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## **Disabling organizational spaces: Exploring the processes through which spatial environments disable employees with impairments**

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### **Abstract**

Adopting a Lefebvrian perspective that draws attention to the connection between space and power, this study aims to contribute to the organizational literature by offering an in-depth understanding of the processes through which organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments and contribute to the unequal power relations between disabled and nondisabled employees. Based on 65 interviews, it shows how organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments through disabling productivity, social inclusion, independence, and physical comfort and safety. A first contribution this allows this study to make is identifying the different aspects involved in the production of ableist organizational spaces and the way they are connected to the relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees. It shows how ableist organizational spaces are conceived in an ableist way, become dominated by ableist spatial practice and infuse lived experiences with ableism. Second, this study extends debates on disability in organizations by offering a spatial understanding of ableist notions of the ‘ideal employee’, the reproduction of ableist discourses, and embodied experiences of ableism in organizations. A third contribution this article makes is providing an understanding of the strategies employers and disabled employees use to (attempt to) manage ableist organizational spaces. It argues that as these

strategies mainly aim to secure productive participation, they do not address, or can even contribute to, other disabling processes. In this way, they not only reproduce relations of power between employers and disabled employees but also do not fundamentally challenge those between disabled and non-disabled employees.

## **Keywords**

Ableism, disability, inequality, Lefebvre, organizational space, power

## **Introduction**

Disabled individuals continue to be underrepresented in employment and to experience unequal opportunities when they are employed. This involves not only lesser career opportunities, an overrepresentation in precarious positions, but also a confrontation with different types of interpersonal discrimination (Beatty et al., 2019; Foster and Wass, 2013). Building on theoretical developments in the disability studies literature, the organizational literature has recently developed new and refined analyses of the processes involved in this (re)production of unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. These studies have particularly exposed the disabling role of the ableist design of jobs (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Randle and Hardy, 2017; Sang et al., 2016) and ableist discourses (e.g. Dobusch, 2017; Elraz, 2018; Mik-Meyer, 2016).

While these studies offer important contributions to our understanding of disability at work, they have paid little attention to one element that is recognized in broader disability studies as playing an important role in oppressing individuals with impairments: the disabling role of space (e.g. Feely, 2016; Freund, 2001; Imrie, 2014). Answering calls in organization studies (e.g. Williams and Mavin, 2012) and in the broader disability studies literature (e.g. Feely, 2016) for more attention to the connection between (organizational) space and

disability, this study aims to contribute to the organizational literature by offering an in-depth understanding of the processes through which organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments and contribute to the unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. To do so, it draws on a Lefebvrian approach to space (Lefebvre, 1991), which has recently been used to expose the role of space in power relations in the workplace (e.g. Dale, 2005; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015; Zhang and Spicer, 2014).

Drawing on 65 interviews with employees with impairments, this study offers an understanding of the different aspects involved in the production of ableist organizational spaces and the way they contribute to the unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees. Second, it extends current debates on disability in organizations by offering a spatial understanding of ableist job design, of ableist discourses and of embodied experiences of ableism. Finally, this study provides an understanding of the strategies employers and disabled employees use to manage ableist organizational spaces.

### **Relations of power between disabled and non-disabled individuals in disability studies and organization studies**

To understand the disadvantaged position of disabled employees, organization studies have in recent decade increasingly drawn on insights from the multi-disciplinary field of disability studies (Williams and Mavin, 2012). Arguably, this field's core theoretical basis is the social model of disability, which moved theorization on disability beyond individual and medical conceptualizations (Barnes, 2012; Oliver, 1996). Whereas such models understand disability as a direct result of biological or functional limitations of the impaired body, the social model proposes that disability is the result of the way society is structured, which causes individuals with impairments to become faced with barriers that disable them (Barnes, 2012; Goodley, 2014; Oliver, 1996; Thomas, 1999).

In recent years, disability scholars have started to extend and complement the social model's classic insights and its traditional historical materialist theorizing with feminist and poststructuralist theories (Goodley, 2014; Thomas, 2014). Focusing on the connection between discourse and power, they have interrogated the way disability is discursively constituted through a relation in which bodies with a certain set of (perceived) capabilities become deemed 'normal'. Disability is then produced through ableist ideas and practices that, presuming able-bodiedness, afford unacknowledged privileges to these bodily variations considered 'normal' and turn bodies designated as 'impaired' into a fundamentally inferior 'other' (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014; Shildrick, 2009). Scholars working in this tradition have further aimed to overcome the neglect of the body by the traditional social model (Hughes and Paterson, 1997; Reeve, 2012; Thomas, 1999) and drawn attention to the way impairments are both socially produced and experienced. Opening new debates on the ontological status of impairments, such scholars have argued that impairments are produced within specific social and political contexts through medical discourses marking certain bodily variations as so 'different' they become recognized as pathologies (Hughes and Paterson, 1997; Thomas, 1999, 2014). Moreover, attention to the body has enabled this stream of literature to better understand individuals' embodied experiences and impairment effects, or the restricting impact of bodily variations designated as impairments on individuals' lives and opportunities (Thomas, 1999, 2014).

Organization studies have started to increasingly draw on insights from disability studies to theorize the unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees, thereby complementing traditionally dominant, social-psychological approaches, which largely overlook the issue of power (Mik-Meyer, 2016). In this way, they have offered novel explanations for the way organizational processes contribute to disabled individuals' disadvantaged labour market position, exclusion from paid employment, and precarious

societal position. A first main theme in these studies is the way jobs and the organization of work are implicitly designed in an ableist way, around an ‘ideal employee’ who is able-bodied (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Randle and Hardy, 2017; Sang et al., 2016). Reflecting arguments in materialist disability studies (Barnes, 2012; Thomas, 2014), such studies argue that individuals with impairments become disabled as participation on the labour market requires them to perform jobs defined and designed ‘against’ their bodies in terms of (for instance) speed, flexibility and strength. In relation to these jobs, individuals with impairments become considered as lacking the capabilities considered ‘necessary for maximally productive workers’ (Harlan and Robert, 1998: 401), causing them to be seen as inferior employees by employers and to suffer negative career effects (Randle and Hardy, 2017; Sang et al., 2016). Connected to this topic are debates on workplace accommodations, through which those aspects of the organization of work that disable a particular employee with an impairment can become modified to better reflect his or her needs and capabilities (Foster, 2007; Nevala et al., 2015; Padkapayeva et al., 2017). However, studies show that despite legal obligations, employers often resist adapting the ableist organization of labour, thereby reproducing the unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees (Foster, 2007; Harlan and Robert, 1998).

Second, organization studies have exposed the disabling effect of ableist discourses. Studies adopting discursive approaches have specifically explored the existence and power effects of discourses producing employees with impairments as fundamentally different from, and inferior to, the ideal of able-bodiedness. This leads them to become constructed in the workplace as, for example, deviant, unproductive, in need of care or over-sensitive (e.g. Dobusch, 2017; Elraz, 2018; Jammaers et al., 2016; Mik-Meyer, 2016), which results in marginalization and threatens their professional identity and labour market position. Such studies have further highlighted how these discourses inform disabled employees’ identity

processes. They show how individuals can start incorporating ableist views in their self-identity or be forced to engage in extensive identity work in order to maintain a positive sense of self at work (Elraz, 2018).

### **The missing spatial understanding of disability in organizations**

One element that is largely missing in debates on disability in organizations is the role of organizational space – beyond the design of specific jobs – in contributing to the unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees. Nevertheless, there are important reasons to further study disability in organizations from a spatial perspective. First, a number of organization studies have provided empirical evidence of the disabling role of the broader organizational space. For example, in their study on disability in the film and television sector, Randle and Hardy (2017) describe, without offering a further in-depth analysis of the role of space, how one of the barriers disabling employees with impairments is the fact that work occurs at multiple different locations. The most extensive discussion of the disabling role of organizational space is found in a study by Newton et al. (2007), which offers a range of empirical examples of spatial elements disabling individuals with impairments. Mainly focusing on the issue of access to both buildings and work, they, for example, point to the potential disabling effect of malfunctioning lifts, the absence of good signage, or heavy doors. However, given its exploratory aim, this study mainly identifies disabling spatial elements, rather than theorizes the processes through which space contributes to unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees, or connects these findings to broader debates in the organizational literature.

Second, the need for such an exploration is supported by broader debates in the literature on disability, where scholars, especially from the fields of human geography, architecture and rehabilitation, have been more attentive to space (e.g. Feely, 2016; Freund,

2001; Gleeson, 1999; Hamraie, 2013; Imrie, 2014; Imrie and Hall, 2001; Kitchin, 1998; Nevala et al., 2015; Padkapayeva et al., 2017). Often focusing on public spaces and cities, scholars have exposed how spaces can disable individuals with impairments as they are designed in a way that reflects and privileges majority bodies (Hamraie, 2013; Imrie, 2014). Like in the study of Newton et al. (2007), most attention has gone to the issue of physical access (Gleeson, 1999; Hamraie, 2013), with studies showing how spaces can exclude people with impairments, segregate them from specific areas of social life and maintain the spatial dominance of non-impaired bodies. However, this literature has also exposed that even when they are formally accessible, spaces can be oppressive and disable individuals with impairments by making them feel different, marginalized and out-of-place (Freund, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Kitchin, 1998). This occurs as access is conditional, for example through ‘24-hours in advance’ reservation requirements for public transportation, or is enabled through retrofitting or additive design (Dolmage, 2016; Imrie and Hall, 2001). While such ex-post adaptations can ensure formal accessibility, they are also criticized for reflecting a problematic ‘separate but equal’ logic to disability and continuing to signal that bodily diversity is not truly valued and that disabled people are second-tier citizens (Dolmage, 2016; Imrie and Hall, 2001).

Despite the invaluable insights of this literature, disability scholars (e.g. Feely, 2016; Freund, 2001; Kitchin, 1998) continue to argue that both historical materialist and poststructuralist approaches in disability studies have paid insufficient attention to the disabling role of space. Calls are especially being made for more studies that go beyond a focus on access to, and exclusion from, spaces and offer an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of space, thereby focusing on how disability is produced ‘sometimes most powerfully by our uses of space’ (Dolmage, 2016: 103; Freund, 2001; Hamraie, 2013; Kitchin, 1998). Furthermore, while existing studies focusing on non-organizational spaces



might allow us to envision the general connection between space and disability at work, disability scholars (e.g. Reeve, 2002; Thomas, 1999), in line with the general idea of the social model, warn against assuming that disability operates in the same way regardless of the social setting in which it occurs. Understanding how space contributes to unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees therefore requires an exploration of the disabling role of space within the specific context of the workplace that captures the specificities of the sphere of work. This argument echoes Freund's (2001) call for in-depth explorations of disability within specific types of spaces, proposing that 'there is a need to look more closely at the material organisation of everyday life (e.g. work places)' (p. 691). Similar calls for more in-depth explorations of the connection between disability and the material spaces of organizations have also been made in the organizational literature (e.g. Williams and Mavin, 2012).

The aim of this article is to answer these calls for more attention to the connection between space and disability, and to contribute to the organizational literature by offering an in-depth understanding of the processes through which organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments and contribute to the unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. In this, we aim to go beyond exploring how space can disable access to work, and rather focus on the lived experience of individuals once they are employed in organizational spaces. To do so, we draw on the framework of Lefebvre (1991).

### **Organizational space and power**

In recent years, organization studies have shown an increasing interest in the topic of space (e.g. Dale, 2005; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). An important source of inspiration for this 'spatial turn' in organization studies has been Henri Lefebvre's (1991) book *The production of space*. In it, Lefebvre (1991) argues

that space ‘cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object’ (p. 73) but should rather be seen as ‘a means of control, and hence of domination, of power’ (p. 26).

To grasp the multifaceted nature of the production of space and its complex links to power, Lefebvre (1991) introduces a conceptual triad, consisting of three distinct, yet dialectically connected aspects of social space: representations of space, spatial practice and representational spaces. The first aspect, representations of space, highlights the way spaces are not conceived in a social vacuum, but are shaped by an existing political order, and more or less deliberately infused with specific logics and meanings (Dale, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). Spatial practice draws attention to the connection between the physicality of a space and the performances in it. It highlights how space, itself the result of past actions, ‘permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 73). This causes spaces to become dominated by specific behavioural customs and routines, which indicate the ‘competent’ way to perform that space (Dale, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015). Third, the idea of representational spaces refers to the way space inhabits individuals’ lived experiences. It highlights the way individuals experience and interpret space in their daily lives, and the link between individuals’ identities and the meanings engrained in, and assigned to, space (Dale, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015).

Reflecting Lefebvre’s (1991) focus on the dominance of ‘the space of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism’ (p. 57), studies empirically investigating the link between organizational space and power have mainly focused on the way spaces reproduce relations of power between management and employees. However, some studies have further highlighted the link between organizational space and gender relations (e.g. Tyler and Cohen, 2010; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015). For example, Tyler and Cohen (2010) show how organizational spaces materialize gender relations and impose particular identities onto female

employees (e.g. through indicating their Otherness). Similarly, Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) show an organizational space reproducing gender relations and forcing female junior diplomats to adopt a very masculine identity to symbolically distance themselves from the female administrative staff they share an open workspace with.

Despite this attention to relations of power between different social identity groups, the issue of disability has been overlooked in this literature. Given the lack of in-depth attention to space in organization studies on disability as well as the lack of attention to disability in studies on organizational space, the aim of this article is to offer an in-depth understanding of the processes through which organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments and contribute to the unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees.

## **Method**

This study draws on 65 in-depth interviews conducted in Flanders, Belgium, for two research projects on the careers and organizational experiences of employees with impairments. This study is based on interviews with employees with physical and/or sensory impairments, which are two types of impairment the Flemish government distinguishes when recognizing disability. While using such official classifications of impairment in the selection of our interviewees risks contributing to the reproduction and the naturalization of their binary thinking, we consider this, following Shildrick (2009), to be ‘both inevitable and appropriate’ and a ‘strategic necessity’ for ‘the contestation of ableist attitudes, values, and politics’ (p. 3). The group with physical impairments includes individuals officially classified as having certain limitations related to physical activities, mobility, dexterity, or stamina (e.g. individuals with neuromuscular disorders, spinal cord injuries, spina bifida, respiratory disorders or cerebral palsy) while the group with sensory impairments includes individuals

officially classified as having certain degrees of vision (e.g. individuals with cataract or glaucoma) or hearing loss (e.g. individuals with auditory neuropathy or Usher syndrome). Of the interviewees, about half were women and about half were men. At the time of the interview, they worked in a variety of managerial, professional, administrative, clerical and service jobs in the public and private sector. To protect their anonymity, the interviewees are given a pseudonym and the personal information we provide remains vague.

Potential interviewees were informed that the goal of the interviews was to get a detailed understanding of the career and work experiences of employees with impairments. Before the start of the interview, interviewees were (again) informed about the research goal, the research process and the protocols regarding the use of the interview material. Furthermore, they were asked for their permission to record the interview and informed they were free to share the type and amount of information they perceived to be relevant and felt comfortable with. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, which means that while a topic guide with specific questions was prepared, these were not strictly adhered to during the conversations. Rather, the interviews followed their own specific logic, which was strongly shaped by the interviewees, by the topics they introduced and by the pursuit of such emerging themes in their stories. At the start of the interview, the interviewees were asked to introduce themselves and provide some information on their educational background and their impairment. Next, the interviews focused on the interviewees' experiences on the labour market, which included discussions and questions on the following topics: the interviewees' career trajectories (e.g. can you describe the different steps in your career?); the impact of their impairment on their career trajectories (e.g. do you think your impairment impacted your job search? Why/why not?); their experiences of working in different organizations (e.g. how do you experience working in your current job/organization? Which elements have an impact on the way you experience your workplace?); their relations with co-workers and supervisors

(e.g. how would you describe your relationship with your co-workers?); the influence of organizational policies on their workplace experiences (e.g. have you ever asked for reasonable accommodations and how did this process unfold?); and the influence of the physical environment on their experiences (e.g. how do you experience the accessibility of your workplace?). The interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half, and were all audio-recorded and transcribed.

The analysis of the interviews followed a constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2008; Tracy, 2013), which combines the analytic approach of grounded theory with a social constructionist epistemology, and is based on an iterative dialogue between insights emerging from the empirical material and sensitizing concepts from the theoretical framework. The first step of the analysis involved an emic process of open coding, identifying fragments in which interviewees described the disabling effects of spaces on their activities and experiences as employees. In line with the Lefebvrian idea of space as subsuming objects, forms and the relations between them (Lefebvre, 1991), this process focused on all elements within organizations with a material dimension (e.g. buildings, furniture, machines, devices, technical and information technology (IT) infrastructure). To these fragments, we assigned first-order codes identifying both the spatial elements (e.g. room acoustics and interior) and their effect on interviewees (e.g. not being able to hear in meetings).

The second step of the analysis comprised of an iterative process involving an interpretative back and forth between the inductively identified first-order codes and sensitizing concepts from the theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2008; Tracy, 2013). Specifically, to capture the complex relationship between space and power, we used the different aspects of the Lefebvrian triad as sensitizing concepts. In terms of spatial practice, we focused on the effects of spatial elements on interviewees' 'spatial competence and performance' (Lefebvre, 1991: 38) or ability to adhere to the practice dominating a space.

This led to codes such as not adhering to spatial practice in terms of productivity or not adhering to spatial practice relating to social activities. In terms of representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1991), we focused on the effects of spatial elements on employees' identities, both in terms of the way they see themselves and the way they experience becoming seen by others. This led to codes such as a spatially effected sense of being less productive or a spatially effected sense of exclusion. In terms of representations of space (Lefebvre, 1991), we focused on the logic and norms engrained in the spatial elements disabling employees. This led to codes such as norms of distances to cover or acceptable stimuli.

While this process enabled us to tease out the different aspects of space involved in disabling interviewees, Lefebvre (1991) argues that these aspects of the spatial triad are always entangled in daily life and exist in dialectical relationships that need 'to be given utterance' (p. 46). Therefore, in line with other empirical studies adopting this approach (e.g. Dale, 2005; Zhang and Spicer, 2014), the third step of the analysis comprised of a process of constant comparison to 'give utterance to the relationships' between the codes relating to the different aspects of the spatial triad. This ultimately led to four codes, each capturing a different process through which space can disable employees with impairments and contribute to the unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. For instance, the codes relating to performances not adhering to spatial practice in terms of productivity and a spatially effected sense of being less productive were brought together under the code 'disabling productivity'. The other codes resulting from this process are 'disabling social inclusion', 'disabling independence' and 'disabling physical comfort and safety'. While these codes capture different processes through which organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments, they can, in practice, occur simultaneously or be interconnected.

## **Findings**

### *Spaces disabling productivity*

A first process through which spaces can disable employees with impairments is by disabling productivity. This occurs as spatial elements, conceived in an ableist way, disable the ability of employees with impairments to adhere to able-bodied spatial practice in terms of productivity, and lead to lived experiences of organizational space infused with a sense of lower productivity. More specifically, spaces can disable productivity through causing the performance of (particular tasks of) a job to be more difficult as well as through causing loss of time. In this way, organizational space leads to unequal opportunities to be (seen as) productive, thereby contributing to unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. An illustration of the way space causes the performance of (particular tasks of) a job to be more difficult is offered by the following quote by Sandra, a social assistant with a visual impairment:

I switched to working half-time because I felt it was hard to remain fully concentrated in an office where five or six people work together. [ . . . ] I mean, I'm able to concentrate, but still, because you don't see well, you hear the door opening and you want to know who's coming in. [ . . . ] My supervisor brought this up herself and said: 'Sandra, I don't know what's wrong, but I have the feeling that you have a harder time concentrating'. And that was true. Because in a short period of time, two or three people had joined our department, and they all had to sit in our office.

While she also described how a screen reading software formally enables her to do her job, her office space, conceived around an ableist norm of 'acceptable stimuli', causes Sandra to deviate from the standard of productivity set by able-bodied spatial practice in the same office. This, in turn, caused her lived experience of this space to become infused with a sense

of lesser productivity, especially since she also started becoming visible to her supervisor as less productive. This example further shows how her difference in productivity was not ‘resolved’ through an accommodation enabling her to better adhere to the able-bodied standard of productivity by addressing the ableist nature of space. Rather, it led to a change in the amount of hours Sandra works, thereby improving her ability to be productive during the hours she is present within this ableist space, but reducing her participation on the labour market. While Sandra’s story is an illustration of the way spaces can affect employees’ entire job performance, other interviewees described how spatial elements impact the productive performance of parts of their job. As the following quote from Dan, a public servant with a hearing impairment, illustrates, this often involves parts of their job employees perform outside of their regular office:

It [my impairment] is not that much of a problem at work. But you do have meetings. And then it’s not always easy to create circumstances in which I can hear everything perfectly. That’s quite crucial in a meeting. [. . .] Like when you have a meeting in this big room, with very large tables. [. . .] Tables standing far away from each other, that creates a distance, and that’s difficult in terms of hearing. [. . .] You also have these big lectures. I do register for them. When I arrive, I quickly know whether I can hear or not. If not, I return to the office. Although sometimes you’re sort of stuck. [. . .] I’ve already told my supervisor that it’s no use being there. The day’s boring as hell, and has no added value.

In this excerpt, Dan describes how he is generally able to perform his job productively, but how spaces conceived around the ableist norm of ‘sound levels’ deny him the ability to perform meetings and lectures as productively as his able-bodied colleagues. This not only



gives him a sense of a loss of productivity but also denies him the opportunity to attend relevant trainings and makes him visible to his supervisor as less productive and not adhering to able-bodied practice.

Second, spaces can disable productivity by leading to a loss of time. They thereby cause performances to take longer than able-bodied spatial practice, which generates a sense of being constantly ‘lagging behind’ able-bodied co-workers and, for example, having to compensate through working longer hours and (further) sacrificing one’s work-life balance. Dan’s interview also offered an illustration of this issue when he described having to invest additional working time in looking for appropriate meeting rooms, time his able-bodied colleagues can invest in performing their actual job. Another example of this was given by Leon, a public servant with a physical impairment using a wheelchair. While he is happy to have access to different reasonable accommodations enabling a generally productive performance, he still described how different small spatial elements recurrently lead him to lose time. This, in turn, makes feel less productive in relation to less time-consuming able-bodied spatial practice and drive him to attempt to compensate for this difference in productivity by working longer hours:

There are these things like, for example, that punch clock, it’s too high for me. [. . .] I know that I spend more time on that than someone else who doesn’t have this impairment. Not that it keeps me up at night, or that I have a real problem with that, but if that clock would have been placed slightly lower. . . [. . .] Every minute, all the time you lose because of these practical problems you have, that’s annoying. Either that’s your private time you lose, or your working time.

*Spaces disabling social inclusion*

A second process through which spaces can disable employees with impairments is by disabling social inclusion. This occurs as spatial elements, conceived in an ableist way, disable the ability of employees with impairments to adhere to able-bodied spatial practice related to social inclusion, and lead to lived experiences of space infused with a sense of lesser inclusion or even exclusion. More specifically, spaces can disable social inclusion through causing difficulties to participate in social activities and through causing segregation. In this way, organizational space leads to unequal opportunities to experience inclusion and to build professional networks and strong ties with co-workers, thereby contributing to unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. First, this occurs as the spatial practice of, for example, lunches, parties and team building events unfold in, and are shaped by spatial settings conceived around ableist norms, for example, of ‘standing’ (e.g. as drink receptions lack chairs and have high cocktail tables) or of ‘acceptable stimuli’ (e.g. as they occur in locations with noise and poor acoustics). An example of this was given by Ruth, a secretary with a physical impairment:

I can go to the cafeteria, that’s perfectly possible. But it’s a long walk and that prevents me from going there. There are days I eat alone in my office. Sometimes I prefer to stay here, in order not to waste my energy on that journey. Just quickly eat something and restore my energy. It’s not that far, but for me it costs too much energy to be like: ‘let’s get a quick bite to eat in the restaurant’. Then I’m like: ‘never mind’. Even though that means I don’t have contact with people from other departments, I prefer to stay here to avoid that trip.

This excerpt particularly illustrates three issues. First, it shows how a space’s layout conceived around an ableist norm of ‘distances to cover’ disables Ruth’s ability to adhere to

the spatial practice of lunching in the cafeteria. This spatial practice reflects her able-bodied co-workers' routine of 'having a quick bite to eat', a standard she has difficulties adhering to because of the outline of the space. Second, it highlights how different disabling processes can be connected, as this distance – a spatial element not connected to the specific design of her office or job – would disable Ruth's productivity if she went to lunch like her able-bodied co-workers. Third, it shows how faced with the choice between disabled productivity or disabled social inclusion, Ruth often opts for the choice that allows her to remain productive, although this leads to a sense of being less included, as well as disables her ability to build the type of social ties with co-workers and employees from other departments that can be important for career success.

Second, organizational spaces can disable the social inclusion of employees with impairments by causing segregation from their co-workers. This often involves reasonable accommodations that force them to perform a space in a segregated way or remove them from spaces where they are less productive. An example of this is the permission to work from home rather than from an ableist organizational space. This, however, also disables their ability to participate in the spatial practice of informal organizational life, leaving them feeling less included and denying them equal opportunities to build strong relations with their co-workers. An illustration of this process was given by Dirk, who is an administrative staffer with a visual impairment. He discussed how he was unable to adhere to able-bodied productive practice in a shared office conceived around an ableist norm of 'lighting'. As a reasonable accommodation, he was moved to his own, darkened workspace, which enables his productivity yet disables his social inclusion. While his able-bodied co-workers are enabled by their shared work space to enjoy inclusion and participate in the spatial practice of informal organizational life, Dirk experiences how his spatial distance reinforces his social distance to them:

I sit here, behind the corner. In a dark spot. Everyone says: ‘wow, this is dark’, but for me, that’s perfect. The darker, the better I can see my screen. They put me here, way in the back, in a corner where I don’t see or hear anyone. It’s a bit lonesome. [. . .] I have less contact with my co-workers, because they’re located downstairs. In this hallway, there are some people, but not that many. [. . .] So because I’m not in their midst, over time, the threshold gets bigger and bigger.

### *Spaces disabling independence*

A third process through which spaces can disable employees with impairments is by disabling independence. This occurs as spatial elements, conceived in an ableist way, disable the ability of employees with impairments to adhere to able-bodied spatial practice in terms of independence and lead to lived experiences of space infused with a sense of dependence and even humiliation. Specifically, spaces can disable independence through causing dependence to perform activities related to basic needs, and through causing dependence to perform one’s job. In this way, organizational space leads to unequal opportunities to be (seen as) independent and to not be (seen as) burdening co-workers, thereby contributing to unequal power relations between disabled and nondisabled employees. First, employees’ ability to independently perform activities such as eating, drinking or going to the bathroom can become disabled by spatial elements, such as appliances, vending machines or toilets, that are conceived around ableist norms, for example, of ‘standing’ or ‘processing visual information’. An illustration of this process was given by Leander, a staff member with a physical impairment:

You know what the most unpleasant thing is? You're in a meeting and you have to go to the bathroom. And oh yeah, the bathroom is on the first floor. Then you have to interrupt the meeting and ask: 'excuse me sir, is there someone willing to help me up the stairs?' That's unpleasant. It happened to me last week. I really had to go to the bathroom, and the meeting was about to end. But new points kept being raised, and I'm thinking: 'I'll wait some more'. Until I realized: 'I can't hold it anymore, I'll get an accident'.

This excerpt shows how spaces conceived around the ableist norm of 'using stairs' cause Leander to deviate from the able-bodied practice of going to the bathroom independently. While he desperately attempted not to make himself visible to attendees of the meeting as requiring help, he was ultimately forced into an unequal and humiliating relation of dependence with his able-bodied co-workers, who are enabled to go to the bathroom independently.

Second, spaces can also make employees dependent on their co-workers to perform parts of their job, causing them to have to enter into a relation of dependence in order to attempt to adhere to productive practice. An illustration of this is given by Jim, a public servant with a physical impairment using a wheelchair:

You shouldn't be naive and say: 'in a work context with reasonable accommodations, there is no disability'. [. . .] Like one photocopier is more accessible than the other. [. . .] For these small things, I have to rely on my colleagues. [. . .] I mean you can always find someone at the photocopier to make a copy. [. . .] You do pay attention to not always asking the same colleague, and asking someone else once in a while. In that way, you don't become too much of a burden on one co-worker, you know.

This excerpt shows how Jim, despite reasonable accommodations allowing him to be productive, is unable to perform parts of his job independently due to spatial elements conceived around the ableist norm of ‘standing’. This infuses the lived experience of space with a sense of having to depend on his able-bodied co-workers, in relation to whose independent performance of space he risks becoming visible as a burden. A similar example was given by Mary-Jane, a sales representative with a visual impairment, who described her independence being disabled by computers and other devices that are designed around the ableist norm of ‘processing visual information’ and that are not compatible with her braille reader:

In cases like that, you need a colleague explaining it to you, and telling you step by step what you have to do. [. . .] You really need co-workers who are willing to grease their elbows to explain things to you. [. . .] It’s hard, because you want to perform optimally like everyone else, and you prefer not to admit you’re faced with certain difficulties. But when you start looking for a solution yourself, it takes you 10 times longer than if you ask for help. [. . .] You want to do everything on your own, and I have to say, to be happy in your job, it’s nicer if you can do it all on your own. For me at least. Because otherwise, you start feeling dependent and not really useful.

This story again highlights the potential connection between productivity and other disabling processes. While her able-bodied co-workers are enabled to perform their job independently, spatial elements make it impossible for Mary-Jane to perform her job both productively and independently. Although this causes her to feel less satisfied at work, she feels forced into a relation of dependence in order to attempt to adhere to able-bodied standards of productive practice.

### *Spaces disabling physical comfort and safety*

A fourth process through which spaces can disable employees with impairments is by disabling physical comfort and safety. This occurs as spatial elements, conceived in an ableist way, disable the ability of employees with impairments to adhere to able-bodied spatial practice in a way that is physically comfortable and safe, and lead to lived experiences of space infused with a sense of physical discomfort, insecurity and unsafety. More specifically, spaces can disable physical comfort and safety through causing physical suffering or fear for one's health, and through causing an evolution in one's impairment. In this way, organizational space leads to unequal opportunities to experience a sense of comfort and safety and to avoid bodily harm, thereby contributing to unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. Some examples of the way spaces can cause physical suffering or fear for one's health were given by Yasmine, a public servant with a physical impairment. She described how her workspace and its emergency escapes, conceived around the ableist norm of 'using stairs', make her fear that she will have a lower chance of surviving a fire than her able-bodied colleagues, who can engage in the spatial practice of walking outside when the fire alarm goes off. She further described the role of spatial elements conceived in an ableist way in making her switch from working with crutches to working in a wheelchair:

The risk of falling was too big. In your wheelchair, the risk of accidents is a lot smaller. [. . .] Doors were a real problem, you got stuck between them. Or elevators. There are a lot of elevators that close really fast. When you're using crutches, try keeping your balance when they're going to hit you. [. . .] 'We're much happier now, because you're not going to fall anymore', that's what co-workers said. [. . .] I have to

get an operation on my shoulder, a strained ligament. [. . .] And then you're thinking like: 'I am able to work'. That's not a problem. I have someone driving me and dropping me off. But because of the carpet, I'm thinking: 'will that be possible?' Because riding on it is really demanding, and then it might get strained again.

In this fragment, Yasmine describes how spatial elements, conceived around able-bodied norms of 'speed' and 'stability', caused her to feel insecure and to become visible as in danger as she attempted to adhere to spatial practice while using crutches. Therefore, she decided to adapt herself to ableist space in order to be able to perform it more safely. However, because of the carpet in the office, conceived around the ableist norm of 'walking', her performance of space remains painful and her lived experience remains infused with insecurity about her future. Nevertheless, she decides to take the risk in order to be able to continue to be active on the labour market, which is supported by reasonable accommodations allowing her to perform her job productively, although not safely.

Second, spaces can disable physical comfort and safety through causing the performance of that space to lead to an evolution in one's impairment, thereby broadening the difference between one's body and that of able-bodied employees, and endangering one's future ability to work. An illustration of this was given by Pauline, an administrative staffer with a visual impairment:

That program, the colour contrast, that wasn't compatible with my enlargement software. It didn't work. I couldn't read that. [. . .] And during that thing with that program, my supervisor kept saying: 'Pauline, you should really try harder'. [. . .] Until one day, I remember the day, I just couldn't take it anymore. I was sitting at my desk with painkillers next to me. So I went to the doctor right after work. [. . .] And as



it turns out, it's because of that program that my vision started to deteriorate even faster.

This illustration shows how spatial elements conceived in an ableist way, such as around an able-bodied norm of 'processing visual information', can cause the performance of a space to affect one's impairment. It further highlights a connection to productivity, as Pauline lost part of her vision in an attempt to adhere to productive practice and conform to pressures to perform as productively as her co-workers. A similar example of this was given by, Jane, an employment counsellor with a visual and hearing impairment, working in an office conceived around an ableist norm of 'acceptable stimuli' and dominated by the spatial practice of walking around and making calls. While she was given the reasonable accommodation of choosing a spot in the office where her productive performance was impacted least, her lived experience of that space continued to be dominated by discomfort and ultimately led to the worsening of her impairment:

I've always had this ear problem. But it got worse due to this change in environment. We now work in this landscape office. And I'm really impacted by my colleagues, people who walk around, especially telephones, conversations going on. I'm lucky, they try to accommodate me. They allowed me to pick my own place to minimize the impact. But I'm still suffering from it. [. . .] So these hearing problems really flared up by working in this place.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this article was to offer an in-depth understanding of the processes through which organizational spaces can disable employees with impairments and contribute to the unequal

power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. Doing so, we make three contributions to the organizational literature.

### *The production of ableist organizational spaces*

First, while previous organizational studies (e.g. Dale, 2005; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Tyler and Cohen, 2010; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015) have argued that organizational space can reproduce class and gender relations, this study's first contribution to the organizational literature is conceptualizing ableist organizational spaces and their connection to power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees. Drawing on the Lefebvrian (1991) triad, we define ableist organizational spaces as conceived in an ableist way, dominated by ableist spatial practice and infusing lived experiences with ableism.

A first aspect is ableist representations of organizational space. In line with the idea of spaces generally designed for 'normal' bodies (Hamraie, 2013; Imrie, 2014), it captures the way organizational spaces (e.g. the outline of buildings, the characteristics of rooms or the devices in them) are conceived in an ableist way (Campbell, 2009; Williams and Mavin, 2012) and infused with ableist norms on the use of the body (e.g. of standing or distances to cover) and on sensory stimuli (e.g. of processing visual information or acceptable stimuli). In this way, they are conceived in a way that presumes that the workforce is and will be able-bodied, thereby reflecting unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled individuals on the labour market. A second aspect involved in the production of ableist organizational spaces is ableist spatial practice. While disability studies have paid much attention to the way spaces exclude individuals with impairments or restrict their activities (Gleeson, 1999; Hamraie, 2013; Newton et al., 2007), this aspect captures the way space 'commands bodies, prescribing or proscribing gestures' (Lefebvre, 1991: 143). It highlights the way ableist organizational space enables, and becomes dominated by, a routine employee

practice that reflects and normalizes the way able-bodied employees can, and unconsciously do, interact with a space designed ‘for them’. This contributes to unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees, as this able-bodied spatial practice serves as the standard of ‘normal’ organizational behaviour against which all organizational performances are judged and in relation to which disabled employees’ performances come to be seen as ‘different’. A third aspect involved in the production of ableist organizational spaces is ableist representational spaces, capturing the way spaces infuse employees’ lived experience with ableism (Campbell, 2009; Williams and Mavin, 2012). It thereby highlights the way space can contribute to unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees by instilling the former’s lived experience of the workplace with a sense of otherness and inferiority – through challenging their professional worth, inclusion, independence, and physical comfort and safety – while affording the latter a sense of normality.

#### *A spatial understanding of organizational debates on disability*

Second, through identifying the different aspects constituting ableist organizational spaces, this study extends debates on unequal power relations in organizational disability studies by offering a spatial understanding of ableist notions of the ‘ideal employee’, the reproduction of ableist discourses, and embodied experiences of ableism in organizations.

First, previous studies have shown how jobs and work processes designed around an able-bodied ‘ideal employee’ contribute to unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees by preventing the former from being (seen as) productive (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Randle and Hardy, 2017; Sang et al., 2016). Despite their focus on ‘ordinary arrangements that structure our work days and work lives’ (Harlan and Robert, 1998: 400), these studies have largely overlooked how work lives are

structured not only by work processes but also by spaces. This study offers a spatial understanding of able-bodied notions of the ‘ideal employee’ by showing how such notions can become embedded in, and operate through, all elements of organizational spaces. In doing so, it extends the insights from previous studies (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Randle and Hardy, 2017; Sang et al., 2016) in two ways. First, it shows that every aspect of an organizational space, and not just the design of jobs, can disable the productivity of employees with impairments and cause them to deviate from productive practice. Second, it shows that ableist notions of ‘ideal employees’ not only affect productivity and not only shape organizational spatial practice that is directly related to the performance of one’s job. Rather, these notions can disable employees with impairments and threaten their labour market position through affecting every aspect of their working life, including their work-life balance, inclusion and social ties with co-workers, independence and physical comfort and safety.

Second, discursive organizational studies (e.g. Dobusch, 2017; Elraz, 2018; Jammaers et al., 2016; Mik-Meyer, 2016) have argued that ableist discourses maintain power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees through the way they produce the former as, for example, deviant, unproductive, in need of care or over-sensitive. While exposing their existence and power effects, discursive approaches have tended to portray these ableist discourses as all-embracing, ever present and overly ‘muscular’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Feely, 2016), thereby implying they are more or less constantly defining and disabling employees with impairments (Dobusch, 2017). While some studies (e.g. Mik-Meyer, 2016) have highlighted the need to acknowledge the role of coworkers in the way ableist discourses are ‘reproduced and maintained’ (p. 1342), this study shows how ableist organizational spaces and the practice occurring in them can play a similar role. They are involved in reproducing, maintaining and affecting the saliency of the types of ableist discourses identified in previous

studies by making employees with impairments visible, in line with ableist discourses, as fundamentally different from able-bodied employees, and as less productive, less included, dependent, insecure or unsafe. This shows how understanding the workings of ableist discourses in the workplace requires attention to the relation between employee bodies and organizational spaces, as this relation can affect the degree to which ableist discourses become salient, maintained and reproduced, come to shape professional identities, and are potentially mobilized by co-workers and managers to marginalize and exclude employees with impairments.

Third, through its focus on ableist spatial practice and ableist representational spaces, this study offers a spatial understanding of embodied experiences of ableism in organizations. In doing so, it not only addresses calls in organization studies on disability (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Williams and Mavin, 2012) but also in disability studies in general (e.g. Thomas, 1999, 2014) for attention to the overlooked psycho-emotional and corporeal dimensions of living and working with an impairment. First, reflecting the idea of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2012), this study shows how ableist organizational spaces can lead to feelings of exclusion, dependence, humiliation and insecurity among disabled employees, and therefore contribute to undermining their professional identity and job satisfaction. While Reeve's (2012) discussion of psycho-emotional disablism focuses on the psycho-emotional consequences of being confronted with structural barriers, discrimination and disparaging looks, jokes or comments, this study also highlights the role of ableist spatial practice. Specifically, we argue that both the ableist design of spaces itself and the confrontation with, and attempts to adhere to, the performance by able-bodied co-workers of ableist spatial practice can have psycho-emotional consequences. Although this able-bodied performance enabled by space, unlike the discriminatory acts, comments, looks or jokes described by Reeve (2012), does not disable employees with impairments by directly targeting them, it still

confronts them with the privilege associated with able-bodiedness and with the way they are disabled to engage in similar performances as able-bodied employees. Second, reflecting the classic argument by Abberley (1987) on the socio-economic origins of impairment, this study shows the role of contemporary ableist organizational spaces in producing not only goods and services but also impairments and impairment effects (e.g. pain and fatigue; Thomas, 1999; Williams and Mavin, 2012). From a spatial perspective, this occurs through an interaction between bodies and space, and between bodies and the ableist spatial practice to which employees with impairments have to attempt to adhere. In this way, ableist organizational spaces can contribute to maintaining the unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees by further widening the differences between their bodies and between the ways these can function at work.

#### *The management of ableist organizational spaces by employers and disabled employees*

A third contribution this article makes is providing an understanding of the strategies employers and disabled employees use to (attempt to) manage ableist organizational spaces. This study shows how these are not primarily aimed at fundamentally creating an enabling environment, or an environment which not only guarantees access, but full participation on equal terms (Gleeson, 1999). Rather, they tend to be aimed at securing a specific type of participation: productive participation. We argue that the use of these specific strategies reflects not only a general neoliberal ideology (Goodley, 2014), which subjugates all elements of human existence to a competitive logic primarily valuing economic performance, but also the specific nature of the employment relation (Foster, 2007; Harlan and Robert, 1998), defined by a power inequality between the employer and the employee.

This study shows that the main way in which employers address the processes through which ableist organizational spaces disable employees with impairments is through

reasonable accommodations. While most debates on reasonable accommodations in the workplace focus on the reason why employees often do not have access to them (Foster, 2007; Harlan and Robert, 1998), our study exposes another problem. In line with critiques of retrofitting and additive design (e.g. Dolmage, 2016; Imrie and Hall, 2001), it shows how they often fail to fundamentally address the ableist nature of workspaces. While studies on public spaces have criticized retrofitting for involving stigmatizing fixes that signify that bodily diversity is not truly valued (Dolmage, 2016), we argue that in the workplace, reasonable accommodations are designed to mainly value one aspect of disabled employees: their productivity. They thereby reflect a neoliberal logic (Goodley, 2014), focused on making individuals productive and employable, as well as the interest of the employer (Foster and Wass, 2013; Harlan and Robert, 1998), which is to extract maximum value from their employees with impairments. While doing so, reasonable accommodations often do not address, and can even contribute to, other processes through which spaces disable employees with impairments, but which do not so strongly affect the value of that employee to the employer. They thereby not only reproduce power relations between the employer and the disabled employee but also do not fundamentally address unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled employees.

Answering calls for a better insight in the lived experience of individuals with impairments within specific spaces (Dolmage, 2016; Freund, 2001; Hamraie, 2013), this article further contributes to our understanding of the strategies disabled employees themselves use to manage ableist organizational spaces. Equally reflecting a neoliberal ethos (Goodley, 2014), this study shows that these strategies often mainly involve adapting themselves and their behaviour to ableist organizational spaces in order to protect their productivity and labour market participation. While such efforts might allow them to conform to the productivity demands of the employer and maximize their value in the employment

relation, it can involve sacrificing their social inclusion, independence and even physical comfort and safety. In other words, disabled employees themselves often equally focus their management of ableist organizational spaces primarily on securing a form of productive participation, rather than on full and equal participation. However, career success on the neoliberal labour market also depends on the accumulation of social capital, the showcasing of independence and the maintenance of fitness to work (Goodley, 2014). This strategy therefore not only maintains the relation of power with their employer but also does not necessarily fundamentally change their position of power in relation to non-disabled employees, who can enjoy a fuller participation in ableist organizational spaces.

#### *Avenues for future research*

This study has a number of limitations, which in turn provide avenues for future research. First, while this study draws on interviews with employees with a wide variety of different impairments, the sample does not include employees with mental or psychological impairments. Especially because these groups are often overlooked in organizational research on disability (Elraz, 2018; Sang et al., 2016), it seems particularly important for future research to investigate their experiences, as well as those of others with hidden impairments, with the disabling effects of organizational spaces. Second, while we deduced ableist norms infusing spaces from the interviewees' experiences, it was not possible to directly analyse the process of conception of their workspaces. In line with other studies on space (e.g. Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015; Zhang and Spicer, 2014), future research on ableist organizational spaces could adopt a more ethnographic case study approach focusing on both the design and use of a space. Finally, it seems especially important for future studies to empirically examine possible spatial interventions to fundamentally change the ableist nature



of organizational space. While studies on disability at work often argue for the redesign of jobs or the creation of a disability-friendly organizational cultures (e.g. Foster and Wass, 2013; Sang et al., 2016), this study points to the need for spatial interventions aimed at producing non-ableist organizational spaces, that are conceived around norms that embrace all possible bodies and capabilities, can become dominated by a spatial practice that all employees can adhere to equally, and that infuse the lived experience of all employees in an equally positive way. Without such spatial transformations, it will be impossible to challenge unequal relations of power between disabled and non-disabled employees, as a ‘revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 54).

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