rule, I'd rather not treat him differently than anyone else. Or conversely, you could say that the way in which I treat people the same is pretty much me treating them differently because everyone has special needs, and he has special needs that I try to support as a manager. And that is also what he has expressed that he'd like. He is very much aware of his condition and what it means for him. But, that said, he'd also love to be able to just work normally like everyone else. He just has some special conditions. He has tried to be in an ordinary job in an ordinary work organization and that was more than he could handle. So in that way, my task is to ensure that his working day is as ordinary as possible and that, in my opinion, is what we're working on.

In this quotation, it becomes clear just how important it is for Robert to treat his employee with disabilities the same as his able-bodied employees. He greatly emphasizes that by treating people differently, he actually treats them the same. Although the 'different but the same' narrative becomes apparent in Robert saying that 'everyone has special needs', his statement about how the employee with disabilities is unable to hold 'an ordinary job in an ordinary work organization' and that Robert thus tries to make his work day 'as ordinary as possible' reveals that the employee with cerebral palsy is, in fact, differently different because of his disability. He thus becomes the subject of a collegial and managerial practice driven by the ideal of an 'ordinary' working day.

Concluding discussion

The contribution of this article lies in its analyses of diversity issues in work organizations. The article shows how the values and ideals of sameness and equality in Scandinavia (Gullestad 1992; Larsen 2011) influence the ways in which able-bodied managers and employees talk about the work situations of their colleagues with cerebral palsy. The article found two related and interconnected narratives: (1) the visible difference of employees with cerebral palsy paradoxically made this group of employees the same as everyone else, who were also 'different' ('different but the same') and (2) the difference of employees with disabilities made them different from the rest ('differently different'). The paper's analysis thus illustrates how the Scandinavian 'big story' of sameness and equality is reflected in the 'little stories', or narratives by managers and colleagues when reflecting on the work situation of their colleague with cerebral palsy. The narrative 'different but the same' revealed how managers and colleagues emphasized the differences of all able-bodied people in an effort to establish the sameness of their colleague with disabilities and thus avoid jeopardizing the imagined (Mills 2000) equality and sameness of the work organization's members. This narrative was, however, challenged by a second narrative that emerged when – despite their efforts to establish the sameness of their colleague – the reflections of managers and colleagues revealed that they, in fact, did perceive their colleague with cerebral palsy as profoundly different from the ways in which the able-bodied colleagues were different ('differently different'). This second narrative revealed that having a visible disability is such an 'unavoidable present' (West and Zimmerman 2002) and such a different way of being different that it becomes nearly impossible to perceive the employee with disabilities as the same (even though the interviewees clearly tried to do so). By stating that employees with disabilities are similar to colleagues without disabilities while making associations to, for instance, the 'differences' of ordinary able-bodied employees, then these claims *both* display the unsettling nature of encountering a person with visible disabilities *and* relate unambiguously to the 'big story' of equality and sameness (see also Mik-Meyer 2016a).

Of course, the many 'little stories' of how disabilities influenced work life as captured in interviews (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) relate to a number of concrete factors (such as the particular organizational context of the work situation, the interview context, and the interviewed person's relation to the colleague with cerebral palsy) and will consequently vary. Nonetheless, all of these 'little stories' of how a disability impacts work illustrate the highly praised values of sameness and equality. These values turned out to be an integral part of how able-bodied managers and colleagues discussed the work situation of their co-worker with cerebral palsy. If the 'big story' in the work organizations is that all employees are basically the same and must be treated as such, then that raises the question of how the special situation of employees with cerebral palsy fits into this narrative. It is important to realize that the ideal of sameness was actually used by the able-bodied colleagues and managers as an argument for introducing special arrangements, thus making it clear that the employees with disabilities were, in fact, different. Special arrangements were therefore necessary for the employees with cerebral palsy to leave the positions as fundamentally different and to be included in the inclusive category of 'we are all different' in the work organizations.

The majority of managers reflected on how to navigate a professional context in which inclusion was an important organizational parameter by which one could show that the work place had diverse employees. This article thereby illustrates what one may call a modern managerial discourse, that is, the manner in which current managers and employees include diverse employees as the same and hence equal and thus indicators of successful human resource management. However, this article takes a critical position to the narrative of everyone being alike (or the same) because the interviews clearly illustrated that the employees with cerebral palsy were, in fact, also perceived as being fundamentally different. Therefore, the key point is not that there *is* a 'big story' of sameness reflected in the interviews but instead *how* this narrative appears and thereby reveals the ways in which able-bodied colleagues and managers experience the encounter with a colleague whom they perceive as fundamentally different. The relativity of what is considered 'normal' in work organizations shows us

that the employee with cerebral palsy is likely perceived as a special employee whose difference differs from all of the other ways of being different in the work organization. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the narrative regarding sameness is only meaningful when it is simultaneously recognized that the employee with cerebral palsy is, in fact, a different colleague. The sameness narrative in the interviews was possibly so strong and so prevalent because it precisely explains the encounter with a different colleague or employee.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Elsass Foundation [grant number 4677].

Notes on contributor

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 *Human Relations, Work, Employment & Society*, *Gender, Work & Organization*, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, *Social Theory and Health* and *Journal of Political Power*.

References

Alvesson, M. 2003. "Beyond Neopositivist, Romantics, and Localists: A Reflexive Approach to Interviews in Organizational Research." *Academy of Management Review* 28 (1): 13–33.

Balser, D. B. 2000. "Perceptions of On-the-job Discrimination and Employees with Disabilities." *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 12 (4): 179–197.

Barnes, C. 2000. "A Working Social Model? Disability, Work and Disability Politics in the 21st Century." *Critical Social Policy* 20 (4): 441–457.

Barnes, C., and G. Mercer. 2011. *Exploring Disability*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Campbell, F. K. 2009. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

De Los Reyes, P. 2000. "Diversity at Work: Paradoxes, Possibilities and Problems in the Swedish Discourse on Diversity." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 21 (2): 253–266.

Ellingsæter, A. L., and A. Leira. 2006. "Introduction: Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia." In *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States*, edited by A. L. Ellingsæter and A. Leira, 1–27. Bristol: Polity Press.

Foster, D., and V. Wass. 2012. "Disability in the Labour Market: An Exploration of Concepts of the Ideal Worker and Organisational Fit That Disadvantage Employees with Impairments." *Sociology* 47 (4): 705–721.

Fraser, R. T., K. Johnson, J. Hebert, I. Ajzen, J. Copeland, P. Brown, and F. Chan. 2010. "Understanding Employer's Hiring Intentions in Relation to Qualified Workers with Disabilities: Preliminary Findings." *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* 20 (4): 420–426.

Ghorashi, H., and I. Sabelis. 2013. "Juggling Difference and Sameness: Rethinking Strategies for Diversity in Organizations." *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 29 (1): 78–86.

Gubrium, J. F., and J. A. Holstein. 2009. *Analyzing Narrative Identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gullestad, M. 1992. *The Art of Social Relations: Essays on Culture, Social Action and Everyday Life in Modern Norway*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Gustafsson, J., J. P. Peralta, and B. Danermark. 2014. "The Employer's Perspective: Employment of People with Disabilities in Wage Subsidized Employments." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 16 (3): 249–266.

Hatmaker, D. M. 2013. "Engineering Identity: Gender and Professional Identity Negotiation among Women Engineers." *Gender, Work and Organization* 20 (4): 382–396.

Holmqvist, M. 2008. "Creating the Disabled Person: A Case Study of Recruitment to "Work-for-the-Disabled" Programs." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 10 (3): 191–207.

Kalonaityte, V. 2010. "The Case of Vanishing Borders: Theorizing Diversity Management as Internal Border Control." *Organization* 17 (1): 31–52.
Kulkarni, M., and R. Valk. 2010. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Two Views on Human Resource Practices for People with Disabilities." *IIMB Management Review* 22 (4): 137–146.
van Laer, K., and M. Janssens. 2011. "Ethnic Minority Professionals' Experiences with Subtle Discrimination in the Workplace." *Human Relations* 64 (9): 1203–1227.
Larsen, B. R. 2011. "Becoming Part of Welfare Scandinavia: Integration Through the Spatial Dispersal of Newly Arrived Refugees in Denmark." *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 37 (2): 333–350.
Lister, R. 2009. "Gender, Citizenship and Justice in the Nordic Welfare States: A View From the Outside." In *Gender Equality and Welfare Politics in Scandinavia: The Limits of Political Ambition?* edited by K. Melby, A. Ravn, and C. C. Wetterberg, 215–222. Bristol: Polity Press.
Luecking, R. G. 2008. "Emerging Employer Views of People with Disabilities and the Future of Job Development." *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 29 (1): 3–13.
Mamman, A. 1996. "A Diverse Employee in a Changing Workplace." *Organization Studies* 17 (3): 449–477.
Mandal, R., and S. O. Ose. 2015. "Social Responsibility at Company Level and Inclusion of Disabled Persons: The Case of Norway." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 17 (2): 167–187.
Michelsen, S. I., P. Uldall, A. M. T. Kejs, and M. Madsen. 2005. "Education and Employment Prospects in Cerebral Palsy." *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology* 47 (8): 511–517.
Mik-Meyer, N. 2015. "Gender and Disability: Feminising Male Employees with Visible Impairments in Danish Work Organisations." *Gender, Work & Organization* 22 (6): 579–595.
Mik-Meyer, N. 2016a. "Othering, Ableism and Disability: A Discursive Analysis of co-Workers" Construction of Colleagues with Visible Impairments." *Human Relations* 69 (6): 1341–1363.
Mik-Meyer, N. 2016b. "Disability and 'Care': Managers, Employees and Colleagues with Impairments Negotiating the Social Order of Disability." *Work, Employment & Society*. doi:10.1177/0950017015617677.
Mills, C. W. 2000. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Oliver, M. 2004. "The Social Model in Action: If I had a Hammer?" In *Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research*, edited by C. Barnes and G. Mercer, 18–31. Leeds: Disability Press.
Roulstone, A., and J. Williams. 2014. "Being Disabled, Being a Manager: 'Glass Partitions' and Conditional Identities in the Contemporary Workplace." *Disability & Society* 29 (1): 16–29.
Sharp, R., S. Franzway, J. Mills, and J. Gill. 2012. "Flawed Policy, Failed Politics? Challenging the Sexual Politics of Managing Diversity in Engineering Organizations." *Gender, Work & Organization* 19 (6): 555–572.
Swan, E. 2010. "Commodity Diversity: Smiling Faces as a Strategy of Containment." *Organization* 17 (1): 77–100.
Tomlinson, F., and C. Schwabenland. 2010. "Reconciling Competing Discourses of Diversity? The UK Non-profit Sector Between Social Justice and the Business Case." *Organization* 17 (1): 101–121.
Törnbom, M., J. Lundävl, A. Jesperson, S. K. Sunnerhagen, and G. Grimby. 2011. "Occupations and Means of Living in Adults with Cerebral Palsy or Meningomyelocele During two Decades in Sweden." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 13 (1): 21–35.
Unger, D. D. 2002. "Employers' Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities in the Workforce: Myths or Realities?" *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities* 17 (1): 2–10.
Vedeler, J. S., and S. Mossige. 2010. "Pathways into the Labour Market for Norwegians with Mobility Disabilities." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 12 (4): 257–271.
Vickers, M. 2012. "'For the Crime of Being Different … ': Multiple Sclerosis, Teams, and Stigmatisation at Work – Lessons From A Case Study." *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 24 (3): 177–195.
West, C., and D. H. Zimmerman. 2002. "Doing Gender." In *Doing Gender, Doing Difference*, edited by S. Fenstermaker and C. West, 3–24. New York: Routledge.
Zanoni, P. 2011. "Diversity in the Lean Automobile Factory: Doing Class Through Gender, Disability and Age." *Organization* 18 (1): 105–127.