

A balancing act: The employer perspective on disability disclosure in hiring

Kaja Larsen Østerud*

NOVA – Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: How to disclose an impairment during the hiring process is an important question for disabled people, yet the associated employer perspective remains overlooked in the literature.

OBJECTIVE: The article investigates whether, when and how employers prefer jobseekers to disclose their impairment during the recruitment process. Stigma and impression management is used as a theoretical lens to interpret employer responses.

METHODS: The article uses interview data from 38 Norwegian employers paired with behavioral data from a recruitment situation. Prior to the interviews, the employers were subjected to a field experiment wherein pairs of fictitious applications were submitted for real job listings. In these, one of the applicants disclosed either a mobility impairment or a mental health condition.

RESULTS: The findings show that disability disclosure is a balancing act between appearing candid and demonstrating competence and that employers favor identity management strategies that present disability in a positive and unobtrusive manner and downplay the impairment. The employers favored disclosure but expected wheelchair users to disclose their impairment earlier than people with mental health conditions. Furthermore, employers with a relational view on disability were found to be more open to hiring disabled people.

CONCLUSIONS: The article illustrates how disclosure expectations can represent a significant disability penalty, thus hampering employment advancement for disabled people.

Keywords: Disability, disclosure, recruitment, stigma, identity management

1. Introduction

Managing a disabled identity in the recruitment process often revolves around the matter of disclosure; but this can be problematic because the disabled person risks being defined by what they cannot do in a situation where the employer's assessment is based on the applicant's perceived

capabilities (Jammaers et al., 2016). Therefore, the identity management strategies identified by Goffman (1959, 1963), including passing and covering, can be adopted by disabled jobseekers to present themselves in line with the employers' expected professional identities and conceptions of an ideal productive worker (Reid, 2015). Several studies investigate disabled people's perspectives on disclosure (e.g. Allen & Carlson, 2003; Jans et al., 2012; Kaushansky et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2018; Lyons et al., 2018; Moloney et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2017; Santuzzi et al., 2019; Vickers, 2017), showing

*Address for correspondence: NOVA – Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Pb. 4 St. Olavs plass, 0130, Oslo, Norway. E-mail: kajalar@oslomet.no.

how it is related to certain advantages, such as suitable accommodation, and clear disadvantages, such as stigmatization and discrimination. Thus, negotiating a stigmatized identity is dependent on the response of the other powerful actor in the picture: the employer. While some research has been conducted on employer attitudes and behaviors toward disabled people (e.g. Bredgaard & Salado-Rasmussen, 2020; Burke et al., 2013; Ju et al., 2013), little is known about the employer perspective on whether, when, and how disabled people should disclose their impairment (Lindsay et al., 2019b). Disclosure issues are complicated by the heterogeneity of disability (Dwertmann, 2016), and different people with varying types of impairments have been shown to favor different disclosure strategies (Jans et al., 2012). Research shows that employers rate candidates with physical impairments higher than those with mental health conditions (Dalgin & Bellini, 2008). However, how the differences in stigma and concealability are reflected in employers' expectations regarding disclosure remains underexplored. Furthermore, there is a need for theoretically informed work that examines when and how to disclose a disability (Lindsay et al., 2018).

This article addresses these gaps by drawing on a unique qualitative data set that pairs behavioral data with interview accounts. The point of departure is two field experiments in which employers received two fictitious applications for a real job listing. The applications were designed to be similar on all accounts save one – one of the applicants disclosed an impairment. The applicants were presented as either being a wheelchair user or having a gap in their résumé due to mental health problems. Thus, as the interviews were conducted and analyzed, the researcher already had information about the employers' behavioral reaction toward open disclosure during the first stage of the hiring process.

The aim of this article is to investigate employer accounts regarding what kinds of identity management strategies disabled people should employ to present the professional identities expected during the hiring process. The article focuses on the employer's role in constructing acceptable presentations of disability in the recruitment process and explores the differences in the disclosure expectations related to mobility impairments and mental health conditions. The aim is to gain insight into whether, when, and how employers expect disabled people to disclose their disability by drawing on perspectives from stigma management and impression management (Goffman,

1959, 1963). As such, the article contributes to the literature by providing a better understanding of how disclosure decisions and their outcomes are impacted by interpersonal and contextual aspects.

2. Previous research on disability disclosure in hiring

Disability disclosure has been particularly discussed in relation to hidden impairments and concealable stigmatized identities (Evans, 2019; Follmer et al., 2020; Jones & King, 2013; Prince, 2017). It has been described as a predicament (Prince, 2017), the hidden disability dilemma (Allen & Carlson, 2003; Fitzgerald & Paterson, 1995), and the disclosure conundrum (Goldberg et al., 2005). In a hiring setting, many may choose not to disclose their impairment if they can avoid it out of fear of being stigmatized, discriminated against, and denied work opportunities (Brohan et al., 2012; Irvine, 2011; Jans et al., 2012; Lindsay et al., 2019a). The reasons for choosing to disclose a disability include the intention to gain accommodation, to be open and honest, and to explain the behaviors that can arise because of an impairment (Brohan et al., 2012; Lindsay et al., 2019a).

Jans et al. (2012) lay out three main points in time during the recruitment process when disclosure is possible: (1) before the interview, (2) during the interview, and (3) after getting the job offer. The authors also highlight the factors that the participants of their study – disabled people who were successful in acquiring and maintaining a job – said had influenced their decision to disclose. They describe significant differences in the views of participants with different impairments regarding disclosure. Notably, professionals with visible impairments, such as being a wheelchair user, preferred to disclose early, while those with hidden and more stigmatized impairments, such as mental illnesses, were more reluctant to disclose the same. A review by Lindsay et al. (2018) also shows considerable variation within the literature regarding the preferred timing of disclosure.

The literature on disability disclosure has almost exclusively focused on the disabled person's perspective, and the current knowledge about employers' attitudes regarding disclosure strategies is, therefore, scarce. Certain studies do indicate, however, that disability disclosure in the recruitment process is associated with negative behavioral responses. A small number of field experiments, which involved

submitting fictional applications for real job listings, establish the fact that disability disclosure during the first stage of hiring leads to significantly lower rates of interview invitations (Ameri et al., 2018; Baert, 2018; Bellemare et al., 2018; Bjørnshagen, 2021; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; Hipes et al., 2016). A literature review by Brohan et al. (2012) regarding the disclosure of mental health conditions points to vignette and survey studies that indicate that disclosing a mental health condition leads to more of a disadvantage than disclosing a physical impairment. Lindsay et al. (2019b) provide a recent qualitative contribution and find that the interviewed employers wanted disabled applicants to disclose their disability and that they considered open disclosure a way of building an open and trusting relationship and a prerequisite for providing necessary accommodation. Gignac et al. (2020), who interviewed employer representatives with experience in supporting disabled employees with episodic impairments, describe a complex array of issues regarding workplace disclosure. While this study did not investigate the hiring process specifically, a relevant finding is the impact of organizational culture supporting either the belief that disability is dependent on social and environment factors or culture that supports a notion of disability as an individual phenomenon, in line with an individualist medical model. The findings indicate a positive effect of the employer conceptualizing disability in line with a relational model that acknowledges the interaction between impairment and context (Shakespeare, 2014).

2.1. Identity management strategies: Stigma and impression management

Stigma management and impression management provide a useful theoretical lens for identifying patterns of the social expectations related to identity management. Originating from the works of Erving Goffman (1959, 1963), they set out strategies for micro-interactions that can help the actor be viewed favorably in the highly evaluative context of recruitment.

Stigma management has been applied extensively to describe the perspective of the stigmatized person; but as Goffman (1963, p. 163) says, ‘Stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process.’ Goffman (1963) introduced ‘passing’ and ‘covering’ as strategies for managing a stigmatized identity.

Passing means attempting to conceal an impairment so that others do not detect it, while covering refers to the disabled person striving to make the situation more comfortable for others by restricting displays of ‘failings’ and minimizing obtrusiveness. These are strategies that disabled people can employ; however, they can also reflect the expectations from the receiving end – from those seeking to avoid uncomfortable social interactions.

The stigma management literature distinguishes between two important impairment dimensions: concealability and controllability (Jacoby et al., 2005). Passing depends on being able to conceal and control one’s impairment, and people with hidden impairments can, therefore, pass by not disclosing. Hence, interaction experiences are quite different for people with stigmatized and concealable social identities as compared to those whose impairments are visible (Clair et al., 2005). In the recruitment process, however, people with visible impairments also have the option of not disclosing their disability during the application stage, thus not making the information available to the employer when they make their first selection of candidates. When the disability becomes known, either because of its visibility or because of disclosure, covering can be employed as a strategy to negate a potential negative impression. While DeJordy (2008) claims that covering cannot help an individual escape discrimination and is merely a way of avoiding discomfort, Fernando et al. (2019, p. 770) emphasize that, for someone with an unfairly discreditable identity, covering ‘can stop them from being fully and finally discredited.’ The authors emphasize that this can be useful in combination with what they call accenting: highlighting a more socially acceptable identity. In this way, stigma can be combated by drawing on other non-stigmatized identities (Toyoki & Brown, 2014). These studies illuminate how stigmatized individuals employ stigma management strategies; but there is obvious potential for further investigation into how stigma-reducing strategies are reflected by the expectations that others hold regarding what constitutes appropriate self-presentation. These expectations are especially significant when held by powerful actors, such as employers. In the recruitment process, the power balance is heavily skewed in favor of the employer, and, therefore, stigma and stereotypes may impact their hiring decisions, leading to status loss and rejection (Link and Phelan, 2001).

In addition to stigma management, this article also draws on the theoretical contributions on self-

presentation found in the literature on impression management. Goffman's (1959) writings on impression management provide the analogy of social interaction as a stage performance. Impression management is a phenomenon that has inspired a myriad of research, which describes various impression management strategies and tactics that can be employed to present oneself in a favorable manner (see for instance Bolino et al., 2008). As a job applicant, the goal is to present oneself as a professional who the employer would want to hire. The applicant assumes the role of an inferior who tactfully attempts 'to put the superior at ease by simulating the kind of world the superior is thought to take for granted' (Goffman, 1959, p. 30). As the recruitment process is a setting where the jobseeker is put under great scrutiny and with significant consequences, the employer will expect the applicant to be meticulous regarding how they present themselves and exercise what Goffman (1959) calls 'dramaturgical circumspection' – being prudent and adapting their performance to the circumstances.

Using impression management tactics is a way of combating the discrepancy disability status can stereotypically represent in the presentation of a potentially productive worker (Sung et al., 2017). To address such discrepancies, the person can develop a plan that 'represents a carefully constructed sequence of behavior, developed prior to interacting with a given target (i.e., it is proactive), that is designed to enhance, protect, or adjust the actor's identity goals' (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997, p. 20). Although the research on impression management tactics is scattered, the tactics mentioned in the literature are often related to either being assertive or defensive (Bolino et al., 2008). Especially relevant for recruitment settings in general are assertive tactics, which encompass self-enhancement, self-promotion, and exemplification tactics and can be employed to convey oneself as someone who brings about positive outcomes and is competent and dedicated. Defensive tactics, such as providing justifications and excuses, may also prove to be relevant when managing negative impressions (Bolino et al., 2008).

Stigma management and impression management prescribe strategies that can be employed in social interactions to convey a favorable image and create a smoother interaction. They highlight how making social interactions flow is a cooperative effort and that the disclosure of a disability may represent a disruption that 'throws a wrench into the works' and causes discomfort, calling for efforts to relieve the social strain (Susman, 1994, p. 17).

3. Method

3.1. Cases and data

The study was conducted in Norway, and all the included employers were located in the capital region of Oslo. Norway has a large employment gap for disabled people despite a high general employment rate. Only 41% of the disabled population is employed, as compared to 73% of the general population (Statistics Norway, 2020). Hiring discrimination based on disability is illegal (according to the Work Environment Act and the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act) unless it imposes a 'disproportionate burden' on the employer (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act, Section 20). Asking about impairments directly in job interviews is also illegal unless the questions are relevant for evaluating the ability of the applicant to perform the required job tasks.

All the interviewees were recruited from a pool of participants who had been subjected to either of two field experiments in which fictitious applications were submitted for real job vacancies (see Bjørnshagen, 2021; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021). In the two experiments, 600 and 699 pairs of job applications were submitted as a response to real job ads. Every pair had similar résumés and cover letters, the same educational background, and the same number of years of relevant work experience. The only significant difference was that one of them disclosed a disability. This was disclosed in the cover letter, wherein the applicant explained that either they were a wheelchair user, or they had been out of work for a year due to mental health problems but had since resumed working fulltime. In the mental health experiment, the control applicant had also had a year off from work, but this was attributed to traveling abroad. The wheelchair user applicant was more specific when explaining the nature of their impairment by saying that they had a congenital back injury, while the mental health applicant was less specific. In this way, the design leaves 'mental health problems' as a floating signifier (Laclau, 1994), allowing the employers to fill in the gap with their own ideas regarding what this could mean.

Only employers who had invited one or both candidates for an interview were contacted for this study. The sampling was purposefully carried out to achieve a balance between employers who invited both or only one candidate. In total, 38 employers agreed to take part in this study: 18 from the wheelchair experiment and 20 from the mental health experiment. Out

of the entire data set, 18 employers had invited both candidates for an interview, three only invited the disabled candidate, and 17 invited only invited the non-disabled candidate.

The employers who were interviewed were from different industries, including non-profit, IT, retail, insurance, sales, kindergartens, and contracting. In the wheelchair sample, the positions that were applied for were accountant, IT developer, salesperson, receptionist, and customer service personnel. In the mental health sample, there was a wider range of positions, including electrician, kindergarten teacher, truck driver, carpenter, salesperson, accountant, and developer. All the enterprises included were in the private or non-profit sector, since the application portals for the public sector required the registration of applicant profiles and were thus unsuitable for the field experiment. IT businesses (12 enterprises) and kindergartens (nine enterprises) are overrepresented in the sample, as these types of positions had a high interview invitation rate in the field experiment due to high demand for qualified professionals. Small, medium, and large companies were all included in the study.

As the field experiments had to be conducted without obtaining informed consent, a thorough review of the ethical considerations was conducted in advance. The research project was reviewed by the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The most important justification for the design is that it allows for direct discrimination in real recruitment settings to be identified in a way that would otherwise be impossible (Pager, 2007). If an interview invitation was received, the employer was swiftly informed that the candidate was no longer a jobseeker to minimize their costs. The employers were contacted by email, through which they were informed about the nature of and the rationale behind the field experiment and were invited to take part in voluntary follow-up interviews.

The interviews were conducted either in person or by phone between June 2019 and October 2020. They were semi-structured, following an interview guide that focused on the recruitment process, the field experiment outcome, impressions of disabled workers, work inclusion policies, and disclosure. The interviewees were presented with the résumés and cover letters from the field experiment and asked to reflect on their recruitment decision and thoughts regarding the disabled applicant. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and selected quotes were translated by the author of this article. In addition, the translation quality of the quotes was assessed by a professional language editing service.

3.2. Analysis

The analysis strategy was a theory-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretically, stigma management and impression management guided the analysis. This enabled the researcher to be especially attuned to the aspects that were related to covering and passing in addition to impression management expectations. The analysis was more latent than semantic, seeking to identify underlying assumptions and ideologies that influence the semantic content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the interviews were completed, they were thoroughly read and reread throughout the analysis process. Smaller segments and meanings captured in the material were coded and eventually put together into broader themes, uniting smaller data units into a 'pattern of shared meaning' (Braun et al., 2019p. 48). This coding process resulted in three overarching themes, which are presented in the findings section: (1) timing as a balancing act, (2) the imperative of constructing a positive disability story, and (3) the impact of disability perspective.

4. Findings

4.1. Timing as a balancing act

The disclosure process takes the form of a balancing act in the interview material. Employers voiced their expectations regarding requiring a balance to be struck between different interests and intended impressions mainly in terms of appearing candid and demonstrating competence. However, the expectations regarding this balancing act differed in the interviewees' responses when the conversation concerned a wheelchair user compared to a candidate with a history of a mental health condition. When comparing the reflections regarding these two types of applicants, it becomes apparent that the employers expect mobility-impaired applicants to disclose their disability at an earlier stage. They did not consider being a wheelchair user to be a private matter in the same way that they perceived a mental health condition. The visibility of the impairment seemed to

make the employers feel more entitled to be informed. As one interviewee put it: 'It will, in any case, be very visible when you show up for an interview in a wheelchair. So, it's something you sort of have to disclose because you can see it' (Interviewee 31 – called in only the non-disabled candidate). A large majority of the employers in the sample who received an application from the mobility-impaired jobseeker favored early disclosure, i.e. before the interview. Only two employers explicitly stated that they would have preferred not to know before the interview because they would not want this information to impact their decision.

Many of those who favored early disclosure wanted the applicant to do so in their application, while some felt it would be sufficient to receive this information after they had sent an interview invitation but before the interview. However, some felt that disclosing such information after an interview invitation would seem overly tactical and stated that such a strategy would make them feel deceived, as exemplified in the words of this manager:

Because then it's obvious that you have tried to trick the recipient. I really appreciated that she did [disclose]. Well, that you did. But she did it in a nice way... Because... Well, it would have been a bit awkward if, like when [my colleague] went downstairs to get you, and there you are in a wheelchair! That would have been quite a surprise. If it would be positive or negative, I don't know. Probably negative, because the consequences are so great. And then I would have a negative impression from the start. So, I think it's a good thing to disclose the information. (Interviewee 9 – called in both candidates)

The comment about feeling tricked indicates that not disclosing would be conceived as trying to pass as being non-disabled and that such a passing attempt would be dishonest. It underscores the ableist norm that the given premise is that jobseekers are not mobility impaired, and deviations from this norm must be declared.

A recurring word throughout the interviews in the wheelchair sample was 'surprise.' Wheelchair users are expected to consider that their unannounced presence is unexpected and surprising. To counteract such surprise, they are expected to cover by disclosing, which enables the employer to prepare for the encounter. One manager said the following:

I would immediately think, 'Oh, can we even get in here?' Because I don't know what the turning radius would be, and I would think more about that and be a bit like, 'Oh, hi! ...'. A little surprised. I would be. Because I would not have expected it when nothing was stated. (...) It's about making it a good experience for both parties, really. Prepared. (Interviewee 5 – called in both candidates)

Disclosure is thus a way of counteracting surprise and embarrassment, giving the employer time to prepare. In a similar vein, accessibility is frequently mentioned as a reason for early disclosure, where the disabled person is expected to take responsibility for ensuring that they do not show up to inaccessible work premises. One employer who did not invite the mobility-impaired applicant for an interview (Interviewee 13) stated that a short flight of stairs in their company building, which was inaccessible for wheelchair users, was the main reason for doing so. The interviewee, an HR manager in the company, felt it was important to disclose being a wheelchair user for this reason: 'A wheelchair I feel that you must disclose. If not, you won't get through the door anywhere.' Her account demonstrated the view that accessibility is a privilege one is sometimes granted if you ask but not something that you can reasonably expect. Informing the employer can thus be seen as a covering strategy, where the disabled person is expected to spare the employer the embarrassment caused by them showing up for an interview in an inaccessible building, making the impairment obtrusive. The disabled person bears the responsibility for this, instead of the employer, by ensuring that the building is accessible.

A recurring paradox in the interviews is that many of the employers who claimed that being a wheelchair user is irrelevant for the job still wanted the applicant to disclose this information. When the researcher asked why, many had difficulties with providing an answer, especially those who had an accessible workplace. This paradox is even more striking when compared to the accounts related to applicants with a mental health condition. In these interviews, the employers were much quicker to suggest issues that could affect the applicant's work capacity. However, the employers in the mental health experiment sample were much more hesitant to answer clearly in favor of early disclosure. Attempting to pass during the first hiring stage was viewed as a more dishonest action for wheelchair users than for people with

mental health conditions. This indicates that the feeling of deservingness of disclosure is determined by not only the potential impact on the individual's work capacity but also the ideas and norms accompanying their specific impairment.

In the mental health experiment sample, the interviewees stated that they did not expect the early disclosure that is preferred in the wheelchair sample, but they all preferred to know before making their hiring decision. A few of the interviewees said that they reacted very positively to early disclosure in the experiment and maintained that this gave an impression of openness, honesty, and courage. One of the managers described this as follows:

Yes, I think it was a very good thing that he shared it because it's very courageous to be honest about it. (. . .) I felt it showed some kind of humility in being so candid. (Interviewee 21 – called in both candidates)

Others reacted negatively, fearing that this early disclosure was a sign that the person overshares private details and does not understand boundaries, as in the case of this manager:

I remember that I thought that this was a bit too much. I kind of thought, 'Oh, is this one of those people who doesn't understand boundaries?' Like, whoa, who is always unloading . . . I don't know if I'm able to explain myself . . . But I remember thinking that, 'Oh, I'm a bit skeptical,' I thought, because they said it at such an early stage. (Interviewee 31 – called in only the non-disabled candidate)

This highlights another balancing act for applicants with mental health conditions – between sharing too much and sharing too little. It is apparent that the same disclosure text can be interpreted very differently when it comes to mental health conditions. An understanding expressed throughout the interviews was that sharing mental health conditions touches on something that is much more private than physical impairments. While disclosure was preferred, many expressed an understanding that it could be hard to do so. The impression of mental health as a private matter seems to explain why the associated disclosure is not expected as clearly as for wheelchair users and why passing is not judged as harshly. Passing, or, at least, covering, can then be used as tools to protect the employer against the uneasiness that an open presentation of mental health issues could produce. This means that jobseekers with mental health conditions

need to be careful regarding what they reveal. One of the employers highlighted 'the difference between being personal and private' (Interviewee 36 – called in only the disabled candidate), indicating an imperative to be meticulous in the presentation of mental health conditions. The employers, therefore, face a dilemma: They want honesty, but, at the same time, they do not want the interviewee to overshare uncomfortable and private information, as they feel that this demonstrates a lack of social competence.

There was overwhelming consensus among the interviewed employers that the best time to bring up a mental health condition was during the job interview. Some employers admitted to spending little time on each application and said that a presentation of a mental health condition is too complex to be addressed properly in this context. Thus, the interview situation is a crucial arena for presenting a favorable narrative. The employer accounts regarding how this can be done is elaborated in the following theme.

4.2. *The imperative of constructing a positive disability story*

A recurring theme in the employer accounts is the imperative to present a positive disability story – i.e., a story that highlights positive personal characteristics and downplays any negative impact of being disabled. The employers highlighted the interview stage as an important avenue to present this story. Personal encounters were said to provide a particularly suitable setting for applicants to present themselves as a whole person, which is illustrated by the following employer response regarding presenting mental health conditions:

I think it's about being... Well, then you're very honest. Then you're not afraid to share things and potentially talk about them later. And then, you can explain them a bit, I think. Since, in an application, that is something you read, some only briefly, others more thoroughly, and then you start to wonder. But if you're in an interview, perhaps you can explain it in such a simple way that it sometimes doesn't sound so intimidating after all. (Interviewee 29 – called in both candidates)

This quote highlights how the employer wants the person to show more of themselves in the interview and how it is important to provide an organized, simple, and non-intimidating presentation. Overall, the accounts provided in the interviews point to an imperative of a positive narrative and of presenting a

thought-out image – an imperative that becomes more significant the more the employer sees the disability as an inherently negative factor. The interviewees make it clear that they expect the disabled applicant to make somewhat of an effort to present a positive image, as illustrated by the response of one manager:

That's something I definitely consider important – that you kind of dress yourself up a little. It's like when you're going to a party, you dress up a little at least. (Interviewee 12 – called in only the non-disabled candidate)

This sales manager highlighted the need to 'sell yourself' during the interview. His account points to covering as a preferred strategy, minimizing the importance of the impairment. He called in only the non-disabled person and not the wheelchair user but said that he might have called in both if the disabled candidate had stated that 'he is as mobile as anyone else' and that the impairment had no impact on his ability to drive from customer to customer. He also suggested turning it into a strength, saying how it would be an advantage by making him more memorable in meetings. Presenting yourself in a favorable light is not something that is unique to disabled jobseekers – being a general expectation for all jobseekers – but the interview material suggests that the imperative is stronger for disabled applicants. One manager, who did not call in the disabled applicant, said the following:

Interviewee: But clearly, it is then even more important to present your positive attributes.

Interviewer: Yes, so it is more important than otherwise?

Interviewee: Yes, I think so. It's too bad that it has to be that way, but that's... that's the way it is. (Interviewee 15 – called in only the non-disabled candidate)

The favored attributes frequently mentioned indicates that the employers prefer that the disabled candidates make use of assertive impression management tactics. They want the candidate to demonstrate ambition and dedication to work, interest in the job in question, and to be forward-leaning and positive. They also highlighted the opportunity to draw on other types of identities, especially a professional identity, that could overpower their concerns about the individual's disability. In this way, they emphasized accenting as an effective strategy for making

a good impression (Fernando et al., 2019; Toyoki & Brown, 2014).

When it comes to presenting the disability itself, some of the interviewees indicate a partiality toward mental health stories that could be related to external rather than internal causes. Referring to external causes can be a form of defensive impression management tactic, providing a socially acceptable justification for having mental health problems. Interviewee 23 referred to two such stories based on her experience that, to her, exemplified acceptable narratives. The first was of an employee who had experienced financial difficulties that caused mental health problems, and the other was about a jobseeker who informed the manager about a difficult spell that she had been through due to a friend committing suicide. Referring to such external causes would make her reassured, and she said the following:

If you can, in an interview, give a good explanation for why things have been the way they are, I would – considering that it was a kindergarten teacher and that we are short on people with those qualifications – I would probably be okay with that, with a good explanation. (...) (Interviewee 23 – called in both candidates)

A related concept is that of overcoming, which is a positive disability story that is often highlighted by the employers in that they would like the person to explain how they overcame their difficulties and are now stable and conscious about how they would solve potential problems that could arise in the future. A manager who did not call in the candidate with a history of mental health problems, due to concerns about their inability to do the job and be mentally present, said the following:

It's sort of the full picture, how he presents himself in the interview, and a bit about the process around the illness maybe. And maybe treatments and... How he expresses himself about it. (...) I think if you're honest about this being something you went through and can feel it is a thing of the past. And that he knows what triggers the problems and can be conscious about that going forward. (Interviewee 32 – called in only the non-disabled candidate)

A notion related to overcoming is 'supercrip' representations (Grue, 2015), and they were present in the employers' considerations regarding wheelchair users. Four of the 18 interviewees in the wheelchair sample mentioned Birgit Skarstein – a famous

Norwegian Paralympian who is a wheelchair user – as a role model. They highlighted how ‘not focusing on barriers but on opportunities’ is something that they would welcome in disabled candidates – not being someone to feel sorry for but, rather, someone who accomplishes seemingly impossible tasks. An interesting case from the data set is an interview with the manager of a small company who decided not to call in the disabled candidate due to him being skeptical of the candidate’s ability to partake in work trips and leisure activities. When asked how he would prefer the candidate to disclose their disability, he initially demonstrated ambivalence but eventually presented a supercrip story of how a wheelchair user could make a favorable impression (after mentioning Skarstein as a ‘role model for what you can achieve’):

If they had just come to the interview without us knowing in advance, and the wheelchair just rolled in, you know, then, what we saw as being a bit of a problem concerning getting up here wouldn’t be much of a problem. So, in that case, it would be smart not to write anything about it. (. . .) Then it’s just like, ‘Oh, how did you get up the stairs?’ And then, they could just talk about, like, how easy it is to get around in a wheelchair in Oslo. And ‘Oh, I can get up and down escalators and go around pretty much everywhere.’ (Interviewee 10 – called in only the non-disabled candidate)

4.3. *The impact of disability perspective*

A methodological advantage of this study is that the interview data was paired with behavioral data, thus making it possible to investigate the differences in the accounts of employers who called in the disabled candidate and those who did not. The analysis uncovered one especially important difference related to the employers’ tacit conceptions of disability. The inclusive employers generally demonstrated a disability perspective that was more relational in nature than that of the exclusionary employers. A relational perspective was associated with inclusive hiring behavior, especially when it was matched with an acknowledgement of the employer’s responsibility for ensuring a fit between the employee and the work environment. Those who held a relational view said that disclosure was the necessary first step to getting to know one another and establishing a dialogue regarding how the employer could contribute to the individual succeeding in the workplace.

The contrasted perspective, in line with the medical model, was expressed by the employers who conveyed impressions of disability as an individual phenomenon. They were more interested in whether the applicant could say that they had recovered or how they could present solutions to their perceived shortcomings. By viewing disability as less fixed, the employers with a relational perspective saw disclosure as an invitation for them to take part in the creation of a suitable work environment. The manager in the following quotation recognized how being able to be open and talk about disability and health was important because of this relational aspect:

You are so, like, dependent on each other on a daily basis that you have to know one another a little in order to know how the other person thinks, how they do things, or how they want things to be and how they expect me to do my job and so on. So, I think it’s important to spend some time on that. (Interviewee 30 – called in both candidates)

The importance of dialogue was especially emphasized by the employers that considered applicants with mental health conditions, who said that disclosure was a demonstration of an open attitude that made it possible to talk about mental health. They expressed that they found closed-off employees problematic because it could hinder this cooperative effort. The fact that a relational view was more salient among employers who considered candidates with mental health conditions could be related to the notion of mental health conditions being something more volatile and more connected to social relations than physical mobility impairments. However, there were instances of employers who acknowledged their role in making the workplace accessible, demonstrating instances of a relational perspective on mobility impairments. One example is of Interviewee 1, who called in both candidates and immediately made inquiries into the possibility of installing a new ramp and door opener for a heavy door. The relational understanding that wheelchair users are dependent on accessibility was general knowledge among the employers. Nevertheless, Interviewee 1 demonstrated a relational understanding whereby she recognized her own contextual impact and responsibility. For managers with a relational view, disclosure then becomes a prerequisite in order to effectively play their part in accommodating the candidate’s needs.

Some of the employers with a more relational view seemed to consider even the act of disclosure in a

relational light. They saw the applicant's disclosure decision as not only being dependent on the candidate but also on the manager's ability to create an environment where subjects such as impairment, health, and accommodation could be discussed in an open manner. One manager said that finding out that a candidate was disabled after the hiring point would be negative:

Then I would think, darn, we had a bad interview, since this didn't come to light. Not because there is anything wrong with having some issues, but because I would think I'd done a bad job if I hadn't been able to get to know this person to that degree before she was hired. (Interview 24 – called in both candidates)

In this quote, the interviewee demonstrates an understanding of how the disclosure process and the relationship between disability and the work outcome are a product of not only the person but also the applicant–employer relationship. Thus, the responsibility is shared rather than placed solely on the disabled jobseeker.

Hence, the employers' disability perspective serves as a mediating aspect of the consequences of disclosure. For a disabled applicant, disclosing a disability to an employer with a relational perspective could entail positive consequences in the form of accommodation, while disclosing to an employer with a medical perspective could result in rejection and discrimination or a strong expectation to present a positive front that involves downplaying the impact of the disability.

5. Discussion

The findings in this article illuminate the employer perspective on identity management strategies that can be used by disabled jobseekers and how employers see disclosure as a balancing act between appearing candid and displaying competence. The employers demonstrate a stronger sense of requiring disclosure when it comes to visible impairments, expecting earlier disclosure in such cases than in those involving mental health conditions. While visible impairments are regarded as something that is more public, mental health is considered more private and inappropriate to share with someone you do not know. Therefore, the conundrum is also reflected on the other side of the employer–employee relationship in how the employer wants the information to be disclosed, but that revealing too much demonstrates

a lack of social skills, which negatively impacts the candidate's display of competence. The differences uncovered illustrate the value of basing research in concrete impairments rather than hypothetical scenarios related to the general concept of disability, which is complicated by its prominent heterogeneity (Dwertmann, 2016).

By using impression management and stigma management as abductive analytical tools, this article sheds light on how employers want disabled people to disclose impairments by presenting candid, positive, and dedicated worker identities, where disability plays a minimal role in their lives. By investigating employer accounts, we gain insight into what kind of world they take for granted, which disabled applicants must simulate to put them at ease (Goffman, 1959). As Goffman (1983: p. 3) argues, social interaction is a 'sustained, intimate coordination of action,' meaning that we strive to help each other achieve a smooth interaction and avoid embarrassment. The findings show that the matter of disclosure does not simply concern whether to disclose or when to disclose but also how this should be done. Disability represents a disruption that can generate surprise and uneasiness, and employers expect disabled jobseekers to assume the responsibility of smoothing this over by using covering and impression management strategies. Employers emphasize the use of assertive strategies accompanied by accenting other identities, and covering appears to be necessary to minimize the impact of their impairment. For mental health conditions, defensive strategies that involve providing external causes are also mentioned.

These findings echo research that indicates the advantages of presenting disability in a favorable light. The adoption of such a strategic approach has been identified in previous literature from the disabled person's perspective (Boucher, 2015; Jans et al., 2012; Kaushansky et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2019a; Vickers, 2017), highlighting strategies that are about 'marketing your brand,' being straightforward and positive, and downplaying the impact of the disability by underscoring that it does not affect your ability to do the job. This article shows how strategies are formed in a context where employers' expectations favor these types of strategies. Hence, the disclosure process is in this way ingrained with expectations of presenting a positive narrative, where narrow employer preferences may make it difficult to enter the scene with a more authentic presentation of disability. Boucher (2015) underscores the problematic nature of the imperative to present a positive front

where even those who reach higher echelons in the organization are unable to act authentically in their disabled identity. The consequence of the imperative to downplay the disability is that it contributes to making disabled people virtually invisible and reinforces an impression of inferiority. The findings reported in this article support this point by describing how employers call for presentations of a positive image and the use of strategies that minimize obtrusiveness, creating a narrow selection of acceptable disability presentations. Furthermore, this imperative can lead to a lack of accommodation in addition to taking an emotional toll that impacts employees' work ability (Vickers, 2017).

Interestingly, many of the employers who hold a positive outlook toward inclusion demonstrate what resembles a relational view on disability (Shakespeare, 2014), especially when it comes to mental health conditions. With a relational starting point, they are more open to negotiating the terms of employment with the applicants who they encounter and acknowledge the employers' environmental contribution to creating limitations and opportunities. This finding could mean that employers who demonstrate this view are more comfortable with addressing disruptive information during social interactions with their (potential) employees. How employers understand and frame disability can be influenced by organizational culture (Gignac et al., 2020) and their approach to the leadership role. Research shows that a strong relationship between a leader and an employee, which is built on mutual respect and trust, contributes to the employee's willingness to disclose health information (Westerman et al., 2017). Further, the findings presented in this article support this sentiment in that inclusive leaders see the outcomes of hiring as a result of the mutual relationship that they help create.

A challenge that remains for disabled applicants is that the negotiation of terms of employment and accommodations is expected to take place during the job interview – an arena where their competition may not have any perceived limitations to negotiate. Thus, the negotiation, the impression management strategies, and the covering actions that are expected can possibly reduce the typical focus on more directly job-related topics. Disclosure issues can thus represent a significant disability penalty, hampering employment advancement for disabled people.

These findings have implications for both research and practice. This article sheds light on the

contextual impact of employers on the identity work of minorities in organizations and contributes to the literature on employer perspectives regarding disability disclosure. Employers meet potential employees with certain expectations of what suitable self-presentation entails, and these are particularly powerful in a recruitment setting, as failing to live up to them could impact employment outcomes significantly. These expectations can contribute to making disabled identities disappear, thus demonstrating how identity work is constrained by cultural representations, stigma, and prejudice and how self-representation is a product of not only personal characteristics but also contextual factors. This article's key contribution to the disclosure literature is to highlight these contextual and interpersonal factors that could serve to limit disabled people's self-presentation and job opportunities.

For employers who seek to facilitate inclusive recruitment procedures, a sensitive approach to disclosure is needed. First, drawing on the findings on employers with a relational view, a suitable measure could be to facilitate an organizational approach to disability as a relational phenomenon. This can entail fostering a culture of acceptance toward employees with different impairments (Gelb & Corrigan, 2008) and emphasizing the manager's responsibility of ensuring that the required accommodations work. Although there is potential to build strong relationships following disclosure, it should not be expected nor demanded given the findings that demonstrate how people who disclose their disability are subject to discrimination. Non-disclosure may simply be an act of resistance against undeniable discrimination and oppression (Kanuha, 1999). Instead, employers should give disabled people agency to present their disabled identity and be afforded a wider range of acceptable self-presentation. Employers play a key role in disabled people's success in the labor market. As such, they need to be held accountable to a larger degree for how their expectations and recruitment strategies influence disabled people's access to work and accommodation.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares having no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

The study has been reviewed and approved in advance by the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2018/257). In addition, the project passed the evaluation by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, who reviewed the interview guides and consent forms.

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Informed consent

Either written or verbal informed consent to record, transcribe, analyze, and publish anonymized statements was obtained from all interviewees prior to conducting the interviews.

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