Unveiling the Scapegoat: A Girardian Reading of Disability and Organizational Discrimination

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Abstract

This study introduces a critical lens to explore discriminatory dynamics towards people with disabilities in organizational contexts, using René Girard's scapegoating framework. Despite the wide range of labels that attempt to define disability, the literature would benefit from a more nuanced approach and dynamic model. This model could explain how an ableist organizational environment can give rise to various forms of violence towards people with disability. By broadening the spectrum of social sciences beyond managerial and organizational studies and overlapping the identification processes in an ableist organization with René Girard's scapegoating framework, this study tries to obtain a more nuanced and dynamic perspective. Indeed, the scapegoating framework allows us to better understand the collective and social dimensions and processes of discriminatory behaviors, capturing relevant elements that characterize the phenomenon. This informs ongoing research into new evaluative tools and sketches new theoretical and empirical approaches.

Keywords

disability, identification, ableism, scapegoat, Girard

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, disability has gained growing recognition as a critical dimension of workplace diversity, in line with broader societal shifts toward human rights–based approaches (Bizjak et al., 2026; Beatty et al., 2019; United Nations, 2006). Yet, despite international commitments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace remains fraught with systemic barriers and persistent discrimination. Disabled individuals continue to experience lower employment rates, precarious contracts, and subtle exclusionary practices (United Nations, 2024). These are not merely residual effects of outdated policies but expressions of enduring organizational norms that privilege able-bodiedness as the implicit standard of competence and value (Jammaers, & Zanoni, 2021; Campbell, 2008).

Recent scholarship has advanced our understanding of how ableism operates as a social and organizational process, shaping the meanings attached to work, identity, and belonging (Baldridge, & Kulkarni, 2017; Kulkarni, & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Jammaers, & Williams, 2023). However, the mechanisms through which ableist labeling evolves into exclusion or even symbolic and material violence remain underexplored.

Accordingly, we propose a dynamic framework that connects the processes of social categorization underlying ableism with René Girard's theory of scapegoating (Girard, 1972, 1982), in order to inquire how social tensions are collectively resolved through the symbolic targeting of a vulnerable individual or group, thereby restoring a sense of order. When read through the lens of organizational life, this perspective potentially sheds light on how ableist norms may channel organizational anxieties into discriminatory practices that stabilize the system at the expense of marginalized members.

By combining insights from disability studies, organizational identification, and Girard's theory of scapegoating, we offer a conceptual model that reframes discrimination against disabled employees as a socially produced and collectively sustained process. This approach contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it expands the theoretical understanding of ableism by situating it within broader mechanisms of collective exclusion. Second, it provides a novel interpretive lens for managers and scholars to recognize and disrupt the cycles of symbolic violence that undermine inclusion.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the evolution of disability definitions within organizations, from medicalized to social interpretations. The following section reviews existing theoretical frameworks explaining discrimination toward people with

disabilities and identifies their limitations. We then introduce Girard's scapegoating framework and apply it to the organizational context to illuminate the dynamics of exclusion. Finally, we discuss the implications of this approach for fostering awareness and inclusion in ableist workplaces.

Disability in organizations: from an individual to a social description

The complexity of disability issues and the empirical approaches adopted by organizational scholars have led to a lack of a unique and shared definition (Beatty et al., 2019). Indeed, many studies use the term 'disability' to cover different kinds of categories of disability, leading to the underestimation of differences across conditions (Woodward, & Day, 2006). Despite the wide range of labels and related constructs present in the literature, the definition of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the most utilized by organizational scholars (Beatty et al., 2019; Cavanagh et al., 2017). According to the CRPD, the term "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (United Nations, 2006: article 1, purpose). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) is the typical model organizational scholars adopt to define disability (Beatty et al., 2019; Cavanagh et al., 2017; Robert, & Harlan, 2006; Stone, & Colella, 1996), in which the terms 'impairments,' 'limitations,' and 'restrictions' refer to 'deviant' conditions as compared to what are generally accepted as normal conditions (Vornholt et al., 2018). However, in the last two decades, the disabled people's movement (Charlton, 1998) and social science researchers (Barnes, 1991; McConachie et al., 2006) have contributed to the shift from an individual and medical description of disability to a structural and social one. This change of perspective has prompted awareness that people are viewed as disabled by society, rather than their bodies providing the label (World Health Organization, & World Bank, 2011).

Impairments often result in a 'devaluation' of people, ascribing a stigma (Snyder et al., 2010). When individuals are categorized as disabled, observers immediately evoke negative stereotypes and assumptions that guide their process of interaction (Stone, & Colella, 1996). Managers, for example, may perceive people with disabilities as having lower productivity rates or fewer competencies (Schur et al., 2009). Stereotypes related to disability also affect co-workers' attitudes (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Kulkarni, & Lengnick-Hall, 2014), attributing

stigma to disabled colleagues. Stigma occurs when an attribute is used to identify an individual as 'tainted' rather than 'usual' (Goffman, 1963), which negatively impacts the acceptance of all types of disabilities, demonstrating the presence of a socially accepted concept of ableness as a normative standard that society believes should be achieved (Harlan, & Robert, 1998).

Given the rising awareness of social construction as a key element that shapes prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination (Stone, & Colella, 1996), ableism has often been used to conceptualize the marginalization of disabled individuals (Williams, & Mavin, 2012), referring to all ideas that presume that non-disability is the normative organizing principle according to which people are evaluated (Jammaers et al., 2016). Ableism refers to a culturally embedded belief that characteristics related to disability are negative conditions to be ameliorated (Campbell, 2008). Therefore, ableism highlights how disability is not an individual trait but an effect of cultural and societal structure that marginalizes individuals. Although disability is often overlooked as an element of diversity in the literature, the ableist perspective underlines the negative consequences of dissimilarity (Guillaume et al., 2012), since the process of reinforcing 'normal' – and othering those outside this category – leads to people with disabilities facing discrimination in organizations, including lower pay, reduced participation in projects, less job security, higher levels of supervision, negative treatment or even violence (Schur et al., 2009; Snyder et al., 2010). However, the dynamics of this shift from ableist labels to actual negative actions directed towards people with disabilities require some clarity (Jammaers, & Zanoni, 2021). Integrating organizational literature on the discrimination against disabled people into sociological literature on the discrimination of minority groups is in line with the evolution of the concept of disability (World Health Organization, & World Bank, 2011), since it abandons the traditional view of disability as an individual and medical impairment, adopting the view of disability as an ascribed, socially constructed status (Snyder et al., 2010). For this reason, in the next paragraph, we provide a brief examination of the theories adopted to explain the model within the domain of the personal and social characteristics of the involved actors (Stone, & Colella, 1996), specifically employees with disabilities, their colleagues, and supervisors.

Disability in organization: constructing previous framework

The exposed shift that moves from understanding disability as an individual condition to a structural and social one recalls the importance of reconstructing the underlying stigma process, which is still lacking in the literature (Beatty et al., 2019). To do so, we will first briefly expose,

although not exhaustively, some theoretical frameworks previously adopted in the literature to analyze various contributions and limitations (see Table 1).

Starting from Stone and Colella's (1996) model, the explanations of the phenomenon can be categorized into three overarching 'domains.' The first domain pertains to personal characteristics, encompassing the attributes of individuals with disabilities, their colleagues, and supervisors. Research in this area has identified the influence of prejudice (both affective and attitudinal bias), stereotyping (cognitive bias), and discrimination (behavioral bias) as significant factors (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008), which is one of our interests. The second domain addresses environmental conditions, with studies examining the effects of legislation and statutory obligations on outcomes for employees with disabilities (Brzykcy, & Boehm, 2022; Schur et al., 2009). The third domain focuses on organizational characteristics, like employees' perceptions of organizational fairness and the availability of flexible working arrangements (Schur et al., 2009), among other factors.

Within the first domain outlined by Stone and Colella's (1996) model, most studies that draw on social categorization and stereotyping examine the psychological processes underlying the relationship between the presence of people with disabilities in organizations and their treatment (Beatty et al., 2019; Stone, & Colella, 1996). On the one hand, many studies show a significant relationship between stereotyping and discrimination against disabled employees (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Dwertmann, 2016); however, on the other hand, by in analyzing the stereotyping process through the lens of reasoned action theory, Nelissen et al. (2016) found a positive relationship between stereotypes and positive behavior toward disabled employees. Indeed, according to the reasoned action approach (Fishbein, & Ajzen, 2011), attitudes toward employing people with disabilities shape beliefs that, in turn, influence cognitive appraisal and subsequent treatment (Nelissen et al., 2016). Such contradictory findings suggest that, by analyzing the phenomenon through a psychological lens, we can identify different outcomes of the process, which, however, share a common element: the varying treatment of the recipient. The motivations that could lead to positive or negative behaviors remain unclear, since it is unclear why the crowd chooses to adopt a different treatment toward a selected 'diverse' individual.

To understand the motivations that underlie the stereotyping process, organizational scholars who focus on the psychological process of attitudes toward disability make a step forward. Corrigan (2004) employed the attribution theory as a useful conceptual framework to better explain how attitudes can lead to discriminatory behaviors, emphasizing the importance of the extent to which a person is perceived as being responsible for their condition (Corrigan,

2004). Adopting this perspective makes it possible to explain why different impairments lead to different treatments. For example, according to this conceptual framework, mental illness is more stigmatized than physical impairment since people with mental or behavioral impairments are perceived as more in control of their condition and, thus, less worthy of pity and empathy (Corrigan et al., 2000; Elraz, 2018; Weiner et al., 1988).

Although this conceptual framework provides additional insight, the attribution theory remains insufficient in explaining why the stigmatization process is triggered in some organizational contexts and not others. To better understand this, some insights were gleaned by analyzing the phenomenon via rational economic and institutional theory (Harcourt et al., 2005; Kulkarni, & Lengnick-Hall, 2014). The rational economic theory emphasizes the self-interest of economic optimization, thus anchoring discriminatory behaviors to the perception of disabled people as less productive employees. Alternatively, institutional theory (DiMaggio, & Powell, 1983), which focuses on the legitimacy of organizations, links discriminatory behavior to the coercive, isomorphic, and mimetic pressures that can influence the hiring of people with disabilities (Kulkarni, & Lengnick-Hall, 2014). Both theories, however, are rather lacking in their explanation of the social dimensions of disability. For instance, it is not possible to explain why different impairments receive the same treatment or, conversely, why the same disability could trigger different reactions within organizations.

A more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon has been provided by the social theory of disability (Harlan, & Robert, 1998), which posits that disability is an outcome of social attitudes, institutions, and social structures. The social theory of disability, also referred to as the minority group of disability or social model of disability (Robert, & Harlan, 2006), highlights similarities between people with disabilities and other minority groups (Van Dijk, 2017).

The same consideration can be applied to social construction theory (Harlan & Robert, 1998), which posits that organizations reflect and reproduce the culture of the larger society. The main contribution of this theory is to highlight how organizations are socially constructed realities that reside in the minds of their members as a set of rules. More specifically, the social construction theory considers the role of ableism in defining work organization, shaping those perceived as not able as less competent and trustworthy workers (Harlan, & Robert, 1998). By highlighting the binary and hierarchical relationship between disability and able-bodiedness, ableism reveals that it is not merely concerned with the marginalization or ‘othering’ of disabled individuals (Jammaers, & Zanoni, 2021). Instead, it demonstrates how this process of othering is fundamental to constructing what is considered ‘normal’ and what is ‘diverse’

(Campbell, 2008; Goodley, 2014). However, both theories, the social theory of disability and the social construction one, lack the explanation of how social influence impacts work organization, only partially considering the role of an 'undefined' organizational culture (Harlan, & Robert, 1998).

In the face of this challenge, some headway has been made by studies that have adopted Bourdieu's theory (Jammaers et al., 2016; Jammaers, & Williams, 2023). Specifically, through the concept of 'habitus,' these studies enable a deeper understanding of how external social structures become individually interiorized (Jammaers, & Williams, 2023). Indeed, according to Bourdieu (1990), practices are produced through habitus – namely, the system of persistent embodied dispositions acquired through socialization in a given 'field.' The field can be understood as a network of relations consisting of historical practices, where individuals interact under specific game rules (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu, & Wacquant, 1992). Therefore, the re-enactment of repeated patterns of socialization practices leads individuals to engage in stereotypical, embodied self-representation (Bourdieu, 1991; Jammaers, & Ybema, 2023).

In other words, Bourdieu's theory explains how social structure influences the reshaping of self-identity (Jammaers, & Ybema, 2023). Indeed, the identity-shaping process has received increasing attention over the years in the organizational literature (Ybema, 2020; Bizjak et al., 2026), principally about the concept of identity work. The identification process enables individuals to create a sense of order in their world by distinguishing between ingroups and outgroups and reducing uncertainty through the more profound meanings derived from the collectives with which they identify (Ashforth, 2008).

Table 1. Theoretical framework previously adopted in the literature

	Explanatory power	**Level of analysis**	**Limits**
Stone, & Colella (1996) conceptual model	People attributes, environmental factors, and organizational characteristics affect the way disabled individuals are treated, mediated by the stereotyping process of observers' cognition.	Personal/Social Organizational	The reasons that trigger the phenomenon remain unclear.
Social categorization and Reasoned	Attitudes toward the employment of disabled people will shape beliefs that, in turn, will shape the cognitive	Personal/Social	Motivations that lead to different stereotyping

action theory (Beatty, 2019; Cavanagh et al., 2017; Nelissen et al., 2016)	appraisal and the consequent treatment.		process effects remain unclear.
Attribution theory (Corrigan, 2004)	Attitudes toward disabled individuals vary based on the extent to which a person is perceived as responsible for her/his condition, explaining why different impairments lead to different treatments.	Personal/Social	Insufficient to explain why the stigmatization process triggers in some organizational context and not another.
Rational economic theory (Harcourt et al., 2005)	By emphasizing the self-interest of economic optimizations, the theory anchors discriminatory behaviors to the perception of disabled people as less productive employees.	Organizational	The theory lacks an explanation of the social and individual dimensions of disability.
Institutional theory (Kulkarni, & Lengnick-Hall, 2012)	By focusing on the legitimacy of organizations, the theory links discriminant behaviors to the coercive, isomorphic, and mimetic pressures that could influence the hiring of people with disabilities.	Organizational	It is not possible to explain why different impairments receive the same treatment or, on the contrary, why the same disability could trigger different reactions in organizations.
Social theory of disability (Harlan, & Robert, 1998)	Disability is an outcome of social attitudes, institutions, and social structures, in line with the evolution of the concept of disability.	Personal/Social	The theory lacks an explanation of motivations that underlie the choice of a specific minority group inside a particular organizational context.
Bourdieu's theory (Bourdieu, 1991; Jammaers, & Williams, 2023)	Social structures become individually interiorized through the role of the habitus in a given field.	Personal/Social	The theory focuses on the effect that social structure has on individuals neglecting the influence that they have on organizations.
Work identity framework (Jammaers, &	Identity work entrails the process of shaping, maintaining, and revisioning individuals' coherence to the understating of themselves, dealing	Personal/Social	The identity work concept neglects the importance of the influence of social

Ybema, 2023; Ybema, 2020)	with questions such as "who I am?" and "who I want to be?"	structure in shaping the organizational one.

The potential negative aspect of intragroup dynamics is that identification may encourage discrimination against other groups within the organization, undermining intergroup cooperation. Indeed, members strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, which is achieved through comparing themselves (an ingroup) favorably with relevant outgroups (Tajfel, 1981). As a result, hostility can erupt more readily between groups than between individuals (Ashforth, 2008). By intertwining the identification process with the conceptual lens of ableism, it becomes clear how – in a context imbued with ableist beliefs – people with disabilities easily become 'diverse' subjects in a context of 'normal.' Therefore, the identification process in an ableist organization allows us to understand the mechanisms that could transform an employee with disability into the 'culprits' or individualized scapegoats and why. It does this by defining 'diverse' people with disability as part of a multifaceted identification process. Indeed, two core components are indispensable to formulate this identification, and a third component is often present. The first essential component is cognitive, referring to the individual's recognition of their group membership. The second is evaluative, where this recognition is connected to value judgments. The third component involves an emotional commitment to both the membership awareness and the evaluations related to this (Tajfel, 1981). The disabled worker starts to be used as a negative example to reinforce the ideal worker (Jammaers, & Zanoni, 2020) in the binary hierarchical relationship between disability and able-bodiedness (Jammaers, & Zanoni, 2021).

To explain how the ableist identification of the 'diverse' leads to various forms of violence perpetrated towards disabled workers, we will use the concept of the identification process in an ableist contest, overlapping with the Girardian theoretical framework. The following section will investigate the scapegoating mechanism, as seen by René Girard, including the four stereotypes that characterize his approach. Table 1 summarizes the conceptual frameworks dealt with in previous literature.

Girard's scapegoating framework and disabilities in the workplace

The French anthropologist and philosopher René Girard devoted a large part of his research to the causes of conflict and violence, and the mechanism of scapegoating as an attempt to limit

these negative phenomena. For Girard, violence and conflict are endemic to human societies because of mimetic desire. This is characterized by a triangular structure: people usually desire the same object, automatically becoming rivals. The object of conflict almost loses its value and is replaced by the desire for prevarication, typical of mimetic conflict, which spreads in a chain and may turn into violence. In this sense, human conflict is not caused by differences but by similarities due to desiring the same objects. The only way to limit this violence and its effects is to identify a specific culprit, a scapegoat, to be destroyed to restore peace within societies.

According to the scapegoating theory (Girard, 1972, 1982), when a group or a society is involved in a violent conflict, the crowd chooses and annihilates a single individual believed to be responsible. The victim, therefore, serves two purposes: she/he is identified as the perpetrator of the initial violence, and is simultaneously believed to possess a supernatural ability to bring the dispute to an end. The scapegoat is a victim on whom violence is focused to prevent conflict from escalating within a group or society. Violence breeds more violence, jeopardizing a society's stability or even existence; it is therefore necessary to focus on a vulnerable subject.

For Girard (1982), the scapegoating framework is characterized by four conditions, which he calls 'stereotypes.' The first stereotype is the presence of a social and cultural crisis, specifically a crisis of non-differentiation, where negative reciprocity spreads, making social behavior similar as part of this negativity (Gervasi et al., 2022). Instead of blaming themselves, individuals generally blame society as a whole, which leads to a removal of responsibility. Persecutors are often persuaded that a small number of people, even a single one, can cause irreparable harm to society. Persecution of scapegoats is most likely to occur during crises that destabilize existing institutions and encourage the formation of crowds (i.e. spontaneous, popular gatherings). It is not deemed necessary to identify the underlying causes of these crises, as what is important is the shared awareness of the end of the rules and of the distinctions that define cultural order. The second stereotype is associated with certain stereotypical accusations that erode social order. The crowd generally identifies crimes that appear fundamentally deviant – in the sense that they harm the foundations of cultural order, family, and hierarchical differences, without which no social order would exist. The third stereotype is that the victim must be an individual who is particularly vulnerable to persecution. Girard clearly states that the choice of the scapegoat is not a matter of guilt or innocence. The 'ideal' scapegoats are those who have physical or moral differences from the rest of the group, preventing (or making it more challenging) to establish a dynamic of identification. They may have a physical or

psychological defect (such as being crippled), or be exceptionally ugly, or they may be people of exceptional beauty. What is important is that the scapegoat must have some characteristics that make it difficult for her/him to reciprocate the violence she/he receives. Otherwise, it would trigger a new cycle of violence, putting at risk the stability of the group. The fourth stereotype is violence, particularly a kind of collective violence. In this sense, the victim polarizes the violence that the group must eradicate. The mechanism of negative reciprocity (Gervasi, & Faldetta, 2022) provokes an escalation of violence that can be detrimental to the group's survival. The scapegoat is chosen as a victim to focus violence on her/him, thereby preventing conflict from escalating.

Girard's framework shows a transcultural and universal model of collective violence that, in Girard's reasoning, can be easily detected in most human societies and groups in every place in time and space. To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have applied the scapegoating framework to the organizational context (Boeker, 1992; Bonazzi, 1983; Djabi, & de Longueval, 2020; Eagle, & Newton, 1981; Faldetta, & Gervasi, 2024), but none of them have focused on disability and the treatment of disabled individuals in the workplace. We believe that the frameworks, overlapped as described, can offer a better way to understand the treatment of disabled individuals in organizations, particularly concerning discrimination in its collective and social dimensions, capturing relevant elements that characterize this phenomenon, including those less commonly encountered in organizational studies.

For our purpose, we provide two examples from organizations to better show how people with disabilities have been constructed as scapegoats. The first example is that of Meseret Kumulchew, a supervisor at a Starbucks store in Clapham (southwest London), who worked with a form of dyslexia that made it difficult for her to read, write, and enter numbers correctly. Her duties included periodically recording water and refrigerator temperatures, then entering the data on forms. Because of her dyslexia, Kumulchew made some numerical errors on the forms. The company interpreted these errors as 'falsifications' and demoted her, forcing her to repeat the training. The Employment Tribunal, however, found that Starbucks had discriminated against Kumulchew by failing to make 'reasonable adjustments' to account for her disability. The tribunal clarified that the errors were attributable to her dyslexia-related difficulties and that the demotion occurred without prior assessment of the adaptations necessary to allow her to perform her duties properly.

The second example is that of Nabil Mehdinejad, a driver and postman at the Royal Mail depot in Mount Pleasant (London), who suffers from ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. His supervisor, Muhammed Hafeez, repeatedly made suggestive comments about him ('dodgy,'

meaning ‘unreliable’ or ‘suspicious’), implicitly linking them to his neurodivergent condition. Also in this case, the Employment Tribunal found that, although the company was aware of his disability and had made some accommodations, it had failed to prevent or address the resulting climate of derision and hostility. The behavior was classified as harassment on the grounds of disability, and Mehdinejad was awarded approximately £14,000.

Now, let us return to the four Girardian stereotypes and try to use them to explain the two examples as cases of scapegoating. In the case of Meseret Kumulchew, we can identify a crisis of non-differentiation (the first stereotype), referring to the fact that an administrative mistake was meant as a conscious falsification made by the employee. These kinds of mistakes could bring a sense of ‘disorder’ within the organization, so leading to an organizational crisis because the prevalent ableist culture, which doesn’t admit errors, is called in question. The stereotypical accusation (the second stereotype) is related to the fact that, according to the social theory of disability, disabled individuals are often seen as people who cannot perform well in the workplace. Indeed, in an ableist society, individuals are typically evaluated according to non-disability organizing principles (Jammaers et al., 2016, 2021). From this perspective, disabled individuals can be accused of being unable to perform the tasks required in a specific workplace. In the case of Meseret Kumulchew, this is related to the data falsification, which is a symbol of ‘moral’ deviance from the ableist culture. The sign of selection of victims (the third stereotype) is quite evident, as it is related to the fact that the victim must be an individual who is particularly vulnerable to persecution. From this point of view, disabled people are perfect examples of what Girard indicates as scapegoats. Indeed, they have specific signs that differentiate them from other people and that, at the same time, make them vulnerable. In our case, dyslexia is a visible and permanent sign that makes a difference between Meseret Kumulchew and the ableist group. The fourth stereotype is violence, particularly a kind of collective violence. It is easy to show that people with disabilities are at an increased risk of experiencing violence compared to people without disabilities (Dammeyer, & Chapman, 2018). In our case, collective violence is exemplified by demotion, exclusion, and public devaluation of merit suffered by Meseret Kumulchew.

In the case of Nabil Mehdinejad, we can identify a crisis of non-differentiation (the first stereotype), referring to informal conflict in the work group, and the intolerance towards the cognitive difference that characterizes the employee. The stereotypical accusation (the second stereotype) is shown by the ‘dodgy’ label attributed to the employee, who is considered a threat to the production order. The sign of selection of victims (the third stereotype) is related to the multiple neurodivergences that characterize Nabil Mehdinejad, making him an individual who

is particularly vulnerable to persecution. The fourth stereotype is violence, which, in our case, is exemplified by the harassment, isolation, and lack of institutional protection suffered by the employee.

In both cases, we can see how the scapegoating mechanism is constructed against people with disabilities. In the first example, the ableist group defends itself by reaffirming the model of cognitive efficiency as the norm; the worker's mistake becomes the pretext for reestablishing the boundary between 'able' and 'disabled' people. This case exemplifies the transformation of error into moral guilt. In the second example, the ableist group strengthens its cohesion by distancing itself from the 'unreliable other.' The organization fails to mediate, perpetuating the scapegoating mechanism. This case demonstrates the collective dimension of contempt: the stereotypical accusation (unreliability) becomes the dominant group's identity glue.

From the discussion presented above, we could conclude that the scapegoating framework is a descriptive model that helps explain why disabled individuals are discriminated in human societies and, in particular, within organizations. As said before, Girard's framework is not normative, as it does not prescribe particular actions to overcome this problem. In the next section, we will propose a tentative first step to expand on this important issue, proposing strategies for including disabled people in the workplace. Considerations on the four Girardian stereotypes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The explanatory power of the four stereotypes in discrimination of people with disabilities

Girardian Stereotype	**Pattern Evident in the Example**
Crisis of non-differentiation	**Meseret Kumulchew:** An administrative mistake interpreted as conscious falsification; organizational disorder due to ableist culture intolerant of errors. **Nabil Mehdinejad:** Informal conflict and intolerance toward cognitive difference within the work group.
Stereotypical accusation	**Meseret Kumulchew:** Disabled individuals seen as unable to perform well; her dyslexia-linked errors framed as moral deviance and falsification. **Nabil Mehdinejad:** Labelled "dodgy" (unreliable/suspicious), considered a threat to production order.
Sign of selection of victims	**Meseret Kumulchew:** Dyslexia as a visible and permanent sign distinguishing her and making her vulnerable. **Nabil Mehdinejad:** Multiple neurodivergences (ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia) making him particularly vulnerable to persecution.
Violence	**Meseret Kumulchew:** Demotion, exclusion, and public devaluation of merit.

Discussion on identification, ableism, and scapegoating

The previous section shows how the scapegoating mechanism constitutes a trap that every human society falls into. Analyzing the discrimination of people with disabilities using this theoretical framework may unveil the mechanism that causes such discrimination, so contributing to challenge Girard's four stereotypes through employees' awareness.

As previously outlined, ableism supports the scapegoating mechanism within organizations by highlighting the binary hierarchical relationship between disability and able-bodiedness (Jammaers, & Zanoni, 2021). Drawing from the social identity theory (Ashforth, & Mael, 1989), we know that the individual tries to obtain a better social identity thanks to the feeling of belonging to highly considered groups. The identification process allows organizational members to respond to such a need, feeling part of something greater (Ashforth et al., 2008), also leading to a progressive loss of differences (Ashforth et al., 2008; Desmond, & Kavanagh, 2003). Following this argumentation, the majority of employees who are able-bodiedness individuals will tend to identify themselves with the dominant ableist group. However, the identification process is dynamic and turbulent, involving routine activities and a broad spectrum of life experiences. It is distinguished by imbalances, critical turning points, and a blend of continuities and discontinuities (Ashforth et al., 2008). Indeed, as incongruences between individual and organizational identities arise, boundaries could be reconstructed. Conflicts can derive from the individuals' awareness of multiple aspects of their identity and the relationships between them, triggering identity changes to avoid stagnation or paralysis (Seidl, 2003). In light of this, since ableist identification may foster discrimination against disabled minorities within the organization, we propose a model that draws on employees' awareness. If employees are aware that they are part of a process that leads to ableist identification, this could prompt identity conflicts and lead to recognition of the victim's innocence. To support this model, we will explore each Girardian stereotype, reading it considering the identification process in an ableist environment.

As we know, Girard's first stereotype is a crisis of non-differentiation. Paradoxically, in a world where societies and organizations experience greater volatility and the connections between individuals and organizations become more precarious, the longing for work-related identification is expected to intensify (Ashforth et al., 2008). This is primarily because traditional anchors are becoming increasingly uncertain and unreliable (Van Dick et al., 2004).

Thus, through identification, an individual may create a sense of order (Hogg, & Ridgeway, 2003), eroding differences between others and increasing non-differentiation.

Although identification can lead to non-differentiation, the awareness of stagnation or the immobilization of identity (namely, the awareness of the presence of the Girardian first stereotype) triggers changes to foster identity development and growth (Seidl, 2003). Thus, organizational members could shift towards a sense of positivity in identification (Ashforth et al., 2008). Employees' awareness of being part of a 'stagnation' within an ableist identification process could potentially trigger the loss of the sense of positivity and the willingness to align with identification inspired by uniqueness, thus unveiling the scapegoat mechanism perpetrated against disabled employees. Indeed, when we speak of unique characteristics, we refer to specific competencies, qualities, and positive attitudes or traits that may be not related to an ableist perspective.

Girard's second stereotype is the presence of stereotypical accusations. As we have seen, a shared concept of ableism within an organization, leading to accusing people with disabilities of being less efficient or of lower performance, is common (Schur et al., 2009). Labeling someone as disabled often triggers negative stereotypes and preconceived notions, influencing how others interact with that individual (Schur et al., 2009). People with disabilities are often ascribed various stereotypical characteristics, encompassing a range of undesirable traits such as being helpless, depressed, isolated, unappealing, incompetent, and insecure (Cavanagh et al., 2017).

Whilst undoubtedly a general culture that stigmatizes disabled individuals persists, it is important to recognize that stereotypes can vary depending on the type of disability. For instance, physical disabilities tend to elicit a less negative response. Miller and Werner (2005) suggest that individuals typically display a preference for working with, associating with, or feeling more at ease around people with physical disabilities compared to those with mental disabilities (such as those who are mentally challenged, developmentally disabled, or mentally retarded) or psychological disabilities. Furthermore, physical disabilities are often more accepted or preferred over sensory disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness) or neurological disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy) (Tringo, 1970). It is interesting to note, for instance, that a growing number of information technology companies specifically hire people with Asperger's syndrome, appreciating the ability to focus on detail, which is particularly helpful in detecting errors (Dwertmann, 2016). Indeed, according to Stone and Colella (1996), the assumptions rooted in stereotypes play a significant role in shaping how organizations treat disabled employees and job applicants. This treatment varies according to context, highlighting the

importance of how ‘normal’ or ‘diverse’ concepts are based on identification boundaries. The awareness that who is deemed ‘normal’ depends solely on setting boundaries could help members of an organization to understand that disability is not a fault. The consequent recognition of the ‘innocence of the victims’ should lead to unveiling the scapegoating mechanism, shifting from ableism to an appreciation of uniqueness.

The third Girard stereotype is based on the presence of specific ‘signs’ which mark the selection of victims. We know that victims in organizations often belong to specific categories. Organizational identification steeped in an ableist culture easily identifies people with physical or mental impairments as ‘diverse,’ considering them a stigma. This stigma refers to an attribute that discredits the person, or to the perception of them as deviating from the norm – thus transforming them from ‘regular’ to tainted or devalued (Goffman, 1963). The ‘signs’ of victim selection inside an organization vary based on the ingroups defined by identity boundaries. Studies have found that different impairments lead to varying acceptance levels (Vornholt et al., 2013). McLaughlin et al. (2004) conducted a study that revealed that the type of disability indirectly influences acceptance. They found that this acceptance is mediated by the presence of stigma, wherein the severity and perceived controllability of the disability affect acceptance. It is therefore evident that the stigma surrounding disability impacts the acceptance of people with all types of disabilities in the workplace environment in a negative way (Cavanagh et al., 2017). The awareness of members of an organization about how identification processes within an ableist environment can influence who is stigmatized inside an organization, however, should lead to greater acceptance. Through the unveiling of the scapegoating mechanism, co-workers and supervisors should perceive disabled employees as integral and valued group members, acknowledging their full inclusion and participation. Also, the emotions and feelings experienced by co-workers towards the employee with a disability should change, leading to higher levels of affective acceptance, holding no reservations or negative sentiments towards employees due to their disability. Moreover, people with disabilities should be granted access to all common areas and events, and they should be fully integrated into both professional and social activities associated with their jobs.

Girard’s fourth stereotype is the presence of violence. As previously mentioned, people with disabilities become victims of many types of violence, of varying intensity. Apart from physical and psychological violence, individuals with disabilities encounter several significant disparities in the workplace. These include receiving lower wages and fewer benefits, experiencing less job security, facing higher levels of supervision, having limited involvement in decision-making processes related to their jobs and departments, and receiving reduced

opportunities for company-sponsored formal training as well as informal training from co-workers (Schur et al., 2009). Adverse treatment of and barriers to interaction with people with disabilities originate from an ableist perspective, so from the perception that they are less competent in terms of job performance (Boyle, 1997). This perception is influenced by labeling and stigmatization (Wertlieb, 1985), as well as the tendency to categorize people with disabilities as members of an outgroup (Shore et al., 2011) based on identification (Tajfel, 1981) and perceived similarity (Byrne, 1971). Thus, if an organization promotes practices such as discrimination against minority groups, concealing group errors, or engaging in unethical conduct, it can inadvertently encourage behavior that is harmful to those who are defined as 'diverse.' On the contrary, organizational members' awareness of the identification in an ableist organization, and so the unveiling of the scapegoating mechanism, should lead to greater protection of vulnerable co-workers. This process of awareness should lead to the avoidance of violence against disabled people, so contrasting the fourth Girardian stereotype.

Theoretical and practical implications

By proposing the overlapping of different conceptual lenses, namely identification, ableism, and scapegoating, we suggest new empirical and theoretical approaches to improve the inclusion of disabled workers in organizations. Indeed, by adding the scapegoating framework to the analysis, it is possible to identify four paths of intervention, relating to each of Girard's stereotypes.

Following our reasoning, the recognition of the victims' innocence comes about through organizational members' awareness of their being part of a scapegoating mechanism. This awareness should extend to the organization's identification processes, and how they are imbued with ableism.

From a practical point of view, managers should be the first to detect the presence of a scapegoating mechanism inside the organization and remove the veil of unawareness. This reveals the victim's true innocence, thus contrasting the second stereotype. Therefore, managers do not have just to make workers aware of who the scapegoat is; on the contrary, they should make the organization members conscious of the presence of such a mechanism. In this way, they could also avoid the mere shift from one victim to another. To avoid René Girard's prediction – according to which awareness of a scapegoat results in its permanent loss, exposing us to unresolved mimetic conflicts (Girard, 1982) – managers should intervene in the identification process of organizational workers in a way that fosters inclusion, acceptance, and

uniqueness. From this point of view, we can note that setting boundaries to include minorities reinforces a relationship between the identity of the minority population and the rest of the organizational members. Observing processes of social identity construction, and the different ways minorities are discriminated against within organizations, could represent an opportunity to foster inclusion processes. In this sense, supporting interaction between identity at the organizational and group levels and identity construction at the individual level is important. Using this approach, intervening based on the first stereotype, namely the crisis of non-differentiation, is possible. Furthermore, revealing the importance of ableism in the identification process will contrast the third stereotype, namely recognizing the signs via which victims are selected, eliminating the need to perpetrate violence towards a victim who is no longer seen as guilty, contrasting the fourth stereotype.

Overlapping the scapegoat theory with the conceptual lens of ableism and diversity literature outlines a new path of research, which can be directed to contrast the four stereotypes of the scapegoating mechanism. Further research could be conducted to understand how managers can act as initiators in revealing victims' innocence and choose instruments to spread awareness among organizational members. Furthermore, new streams of research could utilize new methods to contrast mimetic desire by introducing, for instance, gift-giving and positive reciprocity, leading to mutual recognition of differences (Faldetta, & Gervasi, 2024). Indeed, the presence of an environment imbued with gift-giving and positive reciprocal exchange contrasts the perception of mimetic desire, thus challenging the third stereotype of violent or negative reciprocity and contrasting the fourth stereotype. For instance, mutual recognition (Taylor, 1989) – encompassing love, respect, and esteem (Honneth, 1996) – with a profound relational acknowledgment could result in meaningful interactions that are not a mere reintegration into the group but relational repair. Indeed, the way stereotypes play out depends on the cognitive status of co-workers, as such strategies for inclusion could foster positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and contribute to challenging Girard's second stereotype.

In Table 3, we summarize the possible effects of rising awareness among employees of being part of a Girardian scapegoating mechanism in an ableist context, presented in a before-and-after frame.

Table 3. Framework reconstruction before and after the employees' awareness

Four Stereotypes	**Awareness of scapegoating mechanism**

	Before	*After*
Crisis of undifferentiation	Identification to lose difference and reduce uncertainty	Flourishing of a sense of uniqueness
Stereotypical accusation	Recognition of disabled people as less efficient or performant	Recognition that differences depend on boundaries
Sign of the selection of victim	Differences as stigma	Differences as constructive characteristics
Violence	Presence of disparity and antisocial behaviors	Protection toward vulnerable coworkers

Conclusion

In this study, we have shown that discriminatory practices directed toward disabled employees in organizations can be better understood descriptively by adopting René Girard's scapegoating framework. Broadening the spectrum of social sciences beyond managerial and organizational studies, we have demonstrated that when a group or a society falls into a situation of violent conflict, a way to overcome the risk of an escalation of reciprocal violence is uniting against a single victim who cannot reciprocate this violence. This victim is the scapegoat and can be subjected to discriminatory behavior. We have also shown that by overlapping new conceptual lenses from fields beyond organizational studies with studies on ableism and identification processes, we can find a more nuanced, focused, and dynamic model to explain discriminatory phenomena toward people with disabilities in organizational settings.

This new perspective could lead to new research paths and implications for managers intervening in the phenomenon. Indeed, following this theoretical framework, new tools for managers could be suggested, such as spreading employees' awareness of being part of a scapegoating mechanism, challenging all four stereotypes. Although the exercise of power is not always repressive, it can be productive, constituting subjects through subtle disciplinary mechanisms. Recognizing the scapegoating process thus requires not only an ethical commitment but a critical awareness of how organizations govern through the classification and normalization of bodies.

Despite this study providing a conceptual framework, constituting a first step toward a future research path, it suffers some limitations. Qualitative studies could empirically explain how the four stereotypes influence organizational behavior in relation to disabled people, suggesting better solutions for inclusion practices. Moreover, theoretical and empirical research can find

more tools to prompt awareness of the scapegoating mechanism, with new implications for practitioners. Indeed, according to René Girard (1982), if someone 'scapegoats' another person, it is likely to be a third party that will be aware of this. The third party in question should be organizational managers in general, granted as they are with the possibility of lifting this veil of unawareness.

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