

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Alternative for Whom? Conceptually Exploring Meaningful Work for People With Disability in Alternative Forms of Work Organization

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper explores the role of an ethics of embodiment perspective in promoting meaningful work for people with disabilities in Alternative Forms of Work Organization (AFWO). Starting with a consideration of the importance of meaningful work within a broader project of disability inclusion, the paper addresses four main challenges that AFWO faces, as expressions of a neo-normative paradigm, in producing meaningful work for people with disabilities while considering issues of embodiment: (1) self-identity; (2) autonomy/flexibility; (3) abstract embodiment; (4) Intermediate space/time. Referring to crip theory, a radical and provocative approach in disability studies that challenges normalization and compulsory able-bodiedness, the paper then proposes four illustrative cases that offer a critical and innovative view on embodiment. From the analysis of these cases, we identify four categories for a crip ethics of embodiment: (1) crip self-identity; (2) mixed ability organizing; (3) meaningful embodiment; and (4) non-normative space/time. We argue that these four categories provide new pathways for AFWO to promote meaningful work for people with disabilities and represent a potential turning point in reflecting on the neo-normative approach in organizations.

1 | Introduction

Alternative Forms of Work Organization (AFWO) are gaining relevance in debates about the inclusion of people with disabilities in work. These forms of organization, in fact, attempt to overcome the view of the organization as something rigid and unitary (Aroles et al. 2021; Kingma 2019), give greater centrality to community (Daskalaki and Fotaki 2017; Prasad 2023) and advocate autonomy, equality, participation, and solidarity (Bendl et al. 2024; Cheney 2014; Fujimoto et al. 2014). As such, they are seen as providing opportunities for people with disabilities to engage in meaningful work activities (Hall and Wilson 2011; Laaser and Karlsson 2021; Michaelson et al. 2014; Yeoman 2014) in a society where they

are too often hired solely to comply with legal requirements for sheltered employment (Bend and Priola 2022; Hein and Ansari 2022). In these situations, people with disabilities find themselves doing work that is neither meaningful for themselves nor for the organizations for which they work ending up in legitimacy traps (Sandholtz 2015), occupational segregation (Revillard 2022), and dirty labor (Maravelias 2022). As meaningful work—residing in a combination of the ethical and subjective realms of autonomy, dignity, and recognition (Laaser and Karlsson 2021)—is a fundamental human need (Yeoman 2014), achieving meaningful work is an important aspect of disability inclusion (as also stated in the framework of the UN Convention for the Rights of People with Disability—United Nations 2007). However, some studies have shown

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that obstacles to achieving meaningful work are also present in AFWO, especially as the evolution of these forms of organization is linked to neo-normative and neoliberal paradigms (Fleming and Sturdy 2009; Kingma 2019; Mielly et al. 2023; Morales and Stecher 2023; Resch et al. 2021). In relation to disability, this produces a reliance on ableist normative assumptions (Bendl et al. 2024; Jammaers and Zanoni 2021; Jammaers et al. 2016; Knights and Latham 2020; Mauksch and Dey 2023). Ableism is based on the idea that ability is a normal condition, while disability is a condition characterized by inferiority and corruption and as such needs to be “fixed” or compensated for. Such ableist attitudes are visible in the persistent tendency to consider people with disabilities as “others” (Mik-Meyer 2016; Mauksch and Dey 2023) in need of care, and thus treated in condescending and charitable ways (Buchter 2022; Hein and Ansari 2022; Jammaers and Ybema 2023).

In this article, we argue that an ethics of embodiment perspective (Dale and Latham 2015; Hancock 2008; Pullen and Rhodes 2015) can help to confront these issues and promote meaningful work for people with disabilities in AFWO. An ethics of embodiment, in fact, is an invitation to think of the body as a canvas upon which cultural meanings are inscribed, rather than as a mere physical entity. It interrogates how embodiment occurs within the workplace (Hindmarsh and Pilnick 2007; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009) and how this produces “body work” (Harding et al. 2022; Lawrence et al. 2023; Swan and Flowers 2017), how bodies are regulated through managerial procedures that require adherence to specific (conceived) standards (Rajan-Rankin 2018), as well as examining resistance to those forms of regulations and normalization (Fotaki and Harding 2017). This ethical approach informs recent trends in organizational disability studies (Dale and Latham 2015; Dobusch et al. 2021; Jammaers 2023; Jammaers and Ybema 2023; Maravelias 2022; Mik-Meyer 2016; Zeyen and Branzei 2023), as it accounts for the embodied nature of stigma and discrimination suffered by people with disabilities at work. Histories of discrimination and societal discourses, in fact, are written onto bodies and affect the way people use the body as a symbolic resource in the formation of their identity (Jammaers and Ybema 2023) and the meaning of their work (Dale and Latham 2015; Jammaers et al. 2016; Mik-Meyer 2016; Zeyen and Branzei 2023). These insights invite us to contemplate the ethical aspects of how we perceive, engage with, and respond to our bodies and those of others, particularly within the evolving dynamics of social and organizational contexts.

Rather than adopting an accommodation-based approach (Beatty et al. 2019), focusing on how AFWO can meet the needs of people with disabilities—an approach that has been criticized for assuming disability as something to be assimilated to dominant norms and compensated for, rather than something that has value in itself (Dobusch et al. 2021; Williams and Mavin 2012)—in this study we adopt a disability-centered perspective and explore how practices and theories within disability movements propose and enact an ethics of embodiment. This ethics of embodiment can inform AFWO and provide learning opportunities. In particular, we refer to a particularly radical approach in disability studies which adopts the name *crip theory* (Hamraie and Fritsch 2019; Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006, 2018). Inspired

by queer theory, crip theory unites scholars and activists who engage in countercultural practices (Leary 2004) to challenge heteronormativity, compulsory able-bodiedness, conciliatory views of disability, as well as the ableist assumptions embedded in social and organizational practices. This approach seems to align well with an ethics of embodiment, as it contrasts starkly with the principles of virtue ethics, where the person with a disability is seen solely as a figure requiring more care (Dale and Latham 2015), without considering their embodied subjectivity.

Starting from these considerations, in this study we explore how the crip movement and related crip theory could inspire practices within AFWO that produce meaningful work for people with disabilities. To this end, we identify four categories in which crip theory and practice enact an ethics of embodiment (which we define as a *crip ethics of embodiment*), namely: (1) crip self-identity; (2) mixed ability organizing; (3) meaningful embodiment; and (4) non-normative space/time. An illustrative case is provided for each category.

This research contributes to business ethics literature on AFWO by highlighting the urgent need to address issues of ableism and discrimination by rethinking the role that diverse embodiments play within organizational settings. The debate on AFWO, in fact, has focused more on the neo-normative style of management (Fleming and Sturdy 2009; Morales and Stecher 2023; Picard and Islam 2020) than on ethical aspects related to meaning-making processes, especially concerning people with disabilities. Furthermore, the research provides perspectives on ways to achieve meaningful work, an important aspect of disability inclusion, highlighting the active role of disability movements and organizational disability studies in pursuing this.

The paper is structured as follows: The theoretical foundations of the discussion are presented in the first three sections. These cover the context of the ethics of embodiment, AFWO within a neo-normative paradigm, and contributions to disability theory from a Business Ethics perspective. The subsequent sections are dedicated to understanding how crip theory can contribute to enacting AFWO, informed by an ethics of embodiment, through four illustrative cases. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

2 | Ethics of Embodiment

In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the role of the body in people's lives, work, organizations, and society (Robinson and Thomas 2021). This shift challenges the longstanding dichotomy of the body and mind, a concept historically attributed to Descartes (Harding et al. 2022), according to which the body serves as the physical vessel for the self, but deserves no ethical consideration in itself. Accordingly, in recent years, there has been a growing demand for more phenomenological, tangible, and corporeal investigations of embodiment within the workplace (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009). This shift has given rise to the formulation of theories concerning an ethics of embodiment.

An ethics of embodiment is developed by critiquing the traditional idea of ethical organizing, which does not consider the

body as possessing ethical agency within organizations (Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Hancock 2008; Dale and Latham 2015). As discussed by Harding et al. (2022), an ethics of embodiment places significant emphasis on the agency of the human body, highlighting how individuals express their work through physical actions. Recent studies have shown that workers embody their knowledge, beliefs, and values through physical actions. Dale and Latham (2015) insist that there has been a neglect of the body or embodied notions of identity, including our embodied engagement with others, joining Harquail and Wilcox King (2010, 1631) to implore “scholars in all traditions of Organizational Identity research to bring the full body of the organization member back into consideration”. This perspective interrogates how embodiment occurs within the workplace (Hindmarsh and Pilnick 2002; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009; Michel 2011) and how this produces “body work” (Harding et al. 2022; Lawrence et al. 2023; Swan and Flowers 2017). From this perspective, the body can also serve as a vehicle to resist various forms of oppression (Fotaki and Harding 2017) and to seize specific opportunities (Styhre 2004). It recognizes the risks associated with physical strain (McMahon et al. 2012) and underscores the importance of recuperating and revitalizing workers’ bodies (Hindmarsh and Pilnick 2007; McCarthy and Glozer 2022).

Accordingly, an ethics of embodiment favors a pluralistic and engaged ethics, as opposed to a tendency towards control, homogeneity, and discrimination. It also presents a contrast to the principles of virtue ethics (Beadle 2019; Knights and Latham 2020). Human embodiment thus retains an ontological aspect (Hancock 2008; Dale and Latham 2015), which implies an ethical call to recognition by others. This means that the exposure of the body to the gaze of the other enables our existence within a process of corporeal being and becoming, where bodily styles, dispositions, habits, and gestures interchange within the physical spaces we inhabit. This idea—also a cornerstone of feminist theory (Butler 1993)—is influenced by French philosopher Levinas (1969). For Levinas (1969), the site of ethics is where the self recognizes the radical alterity of the “Other”. The encounter with the Other is the site where an ethics of responsibility emerges, whose significance lies precisely in the fact that this meeting is not necessarily reciprocal: Is not calculated and does not expect reciprocity or symmetry of exchange. As highlighted by Dale and Latham (2015), this ethics of responsibility is grounded in the vulnerability and sensibility of embodiment. Starting from this premise, an ethics of embodiment shifts an ethics of responsibility from a mutual recognition between abstract (although other) moral subjectivities to materially embodied subjects with their different characteristics. Such a consideration is particularly relevant when considering an embodied ethics of organizational life (Pullen and Rhodes 2015), as it provides “flesh” (Harding et al. 2022) to the dynamics of work and recognizes the relationship between people and the materiality of organization (Dale and Latham 2015). Therefore, an ethics of embodiment acknowledges that the meaning individuals derive from their work is inherently intertwined with the body (Creary and Locke 2022; Harding et al. 2022). This perspective also underlines the importance of embodied affectivity in prefiguring new political practices within organizations (Fotaki and Harding 2017; Daskalaki and Fotaki 2017),

highlighting the fragility and adaptability of meaning-making through the body.

2.1 | Ethics of Embodiment and Disability

Over the past 2 decades, disability has received increasing attention in organizational literature, largely due to the influence of disability studies. The main contribution that this field of studies has made to organization studies is probably the shift from the medical model to the social model of disability (Oliver 1996; Shakespeare 2006). The social model emphasized that disability is not an individual ailment to be cured but rather a societal construct—a form of inequality resulting from societal practices that marginalize individuals with impairments, both through environmental obstacles and cultural biases. While playing a key role in recognizing that disability is not just an individual medical issue, the social model clearly distinguishes between “impairment” and “disability,” with the former referring to a physical condition and the latter to a social condition. Hughes and Paterson (1997) argue that, in doing so, the social model underestimates the importance of the embodied existence. In their view, the social model, while rightly denouncing the oppression of people with disability, persists in a dualism between the physical and the social in which the latter receives greater consideration than the former. Consequently, the social model cannot account for the lived and embodied experience of prejudice, oppression, and discrimination, reducing these to abstract categories. To challenge this approach, they propose a “carnal politics of impairment” (Paterson and Hughes 1999), which considers the disabled body in everyday routine practice, including the ways in which that body is made to “disappear” because of regimes of concealment in institutions, representations, and discourses.

Extending this argument, Abrams (2015) adopts a relational ontology to go beyond a static and normative concept of the body. Rather than considering the body as purely organic and material, these criticisms invite a recognition of the body as the source of lived experience, as well as the product of historically constructed meanings and attitudes. From this perspective, an ethics of embodiment also considers the embodied experience of discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization suffered by people with disabilities, thus addressing an ethical commitment to respect and dignity, starting from the body. This entails considering the body and its vulnerability as central to ethical considerations, as well as addressing the discursive and nondiscursive ways in which certain bodies are constructed as “other” (Mik-Meyer 2016; Jammaers and Ybema 2023) and consequently discriminated against in social and organizational life.

Remarkably, the influence of the disabled body on shaping meaning in the workplace has remained a relatively unexplored topic in management journals until recent years (with recent exceptions in works by Jammaers and Zanoni 2021; Jammaers and Williams 2021; Hein and Ansari 2022; and Zeyen and Branzei 2023). When it comes to employees with disabilities, there is a clear necessity to not only identify the most prevalent forms of bodily engagement practiced by workers in general, but

also to acknowledge the additional challenges and expectations that organizations may impose on workers whose bodies deviate from arbitrary standards. The more conspicuous the distinctions among human bodies in the workplace, the heavier the burden on those whose bodies deviate from established norms, often obliging them to engage in additional, sometimes taxing, and occasionally even detrimental forms of bodily engagement (Zeyen and Branzei 2023).

3 | Evolution of AFWO and the Raising of a Neo-Normative Paradigm

Collectively, AFWO constitutes a diverse and evolving field, presenting ambivalences and contradictions. Interest in AFWO initially derived from seeking to adapt to changing economic landscapes and workforce expectations, with a specific focus on optimization offered by flexibility, collaboration, and a more egalitarian approach to management and employee interaction (Aroles et al. 2021; Kingma 2019). AFWO has thus evolved from being associated with positive aspects of flexibility and autonomy to a more complex situation where the impact on employers and employees varies depending on who promotes and benefits from these new ways of working (Berkery et al. 2017; Fleming 2009; Morales and Stecher 2023; Picard and Islam 2020; Spencer 2023). During this period of innovation, changes in employment were aimed at increasing the complexity of job roles, affording workers greater opportunities for training, access to information, and decision-making power within their work, whilst simultaneously enhancing operational efficiency for corporations. This perspective was decidedly optimistic, based on the notion that it conferred advantages upon both individuals and organizations. However, over time, the focus moved towards practices that involve less commitment from employers and work arrangements that are not tied to a specific physical workspace (Kingma 2019), linking this to the concept of meaningful work. Criticism shows that achieving a balance that benefits both employers and employees is not an easy task, although crucial in an evolving work environment.

Neo-normativity can be considered a characteristic trait of AFWO. Neo-normativity prompted a shift toward positive emotional narratives, centered on individuality and authenticity (Fleming 2009; Picard and Islam 2020). This perspective marked a departure from the perception of large bureaucratic organizations as “artificial” and lacking authenticity. Instead, it embraced a mobile, individually expressive ethos of capitalism that incorporated this criticism and aimed to address workers’ feelings of estrangement without fundamentally challenging the underlying power structures within an organization (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). This approach does not seek to directly regulate behavior but rather focuses on reshaping the values and self-identity of workers to align with the organization’s objectives. In the 1990s, companies primarily aimed to transform subjectivity by fostering identification with the corporate culture as a form of normative control. However, since the 2000s, the emphasis has shifted toward encouraging employees to embrace values that originate outside the organization but are prevalent in an increasingly neo-liberal society (Brocklehurst 2001; Morales and Stecher 2023).

In this context, society itself provides the values to which workers are expected to commit. They are motivated to self-regulate and act authentically in a manner that aligns with corporate goals (Fleming and Sturdy 2009).

Neo-managerial paradigms are associated with decentralized production, outsourcing, reduced employment stability, and the extensive use of nontraditional forms of employment. They also exert significant pressure to achieve rapid and high profitability. These developments have eroded the feasibility and effectiveness of the traditional bureaucratic control strategy, which relied on a uniform, stable corporate culture and a certain level of mutual commitment between employers and employees. Simultaneously, the neoliberalizing trends in social life and the widespread promotion of values such as entrepreneurship, personal self-realization, risk-taking, and the capitalization of individual effort have created a context in which workers enter the organization having already adopted these values (Fleming 2017). The concept of neo-normative control encompasses the idea of urging employees to “be themselves” considering them as autonomous individuals rather than merely aligning them with a shared set of organizational values (Fleming and Sturdy 2009). There is a rising trend in management rhetoric and associated practices that promotes diversity, dissent, idiosyncrasy, and the open expression of “authentic” emotions in the workplace, particularly those that were traditionally discouraged in bureaucratic or formal organizational settings. Neo-normativity stands in stark contrast to bureaucratic control (Edwards 1979) by standardizing norms that develop informally in nonworking life. In line with this approach, managers are encouraged to facilitate the expression of employees’ “authentic” selves, aligning with the similar neo-human approach to relationships (Morales and Stecher 2023).

Increasing focus on diversity and inclusion forms part of this paradigm shift. The principle of diversity and inclusion is that every organizational member can feel valued for their uniqueness (Shore et al. 2018) and where “members do not have to leave valued parts of themselves outside as a condition of membership” (Ferdman 2017, 239). This approach has informed alternative organizations’ commitment to autonomy, equality, participation, and solidarity (Cheney 2014; Daskalaki and Fotaki 2017), as well as community-based organizations’ devotion to a social economy based on solidarity (Prasad 2023). Within this context, AFWO adhere to the principles of equity and inclusion, extending these to people with disability. Literature has pointed out the potential for alternative organizations to offer other opportunities that complement or replace employment as the foundation of social participation for people with disability (Hall and Wilson 2011; Mauksch and Dey 2023). Conversely, recent research highlights the limits of neo-normative approach—despite their promotion of inclusion, these forms of organization also heighten feelings of anxiety, distress, fear (Mielly et al. 2023), alienation (Resch et al. 2021), dissatisfaction (Picard and Islam 2020), and the intricate relationship between pleasure and pain (Müller 2018).

Such considerations highlight the complexities inherent in the pursuit of meaningful work in AFWO. Before exploring whether AFWO can create meaningful work, with particular reference

to the issues faced by people with disabilities, we now define what we mean by meaningful work.

3.1 | Meaningful Work

In the pursuit of meaning in life, work plays a pivotal role. For a significant portion of their waking hours, many adults are engaged in their work, which frequently serves as a key provider of purpose, a sense of belonging, and a foundation for their identity and employee engagement (Beadle 2019; Michaelson et al. 2014; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Yeoman 2014). The ongoing debate about the moral nature of work revolves around the question of whether work is inherently degrading or empowering, as articulated by Wolfe (1997). From an ethical standpoint, one could argue that workers require and, in fact, have a right to engage in “good” or “meaningful” work (Yeoman 2014). Still, the definition of what meaningful work is continues to be debated. Workers can experience better material and personal well-being when their work aligns with certain quality standards. At the same time, work that offers competitive compensation, a reasonable degree of independence, and opportunities for skill enhancement can be considered more conducive to human development and personal growth than work that is poorly paid, heavily regulated, and lacks complexity. In the field of sociology, the notion of meaningful work has been theorized as the combination of objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, dignity, and recognition (Laaser and Karlsson 2021). In the realm of psychology, it is generally acknowledged that workers' psychological dispositions influence their self-reported well-being in workplace surveys. Simultaneously, there is an understanding that both the type and nature of work also significantly impact individual assessments of well-being at work (Spencer 2023). Furthermore, in a specific line of inquiry, scholars in the field of business ethics have explored meaningful work as a moral concern related to how we manage ourselves and others. They have investigated whether there are identifiable attributes of meaningful work to which we are morally entitled, as well as investigating moral obligations to ourselves and others (Michaelson et al. 2014).

Dignified work centers on the concept of the right to work and the freedom to make choices in one's professional life. This freedom is supported by fair and equitable compensation, the ability to resist and address unfavorable working conditions (Ciulla 1998; Phelps 1997; Lamont 2002), and the capacity to strike a balance between paid employment and other life commitments. It is essential to acknowledge that paid work is just one component of a meaningful existence (Rifkin 1996). It is consistently observed that human dignity is closely linked to the opportunity to exert agency in one's work (Hodson 2001). To cultivate workplace behavior that is neither indifferent to the environment nor limited to resisting management's control strategies, the concept of pride in one's work and the drive to establish autonomous spheres of activity must feature prominently.

However, the role of embodiment in issues of meaningful work has rarely been addressed. In the next section, we highlight the

main challenges AFWO faces in producing meaningful work for people with disabilities when considering issues of embodiment.

4 | AFWO and the Challenge of Disability

The role of embodiment in shaping the experience of people with disability in the workplace is receiving greater attention within organizational disability studies. Studies report the numerous obstacles that people with disability face in entering organizations and becoming valuable members of those organizations. This is not only related to issues of accessibility and physical barriers present in workplaces (Beatty et al. 2019), but also to phenomena such as legitimacy traps (Sandholtz 2015), occupational segregation (Revillard 2022), and dirty labor (Maravelias 2022). Too often, in fact, people with disability are employed solely to comply with legal requirements for sheltered employment (Bend and Priola 2022; Hein and Ansari 2022) and are entrusted with irrelevant or even useless tasks. Considering this literature alongside an ethics of embodiment, we identify four critical aspects that AFWO face in producing meaningful work for people with disability: (1) self-identity; (2) autonomy/flexibility; (3) abstract embodiment; and (4) intermediate space/time.

In terms of the first point, AFWO typically addresses employees' identity in terms of fostering authenticity and diversity rather than supporting homogenization with rigid organizational values (Brocklehurst 2001; Morales and Stecher 2023). This approach is linked to meaningful work inasmuch as workers are recognized for their uniqueness (Shore et al. 2018) without having to renounce part of their identity (Ferdman 2017). Nevertheless, this approach gives too much importance to the individual aspects of identity, underestimating how the social and collective meanings associated with certain groups—usually minority and marginalized groups—are crucial in the definition of identity. When related to disability, this entails considering disability not as an individual condition, but as being constructed collectively (Shakespeare 2006; Williams and Mavin 2012). As highlighted by Siebers (2008), embodiment is an integral part of disability identity, not only in terms of individual experiences, but also because disabled bodies are constructed and constrained in line with normative assumptions, embedded in both discourses and artifacts. Those discourses and artifacts also construct images of the ideal worker that latently discriminate against non-normate bodies, even in environments where diversity is promoted. As the body is a symbolic resource in the formation of identity (Jammaers and Ybema 2023), and certain bodies (i.e., those charged with historical and social prejudices and stigmatization) are more strongly linked with certain identity prescriptions, such as inferiority, unprofessionalism, and the need for assistance (Siebers 2008; Hein and Ansari 2022; Jammaers and Zanoni 2021; Jammaers and Ybema 2023; Mandalaki et al. 2022). Accordingly, identity work by people with disabilities can be oriented toward challenging those stereotyped prescriptions, and can also be seen through the way in which they conduct their bodies in organizational life—for example, by trying to conceal their impairments from colleagues or, on the contrary, proudly showing them (Follmer et al. 2020; Woodward and Day 2006).

As for the second point, AFWO underline autonomy and flexibility as aspects that support the creation of meaningful work, increasing workers' agency while accommodating their diverse needs. Flexibility is commonly defined as a work arrangement that primarily focuses on offering a span of choices to employees. It involves arrangements that enable employees to adjust the amount of work they do, the timing of their work, or the location where they perform their tasks (Berkery et al. 2017; Kingma 2019; Morales and Stecher 2023; Picard and Islam 2020). Alis et al. (2006) propose a difference between flexibility *for* employees and flexibility *of* employees, or—as suggested by Berkery et al. (2017)—between employee-oriented practices that focus on work-life balance and individual preferences, and employer-oriented practices that support the response to volatile market demands. Nevertheless, such a neo-normative approach risks producing “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977) that are extensively controlled and assessed for their “abilities” in the name of autonomy and flexibility. Relying on Foucault's idea of governmentality, Maravelias (2022) has shown that such neoliberal approaches to disability employment have a twofold effect. On the one hand, they remove the category of sheltered employment and open the labor market to people with disability. On the other hand, however, they push individual placement programs where people with disability end up being assessed as only fit for jobs that nonimpaired individuals would not accept. In this sense, the neo-normative approach places people with disability “at once inside and outside society” (Maravelias 2022, 1053). This consideration also highlights the negative emotions that jeopardize the possibility of meaningful work. These emotions might not emerge solely in spite of (or as a rejection of) positive socialization efforts, but rather, they could constitute a phenomenon that is inherently intertwined with and operates within neo-normative discourse (Mielly et al. 2023; Resch et al. 2021).

As for the third point, organizational assets and practices addressed to disability, such as social entrepreneurship and community-based organizations, often consider it an abstractly embodied condition. This means they take into account people's embodiment, but as a nonhistorical condition and static condition. They assume that breaking down the barriers to disability participation in the present may be enough to produce meaningful work. Such an approach underestimates that people with disability have their bodies inscribed with centuries of discrimination and stigma, which affect the way their very bodies are seen and identified, and how their body work can be meaningful. In this regard, scholars highlight that a commitment to an alternative economy doesn't necessarily equate to inclusion (Bendl et al. 2024; Mauksch and Dey 2023), as ableist attitudes persist in the tendency to consider people with disability as “others” (Mik-Meyer 2016; Mauksch and Dey 2023) in need of care, and can lead to treating them in condescending and charitable ways (Buchter 2022; Jammaers and Ybema 2023).

As for the fourth point, AFWO considers virtualization as a form of intermediation (Boersma and Kingma 2005) that can foster accessibility and well-being (Boersma and Kingma 2005; Kingma 2019; Spencer 2023). In this sense, AFWO observes the expansion of spatial and temporal boundaries that can benefit people with disabilities, allowing them to overcome both physical barriers to access workplaces and temporal barriers related to the burden of having to use various accommodations

(Kafer 2013). However, such intermediate space/time is generally adopted to foster business-oriented strategies rather than to address an ethics of embodiment. As a consequence, scholars in disability studies report how technologies are not adequate in providing accessibility as long as ableist assumptions (that associate embodiment and related accessibility needs with negative meanings) remain undisrupted (Malknecht and Antonelli 2024; Papalia 2023; Ripetta and Silvestri 2024).

In order to address such critical stances, we now refer to *crip theory* as an approach that can enact an ethics of embodiment and accordingly produce meaningful work in AFWO.

5 | For a Crip Ethics of Embodiment: Meaningful Work in the Crip Theory Movement

Crip theory is a radical approach in disability studies that challenges normalization and compulsory able-bodiedness as expressed in culture and society. The crip movement seeks to disrupt existing norms and assimilationist approaches to disability, calling for a redefinition of what it means to be human in all its diverse forms, moving beyond predefined categories. It aimed to encompass diverse forms of embodiment and states of mind, transcending the limitations of the able-bodied versus disabled binary (McRuer 2018). Accordingly, it emphasizes the importance of intersectionality and recognizes that individuals embody multiple identities and experiences simultaneously.

In this sense, crip theory takes a more radical stance than other disability rights movements, as it rejects identity-based disability politics which tend to oversimplify subjective experiences through the disability label. According to crip scholars and activists, nonconformity to physical and behavioral norms is an expression of disability's challenge to heteronormative norms, and should not be normalized (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2018). To this end, crip theory invites a politicization of disability beyond individualizing approaches, prompting a coalitional politics based on *interdependence* (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006). Therefore, the crip movement aims to enable practices capable of transforming established values and meanings associated with disability and to generate alternative forms of existence, aiming to reframe disability as a site for collective debate and reimagining. Such practices are often linked to art and counterculture. In fact, the crip movement emerges from sites of activism, art and culture concerning disability (McRuer 2018), highlighting the importance of cultural practices, representations, narratives, aesthetics, and artifacts through which disability is constructed and marginalized as a social category. The movement fosters experimental approaches in both technology and the arts. Moreover, crip theory is critical of neoliberal policies typical of contemporary organizations. According to McRuer (2018) such policies, although promoting diversity on a discursive level, discriminate against people with disability on a material level. Firstly, because they foster highly performative ways of working that necessarily leave the most vulnerable behind; secondly, because they tacitly support cuts to public social services, which people with disability are usually the primary users of. Challenging such organizational models, crip theory “entails radically revisioning, from committed anti-ableist positions, the taken-for-granted systems in which we are located” (McRuer 2018, 22).

In the following sections, we undertake an exploration of how practices associated with the crip movement offer a critical and innovative viewpoint on embodiment, providing new pathways for AFWO in terms of meaningful work for people with disabilities. We propose four categories that explicitly address the four critical aspects highlighted above: crip self-identity; mixed ability organizing; meaningful embodiment; and non-normative space/time. For each aspect, we propose an illustrative case.

5.1 | Crip Self-Identity

Crip Arte Spazio¹ is an exhibition hosted by the Venice Biennale in 2024. It explores the ways of representing disability—too often related to misery and pietism—and contrasts them with the exuberant, dynamic, and witty Disability Arts Movement. By placing disabled bodies in space in dialogue with aesthetics that differ from the usual, the project sustains art as a practice that exposes disabling imagery and has potentially transformative effects. The exhibition portrays disability through the works of disabled artists, who depict the disabled body and subjectivity in their creations. The “Who’s Who” series of portraits by Tanya Raabe-Webber is particularly meaningful in understanding how specific crip representation of disability is. Raabe-Webber’s portraits of disability activists, in fact, interrogate the relation between the impaired body and other aspects of the person’s value and personality. Here, bodily impairment is neither the main trait of someone’s identity, nor is it subordinated to the moral side of personality: the two are on the same level and influence each other. This way of representing bodies does not aim to conceal disability (a strategy that too often leads to mere tolerance, Mitchell and Snyder 2015), neither does it want to make a spectacle of it, as happens in many “inspirational” representations where the emphasis is on the additional strength people need to “triumph” over their disability (the so-called “supercrip,” McRuer 2018, 22). Rather they want to actively show and make visible the value of disability as a proliferation of possible modes of existence. Moreover, the aim is not to simply denounce the barriers and discrimination people with disability face when navigating physical and social spaces, but to emphasize the affirmative, proud, and political aspect of the fight for access, as in Keith Armstrong’s “Photo Activism” in the same exhibition. The discriminatory aspects that characterize the lives of people with disabilities are not represented in a pitying fashion but are transfigured and transformed into hybrid figures that embody multiple identities, as well as symbols or sculptures, such as Jason Wilsher Mill’s “Argonaut.”

These works deal with the identity work that people with disabilities carry out in organizational life via the body. Crip theory assumes a particularly radical approach: It does not simply call for inclusion but for a reconfiguration of what it means to be human. Accordingly, it challenges the very idea of identity, underlining that too often disability identity, although important for claiming rights and pride, reinstitutes the humanistic and individualistic ideal on which the very category of “normal” is based. According to crip theory, disability is not to be normalized but rather scatters normality itself, offering up a proliferation of ways of being together and fostering hybrid collectives

and coalitions. From this perspective, self-identity is not understood as a disabled identity that belongs to the individual, requiring recognition and inclusion in organizational life through exceptional accommodations and sheltered solutions. Rather, it is understood as an embodied dimension which is simultaneously individual and collective, actual and historical, and calls for a radical reimagining of what disability is and how it relates to society.

5.2 | Mixed Ability Organizing

Sins Invalid² is a performance project based on disability justice. Led by disabled people of color, Sins Invalid’s performance work explores the themes of sexuality, embodiment, and the disabled body, developing provocative work where paradigms of “normal” and “sexy” are challenged, offering a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all bodies and communities.

Sins Invalid is committed to social and economic justice for all people with disabilities, moving beyond individual legal rights to collective human rights. Its goals are promoting leadership opportunities for people with disabilities within communities and within the broader social justice movement; providing a supportive and politically engaged space for both emerging and established artists with disabilities to develop and present compelling works to a broad audience; developing and presenting strong artistic work that explores the full and multidimensional experiences of disabled artists. To this end, Sins Invalid promotes a *mixed ability organizing* approach that informs their activity and work (Invalid 2017).

As per their description (Invalid 2017), mixed ability organizing relies on the bridge between different capacities, orientations, and relationships of power. It is based on trial and error and experimentation of new methods of working together. Moreover, it is strongly related to disability justice and the principle of interdependence (McRuer 2006; Kafer 2013). A key tenet of mixed ability organizing is the consideration of indebtedness as a positive condition, rather than as a problem to be solved. Indebtedness, in fact, is the basis of collaboration in mixed abilities settings, where giving and receiving support is the condition for each person bringing complementary skills to a project. Therefore, this kind of organizing starts from the awareness of each respective need and capability, without succumbing to “accounting” for debts to one another. In this condition, unevenness is an organizing principle (Invalid 2017). This entails paying attention to and being honest about the complexities of embodiment, and developing practices capable of attending to that complexity. For instance, while people with different impairments may share a common experience of oppression under ableism, it can also be true that particular organizing contexts can provide for the access needs of some and not others. A particular meeting space may present difficulties for people with mobility impairments, while a particular style of conducting a meeting may present difficulties for people with emotional or cognitive impairments.

Mixed ability organizing must be able to take stock of, engage with, and work through these complexities. Therefore, mixed

ability organizing does not pretend to level people's differing bodies, minds, hearts, desires, needs, and limits. Rather, it engages with such differences through mutual aid, support networks, and resistance to both institutional and internalized ableism. This entails embracing what individuals' bodies and minds have the capacity for, but also enacts forms of collaboration in which an individual's privileges become a shared value and a resource to support collective access to work. Finally, mixed ability organizing supports organizing *with*, and not *for*, one another.

5.3 | Meaningful Embodiment

A good example of such an approach is Hastings-based cooperative Project Art Works³. Project Art Works collaborates with people with complex support needs, families, and circles of support. Their practice intersects art and care, responding to neurodivergence and its gifts and impacts. Challenging paradigms of inclusion, it encompasses direct practical and holistic support, films, events, projects, and exhibitions. As described on the project's website, they facilitate personalized creative pathways for artists and makers. The studio spaces, where events and happenings take place, are without hierarchy, and artists work together in purposeful collaboration using total communication. Gesture, sound, signing and empathy allow for more expansive and freer forms of connection. Focusing on embodiment, the cooperative's permanent workshops are not oriented towards realizing projects pre-established by the management group, but rather bring out the inherent project ethos of working together and the possibilities granted by the specific characteristics of the bodies and minds of those involved. In this sense, the activity of the cooperative is not oriented towards art therapy but toward sharing and cohabitation of spaces. Adopting a crip perspective, the cooperative promotes an ethics of embodiment that, rather than accommodating the "special" needs of individuals, questions the organizational context and social norms that construct those needs as special. In line with this, the workshop does not involve distinctions of roles between "operators" and "assisted," but all participants are "collaborators," regardless of their disability. The consequences of this approach are often in conflict with the productivity requirements of the neoliberal and neo-normative paradigm (their projects often take many years to come to fruition), but they do produce meaningful work for the people involved. Therefore, meaningful work is based on meaningful embodiment as a necessary condition for the development of collaborative projects, which are themselves always subject to transformation (and in some cases may not be realized), and which would have differing characteristics in the presence of different individuals and bodies.

In this example, the crip approach considers the ascribing of value to disability as a collaborative endeavor that, rather than focusing on individual conditions and abilities, fosters meaning-making through the body itself. This approach simultaneously respects the ethical principle of treating individuals as free agents and overcomes the abstract idea of agency by engaging with the materiality of embodiment and the multiplicity of factors linked to it.

5.4 | Non-Normative Space/Time

We can find an example of non-normative approaches to time and space in the practices of Reverb: A Queer Reading Series, a monthly reading series that Leah Horlick and Estlin McPhee started in 2013 in response to the lack of spaces in Vancouver where the people they loved could gather and share their poetry and creative writing. It was an effort to establish a caring, safe, and supportive Queer space where presenters and attendees could participate without having to accept the compromises that they typically encountered at venues where literary events were held. At the heart of this effort was a commitment to maintain a space that met the needs of the people around them, many of whom experienced barriers to participation on account of the intersecting oppressions that limit access for those who are discriminated against on the basis of race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, or mental health diagnosis. With the support of their families and friends, they modeled the kind of accessibility that they and their communities needed and approached their organizing with a degree of openness and intentionality that nurtured a culture of care that flourished with each monthly gathering. Papalia (2023, 272) describes such meetings as treating accessibility as an action rather than a fixed set of policy recommendations, operating as an ongoing effort to maintain a space for a range of emerging and complex needs in the midst of systemic barriers and traditions of violence. The following were features of a typical Reverb event toward the end of the run of the series in 2017:

- Free, allergen-free food and drink, with vegan and gluten-free options.
- A commitment to maintaining a fragrance-free policy with signage, a designated seating area, and an educational campaign with reminders and instructions prior to events.
- Ramps, accessible restrooms, and areas marked off for wheelchair and scooter access.
- A commitment to maintaining a sober space.
- By-donation admission on a pay-what-you-can/nobody-turned-away basis.
- American sign language (ASL) interpretation and ASL VLOG promotion.
- Free on-site childcare.
- Reserved accessible seating with the availability of a range of comfortable seating options.
- Active listeners.
- A commitment to staying on time.
- Online promotion with additional paper handbills.
- A commitment to maintaining majority BIPOC representation with regard to featured artists, writers, organizers, and access workers.
- A commitment to paying featured artists and writers.
- A commitment to receiving content ahead of time so access workers could plan accordingly and the need for trigger warnings could be identified.

This approach recognizes embodiment as a condition for organizing space and time, as space and time themselves would not have the same characteristics in the presence of different individuals and bodies. This results in a non-normative relationship with space and time, which are not seen as invariants or mere containers within which productive activities must take place but are redefined by the very act of doing: Space is redefined by the bodies that inhabit it, and time is expanded and contracted in a nonlinear manner based on the progress of activities.

6 | Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we examined if and how AFWO can produce meaningful work for people with disabilities, contributing to the wider project of work and social inclusion. Starting from this point, we hypothesized how adopting an ethics of embodiment could help address the challenges that disability presents in AFWO. To achieve this, we have made reference to crip theory and outlined four ways in which experiences inspired by crip theory enact a crip ethics of embodiment in organizing. Each of the cases we have presented addresses a critical point in AFWO and its capability to create meaningful work for people with disabilities.

The concept of *crip self-identity* enables us to better understand the relationship between individual and organizational identity and to overcome individualistic approaches to self-identity which are typical of AFWO. In a neo-normative paradigm, identity is understood as highly unique and flexible, interacting dialectically with organizational identity (Brocklehurst 2001; Morales and Stecher 2023; Fleming and Sturdy 2009), but also reinforcing the burden for individuals with historically stigmatized bodies (Jammaers and Ybema 2023). The crip approach instead questions that self-identity is something good in itself and argues that the individualistic values inherent in most diversity and inclusion rhetoric can produce normalizing and exclusionary effects for those bodies that bear histories of stigmatization. From this perspective, to create meaningful work it is not enough to say “just be yourself” (a common slogan in diversity and inclusion campaigns, see Fleming and Sturdy 2009), but it becomes necessary to question (and challenge) the cultural values through which certain “selves” are recognized as acceptable. This entails shifting attention from individual uniqueness to ways of being together with a sense of belonging, and to coalitions that are both individual and collective, and do not underestimate the history of oppression that impact certain bodies and their representation.

Mixed ability organizing allows us to overcome the drawbacks of an emphasis on autonomy and flexibility, which characterizes AFWO. While autonomy and flexibility are intended to increase workers' agency and accommodation possibilities (Berkery et al. 2017; De Menezes and Kelliher 2011), they also lead to greater top-down control, with the consequence of placing individuals both inside and outside society and the labor market (Maravelias 2022). In response, crip theory's mixed ability organizing puts emphasis on embodiment as a complex dimension that calls for nonpietistic forms of mutual aid and support networks. Cultural values inscribed in bodies, when viewed through one's subjectivity, are far from flexible and actually

challenge the flexibility imposed by the neo-normative approach. Rather, mixed ability organizing invites a rethinking of autonomy and flexibility, acknowledging that all organizational members can act as allies to one another in different ways across abilities, provided they are intentional about their institutional positions and how each exercises their power to support others. The crip approach focused on mixed ability organizing critiques AFWO for being business-led and assimilatory and seeks neither to overcome disability nor lapse into a celebration of individual difference in and of itself.

The exploration of *meaningful embodiment* reveals what an ethics of embodiment can potentially bring to practices and how people feel within AFWO, which (as stated) is one of the major issues of these organizations. Beyond abstract ideas of embodiment that characterize neo-normative approaches, meaningful embodiment sheds light on the challenges that differing bodies pose to mainstream economic concepts such as productivity and task accomplishment. This consideration extends well beyond disability, as in the current economic climate a sense of meaninglessness characterizes most workers' lives. Precarity, superficial teamwork dynamics, evolving and specialized work patterns, swift obsolescence of both new and traditional skills, the erosion of company loyalty, and the uncertainty faced by individuals who frequently transition from one job to another can be serious issues for workers' dignity, eroding the very principle of the right to meaningful work (Yeoman 2014). Sennett (1998) argues that due to these patterns, workers are at risk of losing their ability to place themselves within a coherent life narrative and to perceive continuity in their lives. This loss of coherence results in a loss of character, ethical breakdowns, reduced community involvement, and a diminishing sense of personal purpose and fulfillment, ultimately leading to a loss of meaning. In this framework, the crip approach is particularly radical, as it invites us to consider the embodied person as the measure of value, rather than using economic metrics to measure the value of people. This is the foundation of a crip ethics of embodiment: embodiment, as a social and historical condition that includes social cohesion, mutual support, collective and personal well-being and satisfaction, must be the main value, while growth in productivity and performance, return of investment, and profit must be seen as consequences of it. In this perspective, meaningful work involves getting away from productivity as the overriding principle of our relationship to the world.

The concept of *non-normative space/time* expands this consideration even further. While organizational spaces and times have traditionally constructed productive bodies (which are also “docile bodies,” to recall Foucault 1977), the crip perspective highlights that taking accessibility seriously can turn this condition upside down: here, bodies and their diverse attitudes actively shape space and time. This is another expression of an ethics of embodiment, as in this case, there is no heteronormative ideal guiding the creation of space and time, but rather spaces and times are accustomed to bodies in their diversity. This entails a multiplication of norms, challenging the very possibility of talking about accessibility standards. When bodies are taken into account in their material and historical dimension, meaningful work becomes a complex and open-ended endeavor that requires experimentation and

adaptability. This also offers an entirely new way of thinking about the dogmas of flexible work and technology use, suggesting that bodies, inscribed with cultural values, engage in a dialectical relationship with the organization and predate technological determinism, which is not the cause but rather the effect of the expansion of spaces.

In contemporary society, creating meaningful work and including people with disabilities is an ethical commitment of primary importance. The experiences emerging from disability activism, and crip theory in particular, constitute a reservoir of best practices. However, they also show that the endeavor is not easy and requires moving beyond easy rhetoric and neo-normative paradigms. AFWO can take a step in this direction by learning from those experiences and seriously considering the instances of an ethics of embodiment.

AFWO represents an evolution of the typical bureaucratic control model. They aim to eliminate top-down strategies for controlling human behavior and create conditions for organizational values to be spontaneously shared by members. Considering how these results have been challenged over time and how the role of AFWO has contributed to both enhancing and limiting the organizational well-being of individuals, one might think that this is merely a new form of bureaucratic control. However, adopting an ethics of embodiment allows us to consider a more realistic relationship between the body and embodiment within AFWO, rather than an overly optimistic one.

Crip theory encourages us to take a step forward in reimagining organizational structures that discriminate against and marginalize disability. It places a strong emphasis on the multiplicity of possibilities for being and interdependence, surpassing predefined and heteronormative categories that inform most organizational processes. The crip approach centers on the importance of collaboration, including collaboration between the human and the nonhuman, with the aim of generating new forms and possibilities. These forms may conflict with established values and even be undesirable. The fundamental ethical challenge posed by these forms is, therefore, the desire for the undesirable: Only in this way can the impossible be achieved.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to emphasize the crucial work carried out by the puntOorg International Research Network as a daily source of inspiration for the ever-open discussion about the sources of managerial knowledge. Open access publishing facilitated by Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, as part of the Wiley - CRUI-CARE agreement.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/beer.12796>.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.shapearts.org.uk/about-crip-arte-spazio>.

² <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/>.

³ <https://projectartworks.org/>.

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