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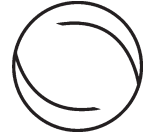
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Article

Oddity as Commodity? The body as symbolic resource for Other-defying identity work

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Abstract

While studies on the work people undertake on their ‘identities’ in professional contexts tend to focus on inner conversations between different possible selves, this paper considers the impact of ‘inherited’ prescriptions and expectations on such inner conversations and the entwining of identity work with historic conditions written onto the body. It does so by studying performing artists with dwarfism. Taking into account their long history of stereotypical roles within the entertainment sector and their visibly ‘different’ body which guarantees to solicit the gaze of others, this study considers identity in terms of the corporeal positioning of the self of artists whose position on stage is often morally disputed, both inside and outside the community of people with dwarfism. Analysing how people use their Othered bodies as a symbolic resource for identity work, we describe three different ways of engaging in embodied identity work: identity ‘ethicalization’, through stereotype-*avoiding* bodywork, ‘queering’, through stereotype-*provoking* bodywork, and ‘distancing’, through stereotype-*acting* bodywork. Each strategy is an attempt to redress the incoherence between preferred (personally aspired) and ascribed (historically inherited) identity. By analysing how people preserve an aspirational self and defy the image of being Other, this study contributes to existing debates by highlighting the role of history and the symbolic use of ‘oddity’ as an instrument in embodied identity work. In addition, it offers a reflective note on the problem of ‘academic exoticism’ through the sensitization of Other bodies and on the potential of able-bodied allyship to attenuate the lack of disability knowledge in management and organization studies.

Keywords

agency, allyship, bodywork, disability, dwarfism, embodied identity work, history, moral taint, Othering

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Introduction

Research into prejudice in the dwarfism community, carried out by my department, found that three quarters of those surveyed had received unwanted attention or verbal abuse; nearly two thirds had felt unsafe when out; a third had been physically handled by strangers; one in eight had suffered physical violence. That's why most of us would rather [have] our peers did not dress up as Munchkins or strippograms. The choices they make damage us all. Of course, just like average height people, some short-statured folk have talent. We may even be more likely to have acting skills, because in order to survive in a disabling world, it's essential to have a good sense of humour. As Warwick Davis says, 'Growing up half the size of your peers makes you an extrovert, so it feels a natural thing to become a performer.'

Sociologist Tom Shakespeare for *The Telegraph*, 2015

While identity and the active work people undertake in forming an identity has received increasing attention over the years in the field of organization studies, the 'field's predominant understanding of identity as the agentic accomplishment of individuals' (Ybema, 2020, p.52) puts identity research at the risk of feeding into a modernist obsession with our selves (Courpasson & Monties, 2017). Despite the merits of post-structuralist studies on the inscription of discursive power in identification processes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kenny, 2010), the bulk of identity research remains focused on inner conversations between different selves rather than addressing how historical conditions materialize in identity work. Inspired by the work of critical diversity scholars, we want to highlight how 'inherited' prescriptions and expectations intermesh with individuals' corporeal positioning in the context of their identity work as a professional entertainer. Prior studies inquiring into the identity struggles of professionals in Othered bodies (e.g. van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019) and in stigmatized occupations (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014) highlight the embodied nature of identity work; without systematically investigating individuals' bodily positioning of the self vis-a-vis historically ingrained imagery in such processes. To put a magnifying glass on history's hold over, and the corporeal dimensions of, identity formation, we take as case study the identity work of individuals with a unique and long history of a life in the spotlights: performing artists with dwarfism.

Dating back to ancient Roman times, 'dwarfs'¹ have played a unique role in the history of performing arts (Bogdan, 1988; Gerber, 1992; Gevaert, 2016). Surprisingly, little is known about contemporary experiences of people with dwarfism working in the performing arts industries. Occasionally the topic does surface in the media, for instance when the successful *Game of Thrones* star Peter Dinklage wins another award or because of the increasing popularity of 'renting dwarfs' for bachelor parties and for other fringe activities. With regard to the latter, moral concerns have been raised both inside and outside the dwarf community, as those kinds of activities are believed to strengthen the idea that dwarfs are 'figures of fun' (Shakespeare, Thompson, & Wright, 2010, p.30). Such narrow representations of people with dwarfism may be at once an asset for those who aspire to a life in the spotlights and a problem for those who are not eager to 'turn their oddity into a commodity' (Ellis, 2018), as the opening paragraph of this paper points out.

Research on the day-to-day experiences of performers with dwarfism holds the potential of broadening the debates, putting more firmly on the agenda both the historical inscriptions written onto the body and individuals' corporeal self-positioning in their identity work. Because of the Otherness of their body – a powerful social construct that cannot be escaped or wished away – they are subject to public scrutiny and moral prescriptions as to how people should (not) put their bodies to (mis)use (Ellis, 2018; Shakespeare et al., 2010). Different from other performers who are type-casted (e.g. black actresses playing nurses in Friedman & O'Brien, 2017) or whose bodies are commodified (e.g. exotic dancers in Mavin & Grandy, 2013), performers with dwarfism have a

rich yet ambivalent century-long history of both subordination and privilege (Gevaert, 2016) resulting in a normative expectation of comic talent bestowed upon an entire community of people. For these reasons, it might be more difficult for them to escape history's hold over identity ascriptions that try to confine them to narrow roles in which actual talent is beside the point while the pure 'display of oddities' is foregrounded. Furthermore, their non-typical embodiment allows us to be attentive to how the body is used as a symbolic resource in the formation of identity, an understudied aspect in organizational identity research (Courpasson & Monties, 2017).

Being interested in the interplay between historic conditions written onto the body and individuals' corporeal positioning of their selves, this article reports the findings of an explorative qualitative study that was guided by the following research question: *How do performing artists with dwarfism respond to the potential incoherence between aspired and ascribed identity in their embodied identity work?* Inquiry into the life stories of six people with dwarfism, active in various jobs in the creative industries, resulted in a number of novel insights. Specifically, this study contributes to the call for identity research to more explicitly bring in corporeality (Courpasson & Monties, 2017) and sociality (Ybema 2020) through showing how subjects are co-constituted simultaneously by 'external'² ascription and 'internal' reflection in the corporeal identity work they undertake when narratively drawing on the body in each of three distinct ways. We labelled such Other-defying identity work 'ethicalization', 'queering' and 'distancing'. For each form, we analyse the use of the body as a symbolic resource informing identity work, referred to as *stereotype-avoiding*, *stereotype-provoking*, and *stereotype-acting* bodywork.³ In their identity work respondents' 'odd' bodies thus serve as an instrument to preserve their self-image or to counter the image of being an Other, with differing emancipatory potentialities. Finally, we reflect on the dangers of our own 'academic exoticism' as able-bodied and average-sized researchers, contributing further to the Othering of an already marginalized community, a process we paradoxically set out to defy. Besides the perils of our own co-implication in the symbolic devaluation of people with dwarfism, we discuss the virtue of forming allyship and co-producing disability knowledge in a field dominated by (assumptions of) able-bodiedness.

Identity work, Othered bodies and morally tainted bodywork

Identity work is used to refer to the active work people in organizational settings put into forming an identity and to highlight how such work is 'never "finished" but always in-progress, continually being "worked on" by individuals in response to changing external stimuli and circumstances and personal preferences' (Brown, 2019, p. 9). Researchers agree that this process is riddled with tensions, giving rise to emotions of self-doubt, uncertainty and fragility (Ahuja, Heizmann, & Clegg, 2019; Beech, 2008; Collinson, 2003). Such tensions in one's identity can stem from inconsistencies between various identity sources and reveal how a worker's self-view becomes challenged by historical, cultural or social norms (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Watson, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). As a large proportion of studies in management and organization have turned their focus to the identity work of people with 'normalized' bodies in knowledge-intensive service jobs (e.g. marketing managers, Ellis & Ybema, 2010; architects, Ahuja et al., 2019) many accounts foreground inner conversations between selves (Ybema, 2020) and self-definition over external ascription, downplaying the role of socio-materiality. However, for some people, some of the time, it is impossible to escape the embodied and ascribed nature of their professional identity, either because of the social meaning of their body (e.g. an Othered body), the nature of their job (e.g. a 'dirty' job), or both.

Indeed, studies focusing on the identity work of marginalized groups highlighted how the 'battle of selves' is complicated by historical identity prescriptions for workers whose bodies visibly

confer a form of professional liability (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021; Slay & Smith, 2011; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016; Trethewey, 1999). As opposed to workers whose bodies are aligned with hegemonic norms of white masculinity, heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, and whose ‘ordinariness’ allows them to feel disembodied (McRuer, 2006), for such workers, embodiment might be felt more strongly and hence inform reflexive identity work in the workplace more persistently. A study by van Amsterdam and van Eck (2019) provides a case in point. They demonstrate how employees with a visibly different (overweight) body become Othered in the workplace, as their ‘fat stigma’ conveys stereotypes of being unhealthy and lazy. Given the institutionalized obsession with health and tightened somatic norms in workplaces these days, a process known as ‘corporate athleticism’, the employees in this study struggled to retain a professional image. They engaged in several identity work strategies that mostly reproduced dominant discourses about size (e.g. ‘humour’, ‘smartening up’, ‘compensating’) but sometimes also resisted them (e.g. ‘flaunting’, ‘irony’, ‘self-acceptance’). The authors argue how movement, dress and the use of spaces are all important things to consider when analysing the embodied identity work employees undertake, defined as ‘activities people engage in with and through their bodies’ to construe a sense of self (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019, p. 53). Of similar interest is the study by Mavin and Grandy (2016) that looks at women elite leaders’ embodied identity work which results from abjection in organizational contexts. While such women are in powerful, highly visible positions, at the same time they experience intense scrutiny of their bodies that are seen as out of place, also by other women. They undertake two forms of embodied identity work: shifting focus away from their bodies and appearances and towards competence and intelligence, condemning women that do for instance dress feminine. A second is, in the absence of clear norms on how to look as a female elite leader, trying to look ‘professional’ (e.g. self-contained, slender and controlled) rather than unprofessional (e.g. too feminine, too masculine, too mother-like).

Another strand of literature that addresses the embodied identity work people engage in when coping with internal aspirations and external ascriptions are studies investigating how workers doing bodywork that is socially constructed as ‘tainted’ craft positive identities. Morally tainted bodywork, for instance, is associated with tasks of ‘dubious virtue’ that utilize bodily practices which ‘defy norms of civility’ and are seen as ‘more evil than necessary’ thereby blemishing one’s ‘character’ (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014, pp. 83–84). In order to deal with such moral taint, exotic dancers combined the ideological tactic of reframing their bodily practices as educational and therapeutic, infusing it with positive value, with a technique of refocusing on economic empowerment or the temporality of their work (Mavin & Grandy, 2013). Sanders’ (2005) study on sex workers demonstrated how the negative psychological effects of selling parts of their bodies were coped with through emotion management strategies and performing a ‘prostitute’ role as business strategy for financial gain. Respondents were able to capitalize on their sexuality and acting skills through the construction of a manufactured identity.

To extend existing debates on how people in Othered bodies or morally tainted professions craft a positive identity, we turn to performers with dwarfism. Given their unique history, we believe their contemporary identity work will offer new insights to a growing literature. Specifically, we explore how our respondents address the aspired and ascribed dimensions of their identities in their corporeal self-positioning. For this reason, we deem the term Other (Campbell, 2009) more fruitful than speaking of performers with dwarfism as ‘stigmatized’, because it tends to reduce identity formation to a person’s ascribed ‘disgrace’. Through a focus on Othering – as a process – rather than on those ‘stigmatized’ – as an outcome – we turn the gaze back onto society and examine the origins of the ‘public antipathy’ often displayed towards disability (Wilton, 2003). Herein we follow disability scholars who criticized Goffman (1963) for ‘not question[ing] the social “norms” that stigmatize people with disabilities’ and ‘tend[ing] to adopt a patronizing tone in speaking of

people who do not meet them, and to belittle and underestimate their efforts to live by different “norms” (Wendell, 1996, p. 57). As such, Goffman ascribes to the orthodox view that impairment is the main cause of disability and disadvantage (Barnes, 2004), while failing to understand how people with disabilities can and do embrace and value their difference, demonstrating a pride in their otherwise devalued identity (McRuer, 2006; Swain & French, 2000). To appreciate the historically inherited dimensions of identity formation, we need to briefly delve into the history of dwarfs as entertainers — a history of both oppression and privilege, inequality and pride.

The history of dwarfs as entertainers

People with dwarfism have taken up unique roles within the creative industries throughout history. The first traces hereof date back to pharaonic Egypt, where they were ‘employed’ to give comic relief to statesmen in royal households (Gerber, 1992). During the dark medieval times, people with dwarfism were displayed at village fairs, and peasant families toured the countryside with infants with birth effects (Niccoli, 1990). From the late 15th until the beginning of the 18th century, royal courts in Europe engaged people with dwarfism as court jesters for amusement, this was especially the case in England, Italy and Spain (Gevaert, 2016). Historians more or less agree that these people servicing at court were better off than those outside court, with better food, housing, clothing and artistic training opportunities (Adelson, 2005a; Gevaert, 2016). There are several cases documented in which people with dwarfism traded in their entertaining role for important positions as counsellor for their king. This should however not be romanticized, as people of short stature were often kidnapped at young age from their parents’ houses, considered as pets and denied human rights such as the right to marry a partner of choice (Adelson, 2005a; Gevaert, 2016; Huizinga, 2007). It is said that by the end of the Middle Ages a true ‘dwarf mania’ among European aristocrats had taken place, which was part of a wider fascination for unusual ‘miracles of nature’, such as black slaves, giants, people with mental impairments and people with other physical deformities (Gevaert, 2016). From the 18th century onwards, performers with dwarfism travelled around and worked independently to showcase their oddity to those willing to pay for it. By the 1840s the commercial freak show, as part of a circus act or working independently, gained in popularity first in the United States and soon spreading across the Atlantic to Europe (Bogdan, 1988). It would take until after the Second World War for the public to lower its interest in the display of ‘freaks’, a label commonly used for women with beards, Siamese twins, extremely obese or skinny people, giants and dwarfs (Garland-Thomson, 1997). The reasons given for the decline of its success by the 1950s are medicalization, growing concerns for minority rights and the rise of alternative forms of entertainment (Gerber, 1992). Although historians have done a good job in reconstructing the history of people with dwarfism in the creative industries, we know little about those living with dwarfism who were not employed as servants or entertainers, making the history of people with short stature very incomplete (Gevaert, 2016; Kruse, 2003).

In modern show business, the pure ‘display of oddities’ as a mere appearance in which talent was often beside the point has made room for more actual ‘performance’ (Gerber, 1992). Several blockbuster movie classics have starred people with dwarfism in ‘fantasy roles’ such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Besides fantasy roles, ‘dwarf roles’, in which people are cast for their short stature, have also been common, such as seen in the ‘Austin Powers’ movies. More recently, performers with dwarfism are taking up more serious, ‘mainstream’ roles such as Peter Dinklage in *Game of Thrones*, in which height in itself is of minor importance. Interestingly, the substitution of actors with short stature by digitalized images of average-sized actors such as in the popular *Lord of the Rings* series and *Snow White and the Huntsman* have been criticized for taking away the roles of actual actors with

dwarfism. In sum, it goes without saying that not all roles featured by actors with dwarfism are experienced as empowering or realistic representations, and some are even said to be exploitative and voyeuristic ventures (Adelson, 2005b). Yet in general, the increased exposure in popular media by famous and ordinary people with dwarfism is celebrated (Adelson, 2005b).

It is clear that to claim that, along with the transformation to modern show business, all forms of exploitation and dehumanizing or mere 'display' made room for respected 'performance' may be a bridge too far. Adelson (2005a) asserts nevertheless that remarkable progress towards the 'defreaking of dwarfs' has been made. Recently in the Belgian press, some commotion arose about a local celebration of the Oktoberfest where people with dwarfism were hired and dressed up in *Lederhosen* to serve drinks and bites, and many national newspapers picked up on the topic. The incident brought to the forefront how some activities within the creative industries that people with dwarfism engage in, referred to as 'fringe activities', are a hotly debated issue in- and outside the dwarf community (Adelson, 2005b). It is easy to see how the act of dressing up a person with dwarfism as a leprechaun, gnome or baby for the amusement of others at (bachelor) parties brings about ethical concerns. Controversy reaches a climax when such people are hired as strippers, 'tossed' in bars or made to wrestle, echoing demeaning medieval times.

In a recent study by Ellis (2018) some participants pointed out how such representations of people with dwarfism have a negative effect on the daily lives of others who do not wish to hold jobs in the entertainment sector. Indeed, 'the legacy of the enfreakment of little people in public consciousness' often means others construct them as 'entertaining anomaly' in public places (Kruse, 2003, p. 499), 'informing the identity of real people with extra-ordinary bodies' (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Others however felt that such roles were a question of individual choice (Ellis, 2018). Gerber (1992) complicates the matter of free choice in his critique of Bogdan's (1988) analysis of the 'freak show' by questioning whether there is free choice between a range of viable options. Regardless of the debates around actual choice, it can be said that in general average-sized people have 'a tendency to see restricted growth people as figures of fun' (Shakespeare et al., 2010, p. 30), contributing to processes of Othering.

Method

Context of the study

This particular research project is part of a larger ongoing project set out to generate knowledge about management and organizations from the marginalized and often ignored perspective of people with disabilities (Jammaers, 2021a, 2021b; Jammaers & Williams, 2021a, 2021b). In an attempt to reconstruct the meaning-making processes of dis/ability across ancient times in the West through historical readings, the first author stumbled upon a newly released book entitled *The great story of little people* (Gevaert, 2016). During its reading, she became intrigued by their simultaneous experience of oppression and pride when working at European royal courts as entertainers throughout the centuries. Despite having interviewed numerous employees and entrepreneurs with different impairment types during her PhD studies, the ambivalence described in this book was new to her. This left her wondering about contemporary workplace experiences of performers with dwarfism, society's current confinement to a limited set of roles and the potential Othering process people with dwarfism might encounter.

The second author shared her empirical interests as well as her theoretical interest in narrative identity work (Beech, Gilmore, Hibbert, & Ybema, 2016; Ybema, 2020; Ybema, Thomas, & Hardy, 2016), an issue more or less common to all organizational members, and given that people with dwarfism have been perceived as 'extreme' (a judgemental label), we figured they offer an

Table 1. Overview of the respondents⁴.

Name	Gender	Age	Job	Regime
Megan	F	25–30	Theatre actress	Fulltime
Jimmy	M	25–30	Stand-up comedian, actor, TV show appearances	Fulltime
Jinthe	F	25–30	Theatre actress, costumed appearances	Part-time
Arnold	M	35–40	Hosting events, costumed appearances	Part-time
Dirk	M	40–45	Actor, hosting events, costumed appearances	Fulltime
Charles	M	20–25	Theatre actor, costumed appearances	Part-time

interesting case study (Chen, 2016; Eisenhardt, 1989) to render visible how issues of history and power determine one's embodied identity work in contemporary organizing. By zooming in on the identity work of a historically marginalized group of people engaged in visible bodywork, the dynamics involved in such processes become more outspoken as the need for 'edifying meaning and identity is often so raw in stigmatized occupations' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 413). As such this article is based on in-depth interviews with people with dwarfism, active in the performing arts and entertainment sector (see Table 1 for an overview). In documenting their stories, we hope to turn the gaze away from the Othered and back onto society and the Othering process.

Data gathering

Scrutinizing popular press articles, websites, videos and social media served the search and selection of respondents (and later acted as a way of enriching the data), as the authors had no personal connections to the community. Due to the small proportion⁵ of people living with dwarfism and an even smaller proportion of them working in entertainment, availability of respondents necessarily infused our sampling strategies. Using 'convenience' and 'snowballing' techniques (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), we aimed at 'maximum variation' with an initial list of seven potential respondents that varied in gender, level of professionalism and types of arts performed, who, after being contacted by email (either directly or through their management agency), referred to three additional respondents. In the end, six of the ten potential respondents agreed to a face-to-face interview with the first author who introduced her research interest to them in a similar way as outlined in the first paragraph of the method section. Three respondents never replied to the email, while one respondent's agent informed us that their artist was currently not giving interviews related to his stature. It is possible that those who declined our request to participate in the study were those who played the roles 'advised against' in the opening paragraph of this article. However, instead of seeking a representative sample and generalizing findings to the experiences of all performers with dwarfism, our aim was to explore a variety of experiences that allowed us to theorize the role of history, power and the body as narrative resources in identity work. With that objective in mind, the authors agreed that the interviews provided sufficiently rich data and theoretical saturation (Small, 2009).

The nature of the activities the respondents were involved in ranged from making movies, giving comedy shows, playing in theatres and musicals, featuring in TV series and appearances in talk shows to costumed appearances at birthday parties, in clubs or at business events. Some respondents did this as a fulltime job while others combined it with studying or another fulltime job, seeing it more as a hobby. Most participants had taken numerous courses for acting, while one had finished a university study in theatre (Megan). Respondents worked as self-employed, through an artist statute or as freelancers. Two respondents identified as women while four as men. Respondents'

ages ranged from 20 to 45 years. At the time of the interviews, all respondents were single, without children, and living on their own except for Megan who shared a house with friends.

The interviews lasted between 1 hour 5 minutes and 2 hours 15 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their careers, more specifically about motivations for becoming a performer, about the role their short stature had played in their careers, about the biggest highlights in their career, and future aspirations. The questionnaire was semi-structured, offering room for the respondent to take the conversation in the direction they deemed relevant, using their own words and raising topics of their own concern, in order to be accountable to the research subjects (Shakespeare, 1996). The first author, an average-sized 29-year-old white female, conducted all the interviews in Dutch in a location chosen by the respondents to create a safe atmosphere in which they felt at ease discussing difficult topics. Given these bodily differences, it is important to reflect on 'how the presence of a research "outsider" affects the performance of those studied' (Tyler, 2011, p. 1495). It is quite possible that the respondents exaggerated their self-reflexive identity work, in order to help her imagine what life as a person with dwarfism is like and understand the choices made. On the other hand, it could also be that respondents lacked trust in the interviewer's intentions due to perceived social differences and therefor withheld parts of the identity struggles they faced, to not make the interviewer uncomfortable, or to 'resist potential devaluation' (Slutskaya, Game, & Simpson, 2018, p. 349).

In a similar vein, bodily differences also affected the performance of the interviewer herself, who, for instance, had to overcome a slight nervousness at the first encounter and more easily established familiarity with younger and female respondents. Her bodily features and privilege were discussed on several occasions (e.g. when spilling coffee over her shirt; when being complimented on her appearance; when being asked about her dressing style). In any case, given the inherent nature of researcher-researched power imbalance and the differences in bodily stature, respondents were inevitably put in an inferior role. Although the researcher explained her general interest in the experience of disability inequality and pride at the start of the interview, ensured confidentiality and carefully clarified to respondents before and after how the collected data would be used, and although the researched expressed contentment and even relief with the research for 'being heard', the very nature of academic inquiry inflicts a form of symbolic violence upon respondents nonetheless (Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001).

Data analysis

The analysis of the data was driven by the following research question: *How do performing artists with dwarfism respond to the potential incoherence between aspired and ascribed identity in their embodied identity work?* To answer this question, the analysis took a narrative identity perspective. Such a perspective considers identity not as a pre-given self or inner essence but as the ways in which individuals narratively position themselves and construct a sense of self (Ybema, 2020). It takes into account the entire 'life story' of the respondent, seeing them as the main author of their life, without losing critical attention to the power relations that might be at play and constrain the possibilities for 'being' (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Beech, 2008). Rather than presenting participants' entire life stories in a chronological way, the chosen entry point of the narratives of the respondents in this paper are 'crossroads experiences' that 'prompted a focus on the internally defined beliefs, goals, values and self-conceptions' (Bennet & Hennekam, 2018, p. 1465) and highlighted micro-level incidents in which self-views are somehow challenged (Alvesson et al., 2008). We thus in a first stage coded for moments in the data that revealed such 'identity work' in which a preferred version of oneself was created, while paying attention to how such choice was limited by the history, culture and social environment of individuals (Watson, 2009). We thus focused on

how identity was the outcome of tensions between ‘internal strivings and external prescriptions’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301).

In a second phase we compared the coded fragments and concluded on three meta-categories of identity work aimed at reducing tension between aspired and ascribed identity, labelled as ‘identity ethicalization’, ‘identity queering’ and ‘identity distancing’. For each of the three forms of identity work we also systematically analysed respondents’ discursive use of their body and bodywork as a narrative resource. So rather than analysing respondents’ actual bodywork ‘in situ’ through live observation or systematic analysis of video recordings of performances, we are interested in how respondents themselves made sense of the role of their body for their identity as performers. We also reflect on the emancipatory potential of each form of identity/bodywork.

The critique in this paper is not aimed at individual performers who do (not) choose to engage in fringe activities or acting jobs related to their stature, but rather at ‘the hostile normativities of contemporary western societies’ (Shildrick, 2009, p. 175). Taking a critically oriented, social constructionist approach, we are aware that identities are not only constructed within a specific historical and socio-material context but also empirically co-constructed in the dialogue between respondents and researchers during the interviews (Alvesson, 2003), a dialogue into which each brings their own lived experiences (Coupland, 2001). The analysis ultimately also reflects the meanings negotiated between the authors, their own theoretical preferences, perspectives and sensitivities concerning the topic under investigation. It is thus inevitably not the only possible interpretation (Cunliffe, 2003; Hardy et al., 2001). We are aware that by focusing only on the working lives of performers with dwarfism, we leave out the experiences of those who lead a life outside the spotlight (for this see Ellis, 2018 and Shakespeare et al., 2010) and ask the reader for caution when assessing the validity of our findings outside the sample.

Findings

Resisting the hold of a historically ascribed identity over their preferred self-view, performers with dwarfism engage in three forms of identity work, which we refer to as ‘ethicalization’, ‘queering’ and ‘distancing’. Identity ‘ethicalization’ is defined as the narrative construction of one’s identity as an ethical human being with moral responsibilities towards a wider community through stereotype-*avoiding* bodywork. Identity ‘queering’ is understood as the mocking or shocking identity work respondents undertake to counter narrow societal views by loudly and proudly articulating their otherness in stereotype-*provoking* bodywork. Identity ‘distancing’ entails lowering the importance that professional identity plays for one’s own sense of self in stereotype-*acting* bodywork. In what follows, we describe each form in empirical detail and clarify how the body is used as a symbolic resource informing identity work. We end with a reflection on the emancipatory potential of the Other-defying identity work strategies, for the individual performer and for the community of people with dwarfism.

Identity ethicalization

In a first form of identity work, respondents undertook identity ‘ethicalization’ by discursively foregrounding the self as an unblemished character, free from moral taint. In the face of potential accusations of re-affirming historical stereotypes, they seek to resist being pinned down as an unethical self by engaging in a particular form of bodywork in which the artist lends her or his body to the public, as a service, to help narrow-minded people overcome their limited perceptions. By narratively presenting the body as a book, put at the disposal of others to better educate the world and demonstrate bodily variation, the speakers voice hope for the acceptance of non-conforming

bodies in the future, contrasting it with an oppressive history. Ethicalization occurred through educating the public on stage by actively striving to play particular, non-stereotypical roles, showing how people with dwarfism take up similar professions as people without dwarfism. This embodied identity work required *stereotype-avoiding* bodywork marked by a systematic refusal to play parts that reinforced the idea of people with dwarfism as inherent figures of fun.

A first example of such identity work we find in the narrative of Megan, who recounts being the first little person⁶ to ever be admitted to the prestigious arts academy. Her agenda for the next two years was fully booked with serious acting roles, a rare case in the precarious world of acting. However, things did not always go smoothly for Megan. Halfway through her studies, she recalls having a hard time finding her place on the stage, and dealing with her physical ‘otherness’ as an actor. A teacher advised her to not ignore her particular embodiment but use it to strengthen her performance. The following excerpt reveals how she now puts her body to use on the stage:

If every little person can play the part, and it is only about my body, for instance a satire program or even if it is a dead serious show, if it is about my body only, I’m not doing it! I do check whether I can add something to the role, to make it work. [. . .] Like for instance, I did a youth theatre performance a while ago. It was about appearances to educate teenagers about how looks have become so important in an ‘era of selfies’. Many kids are so concerned nowadays with how they look: ‘am I thin enough?’, ‘am I muscled enough?’, ‘am I pretty enough?’, ‘who am I?’ and those type of things. And so we were four actors with quite pronounced appearances, and so that [my dwarfism] fit into that perfectly. Then I think, well great! If so many teenagers can recognize themselves in that story, and it helps elevate the narrow image that teenagers have about beauty, well then it is a pleasure for me to use my body for that, really. (Megan)

The performance by Megan with others with a ‘pronounced appearance’ creates an ‘embodied relationality’ in which actors stand together on stage to oppose embodied norms through a ‘recognition-based collective presence’ (Tyler, 2019, p. 58). For Megan this type of identity work was crucial, as her role in the spotlight, she felt, made her responsible for combating the abundance of stereotypical representations of little people in society. As such, Megan was very clear about her view on little people engaging in demeaning fringe activities, illustrating how identity threats come from inside and outside the community:

Yeah I think those kind of people ruin it for serious people, the dwarf community in general I mean. It raises an image of us being dumb and dependant, while we are actually just. . . , many little people have regular jobs, have a family, are just like anyone else. You’re putting yourself in a corner, [by engaging in fringe activities] while it is really unnecessary. When I graduated, there was a media explosion sort of around me, and I received so many emails from little people, thanking me, telling me they could finally relate to someone on TV. So yes, I always get a bit angry with little actors that do engage in such activities. It brings more damage than they know. (Megan)

In a similar way, Arnold, who managed to climb the hierarchical ranks of the services company he had been fulltime employed with for a long time, explains how he systematically refuses to take on performances which do not match his preferred self-view:

I don’t take on every [entertainment] job offer, there has to be some kind of fun in it for me as well. For me it is not a must. If I don’t feel like doing something, I don’t. There could be a few [such jobs] each month, and then nothing for several months. On a yearly basis, I probably take on six jobs or so. If I wanted to do more, I could. [. . .]. I’ll tell people, I can do the job for this amount of money, and then they negotiate a bit but I never go under my price you know, it would ruin the business. [. . .] Unless it’s a job I really like doing, then I will do it for less. For true acting work I will go to great lengths, I will even do those for free. (Arnold)

Being in a financially secure position, Arnold had the luxury of picking out the gigs that matched his preferred self-view, such as those that entailed real acting in movies. For all the respondents in our sample, there were some types of job that they would never engage in, as these were seen as ‘dirty’ (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) and detrimental to the image of the entire community:

I’ve been offered a great deal of money for stag parties, in England, it’s really a thing, someone chains you up to a bachelor with handcuffs, everyone gets really drunk, . . . I just don’t understand why anyone would choose to do that. It’s degrading. (Arnold)

Identity ethicalization as a strategy helps move away from the historically ascribed identity and the damaging potential of stereotypical type-casting (Friedman & O’Brien, 2017) by foregrounding a morally sound identity, based on a self that is accountable to the wider community of people with dwarfism (e.g. De Coster & Zanoni, 2019; Kenny, 2010; Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Zanoni, Thoelen, & Ybema, 2017). Although this strategy constitutes a form of micro-emancipation, it is likely to have wider implications for the community because of the artists’ public visibility. Participants openly resist society’s ‘attribution of corporeal deviance’ and being marginalized by ‘cultural rules about what bodies should be or do’, as Garland-Thomson (1997, p. 6) has put it. In light of the serious threats to one’s identity that type-casting could pose, all respondents engaged in the strategy of *stereotype-avoiding* bodywork, carefully choosing out work, avoiding morally tainted jobs (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014) and reconstructing their identity along preferred self-views, yet for those who were in a financial precarious position and could not rely on a wage from another job, it was harder to be ‘picky’ (Friedman & O’Brien, 2017). As such this form of agency should be seen as a conditional agency, effective as it is grounded in actual embodied practice (Dick, 2015) but highly dependent on social context and possibility.

Identity queering

In a second form of identity work, respondents undertook disruptive ‘queering’ work on their identities to create change through shock or mockery. Such identity ‘queering’ – an ‘attitude of unceasing disruptiveness’ characterized by a ‘loud and proud assertion of difference’ which originated in the late 1980s in gay politics (Parker, 2002, p. 148) – turns around the Othering process. In an attempt to shock an audience or to ‘perform a joke, rather than being one’ (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 9), they put their Othered body to use by staging it on their own terms. By shocking or mocking the audience, fixed inherited meanings become temporarily destabilized and a window of opportunity opens through which the artist can take back control and steer the meanings that others ascribe to them in a preferred direction. This identity seems reliant upon a specific type of *stereotype-provoking* bodywork in which short stature is used as a material device to ridicule societal confinement of people with dwarfism to a ‘dwarf box’. By blowing up and making fun of the stereotype, respondents turn their body into a stage, a podium from which to authoritatively claim space outside the societal cage. Queering of one’s identity thus occurs through creating a moment of disruption in which historically grounded stereotypes are turned on their head, demanding the public’s undivided attention and consequently taking the lead on how one will be defined by others in the present.

A first example of such queering identity work is found in the narrative of Jimmy. Jimmy’s fulltime career as a comedian took off when he was in his last year of law school. The success of his shows accelerated quickly, but his identity as a skilful artist became questioned few years later:

From the moment I won the X award, things really boomed. And after my first tour, I was asked to appear on many talk shows. Yet after a while, the interest in me seemed to fade. And when we [management and

I] asked them why we did not get invited anymore they said ‘well it’s always dwarf jokes with you, isn’t it’ [. . .]. It makes me angry. (Jimmy)

Not having taken these comments lightly, despite the continuing success of his shows, Jimmy decided to use his second tour to make a clear statement about his identity as a comedian, in which the role of his body was undeniable, exactly because of societal restraints on who he could be:

I really just do what every comedian does, live a life in the daytime and then joke about that in the night-time, up on stage. Yes, there might be stuff in there about being a dwarf, but it’s really because when I walk into a place, everyone is staring. That’s reality for me. I always say, the day I walk into the butcher shop, without turning heads, that’s the day I’ll stop making dwarf jokes. So now I bring a really big abacus with me on stage, containing ten blocks. I make ten dwarf jokes in one night, that’s ten out of 150 jokes told in two hours. There you go, people can count along, ten, no more, no less. (Jimmy)

Jimmy’s preferred self-view as a skilful artist became threatened by the critique he received for being only capable of making dwarf jokes. He responded to such threats through disruption, writing an entirely new show in which the negative opinions voiced by a few served as the fuel for another commercial success.

Jinthe’s story demonstrated a similar strategy of queering one’s self, aimed at creating change through shock. She described herself as a part-time student and theatre actor who was struggling to build a career that was both artistically and financially rewarding. Her interview reveals an ambition to change narrowly held beliefs about the ability of women to take up leading roles and about beauty, as phenomena reserved for average-sized people. Consider the following excerpt:

I have to play *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in the near future, so seven male dwarf actors are needed, not female. Like come on, it’s 2018, and I am still forced to play a man. Most roles are so incredibly stereotypical, probably 80% to 90%, and there is no room for putting something feminine in there, it always has to be so very male, angry, tough. . . I never get to play a beautiful woman, those roles are always denied to me. It sometimes tears me apart inside, really. . . People will tell you, ‘but it’s just a role you’re asked to play’, but it is always the same role you know. . . I’m asked to hide my identity the whole time. (Jinthe)

Contrary to a recent study documenting average-sized female actors’ resistance to the sexualization of their bodies and refusal to play ‘princess girl parts’ (Friedman & O’Brien, 2017, p. 370), Jinthe constructs such roles as desirable. She carries on and recounts an event, that can be labelled as identity queering, in which she successfully reduced the tension between her preferred self-view and her ascribed historical identity as a passive object of scorn:

A while ago I did a performance in a rock band, in front of 2000 people, and that performance was a bit extreme, it wasn’t something I was a 100% confident about doing, [. . .] I had to give a sort of kinky SM-like performance, being punished and all. . . [B]ut towards the end of the show, I got to step out of my cage and I caught the lead singer in my web. [. . .] And there was a sort of sexualization around me, and I think female beauty should be celebrated and shown for women with dwarfism as well you know. [. . .] It got a lot of attention from the press and the headlines were saying ‘dwarf takes down lead singer’ and even though my mother was concerned about being mediatized negatively, I think: oh well it sells good artistically. (Jinthe)

Although the experienced identity tensions do not seem entirely resolved, Jinthe did see the empowering potential of her performance and invokes her right to define her femininity for herself,

‘rather than conforming to received interpretations of her body’ (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.25). Despite being aware of the unconventionality of the role, she reflexively turns it into an artistically valid piece of work through her queering identity work, describing it as both commercially intelligent and an act of body politics.

Both examples of Jimmy and Jinthe reveal how ‘shock’, through humour and controversy, was used as a rhetoric device to disrupt the historically ascribed identity and take back control over who gets to define them as artists in the present. Through such identity ‘queering’, tensions are lowered through demanding the final say in who gets to define one’s identity. By foregrounding one’s agency, the hold of others in defining oneself is reduced. It is a technique similar to the ‘undoing of gender’ described by Thanem and Wallenberg (2016), which increases the possibilities for identities by either overdoing stereotypes (Jimmy overdoing dwarf stereotypes in early comedy shows and, in his later shows, mocking critiques of doing only dwarf jokes) or adopting the gender practices primarily associated with the opposite sex (Megan who claims a sexual identity which she is commonly denied). Although our respondents experienced their queering act as liberating, a moment of regaining control, its emancipatory potential is experienced as more dubious, due to the stereotype-*provoking* nature of the bodywork, and conditioned upon the audience’s perceptiveness and therefore perhaps a wishful agency. Yet, their scripted role as an artist did not always allow for it and only Dirk and Arnold to some extent also reported using the strategy of identity queering through humour.

Identity distancing

In the last form of identity work, identity distancing, respondents played down the importance of their professional roles for their sense of self. To resist history’s hold over one’s ascribed identity, they make a reflective effort separating their true and authentic self from their staged self by foregrounding the importance of money or detaching themselves from a performance marked by stereotype-*acting* bodywork. Narratively the body is presented as currency this time, an abstract matter that one can exchange for value, in this case an income. As such the body is highly instrumentalized for commercial ends and discursively separated from the mind, resembling a Cartesian split.

A first example of identity distancing work is provided in the narrative of Dirk. Dirk minimizes the importance of being able to display his preferred self to the audience by foregrounding the importance of money. Before he was well-known in the media landscape for his acting roles, he occasionally made costumed appearances to ‘keep the cash coming’. Unlike other respondents, Dirk openly branded himself as a dwarf entertainer and actor, keeping concerns of being represented in a stereotypical way at bay:

I don’t really mind being cast [as a dwarf] because I am a dwarf. It’s all about types you know, they will never ask an ugly man to play a prince either, so, to me that is the same thing [. . .]. I have no trouble wearing a clown suit or whatever, it depends on the concept, I have to know everything in detail in advance, and it has to feel right. So that it does not feel like abuse you know. [. . .] If tomorrow, a local garden centre asks me to host their open-door day and welcome their customers then I have no problem doing that dressed up as a garden gnome, as long as there is a clear theme. (Dirk)

However, Dirk also recounts a costumed event that he experienced as very disempowering:

I was once asked for an appearance in a club, and I right from the start did not have a good feeling about it but it was good pay so I thought, let’s do it. . . In the end it was me laughing anyways. . . So eventually I was dancing on top of the bar in a gnome costume and they put up that song, that goes ‘hello little

gnomes, hello' and in itself that would not bother me, but the staff and the owner of the bar, they were really making fun of me, they were like 'no way, he is actually dancing to that, what a fool'. Even though the audience loved it, the way they [staff and owner] stood there laughing at me. . . I finished the act and I told them that wasn't okay. (Dirk)

Even though Dirk in this excerpt reveals feeling uncomfortable in the situation, pointing out social suffering caused by ableism, in his identity work, he reclaims agency by referring to the appreciation of the audience and getting paid a great deal. In the face of being type-cast and stereotyped, respondents used pay as a powerful resource to draw on.

Similarly, Charles' identity work seems to rely on the act of distancing. This time, rather than foregrounding the role of money, his identity work was accomplished by presenting a self that engages in acting for the fun of it, not necessarily because he is skilled at it. This is facilitated by referring to the existence of other more pressing passions:

No I can't really sing, it's more like, everyone who wants to, can be part of our musical group, it's about giving everyone the opportunity to develop their talent. I did sing in the last production, and I do like singing, but it's not that I'm any good at it, I don't want to have a career in singing or anything.[. . .] And I don't see myself having a career as an actor either, because I don't think I have the talent, but also, because I simply don't want it. There are many other things that I would find more passion in than in acting itself. That does not mean I don't put passion in my acting, I do, but my life does not revolve around acting. (Charles)

Occasionally, Charles worked for a prestigious event company that hosted exclusive themed events and parties. In the following excerpt, he minimizes the role of such work for his identity by claiming he feels little connection to the people he occasionally performs for:

I was asked to be at a birthday party of some boy who turned 17, with very wealthy parents, so the agency contacted me and a bunch of other burlesque dancers and other crazy stuff, you name it. . . [. . .] There was a barely dressed model, and she was laying down with bites all over her, euhm, body. And I had to invite people in groups of four to follow me towards the 'buffet'. [. . .] I don't see myself doing this for a long time, it's a certain kind of audience, that is not my cup of tea, that does not square with my personality. [. . .] A very decadent world, a world I'm not excited about, I do it purely for the financial aspect, I don't really feel a need to invest more of my time in it, no, that much is sure. (Charles)

Whereas some research suggests that performers tend to claim their work is authentic self-expression (e.g. Beech et al., 2016), the excerpts of Dirk and Charles show a measured disinterest in their performance as integrally part of who they are and a disassociation from their staged selves (Sanders, 2005). This tactic seems close to the 'teflonic identity work' (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016) in which people distance themselves from their work and simply 'play the game' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016), without thinking of it as an integral part of their being. Such discursively constructed sparseness 'refutes the need to invest in one's sense of self' as performer and diminishes tensions by attaching less importance to that role and foregrounding alternative cultural frames that inform their identity, like other jobs or passions (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2020, p. 15). It is a strategy that also popped up in the life story of Arnold (albeit to a lesser extent), but that was absent in Jimmy, Megan and Jinthe's identity narratives. Although this strategy attempts to relieve the individual from identity threats, the stereotype-*acting* bodywork it coincides with leaves existing stereotypes untouched and this form of identity work could thus be interpreted as more defac agency (Contu, 2008) than the other strategies. While respondents' deliberate use of 'bodily oddity' and its concomitant stereotypes echoes historical constructions of the body-as-commodity, the strategy allows respondents to uphold an overall positive self-view (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Discussion

This paper examined the tensions experienced by performing artists with dwarfism between their personally aspired and historically ascribed identities, analysing the corporeal positioning of the self in their embodied identity work. It adds to the current literature in two main ways.

First of all, it provides an undeniably material and historical account of identity work. Understanding identities as arising ‘at the intersection of, and in interaction between, people’s sense of self and the environing social worlds in which their lives unfold’ (Ybema, 2020, p. 64), our study is a strong reminder of the environing world’s significance for, and impact on, people’s identity work: the bodies of artists with dwarfism are engrained with a historically transferred status that cannot easily be escaped, leading to a strong ascribed identity as ‘inherent figure of fun’ (Shakespeare et al., 2010, p. 30). This powerful image intrudes the individual’s identity work which aims to ward off its taint by carefully considering the positioning of the embodied self. Although our respondents did not engage in morally tainted fringe activities, and there were no apparent dirty particulars as would be the case for, say, exotic dancers (Mavin & Grandy, 2013), a reversed *taint transfer* from the historically tainted body onto an otherwise non-tainted job occurred. Such body-specificity, rather than job-specificity, of ‘dirt’ is not new and ‘body (un)suitability’ has been shown to intensify the occupational stigma experienced (e.g. male nurses in Simpson, Slutskaya, & Hughes, 2012), yet, for our respondents the lingering threat of devaluation based on somatic norms of otherwise clean jobs proves to be profound and persistent. The re-enactment of an embodied history through a collectively shared habitus – Bourdieu (1993) gives the example of a harmless habit inherited from the Middle Ages: greeting as if we still raise our hats – provides artist and audience with strong (and hardly harmless) expectations of people with dwarfism engaging in stereotypical embodied self-presentation. Other communities also carry with them the effects of a long-embodied history of strong, abject ascription. For instance, a history of slavery and colonialism continues to influence ethnic minority professionals’ understanding of who they are professionally, including in high-status jobs (Slay & Smith, 2011; Srinivas, 2013). Future research should further investigate how embodied history informs contemporary identity work and its concomitant bodywork across marginalized groups and professions, taking into account the specificities of such collective histories like the variations in inherited baggage of subordination and stereotyping, in traditions of justice movements and activism, and in the wider community’s knowledgeability of such collective histories. By no means is this an easy, clear-cut task, as different embodied histories are intertwined, as illustrated by the intersectional analyses of Erevelles (2011), who shows how the historical legacy of colonizing and slavery produced mental and physical health conditions which persist intergenerationally, and McRuer (2006), who asserts that homosexuality and disability share a pathologized past.

The remedial work in response to history’s hold over identity takes three embodied forms in this study. Identity ethicalization aims to purify the self and display a morally sound identity vis-a-vis the critique that performing artists with dwarfism reproduce stereotypes. It sets out to alter ascribed historic views through stereotype-avoiding bodywork, by responsibly displaying their body to the public in order to increase its ordinariness and enforce a wider acceptance of bodily variation, like a book made available in the public library. Identity queering aims to unsettle stereotypical beliefs through a disruptive queering act. Here the undesirable inheritance is disrupted through stereotype-provoking bodywork, claiming a self that was the joker rather than the joke or the object of desire rather than an asexualized creature. Metaphorically, the body is used as a stage from which to speak and to claim authority, moving from the ‘passive endurance of scorn, to the strategic exploitation of wit and satire’ (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 8). Lastly, identity distancing strategically reduces the overall attachment to one’s professional role. Through the commodification of the body,

treating it as a currency, stereotype-*acting* bodywork can take place without posing too much of an identity threat since the importance of their professional identity in their lives is minimized. Similar types of discursive identity management strategy have been identified in research featuring other minority professionals (e.g. Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021; Slay & Smith, 2011; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016) and among majority professionals (e.g. Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Kenny, 2010) across a range of industries. Future research should qualify the extent to which historical Otherness and embodied suitability influence the reflexive identity work, by investigating different types of work and different professions and by conducting a meta-analysis aggregating and comparing cases of, for instance, minority and majority workers.

Second, the material and historical take on identity work outlined in this study brings to the fore how ‘the personal is political’. Due to our respondents’ presence on stage, the political nature of their identity performances can hardly be denied as their stepping into the spotlight, with a body that guarantees to solicit the gaze of others, is in itself an act of claiming difference and radical alterity (De Souza & Parker, 2020; Parker, 2002). In taking up space in the public domain, the respondents set out to challenge the narrow acceptance of bodily variation characteristic of the neoliberal obsession for ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ (McRuer, 2010). As such all respondents deserve to be recognized, not as passive victims who submit to the exoticism of others, but in their capacity of activists in a hostile, ableist society (Jammaers & Williams, 2021b; Wendell, 1996). Yet, a critical reflection is warranted to differentiate between the three forms in terms of their potential for emancipation of the individual and/or wider community. Identity distancing is the more ‘decaf’ form of resistance (Contu, 2008) compared to the other two in dealing with identity prescriptions. It might be functional in helping the individual cope with its immediate identity threats but its identity work is rife with cultural representations that reduce the Other into an object of curiosity (Chandler & Rice, 2013). The work done then on one’s identity and body is a commodification of difference and critical diversity scholars have argued that this rather forecloses real inclusion, or ‘recognition’ in organizational contexts (Tyler, 2019). Identity queering, like other queering work, unsettles complacencies through ‘making something strange and hence forcing thought’ (Parker, 2016, p. 73) and bringing in ‘an attitude of unceasing disruptiveness, and a taking apart of the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding knowledge, power and identity’ (Pullen, Thanem, Tyler, & Wallenberg, 2016, p. 84). Its consequences move beyond the individual performing the work; however, it is not without danger, as stereotypes are not dismantled but rather exaggerated and used as ammunition. Identity ethicalization seems to be the most sustainable strategy in the long run. Yet, as a conditional form of agency, it is not accessible to all performers as it requires financial stability. Moreover, caution is warranted as it would be a mistake to see performing dwarfs as morally obliged to lead the change and inherently having the power to transform norms in the industry or society (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016). Instead of placing the burden for change upon a few, the undoing of ableism ‘falls on all those who participate in the relevant structures, both those identified with normative standards and those constructed as excessive to them’ (Shildrick, 2012, p. 39). Despite the merits of teasing out the power and political dimensions of identity work, demonstrating different types of remedial work and their relation to micro-emancipation, future research should consider how such accounts might be usefully supplemented with studies of emancipation at a more structural level (e.g. through the work of labour unions, non-profit organizations, disability rights activists, and so on).

We end this study with a last but perhaps most important note regarding researcher reflexivity. The critical reader of this paper might spot a parallel between our research endeavour to tell a story about the oppression of bodies through the case of the dwarf body and oppressive historic exhibitions of that same body at fairs and circuses (which, by the way, had commercial and pedagogic aims: to teach the wider public a lesson about their selves and the ableist imaginary) (Gevaert,

2016). Are we perhaps part of the same problem we wished to critique in the first place, contributing to the sensitization of the Other, making this academic quest suspicious in advance? We certainly felt a tension and at multiple stages of the research process questioned our right to write ‘on’ people with dwarfism. Ideally, emancipatory disability research would be entirely devised and controlled by and disseminated to disabled people and have a meaningful, direct impact on policies affecting their lives (Barnes, 2004). However, for various reasons, such as the way funding works (Barnes, 2004), the unequal researcher-researched relationship (Hardy et al., 2001) and the anti-performativity of critical research (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009), ideal scenarios are usually not part of our daily research routines. Ongoing and meaningful interactions between disabled people and able-bodied academics who critically reflect on their own positionality are therefore an important alternative (Danieli & Woodhams, 2005). Our desire for this study was to tie together a small number of experiential accounts and locate it within a political analysis of social barriers, an ‘outside in’ analysis (Barnes, 2004). In thinking *with* people with dwarfism, we put ourselves in a position of allyship in order to learn from them ways to ‘trouble the dominance of the present state of affairs’ (De Souza & Parker, 2020, p. 7). The voices of disabled people remain largely under-represented in management and organization studies today (Jammaers & Williams, 2021a). In spite of the modest potential for change, thanks to the openness of our participants this paper makes a step forward.

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Notes

1. In this paper, the terms ‘dwarf’, ‘person of short stature’ and ‘people with dwarfism’ are used interchangeably as these terms are considered non-offensive by the dwarf community. In this study, five out of six respondents preferred the term ‘dwarf’ whereas one preferred the term ‘little person’. Language preferences vary geographically, yet the word ‘midget’ is considered as extremely offensive everywhere.
2. The commonly used distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ dimensions of identity formation probably imposes an overly crude binary divide upon empirically entangled phenomena. For the purpose of this paper, however, we consider it as a useful analytic distinction that, from an etic point of view, helps us explain how respondents’ identity work is infused with both personal aspirations and inherited ascriptions, and, from an emic point of view, also reflects respondents’ own understanding of themselves as they often narratively present their identities in terms of tensions between ‘internal strivings’ and ‘external prescriptions’.
3. Although different definitions of bodywork circulate in management and organization studies (e.g. work performed on one’s own body, work performed on others’ body), for the purpose of this study we consider bodywork simply as all work that requires the intensive use of one’s body (e.g. performers, butchers, nurses, police officers).
4. In presenting the data, we used pseudonyms and left out any other identifying information such as the titles of TV shows or plays in which respondents featured.

5. Estimations point out that the reported incidence of growth restriction ranges from 1 in 15,000 to 1 in 40,000.
6. Unlike the other respondents in this study, Megan prefers the term 'little person' and so we use this term in her narrative.

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