



Is There an Ableist Paradox in Frontline Workers' Success Stories About Disability and Work Inclusion?

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Frontline workers are tasked with enabling the employment of disabled people. They engage with an ableist narrative that constructs disabled people as less worthy, less productive, and subordinate when they formulate contrasting narratives of disabled people as productive and capable workers. To better understand how frontline workers engage with the ableist narrative, focus group interviews were conducted with frontline workers (counsellors, employment specialists, and market coordinators) within the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. Focus group interviews generate interaction data resulting from discussions amongst informants revealing aspects of frontline work assumed to be otherwise less accessible, such as success stories. The primary finding is that frontline workers bring up success stories when they are talking about disability and work inclusion. Three narrative practices of these success stories are explored, each with specific contexts and circumstances: learning, motivating, and disability branding. While these narratives aim to redress disabled people's subordinated position, they still display ableist norms, thus suggesting that an ableist paradox exists in frontline workers' success stories.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ableism is suggested as a useful lens in examining disability employment policies and their impacts on the rights and dignity of disabled people (Kumar, Sonpal & Hiranandani 2012; Scholz & Ingold 2020; Van Aswegen 2020). In essence, ableism refers to ‘ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume able-bodiedness’ (Williams & Mavin 2012: 171) or non-disability as a normative organising principle against which all people are assessed (Campbell 2009). Studies on ableism and workplaces find that disabled people are constructed as less capable, less willing, and less productive workers and thus as less employable (e.g., Jammaers, Zanoni & Williams 2019; Mik-Meyer 2016). Other studies on disabled employees and ableism find that employees engage with ableist workplace discourses to create work identities that are compatible with the foundational idea of employees as productive human resources in employment (e.g., Elraz 2018; Jammaers, Zanoni & Hardonk 2016; Kwon 2020).

Although the current literature has well documented society-wide ableist discourses, to date, the literature on frontline workers and work inclusion rarely theorises through the lens of ableism. This is surprising because studies about frontline work find that frontline workers seldom challenge the norms of the self-sufficient labourer (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013; Hardonk & Halldórsdóttir 2021; Lantz & Marston 2012; Møller & Stone 2013; Nothdurfter 2016, 2020). Some studies also find that frontline workers encounter prejudice from employers when pursuing work inclusion (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013; Hardonk & Halldórsdóttir 2021). Without commenting explicitly on ableism, Hardonk and Halldórsdóttir (2021: 46) question whether ‘frontline workers focus on social integration and draw on ableist understandings of what constitutes a person who is “fit to work”, instead of recognising diverse competence from a perspective of inclusion’ (Shier, Graham & Jones 2009).

The current article responds to the gap in theorising about frontline work in promoting employment through the lens of ableism. The use of ableism as a theoretical lens is, to the best of my knowledge, also a novel way of approaching disability employment policies in a Nordic welfare context. In the Norwegian welfare context, welfare professionals are expected to have strong commitments to promoting equal opportunities for employment. This context creates a situation where welfare support and workplace accommodation are higher on the agenda than in other Western countries (Håvold, Harsløf & Andreassen 2018). Studies that explore the presence of ableism in inclusive contexts, such as in schools (Lyons 2013; Slater & Liz 2018), suggest that while the rhetoric of inclusiveness is present, able-bodiedness is preferred and privileged. Continuing in this tradition, the current study explores ableism in the welfare context promoting work inclusion.

Frontline workers used the term *success stories* when they introduced stories that present disabled people as attractive in the workforce. The term *success stories* represents efforts of acknowledging disabled citizens as resourceful, efforts that shift the perception of disability from deficits and limitations towards abilities. While acknowledging disabled people as resourceful, the stories also sustain ableist norms that privilege able-bodiedness over disability, a privileging that stands in opposition to inclusion ideals in disability employment policies. Informed by Bamberg’s (2011) narrative practice approach, emphasising the significance of the context and circumstances in which narratives are embedded and gain their functional value, I ask, which narrative practices accompany frontline workers’ success stories, and how do these practices contain ableism?

2. ABLEISM

According to the seminal work of Campbell (2009: 44),

‘ableism refers to 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. Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human’.

This definition refers to the assumption that the ‘normal’ able body is preferred and privileged over impaired bodily forms in the organisation of society, as well as in organisational, structural, and individual practices. Therefore, Campbell (2009) argues that we should reflect on how

dominant ideas of the 'able body' (which is a social construct) are produced. Such production implies reflecting on how the able body is maintained by examining elements of what is presented as normal or aspirational (Campbell 2012).

Two elements are key to maintaining a system of ableism (Campbell 2009; Campbell 2012). The first element is the concept of normativity—the idea of a normal individual. Ableism represents the meaning of a healthy body and a normal mind, both of which are coupled with a self-assured individual autonomy. 'It demands an unbridled form of individualism that is preoccupied with self-improvement and corporeal enhancement that struggles with the reality of illness and disability' (Campbell 2019: 148). As Campbell states: 'The tool of comparison, of normativity, is the benchmark man, the normative citizen who is invariably White, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle class' (Campbell 2012: 214).

The second element that maintains the system of ableism is the construction of a binary encapsulating a perfectly developed human being and 'the aberrant, the unthinkable, underdeveloped and therefore not really human' (Campbell 2009: 44). Being able-bodied is always relational to that which is considered its opposite; whereas, disability involves assigning labels to those bodies and mentalities outside the norm. Such divisions create problems because, as Campbell (2009: 11) points out, 'inscribing certain bodies in terms of deficiency and essential inadequacy privileges a particular understanding of normalcy'. Campbell states that

These two independent practices of normalising and pathologising must remain distinct for them to work. If the definitions of able-bodied and disabled become too unclear, the legal or governmental administration would have problems functioning. Ableism assists in the governing of disability ensuring that population that appears disordered, become ordered, mapped and distinct (Campbell 2012: 216).

The ableist language seeks to compartmentalise. One such compartmentalisation is the individual deficit categorisation of disability with a focus on illness limitations, a categorisation that constitutes the cornerstone of redistribution in the modern welfare state (Stone 1986: 4). This individual deficit approach has been significant in legitimating disabled people's exemption from labour market participation and ran parallel to the characterisation of work in capitalist societies in terms of paid wage labour and profit maximisation (Barnes & Mercer 2005). This principle has also placed disabled people at a disadvantage because they have been perceived as less productive, both reflecting and, in turn, enforcing an able-bodied norm causing discrimination. In this respect, while frontline workers try to implement inclusive policies, the organisational premises of categorising disability in the labour and welfare services make implementation challenging. They have to both assess disability as grounds for disability benefits that replace earning capacity lost due to illness and emphasise abilities that may eventually lead to employment. Therefore, Campbell's system of binary opposition (able and human/disabled and not fully human) may also oppose the premises that disability employment policies are built upon. Disability as a social category may be blurred because frontline workers assess degrees of ability and disability.

3. THE EMPIRICAL CONTEXT, DATA, AND METHODS

3.1 EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

In Norway, frontline offices are present in most local municipalities and in the administrative areas of large towns. They are given a key role in work inclusion: 'The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (hereafter NAV) helps provide social and economic security while encouraging a transition to activity and employment' (Government.no. 2020). These frontline offices are one-stop shops that provide welfare and unemployment services as well as financial and social assistance. The overall objectives of the NAV offices are to help clients find employment and to provide them with person-oriented, holistic, and efficient welfare services (Gjersøe 2016). Hence, the frontline offices are not divided into specific disability units. Extensive work inclusion efforts are usually provided before disability benefits are granted (Overbye 2005; Solvang 2017).

Work inclusion efforts take several forms in the frontline offices, including tailoring support and services to clients' needs, such as arranging for workplace accommodation or by providing a function assistant or a mentor at the workplace. In addition, frontline workers should also

focus on clients' acquisition of paid employment, that is, how to enhance client qualifications in a broad sense, including formal qualifications and personal resources through skill training, motivation, and self-efficacy (Solvang 2017). In other words, (at least) two different organisational rationalities guide frontline workers' inclusion efforts. Bureaucratic rationalities focus on treating clients equally, lawfulness, and universal access, while market rationalities lead to a focus on client competencies and efficiency, the match between employee capacities and employees' demands, and increasing the willingness of employers to hire disabled people.

Several types of frontline workers facilitate work inclusion in various ways that shape their position in the two rationalities: counsellors, employment specialists, and market coordinators. Interviewees in this study represented all three occupational roles. Counsellors clarify citizens' resources and motivations for work and activities. They offer employment programmes, outline activity plans, and assess rights under relevant legislation. Counsellors should also have familiarity with the local labour market and the means and measures by which citizens may be included (Sadeghi & Fekjær 2019).

Employment specialists play a key role in the vocational rehabilitation programme's individual placement and support (IPS) and extended follow-up. IPS mainly targets people with severe mental health illness. Extended follow-up targets people with severe difficulties finding a job, including disabled people. IPS and extended follow-up are supported employment (SE) models whereby employment specialists offer support to both the employer and the employee in finding the right match and the right jobs (Frøyland, Andreassen & Innvær 2019). Citizen preferences should also play a key role in shaping the follow-along supports that the employment specialist provides. SE prioritises a quick transition into work, with much of the training and skills development taking place in the workplace (Bond 1998). Some counsellors and market coordinators also use elements from SE models. They do so less structured than employment specialists. The use of SE models also varies in various frontline offices.

Market coordinators' core task is employer engagement, meaning 'influencing employers' willingness and responsibilities to recruit or train disabled people' (Van der Aa and van Berkel 2014: 13). The focus is also on creating new recruiting agreements by mapping the local regional employers' demands for labour. Employer engagement is based on the assumption that discrimination by employers gives rise to joblessness.

3.2 DATA MATERIAL

Group interviews were conducted in 2019 at five frontline offices, each located in different Norwegian municipalities, ranging in size from around 80 to 180 employees. A two-step recruitment process was used. First, approval was obtained from the Norwegian Directorate of Labour and Welfare, which in turn contacted local frontline offices on a list suggested by the author and asked whether they would participate in the project. Thereafter, the author contacted the frontline office managers who had agreed to participate. The office managers were asked to recruit participants with relevant experience in and knowledge about disability and work inclusion. There were 40 participants in total, interviewed in 13 groups according to their respective occupational roles. Each group consisted of three to four participants, but mostly four (two to three group interviews in each local office). Informants are coded (1–3) to indicate turn-taking during interviews.

The educational backgrounds of the three groups of frontline workers varied. The counsellors had formal education as social workers more often than did the employment specialists. The employment specialists' formal educational backgrounds varied from social work to teacher training, social sciences, and sales and marketing. The market coordinators had studied sales and marketing and education. The counsellors usually had more years of work experience than did the employment specialists and the market coordinators.

In group interviews, the number of participants is usually between three and five, and participants typically respond sequentially; whereas, in focus group interviews, interaction between participants is encouraged (Breen 2006; Grant 2011; Kitinger 1994). Group interviews in this study included components of focus group interviews. Before each interview started, the interviewer encouraged participants to discuss questions with each other and not to wait for the next question from the interviewer. The author managed all the group interviews except

for three, which were managed by another researcher in the project. The interviews took place at the frontline offices and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

While group interviews shape what the individual can talk about in the group, they also generate informant interaction, developing into collective meaning-making (Peltola 2017). Group interviews have interactional patterns similar to those of group meetings (where frontline workers discuss cases with co-workers) in which, frontline workers told the interviewer, they use success stories for learning purposes. These insights mean that the social context of group interviews probably activated more telling of success stories than individual interviews would have done.

A semi-structured interview guide was used, but interviewers were free to pursue additional relevant themes that emerged during interviews. The interview guide did not include any specific questions about telling stories; instead, the guide probed methods and strategies in facilitating employment for people with disabilities, including the knowledge and skills essential in this work. Another topic was cooperation with frontline workers in the local welfare office and with external actors, such as employers and health professionals. The interview began with a presentation of each participant's professional background and prior work experience.

The author has notified the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (ref. 52180), which has assessed and accepted the data collection and storage of personal data. All participants were informed orally and in writing that participation was voluntary and confidential. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Identifiable aspects of the offices or frontline workers, such as name, age, and location, were altered for discretion in the transcripts. Quotations have also been slightly edited to enhance readability and to protect the anonymity of interviewees. All actions taken were performed in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations.

3.3 ANALYSIS

A narrative practice approach (Bamberg 2011) was used to analyse the data. One premise of this approach is that the researcher has to focus on the context and circumstances in which stories are embedded and gain their functional value. Another premise is that it considers stories as consisting of references to a world of actors, places, and events, of something that has happened. This referential world opens up for the analysis of what the story is about—its content. The terms *story* and *narrative* are used interchangeably and are made up of the above-mentioned referential world. The term *narrative practices* implies an attempt to gain insight into the storytelling process and into what speakers try to accomplish when telling stories (Bamberg 2011).

The practical part of the analysis commenced by using disability and work inclusion as straightforward sensitising codes. Using this open coding, all relevant events and outcomes in the stories were included. Success stories became an analytic focus because they figured in all interviews across occupational roles and frontline offices and also provided valuable information about the professional efforts of work inclusion. In analysing these stories, narrative themes were identified. The themes were entwined with insights into what frontline workers try to accomplish when telling stories—their narrative practices (Bamberg 2011). Three narrative practices (learning, motivating and disability branding) were identified and analysed. As a final part of the analysis, identifying ableism in frontline workers' narrative practices was central.

4. RESULTS

The narrative practices varied among frontline workers according to their occupational demands and the type of disability in question. In their attempt to construct disabled people as positive and productive citizens, frontline workers also positioned themselves against the approach of disability as an individual deficit, or showed the distance to it, while also positioning disability towards physical prowess, recovery, or other forms of normalisation.

4.1 A LEARNING NARRATIVE

The learning narrative illustrates how frontline workers use success stories as a tool to learn about disability and work inclusion. Learning is understood in a constructionist manner, that is,

as taking place in various social negotiations among organisation members. Presented below are counsellors' reflections on how they use the formally implemented weekly meetings for learning. Success stories are then introduced as a matter of learning:

Interviewer: Would you say more about these weekly forums?

Counsellor 1: We can raise different problems there. Things we need help with, whether our evaluations are correct. If there's someone who can help us with that. They can also be used to share experiences, but that's probably not what we use them for most.

Counsellor 2: I think we've gotten better at sharing the success stories there, too. The fact that we have succeeded, and that we [have] service users who [...] What it takes to reach a goal. So there's been a lot of focus on success stories.

Counsellor 3: Also regarding how to engage employers.

The dialogue illustrates a shift from addressing problems to addressing successes in the weekly forums, whereby success stories themselves become the object of group reflection. Success is defined as reaching goals in employment policies and is realised when frontline workers engage employers as well as the citizen.

In addition, in the above dialogue, the counsellors appear as a collective we that learn. The next dialogue also illustrates how the collective we reflect and learn a new way of thinking of disability where potential employees with disabilities are seen as having special resources and strengths. Such self-reflection serves as a method for their learning. Before the dialogue began, informants discussed how frontline workers, including themselves, tended to see disability as a problem to be dealt with and overcome. When frontline workers become aware of such ableist assumptions and expectations, revised representations of disability may gain a foothold:

Market coordinator 1: It's all about the employer needing an extra pair of hands, and we have those extra hands. It's just a matter of finding them. And as I said, it's not that important if you don't have hands or ... I now have an excavator operator with one hand, and it's going very well. The only people who see the disability are us. Because he doesn't see it as a problem.

Market coordinator 3: They learn techniques, so why should we create obstacles.

Market coordinator 1: We are often the ones who see the problems.

Market coordinator 2: Yes, we had a colleague who sat in a wheelchair at [name]. He didn't see any obstacles.

Market coordinator 1: He was the first to come down from the third floor when there was a fire alarm. He drove his wheelchair backward down the stairs.

In the first paragraph, attention is drawn to the need for greater awareness of ableist attitudes related to impairment. The market coordinators assume that what is causing disability is ableist attitudes distinguishing people as disabled, an assumption that develops into a group consensus during the dialogue: *The only people who see the disability are us*. Next, they present two short stories where they present disabled people as creative and capable employees, finding solutions to potential obstacles in their environment. This presentation illuminates the influence of ableism that produces the able, strong, and productive body and its opposite (disabled).

Similar reflections were also visible among employment specialists and counsellors. Challenging their own ableist attitudes of disability and impairment as lacking in abilities to work appears as central in the learning narrative.

4.2 A MOTIVATING NARRATIVE

In the motivating narrative, the citizen's motivation and desire to recover, even when managing illness and health challenges, brought about by helping protagonists (general practitioners, psychologists, and frontline workers), appeared as a central pattern. Frontline workers do not begin from an assumption that citizens are healthy but rather from the position that they are well enough to engage in some amount of employment.

Most of the motivating stories were told by counsellors and employment specialists. These stories often dealt with citizens with psychosocial disabilities, such as social anxiety and depression, citizens who recover psychosocially through their own efforts and the support of psychologists and employers.

Counsellors elaborated on this recovery process as follows:

Interviewer: Does it ever happen that what the doctors say and what you see when dealing with users don't match up?

Counsellor 1: Yes. Perhaps particularly with regard to anxiety issues. A psychologist might say that now it's time for you to get out and try to work, while the person who's struggling with anxiety would find it really difficult even to get past the front door. Or even take the bus down to the frontline office or wherever. So it ... I have a great example. It was someone who had a lot of social anxiety and didn't dare take the bus or things like that, but he wanted to be a bus driver. He got the training through NAV. When he drove the bus, it went fine but being a passenger on a bus proved too challenging for him. So it was just ...

Counsellor 2: Yes. I also had one who suffered from severe anxiety, who couldn't move more than a few hundred metres from his home. But he works 80% of a full-time position close to where he now lives. He had exposure therapy with a nurse in a car so that he could watch his son playing football matches. So even that was really challenging for him. But he finally managed it, at work, but not otherwise.

Counsellor 1: Yes, that's what makes me stay in this job. The fact that there are so many good stories. They in themselves inspire me to keep going. I usually say that we deal with illness and tragedies, but it's amazing what we manage to achieve.

In the two stories presented, the counsellors admire the citizens for their ability to participate and find employment, even when feeling insecure, suffering, and dealing with mental illness. In the last paragraph of the previous dialogue, the counsellor stated that the *many good stories* inspired her: *That's what makes me stay in this job, and they in themselves inspire me to keep going*. Recovery and finding employment motivate the frontline workers, as evidenced by the counsellor's statement that they *usually deal with illness and tragedies*.

Similar events, recovery, and gainful employment happen in the next story, told by an employment specialist:

Interviewer: I have a follow-up question about employers. You told me about a vague feeling that there is something there. Would you like to say more about what this means?

[Another story of a citizen finding work].

Employment specialist: I have a young girl who was very fragile and struggled with anxiety. She had received treatment and had learned some tools she could use. We went through a lot of different types of occupations and then she said that she had done some refurbishing together with her husband, who was a carpenter, and she began thinking she might become a painter. She had a bachelor's degree in sports which she had never used. We contacted one painting company who asked what I could offer them. She began work training there, but I made it very clear that it could not be long-term work training. Gradually she got a job there, not as an apprentice, and would gradually earn a craft certificate. Earn slightly more than an apprentice wage [...] I think there are big differences between employers and industries. This painter was a bit of a teddy bear, but I also felt that he wanted to help people. But it couldn't affect the firm. It helped that the other colleagues knew that she needed a bit more time, so it worked really well. So it's fun when it works.

This story portrays the dedicated efforts of employment specialists, employers, and citizens in the process of finding employment and coping with efficiency demands in the labour market. The citizen, who was *very fragile and struggling*, had to cope with both illness and a competitive labour market. The story is referred to as motivational partly owing to the progressive recovery of the citizen and the helpful efforts of the employment specialist, and partly to the caring

and empathetic employer portrayed as a teddy bear: *It's fun when it works*, the employment specialist concluded.

Whereas the motivating narrative assumes that people are well enough to work, there was also a concurrent sentiment that employment makes people well, depicted by one employment specialist below:

Employment specialist: I have a lot of people who are depressed or have anxiety and who feel that this takes their whole focus. However, when we help and take the recovery process with them... Then, when you start working, you realise that you have 100% work capacity.

[The employment specialist imitates the citizen's voice].

It was only when I didn't work that I got depressed. Returning to work was the best thing that could happen.

Similar reflections were made by several informants. Some employment specialists even used *medicine* as a metaphor for the positive effects of employment relating to mental illness. As a final point to consider, frontline workers' reflections on the possibilities of getting worse because of work were not reflected in the motivating stories; rather, it was assumed that work is health-promoting, occasionally even more than sessions with psychologists and so on.

4.3 A DISABILITY BRANDING NARRATIVE

The disability branding narrative underpins the importance of frontline workers' strategies that facilitate connective and collaborative coordination when facilitating work inclusion. This narrative was used in a broader external context (the employers and the public) to amend existing presumptions and opinions among these actors. Disability is presented by various positive characteristics of skills and talents, and so also are the protagonists in the stories.

Market coordinators and employment specialists told disability branding stories most frequently. The following example represents a disability branding story. Before the story was told, the interviewer asked about designated disability employability programmes. In response, a specific employment programme was brought up. One market coordinator in the interview manages that programme, a human resource development programme characterised by close follow-up of a small number of participants (around 20), recipients of social assistance. After introducing the programme, one market coordinator announced that he had a good story to tell:

Market coordinator: What is most important is the motivation and the choice of where to work. If you really want it, I have a 100% score in engaging that particular employer, despite disability. Even if you are in a wheelchair or are... We have a good story now. There is a man who has been in Norway for several years. He came from a country in Africa. He has never been offered any work-oriented measures or jobs. I took him into the qualification programme in November. He was so determined to get a job. He is in a wheelchair and has no walking function. However, he got the job. Now he works as a course and conference host in a hotel, and his work environment is well adapted. He serves coffee for courses and conferences. In a wheelchair! So, he has many adaptations. He is a full-time worker. The employer is very motivated and satisfied.

On the one hand, the phrase *despite disability* associates individual deficit discourses of disability with expectations of reduced work capacity. Simultaneously, the citizen is portrayed as motivated, goal-oriented, and a full-time worker. The success in the story seems to rest on and reproduce an understanding of disabled workers as commonly less productive. Such expectations make it well worth telling a story when such assumptions are revised due to motivation, skills, and hard work. The market coordinator's construction of the citizen as productive and capable portrays the able, motivated, and productive body as normal and disability as abnormal. The portrayed material accommodation in the environment, as well as the motivated employer, also contributes to the success of this story.

Subsequently, the same informant stated the broader external circulation in the production of the story:

Market coordinator: Yes... In [name of the hotel] the entire management filmed him for a whole day with the hotel director. This film also aligns with the company's image. It is truly fantastic. I've never seen an employer who cares so much about people. How the company engages him in work and how he is portrayed like everyone else. People coming to courses and conferences think it's a bit amusing. He clears away and serves coffee and...

The story seems to be circulated in two ways: First, through filming with the hotel director, thus profiling the hotel as an employer that takes corporate social responsibility. Such responsibility involves the incorporation of social concerns, such as increasing the employment of persons with disabilities, into business activities. Second, as a conversation piece for the conference guests. These guests might circulate this story in their network and thereby might affect societal views of disabled people. The last statement, *he clears away and serves coffee*, indicates lower expectations of disability, and thus ableism, whereby such accomplishments become remarkable.

Disability branding stories told by employment specialists and market coordinators were also told to motivate employers to recruit disabled people by appealing to employers' sense of corporate social responsibility. In addition to employer engagement, the quote below demonstrates how the good stories are used to present disabled people as valued according to present-day labour market demands that temporarily distort ableism:

Interviewer: When you say you are a professional recruiter, what do you mean?

Employment specialist: We don't discuss the participant, to begin with. We map the company's interests. That they are aware of their social responsibility, and I think that's one of the most important things which society or the communication unit in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) or whoever... It's showing the good stories about people with disabilities or people who are recruited and who are now a fantastic resource. And I feel that we've come far and that many appreciate differentness in a way which they didn't do only a few years back. The fact that employers, in particular, not least the public sector, understand that differentness is a good thing.

The employment specialist shifts the label from disability to differentness when talking about an increasing appreciation taking place among employers and in society in recent years. It indicates that differentness is not associated with something negative that should be minimised or compensated for. However, the story used here simultaneously frames difference as 'a fantastic resource', thus implying that inclusion is premised on ability assumptions.

5. DISCUSSION

Here, I discuss the three narrative practices of success stories from two main perspectives: (1) in terms of the frontline workers' local contexts and circumstances, which provide information about what the stories accomplish, and (2) in terms of how frontline workers' success stories contain ableism, leading to my introduction of the term 'ableist paradox'.

Norwegian frontline workers use success stories internally in formal group meetings for learning, for inspiration and motivation, and they use such stories externally to connect with employers and the wider public. This use yields insight into what such stories accomplish for the tellers (Bamberg 2011). Mattingly (1998) emphasised that occupational therapists construct success stories and positive employments with the intent of sustaining hope and optimism that desired outcomes might happen. Professionals, such as anaesthesiologists (Iedema, Jorm & Lum 2009) and teachers (Rust 1999), also teach each other occupational skills and responsibilities through telling stories. Møller and Stone (2013: 587) found that frontline workers' stories provided insights into how frontline workers learn and accept a new way of thinking about disability where 'disability is increasingly interpreted as a matter of personal willingness to work and moral rectitude'. Extending their findings, I introduced in this study frontline workers' success stories as a form of learning, motivation, and disability branding to the employers and wider public.

Danneris and Caswell (2019) explore 'success trajectories' (moving from cash benefits to employment) of 'vulnerable clients' in the context of the Danish welfare state. When looking at citizens with a history of unemployment or with disabilities, success trajectories in terms of leaving the welfare system and getting a job in line with the goals of employment policies are rare. Therefore, getting a job represents an unusual story of success seen from political, organisational, and individual perspectives (Danneris & Caswell 2019). Possibly, frontline workers' success stories in the current study also represent such unusual stories of success. Through success stories, frontline workers legitimise their efforts as viable according to disability employment policies, where supporting disabled people in finding paid employment in the competitive labour market is central (Solvang 2017). As a part of this accomplishment, frontline workers' success stories also contribute to changing the narrative of disability from inability to ability.

On the one hand, frontline workers' success stories may seem like an honest appreciation and acknowledgment of disabled people as contributing citizens, and they may seem like positive, uplifting stories. On the other hand, such acknowledgment of citizens' efforts and productivity also fluctuates into subtle tendencies of overvaluing achievement, that is, such acknowledgment can be exclusionary for those who do not try hard enough. As Campbell (2009: 153) points out, because ableism is so ingrained in society and institutions,

'an ability-based view of disability, even when construed with intentions of communicating inclusion, can expose ableist norms, because it is implied that disabled people should strive to eradicate or overcome impairment to meet the standards deemed as the acceptable ability norm, to gain inclusion'.

'Enablism' is a relevant concept here (Wolbring 2020). To enable often has a positive association of empowering individuals, of supporting and articulating qualities and strengths in the individual, but this enablement operates simultaneously with ableist ability expectations. Inspired by the enablism concept, I introduce in this study the ableist paradox to more precisely capture the complex narrative processes described in the current study.

The ableist paradox refers to the presentation of disability as representing a capable and contributing citizen, often by showing impairment or mental illness as a deficit that is normalised through displaying physical prowess and recovery. This presentation confirms ableist understandings of disabled people as lacking in abilities to work but can also be interpreted as efforts of acknowledging disabled people's capacities to work. The paradox is tied to the contradictory position of disability in the labour and welfare services: Creating opportunities to work entails a presentation of disabled people as having individual agency, abilities, and resources as possible employees. Conversely, disability benefit systems were traditionally built on the principle of providing benefits for people who cannot be expected to work.

The ableist paradox varied according to the three narrative practices. In the learning and the disability branding narratives, frontline workers distanced themselves from disability and promoted abilities. Here, the ableist paradox reveals the ableist binaries where disability is defined in opposition to able-bodiedness (Campbell 2009). In the motivating narrative, frontline workers tell stories from a normalising (ableist) imperative that work promotes health. In all three narrative practices, the frontline workers strive to present the able-bodied, species-typical body ready to work and produce. Simultaneously, supporting protagonists and reasonable accommodation were introduced in the motivating and disability branding narratives. This support was less visible in the learning narrative.

Goodley (2018) suggests that we are entering a time of dis(ability) studies when both the categories of disability and ability must be expanded upon as a response to the global politics of neoliberal capitalism, capitalism where employment status is a marker of human success. Dis(ability) studies allow both poles of the binary to be held in tension precisely because this is what happens every day in the mundane and ordinary lives of disabled people. Disabled people have often been denied the opportunity to occupy the position of the able subject: bounded, rational, capable, responsible, and competent (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2016: 3). Being recognised as having these ideals is understandably important.

Finally, the current article has some limitations. The three narrative practices are painted in rather broad strokes in the current study. The empirical tendency they describe does not allow

for exploring nuances of plotlines related to the type of disability in question. Nonetheless, the motivating narrative stories tended to include citizens with psychosocial disabilities, such as anxiety, who recover from their illness. At the same time, the citizens were presented as weak and struggling. Such presentation mirrors the weak-not-sick stereotype that is associated with help-giving responses to anxiety, that is, a belief that the person's symptoms reflect not only a real medical condition but also personal weakness (Hanlon & Swords 2020). Agentic and impressive presentations of mobility-impaired citizens in wheelchairs emerged both in the learning and in the branding disability narratives. A wheelchair is the ubiquitous and universal symbol for disability, and disabled people in wheelchairs are often related to an inspirational hero-like stereotype (Hardin & Hardin 2004). In addition, it also seemed that the frontline workers told different plotlines, related to their work tasks. While all told learning narratives, the motivating narrative was predominantly told by employment specialists and counsellors. The branding narrative was predominantly told by market coordinators and employment specialists. Future studies could explore such tendencies in greater detail.

Because stories tend to exaggerate and overstate, perhaps making both disabled people's efforts and frontline workers' efforts seem more impressive and imaginative than they are, future studies could also apply other kinds of data material than stories.

6. CONCLUSION

Frontline workers' narrative practices of success stories, each with its own context and circumstances, were analysed. Three narrative practices emerged. The learning narrative illustrated how frontline workers use success stories as a tool to learn a new way of thinking of disabled people as resourceful and capable. The motivating narrative thematised citizens' motivations and desires to recover, a recovery that inspires frontline workers. Employment was also presented as health-promoting. The disability branding narrative was addressing a broader external context, such as employers and the public, to interrogate existing presumptions and opinions of disabled workers as commonly less productive. Important to note is that these three narrative practices also contained ableism, defined as the binary configuration of disabled bodies as opposite [from] and unequal to [those of the] capable, productive able-bodied (Campbell 2009). This presence of ableism generated a paradox in the stories, a paradox that confirms ableist understandings of disabled people as lacking in abilities to work at the same time as the stories represented efforts of acknowledging disabled people's capacities to work.

Additionally, frontline workers' success stories highlight the inadequacy of ableist binaries and indicate the potential for new perspectives that emerge from people positioned as disabled but who also have the abilities and resources to perform well in employment. Goodley's (2018) (dis)ability approach emphasises that the disabled and the able-bodied are too often set up as dichotomous opposites. Instead of the oppositional perspective, the two embodiments could rather be viewed as frictional: conflicting with one another in interesting ways.

Finally, Campbell's (2009) ableist approach has enabled a sensitivity towards how disabled people are met with expectations to perform according to and evaluated against normality-based assumptions in inclusive contexts, such as the Norwegian welfare context. Ableism plays a substantial role in our understanding of why disabled people are excluded from employment. (e.g., Jammaers, Zanoni & Williams 2019; Mik-Meyer 2016). Therefore, it is vital to continue identifying ableist expectations. By acknowledging and communicating that we all have our strengths and limitations, the normalising power of ableism can potentially be destabilised.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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