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How is disability addressed in a job interview?

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ABSTRACT

Evidence reveals that disabled people face discrimination during the hiring process. Nonetheless, knowledge is scarce about how employers and disabled applicants relate to the phenomenon of disability in job interviews. This article explores the understandings of disability emerging from actual job interviews for a company with an expressed diversity policy. By combining the analytical concepts of 'dialogism' and 'staring', the article illustrates the tendency to use an individualised understanding of disability, thus blocking affirmative understanding and the candidates' limited agency to perform the role of 'staree' in the job interview setting (i.e. advocating for disability as an asset). To facilitate more inclusive hiring practices, employers could explicitly link the diversity statements in their job listings to their inclusion policies in practice to show their concern about staff diversity and work-life inclusion to their candidates.

Points of interest

- Disabled people are known to face discrimination during the job hiring process.
- This article shows that even inclusive employers may use a person-deficit approach when talking to disabled applicants in a job interview.
- Educators and employment service providers should educate employers on the different understandings that exist about disability to foster inclusive dialogues and work environments.
- Educators and social workers should support disabled job seekers, as they strive to achieve self-awareness and build self-advocacy skills, which would enable them to inform potential employers about the assets of disability.

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Introduction

How do employers and disabled job applicants address and answer the phenomenon of disability in job interviews? If discussed at all, how do such dialogues unfold, and what might they tell us about the social language in use? In the field of disability and hiring, we have much knowledge about how employers may be concerned about the employability, productivity, and competence of disabled people, as well as the costs associated with workplace accommodations and absenteeism (cf. Vornholt et al. 2018). Moreover, field experiments have shown that disabled applicants face discrimination in the first stage of the hiring process (see, e.g. Ameri et al. 2018; Baert 2017; Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov 2021). Looking more specifically at what happens in the job interview phase, disabled people have provided insights through their stories into how some employers seem to focus on applicants' impairment(s) rather than their qualifications and competencies (e.g. Vedeler 2014; Chhabra 2021; Duckett 2000). A next step is to start exploring how employers and disabled applicants interact and relate to the phenomenon of disability in job interviews (Levashina et al. 2014). By focusing on the behavioural level and drawing on real-life dialogues, we may gain a better understanding of the processes that may lead to the inclusion (or exclusion) of disabled people in employment.

To provide insight into how disability is referred to in job interviews, the current article uses the dual lens of dialogism (Bakhtin 1981; Holquist 2002) and staring (Garland-Thomson 2009). According to Bakhtin, people experience the world through dialogues, and they constantly address and answer the phenomena surrounding them. By making utterances, people exploit social languages, which refer to '[the] languages of authorities of various circles and of passing fashion, languages that serve the specific socio-political purposes of the day' (Bakhtin 1981, 262–263). In the field of disability, several social languages are at the user's disposal, often expressed in terms of different disability models (Shakespeare 2014). Thus, in making utterances, employers and candidates draw on available resources as well as on their personal experiences to construct a limited array of realities facilitated by social languages.

Moreover, using Garland-Thomson (2009) novel theory of staring, the article explores the dynamic relationship between a starer (in this case, the employer) and a staree (the candidate). Garland-Thomson (2009) argued that staring creates a social relationship and is considered a source of knowledge. Consequently, a staree can be more than the object of a stare in interactions; the staree can also teach the starer something new. Thus, complementing Bakhtin's dialogism, Garland-Thomson's theory facilitates the exploration of how and why candidates may engage in a dialogue on disability.

The current article draws on data from a case study to examine how employer representatives and applicants engage in a conversation about

disability using observation data from job interviews as well as follow-up interviews with employers and job candidates. This article focuses on one selected case from a larger dataset, which includes 33 job candidates and 8 recruitment processes from 4 different Norwegian companies that had a diversity statement in their job listings. Although only—but not surprisingly—a minority of the job candidates disclosed a disability, there is much to learn by closely examining one of these cases (cf. Andenaes 2011).

A close inspection sheds light on the understandings of disability that may emerge in a job interview and the involved actors' perceptions of and reasons for engaging in such a conversation. In turn, such an endeavour may lead to a better understanding of how employers in companies with expressed diversity policies relate to—or address and answer—the phenomenon of disability.

The impact of disability in recruitment

Some studies (Vedeler 2014; Chhabra 2021; Duckett 2000; Shier, Graham, and Jones 2009; Trezzini et al. 2021) have examined how disability is referred to in job interviews by drawing on the perspectives of disabled people. These works demonstrate the hesitancy of some employers when interacting with disabled applicants and the employers' inclination to address applicants' physical constitutions rather than their qualifications and competencies. These studies also convey stories of employers who outright discriminated against candidates by ending the job interview once the disability had been disclosed, 'while in other cases, qualified youth participants were asked to not even to attend the interview' (Chhabra 2021, 1700). One way of understanding applicants' narrated experiences is by categorising them into (i) recognising when employers in job interviews focus on the applicant's competence and suitability and (ii) showing hesitancy when employers reveal their uncertain attitudes towards the applicant's disability and forget to focus on the latter's competence (Vedeler 2014).

A relevant body of literature on the impact of disability in job interviews consists of studies on disability disclosure. A systematic review shows that disability type and employers' negative attitudes are some of the important factors that may present barriers to disclosure (Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa 2018). For instance, people with non-apparent disabilities may be reluctant to disclose this information for fear of negative employer reactions. Meanwhile, people with visible disabilities may prefer to address this upfront in their resumes to avoid having the door slammed in their faces during their interviews. Alternatively, to increase their chances of being called for an interview, some individuals with visible disabilities may not address the issue at all until their interviews (Moloney et al. 2018).

The timing of disclosure of disabilities is discussed in the literature, but there is little consensus about the best disclosure timing: pre-employment,

during the interview phase, after receiving a job offer, or after starting the job. One study showed that those in need of accommodation during a job interview revealed their disability prior to the interview, whereas those with a visible disability but with no need for accommodation chose to disclose this in person during the interview (Jans, Kaye, and Jones 2012). Another study showed a variety in timing that was not dependent on the interviewees' need for accommodation; rather, the applicants' decisions 'and reasons for disclosure included advocating for their needs, knowledge of workplace rights, and having accommodation solutions' (Lindsay et al. 2019, 5).

The disclosure literature also includes knowledge about the different forms of disclosure that may be at the disposal of disabled people. Drawing on the life history narratives of people with non-apparent impairment, three main strategies are identified: confessional, pragmatic, and validating (Evans 2019). The strategies may express how a person manages the disability identity, and a person may use different strategies depending on the social context. A confessional strategy entails, for example, disclosing one's disability to ask for services needed to participate in society; a pragmatic strategy to make others reduce disabling barriers in the environment; and a validating strategy to make disability a legitimate identity. Examining disclosure processes using these concepts may reveal how disabled people in interactions with others 'internalize the stigma associated with disability, pragmatically acquire accommodations, or resist and challenge ableist views' (Evans 2019, 726).

None of the referred studies are based on observations of how disability is addressed in actual job interviews. To complement the existing literature, this article takes a close look at a real-life attempt to engage in dialogue about disability in a company with an explicit interest in staff diversity.

Dialogue and staring

In this study, the framework for observing, exploring, and understanding job interview conversations consists of the theoretical concepts of 'dialogism' and 'staring.' These guided the analysis of the observations and the research interviews with the job candidates and employers involved. From an epistemological perspective, Bakhtin's (1981) theory outlines how sentient beings experience the world through dialogues that allow them to constantly address and answer the phenomena surrounding them. Thus, a dialogue is more than a conversation between interlocutors—it is the condition for social life. In a dialogue, the positioned subjects make utterances, and '[e]very utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word "response" here in the broadest sense)' (Bakhtin, Emerson, and Holquist 1986, 91). The utterance is always directed at someone or something, thus endowing it with addressivity.

An utterance is also a construction we make while perceiving or interpreting possible responses. In making utterances, human beings utilise their 'unique, unrepeatable existence as a particular person in a specific social and historical situation' (Holquist 2002, 28), whilst also being subject to social languages, which can be regarded as pre-existing, repeatable language systems, similar to the concept of 'discourse' (Burr 2003).

In the field of disability, several social languages are available. The individualised discourse frames disability as a person's limitations caused by impairment (Shakespeare 2014), and this discourse underpins what is often referred to as the 'medical model of disability'. There are also different variants of the social model of disability. In the UK, the dominant discourse in disability studies presents disability as a consequence of societal oppression and exclusion of people with impairments due to the lack of civil rights and accessibility, resulting in 'minimal benefits, exclusion from employment and the educational mainstream, and blocks on access to the built environment' (Thomas 2004, 571). In Norway and other Nordic countries, where the relative or interactional discourse has gained ground, disability is viewed as a gap between a person's preconditions and the surrounding social and environmental conditions (Lie 1989; Tøssebro 2004). Thus, in making utterances, the employers and candidates involved in this work drew on available resources and their personal experiences to construct a limited array of realities provided by social languages. These resources and limitations are conditioned by the involved actors' social statuses and positions and by the social settings in which interactions and communication unfold.

To complement Bakhtin's (1981) theory and grasp the agency of the actors, I apply Garland-Thomson's (2009) staring theory, which argues that staring is an everyday activity involving staring at sights that (in some way) are novel to our experiences. In contrast to perhaps an everyday perception of staring, Garland-Thomson (2009) did not condemn this act; rather, she focused on the interactions that might arise between a starer and a staree. Her perspective makes evident how candidates who are aware of (potentially) eliciting stares from the employer and, more generally, from their everyday experiences of living a life with disabilities may use their agency in the job interview. She also rendered the staree the potential role of an educator—an actor who may 'shift [the] audience from curiosity to knowledge' (Garland-Thomson 2009, 192). In other words, staring may involve interactions that can be directed; thus, a staree is given agency. This perspective contrasts with, for example, that of Sontag (2003), who explained in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* that staring is primarily a one-way action. Given that staring is an aspect of our interpersonal lives, Garland-Thomson argues that 'the question for starers is not whether we *should* stare, but rather *how* we should stare. The question for starees is not whether we *will* be stared at,

but rather *how* we will be stared at' (Garland-Thomson 2009, 185, emphases in original). Deliberately taking it upon themselves to direct staring encounters, starees may engage in a form of visual activism, a process entailing three steps: looking, thinking, and acting (Garland-Thomson 2009).

To illustrate the potential use of the staring theory, I will use job candidates with physical disabilities as an example, as follows. During job interviews, candidates with extraordinary body features may draw employers' looks, as evident in the candidates' narratives themselves (e.g. Vedeler 2014). By taking part in interviews, candidates (indirectly) ask employers to *think* differently about individuals with disabilities—the low level of employment participation amongst such individuals (Heymann, Stein, and de Elvira Moreno 2014) signals the rare presence of job candidates with disabilities. If employers are receptive (i.e. willing to be inclusive), 'it can create a sense of obligation that primes [employers] to act in new ways … to treat people differently, and to look at people differently' (Garland-Thomson 2009, 193).

While evaluating job applications, employers are encouraged to *look* beyond the potential stereotypes, especially when assessing applications submitted by persons with disabilities. Employers should also regard or *think* about candidates who have comparable qualifications and are on par with candidates without disabilities and invite them to job interviews.

In summary, observations of job interviews and subsequent research interviews with employers and candidates provided insights into specific conversations. By using Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of 'dialogue', 'utterance', and 'social languages', I aim to provide insights into how conversations on disability unfolded during the selected interviews. By including the staring theory of Garland-Thomson (2009), I also focused on the actors' opportunities to negotiate the understanding of disability that emerged during the job interview.

Thus, based on the literature overview and embedded within the theoretical framework of dialogism and staring, this article examines how disability is addressed in job interviews. Specifically, it investigates the social languages used by employers and candidates and the latter's leeway or opportunity to perform the role of starees in the job interview setting.

Methods

In this article, I highlight one specific case from my empirical material, which includes observations of eight recruitment processes in four different companies to positions such as advisers (4 positions), manager (1 position), project leader (1 position), project assistant (1 position), and account officer (1 position). The educational requirement of one position was upper secondary education, while six positions required a bachelor's degree, and one required a master's degree. The vast majority of the candidates called in for

job interviews were women. In all, only 4 of the 33 candidates self-identified as having a disability. Two of them were offered a job. One had been attending a work training measure in the same enterprise and was recruited to a part-time position that suited her needs due to reduced work capacity. The other was offered a full-time, temporary 6-month contract but ended up turning down the offer, as taking up the position would entail relocating from one city to another. The move would involve renting a universally designed apartment and finding new personal assistants. The third candidate, who disclosed a disability, had applied for a full-time position but emphasised in the interview that she would only be able to work part-time due to chronic fatigue. Subsequently, she was not offered the job.

By addressing a job interview and follow-up research interviews with the involved actors, a detailed description and exploration of the dialogue on disability were facilitated. Moreover, the selected case was the only one in which no workplace accommodation was needed. Thus, it provides particularly intriguing insights into how understandings of disability in employment often may revolve around a deficiency approach (i.e. a need for adaptation and accommodation), which is mirrored in a national inclusive work-life policy that tends to include individuals with a disability in need of workplace accommodation. The selected case is particularly useful for learning (cf. Andenaes 2011) about the emerging challenges in job interviews conducted by inclusive-oriented employers, who work for companies that include diversity statements (e.g. 'We are actively working to develop ourselves as an inclusive workplace and to provide workplace accommodations if you need them') in their job listings.

The current study is a single-case study of how disability is addressed and answered in ordinary job interviews (Donmoyer 2009). A single-case study allows for an in-depth study of how actors' actions are embedded in culture and how policy constrains and facilitates the participating actors' responses. Rather than arguing for generalizability, single-case studies may help the reader 'take us to places where most of us would not have the opportunity to go' (Donmoyer 2009, 19), and by providing 'sufficient medium-rare data' (Ibid, 22), i.e. transcripts of real-life dialogues, the reader is also given the opportunity to make their own interpretation of what unfolds between an employer and an applicant. Despite the small sample size and hence an inability to draw more generalizable conclusions, this study has heuristic value, as it may help 'in the forming of questions rather than in the finding of answers' (Ibid, 9).

In addition, the study was conducted within the framework of applied ethnographic research (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). With the aim of gaining a better understanding of socio-cultural problems, the applied ethnographic research approach is commonly used to obtain findings that may be relevant to stakeholders (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). In this case, the

stakeholders are disabled people, their organisations, employer and employee unions, and public employment agencies, all of whom formed part of the expert advisory group for this project.

Both employers and candidates consented to participate in the study. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data reviewed the study to ensure adherence to ethical research guidelines. The employers sent consent forms to the candidates prior to their job interviews, and they were given the opportunity to accept or refuse the request to participate in the study. The observations and research interviews were digitally recorded, and the participants' and companies' names were changed to ensure anonymity.

Determining how my presence affected the job interviews proved difficult. During the observations, I was usually seated next to a candidate, and to minimise my presence, I did not take notes. The recorder was deliberately pointed toward the employer representatives. To further emphasise the message, I began my introduction by stating my goal in conducting the study by primarily observing the job interview practices of employers. However, my presence and the focus of this study made employers more mindful of addressing inclusion and accommodations. This happened in six of the eight recruitment processes, including the case highlighted here, as the inclusion issues were addressed in various ways and not in a consistent manner. Although the aim of the larger research was to learn from actual observations of employment practices, none of the participating employers expressed confidence as inclusion experts. Nevertheless, they contributed data that proved relevant for identifying promosing practices.

The analysis was a circular endeavour in which I combined listening to the recorded job interviews and the research interviews, along with careful readings of the transcriptions, with a theoretical interpretation. Drawing on the theories of Bakhtin's dialogism (Holquist 2002) and Garland-Thomson (2009) staring, as well as on the rich literature on disability models (see, e.g. Shakespeare 2014; Swain and French 2000; Thomas 2004; Tøssebro 2004), I identified the understandings of disability emerging in the job interviews and explored the agency of the employers and the candidates, as expressed and interpreted in the selected job interview and the subsequent research interviews, respectively.

Contextualising the job interview: policy and regulations

This section focuses on a government agency workplace (hereafter referred to as 'State Agency') with a policy of including a diversity statement in its job listings. State Agency, which employs over 250 people, is a large Norwegian organisation (Statistics Norway 2019) consisting of many departments, each with several sections. Government agencies in Norway are strongly advised to include more disabled people in their workforce (see The Government 2018; Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation

2019), and State Agency is a target of a recent inclusion programme launched in 2018.

In Norway, in common with many countries in the Global North, the government has had a goal since the early 2000s of increasing the number of disabled people in the workforce (see Tøssebro 2016) without necessarily levelling the playing field in actual practice. Meanwhile, Statistics Norway, monitoring the employment participation rates of disabled people has reported that the employment gap has not increased (Statistics Norway 2020). The inclusion programme of 2018, which represented the previous government's effort to facilitate the increased employment of disabled people, includes a light quota measure (as there are no sanctions) targeting government agencies (the inclusion programme was terminated in 2022 as the intended results were lacking). These agencies are expected to fill 5% of their job vacancies with disabled people or to employ individuals with a gap of more than 2 years in their CVs (The Government 2018). A circular emphasises that 'individuals with disabilities' are limited to individuals in need of workplace accommodation (The Government 2019, Section 3.2).

State Agency is also covered by the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act (2018, Chapters 2 and 3), which prohibits employment discrimination on the grounds of disability and requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations (also regulated in the Working Environment Act, §4–6). The Act states that an employer is not allowed to enquire about an impairment during job interviews but may ask questions about the need for accommodations. Moreover, as a public employer, State Agency must adhere to the *qualification principle*, which indicates that employers are required to employ the formally best-qualified candidate. This is stipulated in the regulations for the Civil Service Act (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation 2017), §6 'Applicants with Disabilities', which states that employers have to invite at least one qualified applicant with a disability (if there is such a candidate amongst the applicants) to the interview and that a person with a disability may be hired if they are almost as well qualified as the best-qualified applicant. In the online job application portal used by State Agency and other government agencies in Norway, disabled people may self-identify by ticking a box. The purpose is to ensure that the employer identifies and invites at least one qualified person with a disability to the job interview.

In the job interviews that I observed at State Agency, a department leader and a section leader were always present. In most interviews, a union representative, whose presence is in line with the objective of government agencies to implement an inclusive human resource (HR) policy, also attended (see Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation 2019, Section 8.29 Objective).

The job interview: a dialogue on disability

Job interviews were held for a full-time, permanent position, which included tasks ranging from customer service to filing and ordering products and required an applicant with a bachelor's degree. The department invited six candidates for interviews.

Neither the employer nor the HR adviser facilitating the recruitment process identified any applicants with disabilities for this position. However, the fourth candidate interviewed (Thomas Nilsen) had, in fact, ticked the 'person with a disability' box in the online job application portal, which was only later acknowledged by the employers when they looked more closely at his application.

Jan Hansen, head of the department, and Eva Larsen, the section leader, conducted the interviews. (The HR adviser only took part in the second round of the interview, as she acknowledged that Jan was an experienced interviewer and did not need assistance in this part of the process.) The interview was held online via Skype, which meant that Thomas introduced himself while sitting at a desk. A few years ago, he had also been interviewed for a different position at State Agency by Jan, who was unable to remember this until Thomas reminded him about it halfway through the job interview.

Disability was thematised 36 min into the altogether 55-minute-long interview. To contextualise this thematization of disability, let me focus on a break between the second and third job interviews in which Jan, Eva, and I were all present. Eva asked me if there were any issues related to work inclusion that employers like them should be particularly concerned about when conducting job interviews. Both Eva and Jan added that none of the candidates for the position had self-disclosed a disability. I told them, based on my experience (from the work I did in my PhD dissertation), that not everyone with a disability would necessarily disclose having one. The recording of this conversation revealed that none of us followed up on this issue, and we moved on to talking about the qualification requirements listed in the job advertisement. In the following interviews, Jan addressed the issues of disability and accommodation near the end but did not convey any other information on the inclusive work-life policy of State Agency to the candidates.

Returning to the job interview with Thomas prior to the thematization of disability, the conversation included a short presentation of the workplace, a conversation about the advertised position, and questions about the candidate. A few minutes before they started addressing disability, Eva and Jan had informed Thomas about what would happen in the next steps of the recruitment process—they would have a second round of interviews with a selected group of candidates—thus signalling to Thomas that the main parts of the interview had already concluded. Then, the following dialogue unfolded:

Employer Jan: Here [in this workplace], we like to prioritise individuals with disabilities or those with an immigrant background. From what I gather, you haven't ticked any of those boxes [in the online job application portal]. I've been made aware by [name of researcher], however, that not everyone with a disability will do so. That's why I'm asking if (…) we need to accommodate anything for you in particular, and if that's the case, that would not, well, be a disadvantage. Because we would prefer to …

Candidate Thomas: I did check that box for disability, and I've never done that before. In fact, I doubted whether to do so, because the nature of my disability is one that doesn't need any accommodation. It doesn't have any consequences for the professional job. But the disability is visible as I walk a little awkwardly. I was born with a [name of diagnosis].

Employer Eva: Okay, yes.

Candidate Thomas: But I have no pain. The injury is repaired. I have no pain, and it doesn't bother me in any way. But it's visible, and thus, for instance, if I showed up for an interview [in person], you would've noticed that there's something, and then the question is whether I should inform you about it. In most cases, I haven't done so because, to me, everything is actually quite normal. The injury has been treated but is still visible.

Employer Jan: But it's not you, then, who'd carry the books around [at this workplace]?

Candidate Thomas: Please repeat that?

Employer Jan: It's perhaps not you who'd carry boxes with books, right?

Candidate Thomas: If I'm able to, I would. So, it is what it is. I have no pain anywhere, and I consider my health to be as good as it could be. It may, in fact, even be better than [the health] of most [other people], but when people see me, they may think differently. Many who see me may believe that I'm in pain.

Employer Jan: Well, I can't remember any of that from when you interviewed last time. [A little laughter.] Didn't make any impression on me, at least.

Employer Eva: No, and it wouldn't be a hindrance to any hiring.

Employer Jan: No, no.

Candidate Thomas: The impairment has never resulted in any absences, either.

Employer Jan: No.

Candidate Thomas: You can ask my references about that, too, or anyone else, really.

Employer Jan: Yes. Are you at the moment, well I don't know if there are very many job openings now in this area, but are you involved in other job search processes now?

Candidate Thomas: Not yet. There are not many positions like this now.

The first insight revealed in this dialogue is that the employer, Jan, starts the conversation about disability by emphasising that State Agency, as a workplace, wants to hire more individuals with disabilities, as well as people with immigrant backgrounds. Jan's commitment to increasing staff diversity was also recorded in the research interview with the HR adviser and confirmed by Eva in the follow-up research interview. As Eva claimed, 'Jan, our boss, is very committed to this issue of inclusion'. Although Jan seemed a bit uncertain about how to put the inclusion policy into words during the job interview, he still felt strongly about the issues of diversity and inclusion, to the extent that he had tried to thematise the State Agency's ambition. In particular, he told Thomas up front that had he ticked the box 'person with a disability', that would, perhaps counter-intuitively, be a definite advantage. Thus, in the conversation, Jan makes an explicit link to the main inclusion policy measurement that State Agency is subject to, which is stated in the job listing and is made visible in the electronic application form.

When ticking the box and workplace accommodation were brought into the conversation, Thomas mentioned that he had actually ticked that box, and he even emphasised that it was his first time doing so. However, he stressed that he did not require any accommodations, and in the research interview, Thomas did not recognise himself as disabled in terms of experiencing limitations to major life activities. Nevertheless, he had experienced being *regarded* as having a disability or being in pain, as he referred to in the job interview. He further shared that this 'being regarded or judged' aspect was the reason why, for the first time, he ticked the box 'a person with a disability' in the online job application portal. It seems like Thomas feels compelled to label himself disabled (cf. Shier, Graham, and Jones 2009) because of previous experiences.

In the job interview, Thomas continued by discussing how he was born with an injury that was later treated but was still visible in the way he walked. Again, he stressed that the disability had no impact on how he performed his job. The disclosure process Thomas engages in is a pragmatic one; he conveys 'impairment information in very practical terms, using disclosure to enlist others' (Evans 2019, 743), not to reduce physical but attitudinal barriers.

Jan followed up on Thomas' individualising approach to the phenomenon of disability when he asked—in a friendly, joking manner—whether it was perhaps not Thomas who carried boxes of books at the workplace. As a way of repeating that his mobility disability did not affect the execution of job-related tasks, Thomas responded that he could do so if he was able to. One possible interpretation of Thomas' response is that he implies he could carry these books in the same way as others if the boxes were not too heavy. The response could also be read as Thomas's way of signalling that, although he could carry the books, not everyone can carry the same weight, independently of having a disability or not.

Another way to look at the dialogue is to see how Thomas engages in the conversation as a staree (Garland-Thomson 2009), who tries to teach the starer (Jan) that despite having a mobility disability, he may be able to actually carry books. He tries to convince the employer representatives that the injury has been repaired to the extent that it does not even influence his health. Here, Thomas engages in what Garland-Thomson (2009) identifies as 'visual activism', as he tries to make the employer representatives think differently about his skills. By doing so, Thomas draws on his *previous* negative encounters with employers, who seem to have been sceptical about his ability to perform job tasks because he walks 'a little awkwardly'.

In the subsequent research interview, Thomas talked about his most recent job interview in which the topic of disability had not been addressed by the employer (nor by Thomas himself) during the interview: 'But afterwards, I got to know from my reference that the disability had been addressed with her. So, [the employer], out of nowhere, had asked about it but had never addressed it with me during the interview itself'.

Thus, in preparation for the job interview at State Agency, he had decided to be upfront about the issue to ensure that any uncertainty about his work capacity would be scrutinised in the job interview *with* him. In the research interview, Thomas recalled, 'I was, in fact, just waiting for them to bring up the issue'. If Jan and Eva had not addressed the issue, Thomas would have raised it himself at the end of the interview, as he did not want any uncertainties related to his disability to linger, noting that 'I do not want [my disability] to be a minus in the margin'.

In the job interview, Thomas is involved in a dialogue about disability with employers, who have a sincere objective of increasing the number of employees with disabilities and having diverse staff in their organisation. In the research interview, Eva said that in their unit there are disabled employees. In addition, at that time, State Agency was in the process of hiring a third person with reduced work capacity. However, neither Jan nor Eva mentioned this in the job interview itself. Thus, Thomas engaged in the conversation, not knowing much about the employer's actual diversity practice, apart from the diversity statement in the job listing and the opportunity of ticking the 'person with a disability' box in the application form. When Thomas constructs his utterances, he does so on the basis of his *previous* job interview encounters and his interactions with people in general, as evident in his claim, 'when people see me, they may think differently. Many who see me may believe that I'm in pain'. In the research interview, he stated that he has 'participated in at least 50 job interviews'.

Bakhtin, Emerson, and Holquist (1986, 91) asserted that 'any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication' and that 'it is shaped and developed in continuous interaction with others' individual utterances' (89). Accordingly, when responding, Thomas does so in reference not only to

Jan's concrete utterance whilst perceiving or interpreting possible responses, but also to the 'preceding links in the communication (sometimes close and sometimes … very distant)' (Bakhtin, Emerson, and Holquist 1986, 93). Both the individualised and the more social understandings of disability are available to the public—including Jan, Eva, and Thomas—through contemporary culture (see, e.g. Garland-Thomson 1997; Shakespeare 1999) and through national work inclusion policies and legislation. These representations shape people's understanding of disability. Thus, Jan, Eva and Thomas are 'not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time' (Bakhtin, Emerson, and Holquist 1986, 93).

During the interview, the interlocutors draw attention to an injury that is repaired, to what the candidate can do (despite the repaired injury), and to potential tasks that the candidate cannot do. What emerges are dialogue partners using a 'person defect language', which is one of the dominant social languages (Bakhtin 1981) within the disability domain. The dialogue unfolds by utilising a language that expresses and is embedded in an individual-oriented model of disability (Shakespeare 2014)—one that encourages 'the simplistic view that disability is a personal tragedy for the individual concerned' (Johnstone 1998, 19).

Would the dialogue on disability have taken a different direction if the employers had been aware of the disability from the outset? As there is no way of providing the right answer to this question, looking more closely at the regulations guiding an employer's approach to disability and accommodation may provide some insight. According to Norway's Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act (2018), employers are mandated to provide reasonable accommodation. In its report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Norwegian Ombud (LDO 2015) expressed concern that the government has chosen a design for its discrimination protection in working life that primarily emphasizes the right to individual accommodation and not a universal design of workplaces. A plausible assumption is that the conversation would not have been so different given the dominant understanding of disability as a person-defect both in culture and in legislation.

When the dialogue is embedded in an understanding of disability as a challenge belonging to the individual, this also has implications for Thomas's agency and visual activism (Garland-Thomson 2009). As a staree, Thomas tries to teach the employers something new: that his disability will not influence his job performance. When engaging in this form of visual activism, he does so by being present at the job interview, which is the 'looking' part of visual activism. Thomas also engages in the 'thinking' part of visual activism by explicitly addressing that his health is good and that his disability would not affect his ability to perform his job tasks; as such, he is an active interlocutor in the dialogue.

Nonetheless, Thomas resorts to the use of language based on a 'problem belonging to the individual' perspective (i.e. an individual-oriented model). As a job candidate, he is in an asymmetrical power position vis-à-vis the employer, and when, in this dialogue, the employer primarily utilises an individualising language, it seems to restrict Thomas' use of other competing languages.

The potential dilemmas of being the addressee of accommodation questions

According to Bakhtin, 'an essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its *addressivity*' (Bakhtin, Emerson, and Holquist 1986, 95, emphasis in the original). When the employers addressed disability and accommodations in the job interview with Thomas, the candidate became the addressee. This leads to a crucial dilemma for the candidate when applying for a job: Should the candidate reveal the (possibly irrelevant) disability, and if so, should it be done during the application or during the job interview? If the latter, should it be at the beginning or toward the end? As revealed earlier in this article, the research literature provides no clear results (Jans, Kaye, and Jones 2012; Lindsay et al. 2019).

The case analysis demonstrates that when the employer (Jan) consciously addresses the issues of inclusion, disability, and accommodation, he is cautious. Despite this, when he focuses on accommodation, the dialogue seems to be oriented toward the potential tasks that the candidate cannot do and, potentially, the accommodations needed by the candidate to carry out such tasks. Thus, the employer's utterances mirror the workplace accommodation regulations in the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act and the Working Environment Act. In this way, the dialogue becomes individualised, and a more relational understanding of disability is not utilised. Hence, the candidate is cornered and left with few options to try to convince the employer that he is well-qualified, regardless of whether there is a need for accommodations.

In this way, the candidate is forced to discuss his disability, although he believes it is irrelevant. The applicant's strategic dilemma of raising/not raising the disability issue himself during the application process is further seen in his choice of ticking 'disability' in the online application portal. Although the employers apparently did not notice, the issue was discussed anyway, as if the candidate had not ticked disability. Therefore, the intended advantage of approaching his disability upfront was nullified by the representatives' failure to notice it.

At the end of the follow-up research interview, Thomas reflected briefly on the possibility of advocating for the positive aspects of growing up with a disability:

> I wonder if I should have used my disability positively to get the job. [Researcher saying 'yes?'.] For example, by saying that it's valuable to have someone with a slightly different life experience join the staff or something like that. [Researcher

saying 'yes?'.] However, it's not easy to know how that would be interpreted. So, as long as my disability has no impact on how I perform my job, then I really want to say as little as possible about it because [the disability] is not really relevant.

In the first two sentences, Thomas' reasoning suggests a so-called affirmative understanding of disability in which 'an affirmative model is being generated by disabled people through a rejection of the tragedy model (...). The affirmative model, however, is not about the "pain of impairment", but on the contrary the positive experiences and identity of disabled people from being impaired and disabled' (Swain and French 2000, 578–579). The affirmative model would be mirrored in a validating disclosure strategy that 'legitimizes disability identity, signalling a political identity that resists or calls out systems of oppression against a shared, minority status' (Evans 2019, 743). This way of understanding disability has, perhaps, been most clearly expressed in the American context for the last three to four decades, as evidenced by the use of slogans such as 'disabled and proud'. Nonetheless, in the third sentence ('…it's not easy to know how that would be interpreted'), Thomas points indirectly to the fact that employers may not be ready to acknowledge this added competence stemming from living a life with a disability. This interpretation is partly backed up by Thomas' claim that he has been to 50 interviews and has never been ranked first in any of them. In the research interview, he concluded that he wanted his disability to receive as little attention as needed.

The State Agency case analysis demonstrates how the unit under investigation translates its diversity policy into practice by employing disabled people. The employer representatives noted a willingness to employ such candidates. In this particular case, the employers apparently did not initially notice that the candidate had a disability but still raised the issue during the job interview. The candidate, on his side, had a clear strategy for the interview and strongly argued that his disability was irrelevant to his job performance. Whether he managed to convince the employer was unclear. In the end, Thomas was not offered this position, as the employer ranked him second; the candidate offered the position had greater competence, including more varied job experiences. Therefore, this case demonstrates perhaps a common experience: after and during a job search process, disabled candidates can seldom be sure of the significance of their disabilities during job suitability evaluations.

Conclusion

The consistent findings revealing that employers respond less favourably to disabled applicants (e.g. Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov 2021) indicate the need to provide more insights into actual recruitment practices, including how employers relate to disability in job interviews. This text posed the questions

of how employers and disabled applicants address and answer the phenomenon of disability in job interviews and what such a dialogue might tell us about the social languages in use. My research design included a case study of job interviews in a company with a stated diversity claim. I found that disability is addressed primarily in terms of a person-deficit approach (i.e. the interlocutors used a social language that expresses a medical model of disability). This social language is available to employers through contemporary culture and permeates policies and regulations.

The case supports the observation by Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa (2018, 2984) that in order to level the playing field for disabled people applying for jobs, 'there is a strong need for more support and awareness at the societal level (…), particularly among employers'. Although research shows the benefits of disabled candidates who are competent in addressing their disability and their need for workplace accommodation, a close inspection of an actual job interview reveals the tendency to use an individualised understanding of disability, thus blocking an affirmative understanding.

One important takeaway from the analysis is that employers must be more aware of how they introduce their respective workplaces to applicants. Job interviews may be regarded as an opportunity for employers to brand themselves, so they may serve as venues for organisational impression management (Avery and McKay 2006). An implication of the analysis is that employers could be better at linking their diversity statements in their job listings to their inclusion policy in practice. This can be done by providing information about their inclusion responsibilities as employers and, if relevant, addressing how they work to increase staff diversity and create inclusive workplaces. Moreover, one hypothesis that I may derive from the analysis is that asking questions about accommodation should be done later after a job offer is made. It seems more important that employers clarify their inclusion policies in job interviews so that their commitment is explicitly conveyed to the candidates and not just stated 'on paper' (e.g. in the job listings). Although the particularities of this case may be unique, this article displays some real dilemmas in translating inclusive policies into inclusive recruitment practices.

I chose a single-case study design to allow for an in-depth exploration of a dialogue on disability in a job interview carried out in a company with an expressed interest in diversity. An obvious limitation of such small-scale research is that generalization is not possible. Rather, as Donmoyer (2009) points out, such medium-rare data primarily offer the reader access to what may happen in a world that may be inaccessible to most, in this case the job interview. The medium-rare data also invite the reader to take part in the researcher's interpretations of what happens, as well as to reflect on why what happens actually happens.

To conclude, the implications of the research are that (i) real-life dialogue shows that even among inclusion-oriented employers, an

individualized understanding of disability may prevail, which reflects how such an understanding still permeates our culture and is expressed in policies, and (ii) that observational data may be a useful supplement to interview and survey data to get closer to people's understandings and their actual actions. Employing such a methodological approach, further research would be valuable in determining whether an individualized understanding of disability may prevail in job interviews carried out in different national contexts by different companies with other groups of disabled applicants.

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