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## **On ableism and anthropocentrism: a canine perspective on the workplace inclusion of disabled people**

### **Abstract**

Despite growing attention for how disabled people become Othered in organizational settings and similar scholarly interest in the treatment of non-humans at work, no analysis so far has focused on the potential double marginalization that takes place when disabled people go to work with their service animal. In filling this void, this study draws attention to the embodied entanglement of ‘humanimal’ in a number of organizations where animals are unexpected. The study argues that the spatial, discursive and affective treatment of service dogs operates as a proxy for the in/exclusion of employees with mobility and visual impairments. This way, processes of ableism become masked as subtle and indirect performances towards non-human Others. Contributions are made towards several literatures by introducing the idea of a ‘proxy’ to help understand the different modes of peripheral inclusion of disabled employees via their legally accepted service animals, by bringing in the role of affect in workplace disablement, and finally by taking animal labour more seriously.

**Keywords:** ableism; anthropocentrism; peripheral inclusion; disability; human-animal relationships at work; care; office dogs; subtle discrimination; humanimal; animal labour; service animal

### **Introduction**

Management and organizations, as well as the study thereof, have historically privileged the experiences of humans over non-humans and able-bodied over disabled<sup>1</sup> people. Such marginalization is worrisome considering the co-existence and co-dependence of human and nonhuman animals in many workplaces today (Hamilton and Taylor, 2013; Sayer, 2016), and the fact that over 1 billion people are estimated to live with some form of disability, making up a large part of the labour force (World Health Organization, 2020). The underrepresentation of both animals and disabled people in research is problematic as they limit the potential of organizations to engage with contemporary problems, thereby replicating and perpetuating binaries that exclude a wide variety of human and non-human Others. Evidence of such exclusion abounds, with numerous incidents of animal cruelty performed by organizations on the one hand (Coulter and Fitzgerald, 2019), and statistics on the other hand showing disabled people are only half as often employed on average compared to their able-bodied peers, with little improvement over the years (Geiger et al., 2017).

Recently, critical management scholars have shown interest in how anthropocentrism as well as ableism influence the daily organization of work, yet never simultaneously. Studies on ableism, defined as ‘a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human’ (Campbell, 2001: 44), have drawn attention to the discursive and/or material practices (e.g. Dobusch, 2017; Jammaers et al., 2019; Sang et al., 2016; Van Laer et al., 2020; Williams and Mavin, 2012) through which people are sorted, categorized and labelled either as able-bodied or disabled in the workplace. Inspired by post-structuralism, such a lens allows exploring how, even despite formal inclusion of diverse workers through targeted diversity policies (Rennstam and Sullivan, 2018; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011), subtle persistent processes reaffirm the primacy of able-bodiedness over disability whilst disabled people become cast as

‘different’ from the ideal worker (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021; Mik-Meyer, 2016; Sang et al., 2016).

Studies on anthropocentrism, defined as the pervasive tendency ‘to order the value of lives in a hierarchical manner’ in which ‘inevitably placing ourselves at the top and other beings closer to us in proportion to the resemblance between them and ourselves’ (Singer, 1993: 105 cited in Labatut et al., 2016) have similarly gained ground in the study of management and organizations in recent times. Although they remain rare (Dashper, 2020; Labatut et al., 2016), a few critical studies investigate organizational contexts in which humans care for or fail to care for animals and in which animals are treated as commodity (e.g. Clarke and Knights, 2018; Hamilton and McCabe, 2016; Holloway et al., 2014). Rarer are studies on organizations where animals are represented as agentic labourers (O’Doherty, 2016). Dogs especially have been a key subject of such inquiries, for instance by looking at therapy dogs on campus (Charles and Wolkowitz, 2019), or in law enforcement (Cunha et al., 2019; Knight and Sang, 2020). Dogs thus provide humans, and humans provide dogs with ‘significant otherness’ (Skoglund and Redmalm, 2016) in a wide variety of organizational settings.

In this study, the focus lies on the inclusion of service dogs accompanying disabled people in the workplace. A recent literature review on service animals at work reveals the great importance of such animals, yet finds that allergies, phobias and workflow disruptions endanger the organizational support of canine<sup>2</sup> presence (Hunter et al., 2019). The aim here is to ‘dig deeper’ and align with recent claims that dominance of humans over animals and their relegation to inferior other is analogous to the way humans repress other humans that are deemed ‘too’ different (Clarke and Knights, 2018; Taylor and Fraser, 2019). Through interviews, photographs and observations of eight service dog-disabled employee pairs in different workplaces, the following questions are examined: How are service dogs in/excluded in the organizations under study? With what effects for the in/exclusion of the disabled employee?’ This study adds to debates on workplace diversity by exposing the subtle workings of ableist normativity through a non-human ‘proxy’, outlining different modes of inclusion (Rennstam and Sullivan, 2018) and extending the realm of the social order beyond (human) language (Goodley et al., 2018; Janssens and Steyaert, 2019). In theorizing ableism and anthropocentrism as related mechanisms of speciesism, this study answers the call by critical animal scholars to take animal labour more seriously thereby challenging unhelpful binaries (O’Doherty, 2016; Sayers et al., 2019).

## **Theory**

### *Ableism in organizational theory and practice*

Even if disability is still often excluded from debates on diversity in the workplace that privilege gender, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation issues, the topic of workplace inclusion of disabled people has gained researchers’ and practitioners’ attention over the last two decades (Beatty et al., 2019). Several scholars have pointed out the nature of exclusion, evidencing the persistence of ability based inequality through several ‘disability gaps’ such as employment gaps (Geiger et al., 2017), pay gaps (Kruse et al., 2018), temporary and part-time contracts (Pagán, 2012), segregation into low-quality work and certain occupations (Maroto and Pettinicchio, 2014), lower job and pay satisfaction (Shantz et al., 2018), lower performance evaluations (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008), underemployment (Konrad et al., 2013) and ill-treatment (Fevre et al., 2013). Others have focused their efforts on mapping out the underlying reasons for such exclusion, ranging from stigma

(McLaughlin et al., 2004) and the denial of reasonable accommodation (Baldrige and Swift, 2016; Harlan and Robert, 1998) to hostile corporate cultures (Schur et al., 2009).

Recently, some critical scholars have turned to the lens of ableism (Campbell, 2009; Williams and Mavin, 2012) to further problematize the ways in which work is organized around able-bodied norms and thereby contributes to the exclusion of disabled people, similar to the working of other ‘-isms’. Founded on a binary, mutually constitutive relation of dis/ability, ableism provides ‘the layout, the blueprint for the scaling and marking of bodies and the ordering of their terms of relation’ (Campbell, 2009: 6). As such it provides management with a powerful normative principle through which discursive (e.g. Dobusch, 2017; Jammaers et al. 2016; Mik-Meyer, 2016) as well as material practices are organized (Foster and Wass, 2013; Jammaers et al., 2019; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021; Sang et al., 2016; Scholz and Ingold, 2020; Van Laer et al., 2020) in ways that (un)intentionally disadvantage the careers of disabled people. Inspired by post-structuralism, such lens highlights the disciplinary role of a binary structured language reaffirming the primacy of able-bodiedness over disability (Jammaers et al., 2019). It helps shed light on how even disabled workers who are formally included through targeted diversity and disability policies in the workplace, can experience barriers through subtle processes through which they become cast as ‘different’ from the ideal worker (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021; Sang et al., 2016). However, more research is necessary to investigate how this arbitrary sorting process works as a symbolic form of violence (Jammaers et al., 2019) which remains unnoticed by many, including disabled people themselves whose competences are undermined, career aspirations curbed and whose positive (work) identity is under threat (Baldrige and Kulkarni, 2017; Elraz, 2018; Jammaers et al., 2016; Jammaers and Williams, 2020; Kulkarni, 2019).

In an attempt to further advance knowledge on the way ‘diverse’ people who are formally included can still be subtly excluded from full participation in organizational life, Rennstam and Sullivan (2018) argue that research should be attentive to how experiences of ‘subtle ostracism’ caused by certain attitudes and behaviours like joking or awkward silences around Otherness turn true inclusion into an unrealized ideal. They use the ‘peripheral inclusion’ concept to indicate how inclusion, in contexts where complete exclusion is highly unlikely, works as ‘a fragile and dynamic process’ characterized by a simultaneous coexistence of exclusionary and inclusionary pressures from different stakeholders. As this paper turns to the empirical case of formally included disabled employees and their legally included service dogs, the focus lies on degrees and modes of inclusion (‘how included are they’ and ‘how are they included’) (Ashcraft et al., 2012; Ely and Thomas, 2001; Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Rennstam and Sullivan, 2018), aiming to distinguish varieties of ableism across organizations (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021). To analyse such processes, an ableism lens is combined with a posthumanist lens.

#### *Anthropocentrism in organizational theory and practice*

A recent claim states that human-animal interaction remains noticeable by its absence in organization studies with a better chance of finding them in sociology, geography or science studies (Dashper, 2020). Exceptions to this rule are studies that bring animals into organizational theory focusing on contexts in which humans care for animals, such as veterinary clinics and animal shelters (Clarke and Knights, 2018; Hamilton and Taylor, 2012) or in which humans fail to care, such as slaughter houses or animal shelters (Coulter and Fitzgerald, 2019; Hamilton and McCabe, 2016). In addition, some recent studies focus on human-animal interactions in the context of farming, sports and tourism (Dashper, 2020; Holloway et al., 2014). Yet the overall dearth of

research in organization studies that engages with the issue of ‘organizing animals’ is problematic, as is the rare treatment of animals as ‘participants in organizations in more ethically grounded terms’ (Satama and Huopainen, 2019: 362).

Organizations in which animals are not key to the business have only recently received attention from researchers. One recent study is quite remarkable in this sense. It is the one by O’Doherty (2016) about a cat in an airport organization. Here the author develops a ‘feline politics’ that questions common dualism found in organization theory such as object/subject, control/resistance and symbolic/material. The article asks its readers to ‘consider the possibility that some forms of politics in organization are neither simply human or non-human’ (O’Doherty, 2016: 411). The cat is not reduced to a symbol for the organization, but represented as an active participant thereof. In fact, it was the animal who ‘generated the greatest amount of excitement’ among customers and became extremely celebrated by employees who overloaded him with cards and gifts, not simply as the result of ‘sentimental attachment’, but as a way for workers to ridicule ‘the pretensions to power’ of senior management and to protest the decline of the previous family culture in favour of more hierarchy (O’Doherty, 2016: 417-418).

Other settings in which animals are regarded as active labourers are the police where dogs are used to control or ‘police’ humans (Cunha et al., 2019) and hospitals and campuses where dogs are used to provide healthcare and stress relief (Charles and Wolkowitz, 2019). The latter practices are a result of the conviction that dogs have a calming effect and lead to positive emotions in work contexts (Colarelli et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2017). Similarly, a recent review on service animals who accompany disabled people in the workplace concludes that colleagues and employers might have issues with service dogs because of allergies, phobias or disruptions. However, such problems need to be balanced with more independence for the disabled worker and overall reductions in stress, improved productivity and attractiveness, and elevated general morale (Hunter et al., 2019). Yet critical reflection is warranted as the praise awarded to dogs in general as ‘man’s best friend’ (Haraway, 2003; Huopainen, 2020) and service dogs in particular for their ‘usefulness’ is typical of ‘speciesism’, or the grading of animals in terms of their capacity to serve humans (Clarke and Knights, 2021). Organizations’ acceptance of and care for service animals is therefor likely ‘done in order to achieve an end other than the fulfilment of that animal’s life’ (Connolly and Cullen, 2018: 410). Regardless of the function animals are assigned in relation to humans (e.g. from food to companion) and the great differences in institutionalized violence this entails, human power is at the foreground in most studies examining human-animal relations and animals remain a ‘reflection of human relationships’ (Knight and Sang, 2020: 356) presented as ‘in and of human societies’ (Cudworth, 2014; Taylor and Twine, 2014).

In sum it can be argued that, very often, despite their important presence in work settings, animals are being marginalized and ignored in organizational research and practice (Connolly and Cullen, 2018) that refuse to see them as ‘sentient beings with their own rights and interests’ (Taylor and Fraser, 2019: 344). Several studies have now shown how such anthropocentrism is deeply intertwined with sexism (Clarke and Knights, 2018; Finkel and Danby, 2019). Both –isms depart from an opposition (human-animal and men-women) which is being promoted through dominance. Indeed, women, like animals, are often positioned as objects inside and outside organizations, and highly ‘susceptible to having their work ignored, trivialized and/or negated as work’ (Taylor and Fraser, 2019: 344). Inspired by these works, this study aims to similarly analyse the way ableism

and anthropocentrism come together in the workplace to create and maintain power regimes in which the dominance of (some) humans is naturalized (Sayers et al., 2019).

## **Method**

### *Context of the study and study topic*

This study took place in Belgium, a country where some 20% of households have a dog as family member (Horckmans, 2016). Having pets in the workplace is however uncommon, unlike in North American workplaces, where inviting employees to bring their pet to work is on the rise (Linacre, 2016). Disabled people in Flanders (Belgium) had an employment rate of 45.6% in 2019, compared to 81.2% for people without a disability (De Smet et al., 2020). The Belgian anti-discrimination law of 2007 states that any form of direct or indirect discrimination against disabled people, such as refusing the access of their assistance or guide dogs in the workplace or on public transport, is punishable by law. This means that these dogs are to be allowed entrance in restaurants, bakeries or butcher shops, and the same goes for public transport, private taxis and workplaces (Belgian Assistance Dog Federation, 2019).

Historically, the Belgian policy on disability has been one of segregation, both in education and the labour market. In an effort to close the gap, disability-related legislation requires public organizations to hire 3% disabled employees, although no levy-grant system is implemented to enforce such rule (Samoy and Waterplas, 2012). For private organizations, the government foresees financial support in the form of wage subsidies for some (equivalent to up to 60% of the wage cost) and a reimbursement of the costs made to make reasonable accommodations for all workers with an officially recognized impairment.

In Belgium, twelve schools are accredited for the training of assistance and guide dogs. Together, they are responsible for over 300 active service dogs today. It is estimated that less than one in three dogs accompany their human to a workplace. Assistance and guide dogs need to undergo an intense sorting and training of two years. Before being admitted to a guest family and embark on an intense training course, they are carefully selected based on their species and comportment as a pup. During the training, a whole series of pups and young dogs become dismissed for not fitting the wanted profile, and generally three to four of the 10 initially selected pups become an assistance or guide dog. Dogs that fall out in the last stages of the process often become therapy or companion dogs (Charles and Wolkowitz, 2019). In a very last step, trainers look for a dog-human fit, based on personalities of both, composition of the household, lifestyle and employment situation of the disabled person.

### *Data sampling*

Respondents in this study were recruited through the help of three schools where either guide dogs for blind people or assistance dogs for people in wheelchairs are trained. The author clearly positioned the research in a post-humanist way as ‘a research about dogs in the workplace’ rather than about disability, and asked the contact person within each school to send out a letter about the research project to clients or former clients who held a part-time or fulltime job. In total, seven respondents contacted the researcher to set up an appointment for an interview, while one more was recruited through snowball sampling. Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the eight dog-human pairs, whose names have been altered to guarantee anonymity. Five respondents were initially hired in their organizations without dog (see human names with\* in Table 1), while four applied for their job with dog. With the exception of three respondents (see

human names in *italic* in Table 1), all had been working in their current organization for over ten years. Half of the dogs in the sample were the first service animal to accompany their humans to work (see dog names underlined in Table 1). Given the small size of this sample, there is a need for caution when transposing the experiences of participants to different contexts (Small, 2009). It is well possible that disabled people who did not wish to participate in the study had more or, on the contrary, less negative experiences in their workplaces. There is no way of knowing for sure whether the eight respondent pairs in our sample are a good representation of disabled people who go to work with a service animal, a vulnerable and difficult to access group (Scholz and Ingold, 2020). However, generalizability is not what is at stake here as this study aims to explore the meaning-making processes around specific constructs (e.g., humananimal entanglement) ‘as they are negotiated within particular local contexts’, from a specific perspective and in a ‘vivid and detailed’ fashion (Liu, 2021: 4).

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INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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#### *Data collection*

The interviews and observations took place in the period of April and May 2019 and were all conducted in the respondents’ workplaces to get a good sense of how the dog and disabled employee occupied the workspace. Some interviews were conducted during working hours; others took place during lunch breaks or after the working day. The author made sure to arrive half an hour early to each appointment, to be able to observe the workspace and its surroundings, and get a sense of colleagues’ interactions within the space. Although short in time, the observations offered a glimpse of how colleagues were affected, bodily (e.g., kneeling down, stepping away) emotionally (e.g., excited, appalled) and verbally (e.g., sweet talking, silence) by the presence of the animal (Hamilton and Taylor, 2012). After each interview, the author wrote down what she had observed before, during and after the interview (+/- 4000 words). With the permission of the interviewees, she took a number of photographs outside of the building, inside the office and of the dog-human pair. Sketches were also made of the layout of each office and turned into drawings (see figures 1-8). Post-humanist scholars have noted that, as animals can never fully be included through traditional research methods (e.g. interviews), visual methods (e.g., photography-based drawings) are essential in making their workplace contributions visible and representing the materiality of their bodies, contributing to the subject-hood of animals (Taylor and Fraser, 2019; Wels, 2020). Although this study remains methodologically humanist as it is written by people who assert the power to speak for animals, it does make an attempt to understand how both co-constitute the world, refusing to ignore animals and using ‘humanity to tell stories about and for them’ (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017: 176).

The semi-structured interview guideline consisted of a first introductory part with questions with regard to the dog in general. This part, next to standard open questions included some projective questions, such as ‘Complete the following sentences: ‘My dog is my...’, ‘Without my dog I...’, ‘My dog and I are...’, allowing space for reflexivity on respondents’ part and moving away from an overly ‘rationalist mode of thought’ as this is important in capturing our often-emotional relationship with animals (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017: 105). Next were a series of questions about the dog inside the workplace, and the way the dog and the employee were being accommodated by the employing organization. The interview guideline ended with some questions

on the relationship between the dog and other actors in the organization (e.g. Do people in your organization ever talk to your dog?; Are there people in the organization your dog does not like?; Is your supervisor ever proud of the fact that there is a dog in the team?). Interviews were tape-recorded, lasted on average 69 minutes and were all transcribed verbatim by the author.

### *Data analysis*

The general aim at the start of the study to ‘better understand the experience of service dogs in the workplace’, soon became more specific when in an early stage of data collection, two aspects generated an amount of surprise on the part of the researcher (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). First, there was an immense divergence in the way dogs were welcomed and allowed to move and interact across the organizations under study. Second, the importance of dogs to the workplace experience and professional identity of the disabled employee surmounted expectations too: the dogs seemed to be far more than ‘just’ a facilitator in meeting human mobility demands. These preliminary insights inspired the following research questions to guide further systematic analysis: How are service dogs in/excluded in the organizations under study? With what effects for the in/exclusion of the disabled employee?’.

As a first step of data analysis, data reduction took place through coding and categorization (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). For this, the interview transcripts were broadly coded for excerpts unveiling ‘moments of in/exclusion of the dog in the workplace’, and, as will be argued further down, by extension of the disabled person. This primary focus on the dog fits with a post-humanist ethic in which an effort is made to take their labour and agency as non-human worker seriously (Knight and Sang, 2020: 355; O’Doherty, 2016). As a result of the process, a total of 191 fragments were coded. Next, through categorization, three sub-codes inductively emerged from the data, leading to a re-organization of the data along the nature of the interaction. Excerpts were assigned the label of ‘spatial’ (42 excerpts) if they mainly described the movement of dog, ‘discursive’ (79 excerpts) if they mainly mentioned written or spoken text towards or about the dog, and ‘affective’ if they mainly mentioned the description of feelings or emotions towards the dog (70 excerpts). For analytical clarity, one category was chosen each time, avoiding double-coding.

As a final analytical activity, conclusions were drawn by looking at the identified themes and ‘thinking about explanations for observed patterns and relationships’ (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016: 347) through a lens of humanimal co-constitution, refusing to see human and animal as ontologically separate agents. Here, workplace interactions are studied as entanglements of canine, human and surrounding environment (Huopainen, 2020), while specific attention was paid to how the different modes of canine inclusion impacted the degree of inclusion of the disabled employee (Rennstam and Sullivan, 2018), whose membership in the organization strongly depended on their service animal.

### *Self-reflection*

Both for studies on human-animal interactions and with disabled workers, it is important to reflect upon how the researcher’s own body, senses and feelings produce a particular and affective reading of the observed experiences (Barnes, 2004; Sayers et al., 2019). Therefore, it should be pointed out that the author of this study is a young, able-bodied, white and heterosexual female disability researcher. Although she does not have a particular fondness of dogs, has never been a dog-‘owner’ herself or lived together with dogs, two family members of hers live with service dogs as disabled persons. Despite ten years of research interest in disability-related social inequality at work, and



although more at ease with the label of ‘temporary able-bodied’ (Linton, 1998), she agrees her ‘outside in’ perspective is far from ideal (Barnes, 2004; Danieli and Woodhams, 2005). At the same time, she recognizes her past has led to a tendency to replicate speciesism through a search for the ‘human story’ in all her respondents (both human and animals) and through such writing still falls into the imperialist trap of ‘editing animals out’ and ‘skimming over their importance’ by seeing them as useful for assisting disabled people’s socio-economic empowerment (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017: 174).

## Findings

In the first part of the findings, focus goes out to the co-constructed embodied subjectivity of the respondents or their humanimal entanglement, and the idea presented is that in/exclusion of the dog was a proxy for in/exclusion of a disabled colleague. In the second part of the findings, the spatial, discursive and affective forms of in/exclusion of the dog, and by extension the person, are outlined and reflected upon.

### *Embodied entanglement of humanimal in the workplace*

The intense entanglement of the dog-human pair in the workplace became apparent when participants explained the importance of their dogs for enabling them to come to the office every day, and so their dog was their ‘independence’ (Oliver), and made them ‘feel safe’ (Hannah). Also, for progression in one’s career, the presence of a dog was essential as shown by Patrick who explained how ‘There are projects to run, companies to talk to, fairs to attend abroad. I am constantly on the move. It would normally not be an ideal job for a blind person but the dog makes all the difference’. More than simply enabling their physical presence in the workplace, the dog was integral to their wellbeing and feelings of wholeness at work. And although this was so for all respondents, a gendered line was noticeable with male respondents seeing their dog in more instrumental terms as ‘replaceable’ (Patrick) or ‘a helping device’ (Oliver). Indeed, male respondents seemed to temper the importance of their dog to their self-view, claiming they could do without as ‘my dog is not my everything’ and ‘only the trajectory to work would take more time’ (Owen). Women felt more at ease describing their dog as ‘best friend’ (Wendy), ‘a part of themselves’ (Natasha), and without whom they ‘would be nothing’ (Mary) or ‘completely lost and useless’ (Megan).

All disabled employees downplayed the excluding effects that allergies, phobias or religious sensitivities from colleagues had. For instance, Natasha explained how her line manager ‘used to take a [...] anti-allergy pill. If she did not, she would not manage to work in the same office as me, but she did not mind so it was fine.’ While Hannah explained how colleagues who were scared of dogs before Hoppa’s arrival ‘learned to appreciate his presence’, and in one case even went on ‘to buy a dog for herself’. Mary recounted her surprise when one day, her colleague who was afraid of animals, refused Mary’s offer to take the lift first and insisted on sharing the lift with them, as he had concluded that Missy was ‘unlike other dogs’ and indeed ‘very well-mannered and kind’. Such anecdote reveals the anthropomorphic<sup>3</sup> legitimization of an individual animal through compliments, whilst marginalizing an entire species, a process common to the workplace experiences of Othered human workers (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Although potential threats to the workplace inclusion of their service animal were thus experienced as minor, this does not mean that the workplaces were free from exclusionary behaviour. Rather, it seems that instances of exclusion towards the dog were informed by something other than simply fear or dislike of dogs. Consider the following excerpt:

[Interviewer] Are there any colleagues you know of here that are ‘not so into dogs’?

[Mary] Not at the moment no, most have retired, most people who did not like dogs.

[Interviewer] How could you tell they did not like dogs? Did they ever say anything?

[Mary] No, not so directly... They would just ignore her, and uh... maybe ignore me as well a bit I guess... It’s a feeling you get, a feeling that they might have problems with it...

[Interviewer] Were those perhaps the same people who already did not engage much with you in the first place, before Mustie’s [first dog] arrival to the company?

[Mary] In fact, yes, you might be right there [laughs]. As a matter of fact yes, it’s odd isn’t it, but coming to think of it, it’s a bit true indeed.

Conversations like these, along with the finding that dogs were extremely integral to the disabled employees’ understanding of the self and participation in the organization, led to the hypothesis that when colleagues and management do not fully include the dog, full inclusion of the disabled person is denied too. The in/exclusion of the animal thus works as a proxy for the in/exclusion of the disabled person. Apart from simply a fear or dislike of animals (Hunter et al., 2019), exclusionary behaviour towards the service dog then becomes a product of ableist inscriptions, labelling disabled employees as ‘out of place’ (Kitchin, 1998) in the workplace, together with animals. In what follows, the different modes of the in/exclusion of dogs are considered, including what it entails for the disabled employees.

#### *Spatial in/exclusion of dogs in the workplace*

First of all, the space dogs were allowed to take up varies a lot between organizations . It ranges from freely running around and greeting all the colleagues in the morning to being kept in a cage all day. Two of the most exclusionary spatial approaches documented came from one and the same organization, Telecorp. Some four years ago, at headquarters, Megan had put in a request to be accompanied by a guide dog as her vision had declined. As she worked in an activity-based workspace (without fixed seating and with many different working spots such as a creative bubble, seating lounge area, shared open desk, ...), it was requested that she kept Moka locked up in a bench throughout the day, close to her – exceptionally – fixed seat (see figure 1). The health and safety department argued it was the particular type of office space which ‘excluded other options’, and had also assured her it was strictly forbidden to visit the cafeteria with her service dog because of ‘the danger in spilling people’s food, and drawling or sniffing at the unwrapped food that is sold at the counter’. However, the experiences of Mary and Missy, who worked for the same company yet at different sites, indicate that spatial restrictions and ‘dog zoning’, was not merely informed by office type but more generally by unwritten company policy and culture. Mary’s request to come to work with her dog dated back some twenty years. At that time, management had suggested to keep the dog outside the building ‘in a kennel on the parking lot’. Yet after consultation with their legal advisers, the dog was allowed to enter the building but for ‘safety reasons’ had to remain attached with a leash to Mary’s desk during the day (see figure 2). Despite the spacious open-plan office, which theoretically seated ten colleagues but in practice was only half-occupied due to the shifts-based organization of work, Missy too was required to be strapped to her human’s desk. These experiences make clear how the arrival of dogs at Telecorp unsettled the organization.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE  
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In the other organizations under study, the organizational disciplining of animal bodies was far less strict and more effort was made to allow the dog the possibility to stretch and have a walk during breaks. The most freedom was granted to Ozzie (see figure 3) and Oatmeal (see figure 4), who freely roamed around their big, open-plan offices and went for extensive walks during the break. Although Oatmeal's human Owen found it easy to let out his dog during breaks as their building was surrounded by grasses and trees, Oliver relied on a 'co-worker pool' who on a voluntary basis took Ozzie out into the capital city where finding a green spot was more challenging. Even if all interviewees saw their dogs as subjects with their own personalities, canine agency became most apparent when observing Ozzie and Oatmeal whose presence seemed to truly co-shape workplace culture as they were 'all over the place'.

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INSERT FIGURE 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE  
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For the remaining dogs, the rule appeared to be that they could wander around freely in their small cellular offices, usually shared with few other colleagues. This was the case for Hoppa (see figure 6) and Nano (see figure 7). Other dogs took up very little space at the request of their human, like Wes (see figure 8) who although working in a shared open space, remained on his mattress during working times, or Pip (see figure 5) who was trained well in disappearing under the table for the time his human was in client meetings.

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INSERT FIGURE 5, 6, 7, 8 ABOUT HERE  
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In sum, spatial restrictions resulted from office types, unwritten organizational policies, human's training preferences or the combination of these factors. Contrary to expectations, spatial arrangements thus also varied within the same office type, pointing to the organizational specificity of anthropocentric beliefs. As these arrangements had a direct impact on the space disabled people in the study took up, ableist beliefs too are likely to have informed the decisions made.

#### *Discursive in/exclusion of dogs in the workplace*

Secondly, dogs in the workplaces under study were both included and excluded through language and signs, or broadly speaking 'discourse'. Sometimes, comments from colleagues clearly expressed how non-human needs were seen as inferior to human ones and the acceptance of dogs was made conditional upon demonstrating the right passive or domesticated behaviour. Consider the following example of a comment made by a colleague of Hannah when she had informed her workplace about getting an assistance dog:

I had a colleague who was very much afraid of dogs, she really did not like the idea of me coming to work with an assistance dog. She said "Well can't you just wait a bit longer until I retire?". I mean, this colleague at the time was like 50 or something.

The conditional workplace acceptance of dogs also became apparent in the following comment made by Mary's colleagues:

If someone new comes in, it could be that she barks, she is very protective of me you know. Then I have to calm her down, make her obey. [...] It does not happen very often so I don't think the colleagues are too much annoyed by it. But it did happen in the beginning that people would say "Oh isn't that an odd thing to do for a service animal, shouldn't they be

quiet at all times?” But it’s still a dog, right? Just because she assists me doesn’t mean she’s not allowed to bark.

For Mary, the conditional acceptance that her dog Missy faced was paralleled by a conditional acceptance of her own presence at work, as a visually impaired person. She explained how she had been asking for a more varied job for many years without success.

There are two visually impaired workers here [city A], one in city B, four in city C, all exclusively working on the call line. We are the only ones left working exclusively on the call line. [Able-bodied] Others have all gotten different roles to combine with the call work. The number of calls has of course gone down immensely in the last decade, but so has the number of call line workers. The pressure on us is huge and the work is very repetitive, it has no change and that’s what makes it so heavy. I’ve asked many times for an adaptation of my job, to combine it with something else, but I’ve now given up trying.

On the other hand, moments of discursive inclusion of non-human others through signs and language also became apparent throughout the interviews. One example hereof occurred when Ollie, Owen’s previous guide dog retired:

When Ollie retired, they [people at work] threw him a full retirement party. He received a real, honourable silver medal from my colleagues. Even people from other departments who had not been in much contact with him throughout the years came by to say their farewells, like Mike from Radio X [local celebrity]: such a big fan of dogs, such a friendly guy! Several people had posted things on Facebook as well, pictures of them and Ollie to tell him goodbye and wish him well. I thought it was really compassionate and beautiful... Everyone was genuinely sad when he died too, even though his death was expected, I mean age-related.

The same discursive humanization of the dog occurred in a different form, through the posting of a sign about Oliver’s dog Ozzie, and the humorous conversations surrounding it:

When I worked in the Jobstore, external people would walk in all the time and act surprised to see a dog, they don’t expect to find that in a government agency, you see. So my colleagues had put up a sign at the door to warn customers, that said “I work here too” with a picture of Ozzie. And at one point, Ozzie was apparently sleeping underneath the sign and a colleague went “Well then, he’s a real government agent now isn’t he, sleeping on the job”. So yeah that was fun, we’ve had some good laughs over the years working there.

In sum, it seems that dog acceptance in the workplace often remained conditional and required a relation to human organizing as passive object that complies. Signs of failure of domestication by humans (e.g. barking) made their rightful presence questionable. Dog-human pairs thus often remained confined, through text and signs, within human-centric, power networks that placed humans above dogs. But in reifying such domination, the rightful presence of disabled people in the organization too, who relied on animal support, became challenged. Nevertheless, instances of a more complete acceptance also prevailed. By discursively constructing the dog as a full member of the organization, some departments managed to temporarily destabilize anthropocentrism as well as ableism.

*Affective in/exclusion of dogs in the workplace*

Thirdly, in/exclusion of the dog took an affective turn, often observable at the corporeal level. Different from others modes discussed earlier, the same type of affect (e.g. caressing) could function as both inclusive as well as exclusive behaviour depending on the circumstances. Consider the following example by Hannah, whose superior repeatedly caressed and approached her dog Hoppa despite clear instructions not to. Affect in this case becomes entangled in multiple power dimensions:

[Hannah] There is one doctor who works at my service, and whenever we are in a group and my dog is awake, for instance at a retirement party, he goes and touches my dog. Or, when he sees me walking, he will all of a sudden ask me the dumbest questions, like “Will he bite if I touch him?”, “Let me give it a try”. It’s hard for me, because the hospital is quite hierarchical, and I’m just a secretary, I can’t tell a doctor what not to do. So I have to wrap it up in nice words and remind him of the agreements made surrounding my dog, ‘Come on doctor, the dog is not used to being petted by other people’.

[Interviewer] Why do you think he keeps doing it?

[Hannah] I don’t know. He’s really someone who puts a lot of importance in “being a doctor” and being more important than anyone else. He would never take something from an assistant. It’s also to show the other colleagues that he is allowed to touch Hoppa whilst others are not, I guess. A display of power?

Negative affect towards the dog from colleagues also contributed to affective exclusion of the dog-human pair. The following notes made after the interview with Oliver are an example hereof:

After the interview had ended and when opening the meeting room door, Ozzie slipped through and saw his chance for a short stroll towards the vending machine down the hall. There he came across a young man who was getting a soda, and started sniffing up to him. This co-worker, who sat in a different office from that of Oliver, was clearly not amused by the canine interaction and rather annoyed, took several steps back. It took a while for Oliver to call back Ozzie and put on the leash. (Notes)

Although the exact origin of this colleagues’ antipathy remains unknown, it is possibly informed by both anthropocentric and ableist beliefs. Yet refraining from affective engagement with dogs at work does not necessarily signify the exclusion of a disabled worker. Consider the following anecdote by Wendy whose boss had provided her with many opportunities in her career, but was not a fan of Wes, nor of previous dogs:

[Wendy] In the very beginning of my career, guide dogs were not well-known, it was quite new, and everyone was quite hesitant and unsure about what would happen, how the dog would behave at work, if he was going to be able to keep quiet for a full day. And my boss, who actually really does not like dogs said from the start, “If you require a dog, then a dog is what there will be!”

[Interviewer] Does your boss ever engage in some form with the dog?

[Wendy] No, he accepts that there is the dog, but he will never address the dog no, not like the others [laughs]. It's not that he is afraid of dogs, not at all, but to him, a dog's a dog. And that's fine too.

The distance of Wendy's boss towards her dog seemed more informed by anthropocentrism than ableism. As such, the proxy relationship between affective exclusion of dogs and the disabled employee is complex and not simply explicable as positive correlation.

Contrary to the exclusion of dog-human pairs exemplified in the previous examples, there is also evidence of inclusion through affective human-animal relationships in the workplace. This becomes apparent in the example of Natasha, who organized 'cuddle Fridays' starring her dog Nano, which sparked much excitement in the workplace:

Once a week I organize cuddle sessions. I take of his jacket, because otherwise I'm saying no all the time and that's really not feasible. Everyone can relax then. It's always on Friday, on Friday he strips and he knows then, that's the end of a working week. [...] I share my office with three other people and that's very hard for them, to ignore him the whole time. [...] Students are never allowed to touch him, I'm very clear on that. [...] I do use him a lot in class, for instance when I explain conditioning theory. He makes for excellent study material you know! I refer to my dog all the time in lectures. I joke around and tell them not touching him is an exercise in self-control and that only if they manage to graduate, they can swing by for a cuddle.

Natasha and Nano's colleagues seemed more than happy to participate in such activity. In being enthusiastic about hugging her dog, colleagues send out a warm welcome to their disabled colleague as well. Patrick too recounted how his dog had the tendency of eliciting positive feelings of care from others who elevated canine needs above human ones:

It has happened to me now and then that during a client visit on site, people are very eager to provide Pip with something to drink but forget about offering me something as well [laughs].

With regard to the affect disabled employees themselves displayed towards their own dog within the workplace, all respondents argued they tried not to cuddle their dog openly in the workplace. When asked about why that was, most respondents argued it was key 'to make a clear boundary for the dog between work and home' (Patrick) or functional to 'prevent others from doing the same' (Wendy). It is also possible that respondents refrained from doing so in order to keep up a professional image and downplay the image of their companion as merely a play mate. In this sense, shame was a last affect and an important aspect of power processes operating in the workplaces under study but luckily, dogs also evoked pride in the workplace, as explained by Owen who recounted 'when we have external visitors, my boss is always eager to introduce them to the office dog [...] yeah she sort of takes pride in showing him off, it's nice'.

In sum, various forms of positive affect towards the dog were expressed in the workplace corporeally, by kneeling down to pet and hug the dog, by caring for the dogs' wellbeing, or by proudly showing him/her off to visitors. Despite the abundance of positive affective reactions from colleagues, who appreciated the novelty of animal Otherness in their organization, some affective reactions indicated exclusion of dog-human pairs (regarding the dog with antipathy and taking a

step back), of disabled employees (addressing the dog against the human's will), or of dogs (refraining from saying good morning to the dog). Indeed, it seems that sometimes, a lack of affect was more informed by anthropocentrism than ableism, and so these two –isms, although related, were not necessarily aligned.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Different from other studies on workplace diversity, this study reveals how moments of in/exclusion of disabled employees can occur 'by proxy', through their non-human companion on whom they rely intensely, and whose presence, although legally ordained, is spatially, discursively and affectively contested. On the one hand, the canine perspective developed here gives a sense of more subtle, indirect form of discrimination such as through 'dog zoning' or colleagues' comments about acceptable dog behaviour. Although subtle in their manifestation as they do not address the person directly, these practices and attitudes might have effects that are 'not so subtle' by including a person only peripherally (Rennstam and Sullivan, 2018; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011) and by reinforcing a clear hierarchy of beings in the workplace. Such speciesism takes a double form in this study, as both ableism and anthropocentrism become intertwined, producing unhelpful, taken-for-granted binaries that 'reach into the caverns of collective subjectivity' (Campbell, 2009: 166) and reaffirm the dominance of humans over animals and able-bodied over disabled people. Yet the study at once demonstrates how not all misrecognition of animals as serious labourers is part and parcel of the same underlying ideology that denies diverse employees socio-economic value. Indeed, the possibility remains that some people 'just don't like dogs'. On the other hand, in being attentive to different modes of inclusion, this study tries at understanding how a social order is reproduced through situated practice (Janssens and Steyaert, 2019). Reopening the realm of the social beyond discourse and humans, power asymmetries are examined through their embodied and material nature, drawing attention to things and emotions and producing alternative knowledge of diversity (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021).

A second related contribution is made towards disability studies. Through the focus on affective forms of in/exclusion, this study considers the affective dimensions of negotiating dog-human relations in the workplace. Until hitherto, affect as an important aspect in the workplace discrimination of disabled people has been largely missing (Goodley, 2014; Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011; Goodley et al., 2018; Reeve, 2002, 2006; Watermeyer, 2012), with priority being paid to psychological processes of stereotyping (Beatty et al., 2019; Stone and Colella, 1996). Yet the neglect of affective aspects of disability is problematic for it ignores 'the cultural investments within the affects of disability and disability' (Goodley, 2014: 64). In this sense, others' display of affect towards the dog reveals something about how disabled people are situated within a specific socio-cultural space (Goodley, 2014). Unlike prior survey-based research that concludes that office dogs in general solicit positive feelings in colleagues (Charles and Wolkowitz, 2019), the account offered here provides a deeper understanding of the way Others 'affect and are affected by' a complex socio-political constellation of '–isms' and how such affect takes the form of a bodily state (e.g., excitement, disgust, pride, shame) that often 'escapes discursive capture and naming' (Fotaki et al., 2017: 4). Interestingly, disabled employees themselves explained how they restricted the affect displayed towards their non-human companion in the workplace, and this is arguably informed by ableist discourses that equate disability to unprofessionalism (Jammaers et al., 2016) and masculine discourses privileging rationality and subordinating emotions, feeling and affect (Phillips, 2014), jointly shaping organizational realities.

Future research should engage in research methods, better suited in carving out the affective dimension of in/exclusion of dog-human pairs in the context of work, such as (multispecies) ethnography (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017; Wels, 2020).

Lastly, advocating for a more complex understanding of animal exclusion that moves beyond organizational concerns for allergies, phobias and workflow disruptions (Hunter et al., 2019), this study contributes to critical animal studies by demonstrating humanimal entanglement (Huopainen, 2020) in a workplace context where animals are unexpected (O'Doherty, 2016). By evidencing processes of multi-species becoming in which human and non-human construct the social realities of the workplace together, it responds to the call for interspecies solidarity, taking animal labour more seriously (Coulter, 2017; Cunha et al., 2019; Knight and Sang, 2020) and examining how animal lives are affected by organizations (Taylor and Twine, 2014). Animal personhood was acknowledged by organizations through various anthropomorphic acts such as retirement celebrations and compliments for being well-mannered, but also through spatial freedom and various wellbeing provisions. Despite these caring initiatives, human needs mostly remained elevated above those of animals (Clarke and Knights, 2021). Such anthropocentric views became particularly visible when animal agency was explicitly denied (e.g., caging). Future research should further decipher meaningful intersections in the way dog-human pairs are welcomed in the context of work, by extending the sample and (further) investigating the role of gender (Connelly and Cullen, 2018; Satama and Huopainen, 2019) and culture (Jegatheesan, 2012; Ma et al., 2020), as well as examining how different forms of materiality such as office type (e.g. flexdesking) affect humanimal entanglement (Dale, 2005).

To end on a positive note, the pleasant and sometimes unexpected experiences of spatial, discursive and affective inclusion encountered across these organizations could be interpreted as movements towards 'ways of organizational life that resist domination and oppression in favour of the enactment of care and respect for difference as it is lived and experienced' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015: 159). Indeed, this study testifies how a far-reaching solidarity across species and a holistic workplace inclusion of all Others is possible, crossing multiple borderlands and deconstructing traditional binaries.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Conceptually this paper upholds a distinction between 'disability' as the disadvantage caused by the way society is structured to exclude and devalue people with impairments, and 'impairment' as a biological limitation whilst acknowledging the potential effect in people's working lives these can have (Williams and Mavin, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Canine as a noun refers to 'relating to or resembling a dog or dogs'.

<sup>3</sup> Anthropomorphic as a noun signifies 'having human characteristics'.

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**Eline Jammaers** is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Business Economics at Hasselt University (Belgium) and guest professor at the Louvain Research Institute in Management and

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Organizations at UCLouvain (Belgium). Her research interests include diversity in waged employment and entrepreneurship as well as human–animal interactions in business contexts. She has published in international scholarly journals and her work has appeared in *Organization Studies*, *Organization*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management* and *Gender, Work and Organization*.

[Email: [eline.jammaers@uhasselt.be](mailto:eline.jammaers@uhasselt.be)]

**Table 1. Overview of respondents**



**Missy & Mary\*** (40-50y, F) work part-time in a traditional, medium-sized open plan office (shared by 12 people), as call-center operator for TeleCorp (telecom services) with a visual impairment



**Nano & Natasha** (40-50y, F) work part-time in shared-room of 3 people as lecturer for CityCollege (higher education) with mobility impairment



**Oatmeal & Owen** (40-50y, M) work part-time in traditional, large open-plan office (shared by over 24 people) as archivist for PubMeda (television and radio services) with a visual impairment



**Moka & Megan\*** (40-50y, F) work part-time in activity-based flex office (shared by over 24 people) as administrative worker for TeleCorp (telecom services) with visual impairment



**Ozzie & Oliver** (40-50y, M) work full-time in a traditional, large open-plan office (shared by over 24 people), as ICT helpdesk for EmployOrg (employment mediation services) with visual impairment



**Hoppa & Hannah\*** (30-40y, F) work full-time in shared-room of 2 people as medical management assistant for Hospi (hospital services) with mobility impairment



**Wes & Wendy\*** (40-50y, F) work part-time in traditional, small open office (shared by 4 people) as management assistant for CountyGov (governance of local region) with visual impairment



**Pip & Patrick\*** (40-50y, M) work full-time in single cell-office (and regularly from home or on client sites) as senior business manager for UniSpinoff (pharmaceutical industry) with visual impairment



**Figure 1: Sketch of activity-based flex office (>24 people) of Moka and Megan**



**Figure 2: Sketch of traditional, medium open plan office of 12 people of Missy and Mary**



**Figure 3: Sketch of traditional, large open-plan office (>24 people) of Ozzie and Oliver**



**Figure 4: Sketch of traditional, large open-plan office (>24 people) of Oatmeal and Owen**



**Figure 5: Sketch of single room cell-office of Pip and Patrick**



**Figure 6: Sketch of shared-room office for 3 people of Nano and Natasha**



**Figure 7: Sketch of shared-room office of 2 people of Hoppa and Hannah**



**Figure 8: Sketch of traditional, small open plan office of 4 people of Wes and Wendy**

