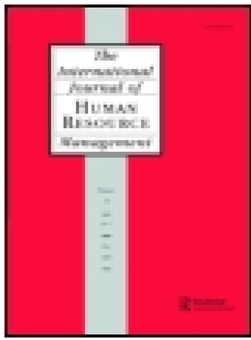

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“Not all fish are equal: a Bourdieuan analysis of ableism in a financial services company”

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ABSTRACT

Responding to recent calls to extend our understanding of ableism as a powerful organizing principle of the workplace, this study examines how ableism operates as a form of symbolic violence, constraining the career opportunities of disabled employees in a financial services company. Drawing on Bourdieuan theory, we analyze how the ‘rules of the game’ structuring the organizational field and the habitus of disabled individuals jointly shape those individuals’ ability to accrue economic, social, cultural as well as symbolic capital, as well as up different positions in a particular social space. A Bourdieuan approach centered on social practice allows us to develop a fuller understanding of the mechanisms through which valued forms of capital are unequally distributed within an arbitrary social order that privileges certain competences favoring able-bodied over disabled workers, and of disabled workers’ own role within such mechanisms.

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Introduction

An increasing body of research has documented that disabled people not only encounter huge barriers in accessing the labor market (Harcourt, Lam & Harcourt, 2005), but even when they are in paid employment, they experience exclusion and marginalization (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). Examples of barriers that impede their inclusion range from lower pay (Gunderson & Lee, 2016; Villanueva-Flores, Valle-Cabrera & Ramón-Jerónimo, 2015) and higher chances of being dismissed (Mitra & Kruse, 2016), to the denial of reasonable accommodations (Foster, 2007; Harlan & Robert, 1998) and lack of support from co-workers (Nelissen, Hülsheger, van Ruitenbeek & Zijlstra, 2016). Even in the presence of formal policies to support disabled workers (Araten-Bergman, 2016), or

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committed leaders or specialized HR managers (Goss, Goss & Adam-Smith, 2000; Kensbock & Boehm, 2016), disabled workers' careers are seriously endangered by the negative meanings attached to disability and disabling effects of organizational policies and practices.

Ableism has recently been advanced as a new theoretical lens to conceptualize these processes of marginalization (Williams & Mavin, 2012). Defined as 'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human' (Campbell, 2001, p. 44), ableism draws attention to the discursive practices through which people are sorted, categorized and labelled either as able-bodied or disabled. This notion has increasingly been applied in the literature on work and organizations, showing how, once so classified, individuals become either 'unemployable' or at best confined to lower-rank positions at workplaces and in the labor market (e.g. Foster & Wass, 2013; Holmqvist, Maravelias & Skålén, 2013; Jammaers, Zanoni & Hardonk, 2016). Drawing on post-structuralist theory and, especially the work of Foucault, the emergent literature has examined the disciplinary role of a binary structured language reaffirming the primacy of able-bodiedness over disability. It has advanced prior social model research on disability at work, which highlighted the disabling effects of a social context made for able-bodied individuals (Barnes & Mercer, 2005), by proposing an alternative understanding of power in neoliberal times as occurring through the constitution of specific forms of subjectivity and workplace identities.

While the focus on the power of language was timely in disability studies (Corker, 1999), with rare exceptions (e.g. Jammaers et al., 2016) analyses of ableism have tended to focus on how meaning is produced through specific authoritative discourses, leaving the social practices constitutive of ableism largely unattended (Campbell, 2009). Yet, arguably, power effects do not only ensue directly from the normalization and institutionalization of ableist identity categories, they crucially arise from how such categories inform the enactment of social practices that produce and reproduce a social order privileging able-bodiedness over disability over time.

This study draws on Bourdieuan theory to advance an understanding of ableism as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989, 1990), operating as an arbitrary organizing principle of social practice in the workplace. Over the past two decades, Bourdieu's theory has increasingly been adopted to examine social practice in organizations as the building blocks of social reality (Sieweke, 2014; Townley, 2014). This perspective is particularly helpful to theorize the 'practice-based aspects of ableism'

because it appreciates how power is *enacted* through social practice, such as the interactions in which people engage (Bourdieu, 1977; Wacquant, 1993) in their struggle for various forms of capital within a given field (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). For Bourdieu, practices are produced not merely through norms as expressed through language but rather through habitus, the system of durable embodied dispositions acquired through socialization (Bourdieu, 1990). To understand practice, agents' 'practical logic' originating in their habitus and shaping their 'feel for the game' and the regularities of the social field need to be addressed (Maton, 2008, p. 53). It is this practical logic that ultimately affects their ability to play the game in ways that allow them to accrue various forms of capital. This attention to the individual agent's embodied habitus is, in Emirbayer and Johnson's words, precisely what is 'so conspicuously missing in Foucault' (2008, p. 27).

To empirically investigate ableism though a social practice lens, we draw on the case study of BankCorp, the Belgian branch of an international bank and insurance company. Based on interviews with organizational actors including disabled employees, supervisors, union representatives and human resources (HR) staff members as well as extensive company documentation, we conduct a two-fold analysis. First, we reconstruct the rules of the field in the organization, showing how they exert symbolic violence by privileging a wide range of embodied dispositions and abilities that both reflect and in turn enforce an able-bodied norm which disables certain workers. Second, we examine how disabled players' position-taking in the field is symbolically and materially constrained by such ableist symbolic violence, unequally affecting them.

Ableism at work

Ableism privileges able-bodiedness by casting certain selves and bodies as functioning differently from normalcy and devaluing them as less human (Ho, 2008). An ableist society then can be described as a society that promotes 'the species-typical individual citizen' (Campbell, 2009), and above all, in contemporary neoliberal societies is 'a citizen that is ready and able to work and contribute' (Goodley, 2014, p. xi). Those who do not have certain sets of preferred capabilities, or are *seen* as not having them, are excluded, marginalized and discriminated against (Wolbring, 2008). As a result, ableism performatively disables certain individuals by relationally defining them as opposed and inferior to able-bodied ones (Campbell, 2009). Because ableism is so ingrained into our collective subjectivity and institutionalized, this structural discrimination becomes largely invisible and the equation of disability to inferiority

comes to be seen as a 'natural' reaction to an aberration (Campbell, 2009). Therefore, the ableist worldview upholds that people should either strive to embody this norm or keep their distance from the able-bodied (Kumar, Sonpal & Hiranandani, 2012). Contemporary ableist workplaces infused with a neoliberal ideology pose a particular challenge to disabled workers, who come to be seen as embodying less or unproductive human resources (Jammaers et al., 2016). Goodley (2014) coined the term 'neoliberal-ableism' to suggest that neoliberalism and ableism reinforce one another, turning the disabled person into the antitheses of the desirable, productive neoliberal citizen.

Few recent studies on ableism in the workplace have deconstructed how ableist discourses marginalize disabled people by categorizing them along the disabled/able-bodied binary to define them as lesser than able-bodied individuals (e.g. Jammaers et al., 2016; Mik-Meyer, 2016; Williams & Mavin, 2012). In this literature, powerful negative discourses in society, informed by neoliberalism, shape the subjectivity of disabled employees, classifying them in certain categories and ultimately leading to self-government and the reproduction of ableist assumptions. Domination and oppression are accordingly conceptualized as operating through the binary able-bodied/disabled classification and hierarchization, in which the former is given preference over the latter. Focusing on the linguistic dimension of ableism, these analyses remain silent on the social practices through which it is informed and reproduced.

Conversely, the literature on the managerial policies and practices that discriminate disabled workers (e.g. Foster & Wass, 2013; Randle & Hardy, 2016; Sang, Richards & Marks, 2016) rarely theorize them through the notion of ableism. For instance, a recent study conducted by Randle and Hardy (2016) showed how disabled employees in the creative industry struggled to live up to an ideal which required flexible workers, responsive to the demands of a fast-changing industry and able to cope with extreme working conditions. Foster and Wass (2013) document how organizations dismissed employees who acquired an impairment without making any real effort to accommodate them in a new job. This was legitimized by job descriptions grounded in the assumption of able-bodied workers requiring multiple-tasking, inter-changeability and team-work, reproducing an ideology of candidates with an impairment as unfit. Only Sang and colleagues (2016) explicitly draw on ableism to interpret the organizational policies and practices – such as frequent changes in working relationships destabilizing sources of support, decreased flexibility and increased formalization – hampering the career progress of workers with hidden impairments (such as dyslexia and Asperger) in the transport industry.

In this article, we contribute to addressing this gap by drawing on Bourdieuan theory to study social practices as a means to uncover ableism as a form of symbolic violence, sustaining an ableist organizational order that privileges able-bodiedness over disability.

A Bourdieuan perspective on ableism

Bourdieu conceives of society as divided into 'social fields', which can be understood in two homologous and mutually constitutive ways (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). On the one hand, a field is a space of objective positions, occupied by agents possessing different configurations of capital. On the other hand, it is a space of position-takings, 'a semiotic or cultural structure consisting of different statements, actions, etc.,' on the part of the agents (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 26). While the 'objective' relations give them their 'space position', position-taking indicates how they themselves modify or conserve this position (Townley, 2014, p. 41). So a field is a social space in which individuals interact within the boundaries of the particular rules of the game that regulate the ways they behave and interact in that social space (Bourdieu, 1991). The notion of field has been used to conceptualize organizations (e.g. Doherty & Dickmann, 2009; Kerr & Robinson, 2009; Robinson & Kerr, 2009), sectors (e.g. Townley, 2015), careers (e.g. Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003) and professions (e.g. Dick, 2008; Spence et al., 2016; Spence & Carter, 2014; Tatli, 2011). It is important to note that fields are not isolated entities but rather should be understood as embedded in a larger 'field of power', or the 'configuration of power relations within which the dominants of a society are arrayed and pitted against one another' (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 13).

For Bourdieu, the rules within a field are never neutral and consequently do not lead to fair outcomes. Rather, outcomes result from agents' differential access to valued and legitimized forms of capital (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). To disregard such unequal access or to consider it as self-evident or a natural outcome of merit, is what Bourdieu understands as 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1977). Doxa are the taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions in a field. Where there is doxa, a legitimation of unequal distribution of capital, there is 'symbolic violence'. Symbolic violence refers to 'a body knowledge that entices the dominated to contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting, outside of any rational decision or decree of the will, the limits assigned to them' (Le Hir, 2000, p. 135). As the schemes we apply in order to perceive ourselves and those dominant to us are the product of the embodiment of

the naturalized classifications of which we are the product, symbolic violence is exerted in inconspicuous ways (Bourdieu, 2001). Organizational power relations are based on symbolic violence, resting on the imposition of and misrecognition of arbitrary power relations (e.g. class, race, gender) as natural relations (Robinson & Kerr, 2009). Symbolic violence offers a particularly powerful notion to embed ableism in social practice, as it refers to a shared system of meaning that normalizes and legitimizes the inequality structuring fields and the different possibilities of agents to act within them.

When conceptualized as a field of relations (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009; Kerr & Robinson, 2009; Robinson & Kerr, 2009), an organization represents a social space in which a 'game' takes place among individuals who compete for personal advantage (Townley, 2014). To explain how individuals are able to take up certain positions within a field, Bourdieu refers to the concept of habitus (2000). People acquire their habitus, or 'embodied dispositions', throughout their lives both by the conditions surrounding their early lives and by the settings – including work settings – in which they are active later in life (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). One's habitus affects the degree to which one is accepted and integrated into a particular field, enabling an agent to 'fit in' (or not), with specific regard to its conventions and regulations (Bourdieu, 1977). An agent whose habitus is 'well-formed', or adapted to the field, possesses a *sens pratique*, or a 'feel for the game' in that field, his/her habitus becomes 'invisible' and the agent is like 'a fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1977). The habitus also shapes people's sense of agency or the possible position-takings open to a person in a given field (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008), influencing one's perception of future possible positions, given one's current location within a social space (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Importantly, 'habitus are profoundly social, they carry the traces of the lines of division and distinction along which the social is organized' (Lawler, 2004, p. 112). Mental schemata are the embodiment of social divisions and so the social and cognitive are linked through the habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Hierarchical social distinctions such as class, gender but also disability/able-bodiedness are marked within the habitus, making some habitus worth more than others, and normalizing some while problematizing others (Lawler, 2004).

For individuals to take up highly valued positions within a given social field, various forms of *capital* – economic, social, cultural and symbolic – need to be accumulated as each form of capital is capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder (Bourdieu, 1977). Economic capital refers to capital in the form of money and other material possessions. In the context of employment, this can be

translated into the revenue an employee generates for his/her employer, for which he/she in return receives a salary (Spence et al., 2016). Social capital refers to the networks a person can draw on as a resource and the capital owned by those connections, both in and outside of work (Townley, 2014). Cultural capital comprises technical ability (cognitive skills such as verbal, reading, writing, mathematics and analytical reasoning skills), which can be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications, professional credentials and social competence (social-behavioral skills such as motivation to achieve, self-regulation and delay of gratification), which are largely acquired through familial transmission and training (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Spence et al., 2016). In the context of work, a 'right' sense of which type of capital to use in which situation confers social advantages including enhanced opportunities for employment and promotion (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Randle, Forson & Calveley, 2015). Finally, symbolic capital denotes reputation, honor and professional prestige and is generally conferred upon those who have successfully accumulated those forms of capital that are the most highly valued by the surrounding field (Spence et al., 2016). Those with symbolic power hold the capacity to define, represent, and legitimize what is recognized as prestigious in a field (Bourdieu, 1985; Townley, 2015), or to impose a vision of legitimate division (Bourdieu, 1989). Symbolic capital is intimately linked to power as it reasserts distinction through division and exclusion of particular individuals (Townley, 2015; see also Doherty & Dickmann, 2009), whose belongingness to historically subordinate social groups becomes a form of 'negative capital' in multiple fields (e.g. Djerf-Pierre, 2005; Karaçam & Koca, 2015; Skeggs, 2011).

Drawing on Bourdieuan theory to understand the social practices constitutive of ableism in the workplace, we address two research questions: What are the rules of the game in the organizational field and how do they exert ableist symbolic violence? and How does this symbolic violence in turn constrain the position-taking of disabled employees within the field?

Methodology

To empirically study an 'organization-as-field', we conducted a case study of BankCorp, the recently acquired Belgian branch of a large international private banking and insurance company. At the time of the study, which was conducted a few years after the financial crisis (2014–2015), BankCorp employed over 15,000 people. This study was part of a larger research project on ableism in the workplace, including three in-depth case studies of different organizations. BankCorp was

chosen for this Bourdieuan analysis as the banking sector is a powerful economic field closely aligned with the broader field of power in Belgian society, which is currently undergoing a process of neoliberalization (De Preter, 2016). Therefore, we expected to be able to observe contemporary forms of ableism at work more transparently in this case (Goodley, 2014; Holmqvist et al., 2013).

Data collection

We collected data through multiple data sources, including interviews and company documentation, including annual diversity reports, job vacancies and internal guidelines for hiring and employing disabled people, and press articles about the banking sector. Twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with nine disabled employees, nine supervisors of disabled employees, two union representatives and two HR staff members. The disabled participants in the study had a broad range of chronic illnesses and impairments, were of various ages and employed in a variety of jobs with varying complexity and status. The semi-structured interviews with disabled participants were carried out following a questionnaire of open questions on the nature of the impairment, professional trajectory, current job, social relations at work and organizational and governmental disability policies. The semi-structured interviews with the other organizational actors covered professional trajectory, experience with disability, support for disability-related questions by higher management, and organizational and governmental disability policies. Interviews were carried out in Dutch, lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Common ethical guidelines concerning informed consent were followed (Creswell, 2013), and anonymity was stressed in communications. All names included in this text are pseudonyms.

Data analysis

To address the first research question 'What are the rules of the game in the organizational field and how do they exert ableist symbolic violence?' the first author initially read the transcripts of the thirteen interviews with supervisors, HR staff and trade union representatives and the complementary documents to gain a sense of 'the institutionalized interests, rules and barriers to entry that operate in a field and construct it as a distinct social space' (Tatli, 2011, p. 240). She identified excerpts that depicted the 'rules of the game' and coded all material along the valued dispositions (habitus) and forms of capital within the organization (cf.

Spence et al., 2016; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Prior empirical investigations of symbolic violence have similarly shown how managers' language, as reflected in interviews and documents, is important to scrutinize as it reflects organizational doxic beliefs that are misrecognized as 'inherently superior' (e.g. Harrington, Warren & Rayner, 2015; Robinson & Kerr, 2009). Then, to triangulate the results of the analysis, the transcripts of the nine interviews with disabled workers were analyzed in a similar manner, as their narratives also contain information on the rules of the game and the extent to which these might be symbolically violent towards certain employees (cf. Kamoche, Kannan & Siebers, 2014). The coding was subsequently verified by the other authors and differences in interpretation were discussed thoroughly until consensus was reached.

In a second phase, we reconnected the information gathered through the first phase on the organization-as-field to the larger field of power, as this is an important step in any Bourdieuan empirical investigation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The larger field of power can be situated at the level of the state and as such it is important to relate the field under study to other powerful institutions outside it (Bourdieu, 1989). To contextualize the case under study, we scanned national newspapers from 2014 until 2018 for trends in the banking sector such as outsourcing, restructuring and digitalization. Additionally, the academic literature was consulted, as the financial service sector and its 2008 crisis have been an important focus of attention within organization studies over the years (for instance, Hargie, Stapleton & Tourish, 2010; Tourish & Hargie, 2012).

In a third phase, to address the second research question – How does this symbolic violence in turn constrain the position-taking of disabled employees within the field? – the configurations of capital and dispositions for each disabled participant in the study were carefully identified and compared. We started from each disabled individual's Hay grade, a score ranging from 9 to 23, resulting from the job evaluation method used in the company for integrated pay and grading structures. This score provided a first indication of their positions within BankCorp, reflecting their prestige or symbolic capital within the field (see Table 1). Based on the outcome of this analysis, we classified disabled respondents in three groups, depending on the degree of symbolic capital they possessed. In our evaluation, we took into consideration individuals' age and seniority, as an employee's Hay grade, ceteris paribus, tends to positively correlate with them.

BankCorp's rules of the game

The group of which BankCorp is a part, occupies a dominant position within the banking environment in Europe, and Belgium specifically,

Table 1. Disabled respondents of the study.

Respondent group	Disabled participant	Age	Impairment (acquired at age)	Hay grade	Tenure in years	Job title	Education
Fish in water	Eric	30–35	Mobility (16)	18	3	Security manager	Bachelor ICT
	Dieter	20–25	Visual (0)	16	2	Trainee	Master Business Economics + Business School
Stranded fish	Ella	30–35	Mobility (18)	15	5	Financial accountant	Post-Academic Education (dr. Financial Accounting)
	Peter	45–50	Visual (40)	15	25	Web support manager	Bachelor ICT
	Tom	25–30	Hearing (1)	13	3	Financial advisor	Master Business Economics
	Julie	20–25	Hearing (6)	11	1	Marketer	Master Language + Master in London
Fish out of water	Mark	50–55	Hearing (0)	13	35	Graphic designer	Secondary Education (special)
	Maarten	50–55	Mobility (25)	11	30	Financial advisor	Secondary Education
	Karo	35–40	Mobility (29)	11	16	Welcome desk officer	Master Communication management

where it has been the market leader for a number of years. Although the company is active in over 70 countries, 3/4 of all employees are located in Europe. To decipher the rules of the game in BankCorp and whether they exerted ableist symbolic violence towards employees, the human resource management (HRM) policies and practices were scrutinized.

BankCorp's recruitment and promotion policy explicitly aimed at retaining only the 'best and brightest workers' (organizational website). In order to attain high levels of symbolic (prestige) and economic (pay) capital in this field, workers were expected to enact multiple dispositions powerfully expressed in the organizational slogan 'brains, heart and guts'. As reflected in the interviews with HR staff and managers and numerous job vacancies, 'brains' referred to the need to display multiple sorts of cultural capital such as fast, accurate and critical reasoning, problem solving, communication skills, extensive language knowledge and good network-building competences. The following quote is illustrative

> Organized, structured, open-minded, adaptive to different situations, … also a good communicator to work well with others. (Chelsey, manager)

'Heart' referred to people skills, such as empathy and kindness towards clients and social skills to manage staff and work together well with

colleagues. This expectation was often manifest in job vacancies' emphasis on 'being a team player' with autonomy, and in many managers' descriptions of an ideal employee. And finally, 'guts' referred to how, in order to play the BankCorp game, employees needed to demonstrate strong negotiating skills, assertiveness and self-confidence. The following quote illustrates this

> You have to be able to think one step ahead, take charge of things, be reflective and not just follow the crowd… […] [the organization] looks for a certain, what do you call this? An X-factor, and I think those are predominantly people who are positive, motivated and want to get somewhere in their lives… (Charlotte, manager)

The company evaluated the performance of employees based on the enactment of these dispositions. For instance, as is often the case in highly competitive work environments, working long hours was considered a strong indication of one's willingness and ability to progress within the field

> I don't continue working until late at home as many of my colleagues do, because I can't log into the system from home [due to accessibility and security issues] and my energy is gone at the end of a full working day. […] In that sense I'm exempt from this informal rule in the bank. (Peter, visually impaired web support manager).

Other rules of conduct were the expected continuous self-initiated investment in learning and development programs to accrue one's cultural capital – as 'when people don't grow, they decline' (Eric, physically impaired web safety manager). Similarly mobility between jobs and across national branches of the company was considered necessary to accrue symbolic capital. Accordingly, performance evaluations were based on employees' possession of valued dispositions and related capital, leading to an intense yearly competition to benefit from 'the limited budget for pay increases' (Ella, mobility impaired financial accountant). Such evaluations were translated into a Hay grade, indicating one's place within the 'objective positions' in the organizational field and revealing one's degree of symbolic capital – the prestige and ability to set the rules of the game. The following quote explains the Hay grade system

> The grading system starts at 11 for simple, low-skilled jobs, and goes up to 23, which is the CEO level. The Hay grade you are assigned to depends on the complexity of your job and how well you're doing it. […] Managers are usually at 17. (Eric, physically impaired web safety manager).

HRM policies and practices specifically aimed at managing disabled employees also reflected these rules of the game. For instance, an intranet application 'my disability' was created from which disabled

employees could 'autonomously order (material) accommodations' (Nicolas, manager), without having to ask a superior, to 'reduce their dependence on others' (Wout, union representative) as well as combat stereotypes about disabled people being 'in need'. The provision of this application implied an expectation that disabled employees proactively managed the negative effects of their impairment and were fully in control of their career. In addition, an e-learning course on disability was given to all supervisors, to 'raise their awareness' (Kate, diversity manager) of doxic beliefs about disabled job applicants and co-workers. External recruiters were also given such training to prevent that 'a person with talent but with a "difference" falls out' (Kate, diversity manager) and ensure a 'strict focus on quality and expertise' of people (Cody, manager). Despite these efforts, the percentage of disabled people at the bank remained low at 0.4% in 2012, compared to the 7.8% disabled workers in the total workforce (Samoy, 2014). This low figure confirms the exclusive nature of the field, although management argued it was caused by 'a stop on recruitment due to the financial crisis' (Kate, diversity manager).

The BankCorp field and its rules were at the time of the study evolving, reflecting wider changes in the banking sector such as outsourcing of simple tasks to low-cost countries (national newspaper, 2014[1]), digitalization and an improved image in the eyes of the public opinion due to better financial performance compared to the years immediately following the 2008 crisis (national newspaper, 2016; cf. Tourish & Hargie, 2012). Participants mentioned 'teams getting smaller' (Chelsey, manager) and shortly after the study took place, an announcement was nade of another major restructure forecasting the loss of 2,500 jobs 'to arm the bank against fast digitalization, weak economy, increasing regulations and competition, and the changing needs of customers' (national newspaper, 2015). Various respondents stressed how jobs in the sector were evolving towards higher complexity, requiring (even) higher levels of skills and flexibility from employees in an 'extremely fast-changing environment' (Cécile, manager). Some managers pointed out how this would thwart the possibility of employing disabled people in the future, revealing doxic beliefs about simple and repetitive jobs being the only suitable jobs for disabled workers

> There used to be a lot of manual work but everything is becoming more and more automated. […] There is a lot of pressure to lower costs, staff that has to be cut. […] The jobs that remain are IT specialists jobs for programming and sales jobs (Wout, union representative).

Taken together, the rules of the game at BankCorp are ableist in that they both presuppose and enforce a neoliberal ideal of an able body/

mind that is unhindered by his/her environment, possesses all the expected dispositions and is fully in control, able and willing to display these dispositions in order to endlessly accrue more capital within this field. Although disabled employees were in principle not excluded from the field, they could only be included on condition that they were able to display the necessary capital to play the game in this highly competitive environment. Many of the respondents seemed to misrecognize the arbitrary ableist organizational order, privileging hyper-able-bodiedness under the guise of 'meritocracy', as illustrated by the following quote

> I work in a very commercial and competitive environment. At the end of the day, it's the [sales] numbers that count and that's it. (Tom, hearing impaired sales person)

Such 'illusio' reflects the larger societal field of power, characterized by a social order in which prestige is reserved for the unencumbered worker, an individual that is not slowed down by contingencies such as ill health. It neutralizes the disabling effects of an organizational environment tailored to subjects embodying the able-bodied neoliberal ideal of the self-mastering, calculative and competitive agent (Goodley, 2014; Vandekinderen, Roets, Vandenbroeck, Vanderplasschen, & Van Hove, 2012). While our perspective focuses on ableism as a key form of symbolic violence, the neoliberal subject has also been theorized as inherently male, upper-class (Oksala, 2013) and white (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010), reflecting the complexity of power relations both in organizations (Robinson & Kerr, 2009) and the broader field of power (Lawler, 2004) and of the misrecognition of their arbitrary character.

Disabled employees' position-takings in BankCorp

Having reconstructed the rules of the game at BankCorp, we now turn to the position-takings of disabled workers within this field. We present the position-takings of three different groups of respondents, clustered according to their degree of symbolic capital, to illustrate, by comparison, how people endowed with a more or less adapted habitus and different sets of capital were able to position themselves differently within the BankCorp field. By zooming in on one player of each group, we gain insight into the role of social practice in the production of an ableist organizational field. Following Bourdieu's metaphor (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), we will show that the first group exemplifies 'fish in water', the second group of respondents 'stranded fish' and the last 'fish out of water'.

Fish in water

The position-takings of a first group of respondents with high symbolic capital in the BankCorp field is illustrated by the account of Dieter. Dieter is a young (24 years old), yet already highly valued player in the field with very limited sight. Although advised by his doctor to use a walking stick he chose not to. Dieter's primary habitus seemed to match well with the ableist rules of the game at BankCorp

> I was raised in a farmer family, the rural way of life. "You shall work, you shall work well and you shall work hard! And if you work hard, then you'll get to do whatever it is you like, but you have to work hard."

At his desk, he used an impressive arsenal of high technological aids for reading, referring to himself as 'Inspector Gadget'. Dieter's dispositions of self-reliance and assertiveness played an important role in his positioning in the field

> I choose to arrange my adaptations myself and not have BankCorp bothered with it. That way I could decide for myself what to buy and take it with me if I left for another employer. I figured I would be more efficient in finding out what to buy anyway and so I handled things on my own.

He started his career in the prestigious 'graduate management scheme' and subsequently moved forward at a quick pace, leading to a current Hay grade of 16. Dieter was aware that entering the field at the start of his career with a 'negative' form of capital such as a disability required him to neutralize it by extensively acquiring other forms of capital

> If you want to find a good job and you have a visual impairment, you have to come up with something extra […]. That's the way things work. It will never be said out loud though. And that is why, besides my very theoretical education, I wanted some additional practical knowledge. And so I did an additional master at a top Business School.

Through the graduate management scheme Dieter met many managers, increasing his social capital, and was able to observe their behavior and actions, increasing his 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1977). The quote below illustrates Dieter's high awareness of the necessity to display strong communication skills

> I've given a lot of PowerPoint presentations when I was in that particular job. It comes as a surprise to many actually. But I really enjoy giving presentations. And I must say, I am quite good at it.

Although he had already gained experience abroad through an internship during his MBA, Dieter grabbed the opportunity to work for an overseas branch of the bank and actively worked on extending his social capital

> In my previous function I got a lot of exposure. People in high places know me now. That is very important… I chose that function specifically for that reason. I knew I would get a lot of exposure and that this would be crucial to my career. If you want a career in the long run, you have to be known. And also known for the work you deliver[…]. Especially for me, with my disability, knowing the management is important.

In line with the valued disposition of 'working hard', Dieter's position-taking in the social space resulted in very long office work hours, illustrating how he had corporeally internalized an external rule of the game, showcasing 'the practical operation of the habitus' (Wacquant 1993, p. 5)

> I know, you're free to request your extra hours back. But I've never asked them for two reasons: first of all, I know I work a little slower than others and I don't think I should be compensated for that, not at all! And second, when you ask for your extra hours, you're not reimbursed financially but in terms of holidays. And in my company, we already get a large amount of holidays, I don't need more, I already don't have the time to take up the ones I have now.

Dieter's habitus was well-formed in that his embodied practice corresponds to the shared conception of the proper way of doing and being in the organization, along ableist norms.

An extremely career-minded person, Dieter is fully in the game and takes the stakes very seriously (Bourdieu, 1998), aiming to reach the highest possible position available in the social space

> I've had a lot of talks with people in high management and they usually say well, 'you're 24 now and we can see you reach a managing position one day, but you're going to have to wait until you're 30'. But I don't want to wait that long.

This first account of Dieter is illustrative of how disabled workers equipped with the well-formed habitus and rich in capital can develop a fine sense of the rules of the game and learn to enact the ableist practical logic in the field, enabling their accrual of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2000; Sieweke, 2014), despite their disability. Dieter manages to take up a high position in the field by acting 'as normal as possible', successfully compensating for the negative capital associated with his disability by accruing superior amounts of social and cultural capital. The other respondent in this cluster, Eric, similarly positioned himself within the field of BankCorp as extremely hard-working, possessing highly demanded skills, and very ambitious. At the same time, through their position-taking, both respondents partake in the reaffirmation of the ableist rules of the game of the BankCorp field enforcing symbolic violence. Whereas these players were like fish not feeling the weight of the water (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and appreciating the game at play and its stakes, this was not the case for all disabled employees.

Stranded fish

Despite sharing a primary habitus of working hard and professional ambition, a second group of respondents highlighted how they became 'stranded' in the BankCorp field. How their limited amounts of symbolic capital constrained their position-takings is well illustrated by Julie's account. Julie has a hearing impairment, yet speaks fluently and relies on lip reading to understand others. She was brought up among hearing people, despite having deaf parents. She holds institutionalized cultural capital in the form of a masters' degree and studied an additional year in London. After a long and dreadful job search, she obtained her first job at BankCorp, yet her career had a difficult start

> They told me they thought the 'graduate management scheme' would not be such a good idea. But they did have an open spot within tax reclaim as an administrative worker. […]. My first three days […] I had to push two buttons.

Disappointed by the job she was given, Julie took action to have her cultural capital acknowledged in the field

> I said to myself: "No, I did not study 5 years and worked so hard to sit here and accept such a stupid job". So I went to my manager and said I would quit. And then they started looking for a decent job, and I became social media marketer.

Later she heard that management had assumed the position of administrative worker would suit her well since there was another deaf female employee working there doing a similar job. In Julie's case, her disability clearly represented a form of negative capital, directly and greatly constraining her ability to position herself in the field.

Although Julie's second job as a social media marketer was more in line with her institutionalized cultural capital, she still felt that the ableist rules of the game limited her position-taking. In particular, she emphasized how her habitus, as a Dutch mother-tongue non-hearing person, was not adapted to the largely French-speaking field, limiting her ability to enact social practices that were key to accrue valued forms of capital

> Most of my colleagues speak French. I speak French too but, French is hard for me to read lips. […]. Informal things are mostly in French. So socially, I'm not always up to date with my colleagues. When something very important is said, my nearest colleague, who started out here together with me, will always inform me. But most things I miss out on. And that is important around here, because a lot of informal things are said that could help you.

Moreover, because of the difficulty of lip-reading while multiple people are speaking simultaneously she did not often have lunch with her colleagues, which hampered her social relations and the accrual of social capital through networking in the company.

Despite her partially well-formed habitus and her multiple forms of cultural capital, Julie was only partially able to convert them into symbolic capital, illustrated by her low grading on the Hay scale (11)

> My statute and wage in my current job are much lower compared to other colleagues doing a similar job. It's because I started out in the 'tax reclaim' unit and never got a raise. That's not really fair.

This shows the 'stickiness' of the consequences of her initial placement in a job based on her negative distinction (disability), rather than her capital, which persisted despite her proactive position-taking and successful transfer to a better job.

As illustrated by her account Julie is not quite a fish in water nor out of water either. The metaphor of stranded fish, one side drifting in water and the other side on shore, seems more appropriate here. As for other respondents in this group, she possesses some degree of cultural capital and knowledge of the field, yet is unable to transform it into symbolic capital.

Like Julie, Peter had an interest in career progress, yet found his position-taking constrained by the ableist assumption that disabled people would be satisfied with staying in the same job, working for the same pay throughout their careers. Also reflecting the field's doxa, Ella and Tom took a position of not being well enough equipped to play the game to the fullest. The analysis of these agents' position-takings unveils more explicitly how ableism is infused in the field, constraining the possibilities for position-taking for disabled players.

Fish out of water

The ableist nature of the BankCorp field becomes even more clear in the cases of disabled workers who had low symbolic capital and were thus 'fish out of water', such as with Mark. Mark started off playing the game without valuable institutionalized cultural capital, yet was eager to develop a successful career and had an interest in the stakes at play. These dispositions were however revised after multiple unfortunate encounters with ableist rules in the field. Born as a deaf person with limited speech ability, Mark attended a specialized school for deaf students which made his secondary diploma of low value within the particular field of BankCorp

> I live a good life, I have a wife, car, house, everything, I go on holidays … But if I had been hearing, I am sure, I would have built a successful career.

Thanks to his father who used to work for the company he started his career 35 years ago within the printing department and became a graphic designer through 'on-the-job training'

> I transferred to photography. We were six there in the beginning. And for every person that retired, no new person was hired [due to digitalization]. I did the same amount of work as every other colleague there, sometimes even better [yet Mark had a lower Hay grade]. And yet each time a person left they did not grant me the promotion [the same Hay grade as his colleagues]. When the last person left, they had no choice but to give it to me. But I really had to fight for it.

Beyond his struggles to have his technical skills acknowledged as symbolic capital, many other struggles persisted. Although he taught himself many skills on-the-job, other formal trainings to further develop his cultural capital were inaccessible to him, as they were organized in an ableist way, assuming a hearing body

> An instructor always gives a presentation with a beamer, and all the other participants can hear him talk and watch the beamer projection at the same time. But for me, I always have to switch between the instructor to read lips and the screen, that's impossible … I don't go to courses anymore because there is no use in going. […].

With different communication skills than those expected in BankCorp, Mark received little flexibility from others to meet his needs

> They do not understand anything about deafness! Nothing at all! They think, well if you can read lips, you're able to understand things. But imagine you're sitting before the television, and you put it on mute, try reading people's lips. You'll get tired of it after three minutes. For me, that's every day's reality.

The expectation of being a fluent communicator not only posed constraints on Mark's ability to acquire more cultural capital, it also impeded the accrual of social capital

> Talking to one person for me is okay, but with more people … There's no use in trying. That's why I never join them for dinner [the other colleagues]. Also here in the workplace, when someone is talking to me, someone else would come by and then they would start talking … They won't let a deaf person have his say. Nobody does. I should get angry but I don't anymore, nobody cares around here …

Like the other respondents in this group, Mark had entered the field with the ambition to progress, yet having encountered various barriers to get his capital acknowledged led him to develop a 'dissident habitus' (Kerr & Robinson, 2009, p. 829) over the years, which clashed with the well-formed habitus required to play the game in BankCorp. He positioned himself, at the time of the interview, as no longer interested in the stakes at play (Dick, 2008). The same type of disinterested positioning was taken by Maarten, who decided, after being denied the promotion that he had been promised before acquiring his impairment, he would stick to working 9–5. Karo similarly positioned herself as having abandoned any prior ambition to play the game, although she appeared

more satisfied with the adapted part-time job she had received after acquiring her impairment. Respondents in the 'fish out of water' cluster seemed more aware than others of the ableist, symbolically violent nature of the field. Nonetheless, they expressed this awareness mostly by referring to how their disability represented a form of negative capital for themselves as individuals (with a specific impairment), limiting their potential to play according to the rules of the game and thrive in BankCorp, rather as an arbitrary feature of the field structurally reproducing inequality.

Discussion

Drawing on the empirical case of a Belgian bank and insurance company, this study sought to advance the emergent organizational literature on ableism by adopting a Bourdieuan perspective focusing on social practices. This study makes several contributions. First, we proposed a conceptualization of ableism as a form of symbolic violence creating social distinctions in the field based on the disabled/able-bodied binary. Such symbolic violence exerted power by shaping agents' ability to take positions in the organization in a taken-for-granted, common-sense way which concealed their arbitrariness (Bourdieu, 1977). The ableist order privileging able-bodiedness over disability was largely misrecognized by our respondents. Both managers and disabled employees partook in the symbolic violence by following the rules of the game, enacting ableist practices and not calling into question the forms of capital that got valued, although such rules reproduced an idealized hyper-able-bodied subject. Nor did they recognize the arbitrariness of the ableist order, referring to the field as a competitive yet meritocratic space.

At best, some disabled agents acknowledged how such rules disadvantaged them *individually* because they did not possess certain capital or because their disability represented a form of 'negative capital' in the eyes of colleagues and superiors. They however did not question the rules of the game in themselves. Some respondents' attribution of missed opportunities for career progression to one's own (lack) of adapted capital and habitus to navigate the field, rather than symbolic violence enacted by ableist rules of the game, suggests an internalization of ableism (Campbell, 2009; Reeve, 2012), leading in some cases to 'disinterest' in the game or career moves with adverse effects (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014; Sang et al., 2016). Overall, respondents' consciousness remained limited, as none of our respondents mentioned undertaking action to change the current 'vision of legitimate division' (Bourdieu,

1989) in the field, except for individual pleas for the acknowledgement of one's own capital.

A second contribution of this study concerns the role of disabled people as strategic players aware of the rules of the game in the field. A Bourdieuan perspective is conducive to seeing that disabled employees are not only defined by ableist rules – an aspect of the operation of power which is prominent in the extant literature (Goodley, 2014) they also participate in social practice by actively taking positions, striving for the accrual of their own capital. Although the rules of the game at BankCorp are manifestly structured along the disabled/able-bodied binary to enforce social practices producing 'desirable' bodies/minds, disabled employees' position-takings show more heterogeneity. As illustrated by the juxtaposition of the cases of Dieter, Julie and Mark who all navigate the same highly competitive space, some disabled agents prove much better equipped than others to develop a *sens pratique*, take a position, deal with the ableist rules of the game, and acquire the valued sets of capital. Their comparison showcases the need to accurately grasp the operation of ableism and its effects and look beyond the disabled/able-bodied dichotomy structuring the field in an ableist way, which has been at the core of the literature on ableism to date (Campbell, 2009).

At the same time, our research design presents some limitations. Future research might want to use a broader sample of workers including able-bodied ones with otherwise similar forms of capital in one and the same social field. This would allow for a comparative examination of the effects of ableist norms on all workers, including those closer to embodying such norms. Moreover, it would facilitate a more fine-grained analysis of how agents' embodied dispositions and capacity to accrue capital might be simultaneously shaped by multiple principles organizing the social field exerting symbolic violence, such as for instance gender, (hetero)sexism and ageism. This recognizes that dispositions associated with specific types of embodiments are likely to similarly constitute (negative) forms of cultural capital (Huppatz, 2009; McCall, 1992). To the extent that the arbitrarily established rules of the game reflect complex power relations in an organization (cf. Robinson & Kerr, 2009), they are likely to exert symbolic violence through *multiple* hierarchized binaries, something we could only get a sense of in this study. Tellingly, the only two disabled employees in our study who manage to be 'fish in water' were both young and male and had a technical education. Conversely, those who were 'out of water' were older and/or female, and/or with low-level or non-technical education. This suggests that symbolic violence is exerted in complex ways, taking at once not only the form of ableism but also of other '–isms'. Further empirical

investigation and theorization untangling such complexity is therefore warranted (cf. Goodley, 2014; Oksala, 2013; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010).

Our study further builds on prior discursive research on ableism by showing how organizational norms do not exert power solely by virtue of workers' identification with them in view of building a positive work identity (Jammaers et al., 2016), but also, more fundamentally, because they come to structure the social field in which actors are socialized and thus learn embodied dispositions which come to define who they are in relation to others (cf. Dick, 2008). Ableism thus informs the field not only as a semiotic/cultural space, but also as a space of objective positions, drawing attention to the close relationship between discursive and social practice at the analytical level of both the individual and the organization. Different to discursive research which points to the violence of language on the subject's identity, a Bourdieuan approach to ableism emphasizes the role of embodied social practice in enforcing symbolically violent norms, highlighting agents and the effect of their practice on the unequal distribution of prestige and material rewards. This rich conceptual vocabulary avoids the pitfalls of approaches which detach language from the social by focusing on identities (including subordinate ones) as a modality of power in themselves (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop & Nkomo, 2010). Future research might want to draw on Bourdieu's work to contribute to current debates on the relationship between ableism as a discursive binary and materiality, including material inequality (e.g. Zanoni, 2011).

Lastly, it is important to consider how the inequality resulting from ableist symbolic violence could be reduced. Despite the increasing consensus that diversity management policies and practices for enhancing equality should best include (a combination of) committed leaders, formal policies, and assigning organizational responsibility for change to specialized (HR) managers and task forces (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Goss et al., 2000; Kalev, Dobbin & Kelly, 2006; Kensbock & Boehm, 2016), our analysis draws attention to the importance of raising awareness of the arbitrariness of the ableist order. This can be done by carefully analyzing whether and how the rules of the game and social practices enacted by agents to play it work to exclude certain individuals and groups. Whereas trainings have traditionally been used to unveil *individual* bias and discriminatory behavior, they could be more oriented to unveiling the exclusionary effects of *collective* social practices which are not based on bias, but rather on shared assumptions about desirable behavior and the ability of individuals to enact it. At the same time, it seems crucial to create organizational spaces where alternative, less symbolically violent social practices can be envisioned that prevent the

conversion of disability into negative capital (Janssens & Zanoni, 2014). This will likely require calling into question the very rules of the game in order to broaden the possible position-takings of disabled employees and enhance their opportunities. . To improve the career outcomes of disabled employees, organizations need to consciously counter the ableism institutionalized in the broader societal field of power by reducing the symbolic violence of the disabled/able-bodied binary of their own social practices.

Note

1. In order to ensure the anonymity of our case, BankCorp, the references to national newspapers remain unspecified.

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