Ableism in management, organizations and employment relations: Challenging dominant ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies and ‘ideal’ capabilities

Convenors:

Koen Van Laer (Hasselt University, Belgium – lead convenor); Jannine Williams (University of Bradford, UK); Eline Jammaers (Hasselt University, Belgium); Deborah Foster (Cardiff Business School, UK); Stefan Hardonk (University of Iceland, Iceland)

In recent years, an ableism lens has been advanced in different scientific fields to expose and critique socially accepted images of ‘ideal’ bodies, minds and capabilities. Ableism refers to ‘a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce 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). Ableist discourses, processes and practices thereby normatively promote a specific understanding of what it means to be ‘able’ and, as such, which bodies, capabilities, and intelligences are deemed ‘normal’ and (economically) valuable. In doing so, they create a strong binary opposition between ‘able’ bodies, capabilities and intelligences, and ‘others’ who are constructed as ‘inferior’, ‘deviant’ or ‘abnormal’ (Campbell, 2001; 2014). The lens of ableism was originally developed within the field of critical disability studies (e.g. Campbell, 2001; 2009; Goodley, 2014; Shildrick, 2009). In this literature, it has served as a conceptual lens to not only expose the way ableist discourses, processes and practices disadvantage, oppress and exclude those perceived as disabled, but also focus on those assumed to be ‘able’ and on the processes and practices involved in reproducing and enforcing norms of ‘abledness’. In this way, it created new ways to de-naturalize dominant ideas of corporeal, intellectual and mental (dis)ability and expose
the way non-disability acts as an organizing normative principle (Campbell, 2009). However, the framework of ableism has also been used to explore issues of gender and race (e.g. Wolbring, 2012) and of what it fundamentally means to be ‘normal’ (e.g. Goodley, 2014). More recently, the concept of ableism has also been introduced into management and organization studies (MOS), where it has been used to explore the organizational experiences of disabled employees and expose and challenge ableist assumptions in contemporary workplaces (e.g. Foster & Wass, 2013; Jammaers, et al., 2015; Williams & Mavin, 2012).

Studies on ableism however, are not the only ones to highlight and challenge notions of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies and ‘ideal’ capabilities in the workplace and labour market. Critical MOS in general have also focused on how organizational (identity regulatory) discourses, practices and material arrangements produce, promote and value particular kinds of employees, bodies and capabilities (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Dale & Burrell, 2008). Different streams within critical MOS have, in turn, shown how these dominant ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies and ‘ideal’ capabilities are infused with different social identities. For instance, critical gender studies in MOS have exposed the gendered nature of organizations. This literature has for example shown how organizational processes reflect ideas of ‘ideal’ ‘disembodied’ employees, which infused with particular understandings of masculinity. In other words, how accepted conceptions of ‘ideal’ employees, bodies and capabilities are gendered and (re)produce gender divisions and inequalities (e.g. Acker, 1990; 2006; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). Similarly, MOS working in the tradition of queer theory have exposed the heteronormative assumptions underlying formal and informal organizational processes, which are involved in (re)producing the homosexual/heterosexual binary and constructing a specific connection between sex, gender and sexuality as ‘normal’. This, in turn, causes employees and bodies which deviate from the heteronormative ideal to be marginalized, perceived to be unsuitable to perform particular jobs or required to adapt to
dominant (heteronormative) standards (e.g. Rumens & Broomfield, 2014; Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). Similarly, postcolonial and other critical studies on race and ethnicity have aimed to expose how whiteness is infused in organizations. In doing so, they have shown how taken-for-granted organizational practices, discourses and norms on ‘ideal’ employees, bodies and capabilities are not ‘race-less’, but rather reflect a white subject who is implicitly assumed to have no race (e.g. Janssens & Zanoni, 2014; Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014). Finally, studies on age in MOS have exposed how ageing and dominant discourses of decline can cause older individuals to become marginalized and seen as inferior in relation to ‘young’ understandings of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies, and ‘ideal’ capabilities (e.g. Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008; Riach, 2007)

Building on these debates, this stream has two main goals. First, we hope to further discussions on ableism within critical studies on management, organizations and employment relations. Second, we hope to advance debates on ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies and ‘ideal’ capabilities between different streams in CMS. Related to the first ambition, we are interested in exploring how the concept of ableism can allow us to further understand organizational processes, dynamics and experiences, especially in the context of disabled employees. However, we also welcome different perspectives on disability, including those critical of the concept of ableism. Related to the second ambition, we aim to stimulate debates between the different perspectives used in MOS to explore, expose and challenge ideas of corporeal, intellectual and mental ‘normalcy’. In other words, this streams aims to contribute to a dialogue which transcends the boundaries between different streams focusing on different social identities, and thereby stimulate a mutual exchange of ideas between scholars interested in exposing and challenging organizational norms related to ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies and ‘ideal’ capabilities.
Potential research topics that could be addressed by submissions include (but are not limited to):

- Ableist assumptions and ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies, and ‘ideal’ capabilities in MOS (e.g. in studies on leadership, HRM, job design and accommodations, careers, work-life balance, sickness absence).
- The way organizational processes, practices, policies and cultures (re)produce or challenge ableism and ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies, and ‘ideal’ capabilities.
- The way organizational spaces, artefacts and materiality (re)produce or challenge ableism and ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies, and ‘ideal’ capabilities.
- The various manifestations of ableism and disability in organizations.
- Ableism and ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies and ‘ideal’ capabilities in critical gender studies, critical studies on race and ethnicity, critical studies on age, queer studies,…
- The interplay between identity regulation and identity work, power and resistance, or structure and agency, in the context of ableism and ideas of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies, and ‘ideal’ capabilities.
- The connection between ableism (or conceptions of ‘ideal’ employees, ‘ideal’ bodies, and ‘ideal’ capabilities) and neoliberalism (e.g. neoliberal concepts of meritocracy, entrepreneurship, independence and autonomy).
- The connection between neoliberalism and the emergence of the health, well-being, happiness and resilience at work industry.
- The connection between ableism and concepts and ideas such as transhumanism, morphological freedom and cyborgs in organizations.
- Ableism and embodiment, the lived experience of being in a body that is different from the ‘ideal’ body, and abject, monstrous or leaky bodies in organizations.
• Ableism, questions of disclosure and (in)visibility in organizations.

• The connection between ableism in organizations and broader societal discourses (e.g. disability pride, body positive movements) and/or institutional frameworks (e.g. legislation, welfare programs)

• The connection between ableism and ethics

References


**Convenors**

lead convenor:

Koen Van Laer is an Assistant Professor at SEIN – Identity, Diversity & Inequality Research, Hasselt University (Belgium). Drawing on critical perspectives, his works focuses on ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and religion at work, on the way workplace experiences and careers are connected to power inequalities, and on the way ‘difference’ is managed and constructed in organizations. His work has appeared in edited volumes as well as in international journals such as Human Relations, Organization, and Scandinavian Journal of Management.

Contact details: [koen.vanlaer@uhasselt.be](mailto:koen.vanlaer@uhasselt.be); Hasselt University, Martelarenlaan 42, B-3500 Hasselt, Belgium. +32 (0)11 26 86 77

Jannine Williams is Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organizational Behaviour at Bradford University, UK. Her research interests encompass processes of organizing; categories of social relations and constructions of difference, particularly
disability and gender; women’s intragender relations and friendship at work; career studies with a focus upon boundaryless careers. She has co-edited a book Deaf Students in Higher Education and published in Studies in Higher Education, British Journal of Management and the International Journal of Management Reviews.

Contact details: J.Williams20@bradford.ac.uk; University of Bradford School of Management, Emm Lane, Bradford, West Yorkshire, BD9 4JL, UK

Eline Jammaers is a post-doctoral research fellow at the research centre SEIN – Identity, Diversity & Inequality Research, Hasselt University (Belgium). Carried out in the framework of the Flemish Policy Research Centre on Equality Policies, her PhD research explored the workplace experiences of disabled employees through critical theories. Her main research interests include ableism and disability, diversity (management), inequality, identity work and power/resistance in organizations.

Contact details: eline.jammaers@uhasselt.be; Hasselt University, Martelarenlaan 42, B-3500 Hasselt, Belgium.

Deborah Foster is a sociologist and a Reader in Employment Relations at Cardiff Business School (UK). She has conducted disability research with Wales TUC, is currently researching with partners (in Estonia, Hungary and Poland) on an EU funded project examining industrial relations and disabled and older workers, and is a member of the Welsh National Advisory Group on Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL). Deborah has published research on disability and employment in the journals Sociology, Work, Employment and Society, The British Journal of Industrial Relations and Industrial Relations
Journal. She has a current interest in the ways in which neo-liberal ideas are influencing the health and well-being at work agenda and its particular effects on disabled employees.

Contact details: fosterdl@cardiff.ac.uk; S46, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU

Stefan Hardonk is a sociologist and post-doctoral researcher who works as a Marie Curie Fellow at the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Iceland (Iceland). His research is situated within disability studies, more specifically in the fields of childhood disability, deafness, and employment, with an emphasis on poststructuralist and critical approaches. As far as employment is concerned, he has a specific interest in the social construction of work by disabled people and support professionals, and in aspects of quality of work and precariousness among disabled people.

Contact details: hardonk@hi.is; Oddi - Sæmundargötu 2, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland