



# Disabled at Work: Body-Centric Cycles of Meaning-Making

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## Abstract

A 22-month longitudinal study of (self)employed disabled workers (*Following the preference of the lead author who identifies as disabled, the linguistic self-presentation by our participants, the precedent of (Hein and Ansari, Academy of Management Journal 65:749–783, 2022), and the clarification note included in Jammaers & Zanoni's recent review of ableism (Jammaers and Zanoni, Organization Studies 42:429–452, 2021), we chose, and consistently use, the term "disabled employees" throughout the paper. We do so to underscore the premise of the social model of disability, which explains that "people are disabled first and foremost by society, not by their individual, biological impairment. To us this term most clearly highlights that it is society (and possibly organizations) that disable and oppress people with impairments, by preventing their access, integration and inclusion to all walks of life, making them 'disabled'.*" (Jammaers and Zanoni, Organization Studies 42:429–452, 2021: 448)) models the growing centrality of the body in meaning-making. We inductively explain how body dramas of suffering or thriving initially instigate cycles of meaning deflation and inflation at work. Our disjunctive process model shows that, at the beginning of the pandemic, disabled workers performed either dramas of suffering or on dramas of thriving. However, as the global pandemic unfolded, disabled workers begun crafting composite dramas that deliberately juxtaposed thriving and suffering. This conjunctive process model stabilized meaning-making at work by acknowledging the duality of the disabled body, as both anomaly and asset. Our findings elaborate, and bridge, emerging theories of body work and recursive meaning-making to explain how disabled workers explicitly enroll their bodies to make meaning at work during periods of societal upheaval.

**Keywords** Disabled workers · Body work · Meaning-making

## Introduction

Negative and stressful situations compel meaning-making. Meaning-making refers to how individuals construe, understand, and make sense of life and work events (Park

& Folkman, 1997). Park (2010, p. 259) defines deliberate meaning-making as “a broad category of efforts to deal with a situation through meaning-related strategies.” In organizations, such efforts range from “coping” to “sensemaking” (Heintzelman & King, 2014); from “ascribing” and “maintaining” (Heine et al., 2006) to “doing,” “updating,” and “sharing” (Lepisto, 2021) meanings as part of performing one’s tasks, roles, and jobs.

Management scholars have so far largely focused on workers’ efforts to make meaning when their sense of existential mattering had been shaken by crises (Christianson & Barton, 2021; Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020). Mundane processes of meaning-making can also loom large, especially for workers who repeatedly face stigma (Ashforth et al., 2017), marginalization (Shepherd et al., 2022), or discrimination (Kreiner & Mihelcic, 2020). A broad range of organizational arrangements, from Snow and Anderson’s (1987) homeless living in Los Angeles to Shepherd et al.’s (2022) rag pickers in Mumbai and Hein & Ansari’s

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(2022) infantilized beneficiaries of sheltered workshops in Germany, underscore the prevalence of everyday meaning-making as a moral issue (Michelson et al., 2014). Because meaning-making is often instigated or exacerbated by losses, disparities, or deficiencies (Jammaers & Williams, 2021; Jammaers et al., 2016; Meng & Ouyang, 2020), growing attention has been given to explaining how workers make meaning in response to repeated crises (Antoni et al., 2020), confrontations (Creed et al., 2022), and violations of their rights (Michelson, 2021).

Recent debates, studies, and calls for papers (Zeyen et al., 2021) drew attention to the growing importance of body-related intersectionalities and insights (Bigo & Islam, 2022; Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2019; Fotaki, 2019; Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021; Little et al., 2015) in management and organization studies, especially as evidence of marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination based on changes and differences in bodies continues to accumulate (Holmes et al., 2021; Leslie & Flynn, 2022).

To explicitly foreground the role of the body in meaning-making at work, we chose to focus on intersectionalities with disability, dually motivated by first author's lived experience as a disabled scholar and by growing interest in the broader scholarly community in surfacing and honoring the diversity of bodies inhabiting today's workplaces (Lawrence et al., 2022). Despite their ubiquity in organizations, (dis)abilities and disabled workers have been rarely programmatically prioritized thus far in management journals (for recent exceptions, see Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021; Jammaers & Williams, 2021; Hein & Ansari, 2022). Yet micro-interactions and norms of inclusion and exclusion (Cuilla, 2019; Michaelson, 2021) exacerbate workers' awareness and engagement of their bodies in everyday aspects of their tasks, roles, and jobs whether they currently identify as disabled (Dale & Burrell, 2014; Dale & Latham, 2015; Hein & Ansari, 2022) or not (Michel, 2011; Bigo & Islam, 2022; Creary & Locke, 2022).

This paper aims to extend the literature on meaning-making by asking, and answering, the following research question: "How do disabled workers enroll their bodies to make meaning at work?" To address our research question conceptually, we focus on everyday meaning-making in response to repeated aggressions (Hein & Ansari, 2022; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022); center our theoretical inquiry on the role of the body (i.e., the agency of the flesh, Harding et al., 2022; body work, Lawrence et al., 2022) in making meaning, and adopt an ethics of embodiment lens (Wolf, 2010; Yeoman, 2014) that tracks the requirements and consequences of such body work on the physical and psychological well-being of disabled workers (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). We approach our research question empirically by collecting longitudinal and multimodal data from a sample of 24 disabled employed

and self-employed workers in UK-based organization. By combining repeated long interviews (Crawford et al., 2021) with solicited diaries (Rauch & Ansari, 2022), we follow disabled workers' experiences of work over time. We answer our research question by process-modeling the central role of the body in recursive processes of mundane meaning-making at work. Our findings contribute to this special issue by showing that enrolling the body in dramas of suffering or thriving motivates two distinct cycles of meaning-making. We discuss how these body-centric meaning-making cycles contribute to participants experiencing work as less, or more, meaningful over time (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Lysova et al., 2022).

## Literature Review

The role the body plays in mundane meaning-making at work has been previewed by two existing concepts: body work (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Lawrence, et al., 2022) and recursive meaning-making, especially as a coping response to the escalation of problematic or traumatic situations (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Lyle et al., 2021). We begin by reviewing what we already knew, pre-pandemic, about how different forms of body work could be implied in making meaning. We then argue that the COVID-19 global pandemic increased the involvement of the body in everyday meaning-making by rendering workers both more aware and more attuned to differences and changes in their bodies (Creary & Locke, 2022; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). Finally, we explain our choice to address our research question by following the everyday lived experiences of disabled workers, whose bodies had already featured saliently in their work arrangements and accommodation prior to the pandemic yet gained renewed relevance in their efforts to make meaning at work as the COVID-19 global pandemic challenged their needs, rights, and values (Yeoman, 2014).

## Body Work

Early arguments advanced by Heaphy (2007) and Heaphy & Dutton (2008) on bodily competence and a recent systematic review (Lawrence et al., 2022) on body work draws explicit attention to how workers deliberately enroll their bodies to perform various types of body work as part of their tasks, roles, and jobs. These can range from largely invisible engagement of their bodies, such as bodily vulnerabilities (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021) and bodily analogies (Courpasson & Monties, 2017) to highly visible performances, including bodily dramas (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021) and bodily practices (Courpasson & Monties, 2017). Some types of body work are common, promoting uniformity and conformity (Courpasson & Monties, 2017). Others are less common.

Bodies singled out by their physical and physiological differences (Gray et al., 2018; Jammaers et al., 2019; Little et al., 2015; Maitlis, 2009; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021; Smith et al., 2019) are often forced to perform additional types of body work just to fit in. The toll of marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination at work also compels further varieties of body work. For example, Maitlis (2009), Creary & Locke (2022), and Harding et al. (2022) point to significant efforts to make sense of bodily differences. Fotaki & Daskalaki (2021) reveal body work to anticipate and prepare for protest. McCarthy & Glozer (2022) show that workers need to retreat in order to replenish emotional energy.

Together, these papers establish body work as a staple of workers' lived experiences while explaining why the types, scope, intensity, uses, and consequences of body work in organizations remain under-researched. One key overarching insight shared among these different author teams is, however, that purposeful, organizationally embedded efforts to shape human bodies at work (Lawrence et al., 2022) are anything but evenly distributed in organizations. Rather, the greater and more visible the differences among human bodies at work, the taller the onus on those whose bodies change or differ to perform more, often more onerous, and on occasion also more damaging varieties of body work (Barclay & Markel, 2009). Therefore, as we begin to programmatically elaborate the concept of body work, we need not only discover the most prototypical forms and functions of body work performed by "normal" workers, but also attend to the extra controls and demands organizations may place on workers whose bodies depart from such arbitrary standards.

An ethics of embodiment (Wolf, 2010; Yeoman, 2014) foregrounds the agency of bodies by drawing attention to the "performative corporealization of working selves" (Harding et al., 2022, p. 649). This lens celebrates both the agency of the flesh (Harding et al., 2022) and its frequent set-backs and interruptions (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). Embodied ethicists have explored the role of the body in multiple domains, from the pursuit and performance of ideologies (Michelson, 2021) to virtues (Beadle, 2019); from needs (Yeoman, 2014) to rights (Colella & Stone, 2004). Recent theoretical (Fotaki et al., 2020) and empirical (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021) accounts of embodied performances show that workers corporeally perform their knowledge, beliefs, and values. An ethics of embodiment lens specifically suggest that bodies can be enrolled to resist forms of oppressions (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021) and to carry out specific opportunities (de Rond & Lok, 2016; de Rond et al., 2019). It acknowledges the risk of breakdown (Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2019; McMahon et al., 2012) and the need to retreat and repair workers' bodies (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). An ethics of embodiment thus views meaning-making at work as inherently body-centric (Creary & Locke, 2022; Harding et al., 2022). It also flags the inherent fragility and fluidity of

body-centric meaning-making (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Prasad, 2014; Cunliffe & Locke, 2020; Nettifee, 2020). This lens draws further attention to the many and diverse types of body labor (Jammaers et al., 2016) disabled workers deliberately engage in to claim and maintain their values and rights (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Yeoman, 2014; Beadle, 2019; Cuilla, 2019).

### Making-Meaning at Work

As workers repeatedly confront similar negative or stressful situations, meaning-making at work is often recursive (Park, 2010). This is especially the case in cultures or organizations that marginalize, stigmatize, or discriminate workers based on changes and differences in their bodies (Little et al., 2015; Jammaers et al., 2019). Meaning-making has been extensively studied in response to a broad range of dramatic and traumatic life events that directly affect one's own body, such as miscarriage (Nikčević & Nicolaides, 2014), depression (Hayes et al., 2005), and cancer (Park et al., 2008). Life events that affect multiple bodies and their interactions, like bereavement (Holland et al., 2006), the September 11th terrorist attacks (Ai et al., 2005) and the COVID-19 global pandemic (Jiang et al., 2020) have also received attention. There has been much more limited research on how such changes and differences in bodies carry over from life to work, or how they shape workers' meaning-making as part of their organizational tasks, roles, or jobs. Maitlis & Petriglieri (2019) described how the quarter of women returning to work after a pregnancy loss manage their own suffering and others' reactions. Kiasuwa et al. (2016) describe how workers returning to work after cancer diagnoses attend to their bodies. More generally, Michel (2011) showed that changes and differences in their bodies eventually and significantly inform how individuals understand and approach their work and vice-versa. Courpasson & Monties (2017) and Bigo & Islam (2022) show how specific bodily practices either reinforce (see also Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022) or, at times, radically reconstitute the meaning of specific tasks, roles, and jobs in organizations (see also Michel, 2011).

Despite the still limited empirical evidence concerning the specific roles that bodies play directly and deliberately in meaning-making at work (for a notable exception see Harding et al., 2022), there are reasons to expect two different types of changes in meaning: restriction versus expansion. A handful of studies at different levels of analysis provide evidence that individual members of organizations can deliberately choose, conserve, and compose meanings (Lyle et al., 2021, 2022; Walsh & Bartunek, 2011). Although the available empirical accounts of recursive meaning-making do not explicitly discuss the role of the body in meaning-making in response to dramatic or traumatic events, they provide some

preliminary longitudinal evidence of the repeated efforts workers make to change meanings.

One key insight from studies of meaning restriction and/or expansion (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Lyle et al., 2021) is that individuals make efforts to preserve and prioritize preferred meanings, even when these may not suit or serve the mission of the organization, and/or disavow meanings that do. Such fluidity of meaning-making may be particularly helpful when workers confront norms or engage in interactions that marginalize, stigmatize, or discriminate based on changes and differences in their bodies (Gray et al., 2018; Little et al., 2015).

### How Bodies Make Meaning at Work

Several scholars suggested different ways in which workers' bodies may be deliberately involved in making meaning at work. Workers' bodies are critical sites of information (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Wang & Zu, 2019), energy (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022), and motivation (Niedenthal et al., 2005). Bodies can make meaning directly by seeking, synthesizing, and remembering (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). For example, prior studies recognized the vital importance of sensorial cues (Creary & Locke, 2022) and analogies (Bigo & Islam, 2022) for embodied sense making. Especially in the midst of crises (Christianson, 2019; de Rond et al., 2019), bodies can be resourced and inter-related in creative ways (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Sergeeva et al., 2020). Bodies have also been shown to intermediate the effects of feeling (Pors, 2018), voicing (Nettifee, 2020), relating (Heaphy, 2017), doing (Murray et al., 2021), and being (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015) on meaning-making at work.

Bodies can be singled out by their changes and differences, either temporarily (e.g., pregnancy, Little et al., 2015; pain, Michel, 2011; or treatment, Taylor, 1983) or permanently (e.g., dis/ability, gender, race, social class, caste, Jammaers et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2022). Bodies can also be deliberately leveraged to counter ongoing stigmatization or discrimination. For example, Gray et al. (2018) describe how first-generation college students with visible social class markers, such as racial minorities, enrolled their bodies, and others' bodies, to fend off micro-aggressions (see also Beavan, 2021 and Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021 for different intersectionalities).

Two recent studies preview the centrality of bodies in meaning-making. Lawrence et al. (2022) conceptually set up meaning as a key dimension—and tension—workers address, through body work. Creary & Locke (2022) empirically reveal how workers come to recognize and capitalize on the suffering and thriving of their bodies. They also point out that not all workers are aware of body differences and changes, nor have already “elevated their embodied experience making individual bodies and experiences salient”

(Creary & Locke, 2022, 884). The former study explicitly, and the latter implicitly also comment on the growing relevance of differences and changes in bodies at work. As the pandemic unfolded, the physical and physiological toll of the disease rendered the suffering of all bodies more extreme (Cai et al., 2021) and more visible (Barton et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021), exacerbating meaning-related tensions (Lawrence et al., 2022).

We began our empirical inquiry with two working assumptions about how workers could enroll their bodies in making meaning borne out in studies conducted before the COVID-19 global pandemic. We continuously challenged and updated this working assumption by closely following how scholars across disciplines problematized, conceptually and empirically, the growing centrality of the body in meaning-making at work while the COVID-19 global pandemic unfolded.

The first assumption foregrounds the physiology of the body (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008) as one among several inputs in meaning-making. Heaphy (2007, p. 57) suggests that body cues are “felt,” not merely noticed. The cues “punctuate” and “clarify” meaning. Bodies can capture and filter a wide variety of cues, including social norms, and the ill- or well-being of other bodies (Heaphy, 2007). These cues can convey threat or opportunity; harm or heal (Heaphy, 2007); demonstrate or mobilize competence (Heaphy et al., 2016; Jammaers & Ybema, 2022); enable or hinder coordination (Christianson, 2019). Across their many functions and interactions, bodily cues soak and drip multiple, rich, and fluid meaning. Bodily cues can be denied, deferred, or dismissed (Michel, 2011). In her nine-year ethnography, Michel (2011: 325) underscores that cues indicative of imminent body breakdowns remain hidden up to several years until workers come to “treat their bodies as knowledgeable subjects”; only much later they heed these bodily cues an information and adjust their tasks, roles, or jobs accordingly. Careful readings of several other studies converge on bodily cues as a particularly useful input to meaning-making for different bodies: pregnant bodies (Little et al., 2015), gendered bodies (Fotaki, 2019), (in)visible bodies (Smith et al., 2019), racialized bodies (Gray et al., 2018), injured bodies (Matilis, 2009), stigmatized bodies (Jammaers & Williams, 2021), politicized bodies (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021), and energized bodies (Lepisto, 2021).

The second assumption underscores the inability to know at all except through flesh-and-blood enactments (Wacquant, 2005, 2015). Bodies know differently (Harding et al., 2022) and accurately (Sergeeva et al., 2020). No other modalities of meaning-making affords quite the same information (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Prasad, 2014; Bigo & Islam, 2022). Body differences thus matter in their own right. Bodies capture and convey essential and, in some contexts, even existential information, e.g., in the emergency room



(Christianson, 2019), during robotic surgeries (Sergeeva et al., 2020), or while rowing the Amazon in pitch darkness (de Rond et al., 2019). Fotaki and Daskalaki (2021) illustrate how bodies can be actively enrolled in meaning-making. For example, activists prepared and staged their bodies in anticipation of protests, to intentionally stage and select a range of cues that convey their political goals. Their study draws attention to such dramatic (inter)corporeal performances as “female resisters use their bodies” (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021: 1277) as “an argumentative resource” (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021: 1276), both in situ (Prasad, 2014) and on digital media platforms (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). Jammaers and Williams (2021) further show how disabled people deliberately craft their bodies, for instance through mediation, sleep patterns, or behaviorisms, to either resist or adhere to ableist norms. Bodily practices (Courpasson & Monties, 2017) and bodily analogies (Bigo & Islam, 2022) have also been shown to facilitate meaning-making at work.

The COVID-19 global pandemic intensified workers’ everyday efforts to make meaning (Barton et al., 2020; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). The sudden transition to remote work, the unexpected challenges of juggling work and family during recurrent lockdowns, and the unprecedented changes in tasks, roles, and jobs also raised poignant questions about workers’ physical and mental well-being (Cotofan et al., 2021; Ivey et al., 2021). Before the pandemic, bodies were rarely mentioned in studies of meaning-making at work (Bailey et al., 2019). The COVID-19 global pandemic drew explicit research attention (Sandbakken & Moss, 2021; Yang et al., 2021) to the roles bodies play in meaning-making at work (Michel, 2011), not only physically and physiologically (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), but also ethically (Wolf, 2010; Yeoman, 2014) and politically (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019; Fotaki et al., 2020).

### How Disabled Workers Make Meaning?

Although bodies convey and conceal critical aspects of diversity, and although a fifth to a fourth of the population is disabled, there has been only very limited attention to the relationship between body work and meaning-making for disabled workers (Dobusch, 2019).

While the body has been explicitly foregrounded many times before in the specific context of disability in organizations (Dale & Burrell, 2014; Dale & Latham, 2015; Michelson, 2021), the role of the disabled body in making meaning at work has so far been largely overlooked pre-pandemic, for two key reasons. First, body-centric mechanisms of meaning-making at work had been generally overshadowed by cognitive and discursive modalities (Park, 2010). Second, and specifically to disabled workers, there has been limited

attention to the varieties of ableism they face in their organizations (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021).

The enrollment of the body in everyday meaning-making may, however, be more informative, for disabled workers. The literature on disability-related stigmatization in organizations has drawn attention to the denial of bodies that deviate from the normal (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021; Kreiner & Mihelcic, 2020). Disabled bodies are almost always judged (Butler, 2000) and stigmatized (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). Ample research in disability studies emphasize the “less than” narrative of disabled people in comparison to non-disabled bodies (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Goodley, 2014) to the point of infantilization (Hein & Ansari, 2022) and even dehumanization (Shakespeare et al., 2021). The more ableist the culture, the more effort is required to accept one’s body and adjust interactions with others (Michel, 2011). Both the absence of appropriate accommodations (Dale & Latham, 2015) and the presence and prevalence of ableist norms (Jammaers et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2020) compel greater efforts to make meaning by disabled workers. Working while disabled necessitates unique forms of body labor, such as bodily crafting (Jammaers & Williams, 2021) in which workers manage and manipulate their own bodies to conform to ableist norms, or acting as if one fits in effortlessly, i.e., masking (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Other forms of socio-symbolic work, such as interpretations (Jammaers et al., 2019) and justification (Jammaers et al., 2016), are often triggered by disabled workers’ greater awareness of changes and differences in their bodies (see also Creary & Locke, 2022) and/or may end up taking a significant toll on their bodies (see also Harding et al., 2022; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). Disabled workers likely rely on many other under-studied forms of body labor to fend off highly targeted (weaponized, Kenny et al., 2019) forms of marginalization, stigmatization, or discrimination at work (Hein & Ansari, 2022).

### Method

We collected longitudinal data from August 2020 to May 2022 as part of a 22-month research project exploring how (self)employed disabled workers based in the UK experienced work. The UK context was especially fitting for examining the central role of bodies in making meaning because disabled workers were caught between legally guaranteed rights and well-established accommodations on one side and highly discriminatory COVID-19-related measures on the other (Zeyen & Branzei, 2020). Given significant contextual differences in how organizations understood and reacted to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the first author’s

extensive professional networks, we focused only on workers (self)employed in UK-based organizations.

## Sample

Prospective participants were recruited via our project website, mailing lists of disabled people's organizations in the UK, as well as the first author's social media accounts. Eligibility criteria for participation were (a) 18+ years old, (b) resident in the UK, (c) considered themselves as disabled in line with the UK Equality Act 2010, and (d) were paid for work (whether employed, free-lance, or entrepreneurial). As recommended by Santuzzi & Waltz (2016), we purposefully sampled on different types of disabilities. Our study included workers self-identifying by either or both innate and/or acquired disabilities. Each disclosed one or more intersectionalities (Table 1). We used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity (all but two of the participants chose their pseudonyms) and removed any details that could reveal their identities.

## Data

Given our research focus on elaborating the role the body plays in meaning-making (Michel, 2011; de Rond et al., 2019; Heaphy, 2017), we employed data collection methodologies that foregrounded participants' lived experiences (Fotaki, 2019; Fotaki & Pullen, 2019). We combined repeated long interviews (Boje and Rosile, 2020; Crawford et al., 2021) with solicited diaries (Rauch & Ansari, 2022).

We conducted initial long interviews with 24 participants, 16 interim follow-ups with 11 participants, and exit interviews with 6, for a total of 46 interviews). We interviewed 14 participants multiple times (2–4 times each).

The 24 intake interviews lasted between 24 and 127 min, averaging slightly over an hour each (67 min); the combined 1612 min provided us with 459 single-spaced pages of transcriptions. The 16 follow-up interviews were slightly shorter on average (42 min each), ranging between 12 and 62 min. The combined 601 min of follow-up interviews added 192 single-spaced pages of transcription. We also conducted exit interviews with 6 participants. These exit interviews lasted slightly under one hour (52 min on average), ranging between 40 and 63 min. The combined 310 min of follow-ups added 97 single-spaced pages of transcription. Section “Appendix A” shows the questions we asked in each round.

We also solicited diaries from all 24 consented participants. All except four of the participants submitted one or more diary entries detailing specific work experiences as they happened. Together, these 20 participants submitted a total of 161 diary entries (1–34 per participant), choosing

accessible and appropriate modalities of storytelling their lived experiences as they kept happening (Boje & Rosile, 2020) to the disabled workers participating in our study (see also Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Little et al., 2015; and Cunliffe & Locke, 2020 for embodied narratives of body-related intersectionalities). Immediately following each of the 46 interviews (initial, follow-up and exit), the co-authors took turns highlighting emerging themes. After every few interviews, we also conducted systematic debriefs comparing and contrasting emerging themes across multiple participants. The 8 debriefs accompanying the initial long interviews generated 346 min of conversation and were transcribed as 162 single-spaced pages of notes. The 5 debriefs accompanying the follow-up interviews added another 249 min of conversation, accompanied by 123 single-spaced pages of notes. Table 2 summarizes the different modalities, and progression, of our data development.

## Analyses

We employed a multi-step adductive approach to data analysis. This subsection outlines our approach using exemplary data to highlight our thought processes. We began by analyzing the full work histories of the 24 disabled (self) employed workers, paying close attention to any differences among their disclosed episodes of discrimination. We first focused on participants' own work experiences during the initial lockdown and return to work (Dashtipour et al., 2019; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Cotofan et al., 2021; Rouleau, et al., 2021; Sandbakken & Moss, 2021; Van Tongeren & Van Tongeren, 2021). Solicited diaries (Rauch & Ansari, 2022) and longitudinal long interviews (Crawford et al., 2021) captured workers' series of changes in their bodies and their work arrangements. Exit interviews added comparisons among multiple reported episodes of discriminations as well as overarching reflections on the overall impact of the global pandemic on work thus far.

The initial long interviews underscored the toll work took on the body at the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Participants described themselves as “exhausted” and “burnt-out” (*Pink, Diary, January 26, 2021*); “tired” and “body-stressed” (*Thomas, Diary, November 22, 2020*); “weary” (*Terpmonk, Diary, January 22, 2021*) and “scared” (*Moolady, Diary, April 12, 2021*). Participants captured not only the direct brunt of the global pandemic on their own bodies, “The last few months have been really challenging and I feel exhausted by it.” (*Moolady, Diary, April 12, 2021*), but also the indirect impact of witnessing others struggling at work:

We had our monthly team meeting. At the start I go round each person in turn and ask them to briefly say what is on their mind—it can be things to celebrate

**Table 1** Participants' work histories

Pseudonym	Disability type	Disclosed disabilities	Configuration of intersectionalities	Work histories		Impact of COVID-19
				Paid work	Unpaid work	
Alan*	Innate	Muscular dystrophy	White, man, young age	Founder (runs his own business since 2017 providing specialist assistive technology); previously worked in cybersecurity	Amateur Paralympic athlete	Moved back in with family; sales dropped as previous products were linked to travel; surged R&D and replaced products; took on advocacy
Annemarie	Innate	Learning disability, dyslexia, sensory overload	White, woman	Managerial role in mental health service; previously worked casual hours in a clinical role	Studying for PhD	Changed to managerial role
Bridie	Innate	Complex skin and eye condition	White, woman, middle age	Theater maker; previously worked a variety of jobs including running a bar	Activism for more inclusion in performing arts	Had many pre-booked activities canceled; took several online projects; started working on a film
Calvin	Acquired	Blind	White, man, middle age, father	Support worker in disability organization; previously worked in civil service and as a free-lance actor	Writer	Changed work tasks/priorities due to management changes; from previous partial remote working to fully remote work arrangements
Charlie*	Innate & Acquired	Autism (innate), mental health (acquired)	White, man, middle age, father	Founder (runs his own social enterprise since 2020 providing cooking classes); previously cooking teacher	Volunteering for special education schools	Received investment from a foundation after a decade of unsuccessful job applications and bootstrapping his vocation
Claudia*	Innate & Acquired	Dyslexia (innate), clinical depression, PTSD (acquired)	Ethnic minority, immigrant, woman, old age	Artist; previously employed in office work	Fundraising for charities	Switched to virtual performances, became carer for partner
Dan*	Innate	Mobility impaired, speech impairment	White, man, young age	Founder (runs his own assistive technology company); previously equality and inclusion consultant	Advocacy work for accessibility	Furloughed for 7 months in 2020; worked online, from parents' home in 2020
Diana	Innate	Dyslexia (innate), Asthmatic (acquired)	White, woman, young age	Educator, coach, disability specialist; previously teacher and bus driver	Inside activism (within the workplace)	Worked from home during & after lockdown with approval from line manager; in-person after changing jobs in July 2021, still fighting for COVID-19 protection
Elaine	Innate & Acquired	Physical impairment (innate), mental health, long-term health condition (acquired)	Black, immigrant, woman, old age, widow	Founder (runs own charity on minority issues and outreach program), online lecturing (part-time)	Additional charity work for ethnic minorities	Need to shield; online working for charity; took on new responsibility for outreach program at university

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Disability type	Disclosed disabilities	Configuration of intersectionalities	Work histories		Impact of COVID-19
				Paid work	Unpaid work	
Elma	Innate	Blind, long-term health condition	White, woman, young age	Researcher at insurance firm	Not disclosed	Worked from home; no face-to-face interaction with support worker, refused access to office even when company reopened; contemplated job change to an inclusion-focused role
Hennie	Acquired	Long-term health condition, mental health, physical impairment	White, woman	Social worker at an adoption agency (part-time)	Not disclosed	Full online working; reduced case load
Herby	Innate	Neurodiversity	White, male, middle age	Housekeeper in a hotel; previously worked lots of different manual jobs (factory, construction)	Activism for local causes, speaker on neurodiversity, artist	Furloughed twice for multiple months, started additional work in kitchen (dish washing)
Josh	Innate & Acquired	Visual impairment (innate), hearing impairment	White, male, middle age	Teacher, specialist for special needs education	Volunteered with special COVID task force of visually impaired charity, additional sight loss	Considered quitting but stayed on; was pushed to do more admin work and become general teaching assistant; returned to one-to-one special educational needs teaching
Kauf	Acquired	Mobility impairment	White, woman, old age	Management consultant, non-executive director (part-time)	Aiming to change recruitment to accommodate disabled people	Left with settlement in August 2020
Kayaviveka	Innate & Acquired	Neurodiversity (innate), mental health (acquired)	White, male, old age	IT support worker	Union work	Went full-time (from 80%), stopped union work
Lisa*	Innate & Acquired	Mental health, Autism spectrum disorder (innate), multiple complex long-term health condition, mobility impairment, PTSD (acquired)	Asian-black, ethnic minority, woman, caregiver (parent and spouse of people living with disabilities), middle age	Disability benefit and rights advisor	Leads disabled parents of disabled children's group, engaged in many local disability charities	Worked reduced hours, sick leave for multiple months, partly shielding
Maya*	Innate	Blind	Ethnic minority, immigrant, woman, middle age, mother	International disability inclusion consultant	Mentoring and training for empowering women in refugee camps, writing research articles	Started new contract, got a 6-month extension, followed by new contract with new organization
Moolady	Innate	Learning disability	White, woman	Church youth worker and youth work coordinator	Took on additional church work	Switched to online service provision, reduction of activities
Nick	Innate	Visually impaired, long-term health condition	Asian, man	Accessibility consultant for museums and galleries (casual work)	Mentored young visually impaired, active in multiple disability organizations	Shielding; shifted to remote work arrangements with significant reductions in work



**Table 1** (continued)

Pseudonym	Disability type	Disclosed disabilities	Configuration of intersectionalities	Work histories		Impact of COVID-19
				Paid work	Unpaid work	
Pink	Innate	Dyslexia	White, female, middle age	Manager of tutors and associated lecturers	Studies for additional degree	Dealt with increased mental health issues in staff and students
Terpmonk	Acquired	Mobility impairment, long-term health condition	White, man, immigrant	Academic	Working with deaf charities	Online teaching, shielding, despite inadequacies in assistive technology
Thomas	Innate	Complex mobility impairment, involuntary muscle contractions	White, man, old age	Librarian in two part-time positions; previously accessibility advisor for museums	Trustee of disability organization, blogger about his disability	Resigned from one part-time job, took on trustee role
Timothy*	Acquired	Physical impairment, long-term health condition	White, man, middle age	Artist; previously manager in education sector	Working with inclusive art	Received big grant, showed art in his garden, won award
Wills*	Acquired	Physical—limb amputation	White, male, middle age	Founder & CEO (runs his own assistive technology business); previously athlete and chemical industry executive	Advocacy work for national disability organizations; role-modeling	Significantly expanded business, decided against opening office, decided to hire remote disabled staff

\*Self-employed (8/24)

**Table 2** Types and sources of data

Pseudonym	Long interviews (24)			Debriefs (8)			Follow-up interviews (11+5)			Diaries (161)			Debriefs (5)			Exit interviews (6)		
	Date	Duration (minutes)	Length (pages)	Duration (minutes)	Notes (pages)	Date	Duration (minutes)	Length (pages)	Date	Duration (minutes)	Length (pages)	Count	First	Last	Duration (minutes)	Date	Duration (minutes)	Transcript (pages)
Alan	May-21	47.55	17						1	Jun-21	Jun-21							
Annemarie	Aug-20	127.55	48	84.38	41	Feb-21	20.52	8	4	Nov-20	Jul-21							
Bridie	Feb-21	60.45	21						0									
Calvin	May-21	101.17	15						6	May-21	Nov-21				May-22	51.30	15	
Charlie	Nov-21	85.60	21						34	Nov-21	Dec-21				May-22	49.30	16	
Claudia	Nov-20	83.03	22						5	Nov-20	Aug-21							
Dan	Jan-21	31.35	7						0									
Diane	Nov-21	70.33	21						0									
Elaine	Nov-20	79	19						0									
Elma	Feb-22	108.11	17						6	Dec-20	Jul-21							
Hennie	Sep-20	55.43	17	38.31	18	Mar-21	30.44	8	4	Oct-20	Jan-21							
Herby	Nov-20	43.11	19						25	Nov-20	Oct-21				Apr-22	50.4	17	
Josh	Sep-20	54.38	15	52.37	13				1	Oct-20	Oct-20							
Kauf	Nov-20	29.52	9						1	Dec-20	Dec-20							
Kayaviveka	Aug-20	66.29	21	33	17	Feb-21	11.56	5	18	Oct-20	Nov-21							
Lisa	Sep-20	59.04	18						5	Nov-20	Oct-21							
Maya	Sep-20	29.1	7						7	Nov-20	Oct-21				Apr-22	39.51	18	
Moolady	Aug-20	49.45	16	34.3	19				1	Apr-21								
Nick	Feb-21	24.46	12						4	Mar-21	Dec-21							
Pink	Sep-20	93.11	22	40.5	21	Feb-21	50.08	14	20	Oct-20	Nov-21				May-22	57.17	11	
Terpmunk	Aug-20	61.01	23	23.13	13				2	Oct-20	Jan-21							
Thomas	Aug-20	61.42	24	40.08	20	Feb-21	38.59	11	12	Oct-20	Nov-21							
						Nov-21	37.16	10										
Timothy	Jan-21	107.55	28						4	Jan-21	Aug-21							
Wills	Jan-21	84.12	20						1	Apr-21	Apr-21				Apr-22	62.51	20	
Accounts	24 (67)	1612	459	346	162	16 (42)	677	192	161						6 (52)	310	97	

or problems they want to share. Everyone brought problems. 2 of my team have contacted me since the meeting to say they are concerned about mental health generally and specifically about named individuals in the team. (*Pink, Diary, January 26, 2021*)

This first stage of data analysis sensitized us to the intensity and the centrality of the body. As normality was extremely disrupted and reconstructed at work in the early stages of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Cai et al., 2021), our participants became keenly aware of the impact of changes in work arrangements on their (different) bodies. They also explicitly elevated their bodily sensations by making highly specific references to how their bodies informed, and were impacted, by work (Creary & Locke, 2022). For example, Elaine began taking lessons in script writing, so she could more fully capture and convey how discrimination felt in her own racialized and disabled body (*Elaine, Interview, November 2020*). Timothy avatared himself, creating a suite of real-time offerings that allowed many others access to the unique embodied ways he was experiencing the global pandemic:

You know, last year I spent a lot of it worrying about the future and I thought, well, there's only one way to get out of this, to get through COVID: to react to it. I had some really big commissions that fell through because of COVID, and the [national funder] said to me, well, why don't you come up with an idea that sort of reacts to the lockdown and you as a disabled artist. So I came up with this bonkers idea of creating augmented reality portals that you could access through a phone or iPad that you could download my body of work an explore, uh, in three dimensions from the comfort of your own home. [...] So I decided to kind of make it like being John Malcovich or being [myself]. You could actually go inside my head and see the creative processes. So [...] there's a crazy animated version of me that flies around and does things. So that's one room. And then in the other room, there's a cinema where can watch films that I've made in lockdown. Cause I started making these movies, these crazy little films about stuff. But more interesting, I suppose, is the fact that in the, in the cinema space I can deliver workshops so people can download a workshop from, with me at home and they see my little face coming up on the screen, but they also see what I'm doing in real time. So I can make art in real time. (*Timothy, Interview, January 2021*)

Participants also drew attention to their own suffering at work (Stowell & Warren, 2018) as their previously embodied competence (Heaphy et al., 2016) no longer sufficed

as they faced an escalation of extremes at work (Cai et al., 2021).

Lots going on today...It is only Tuesday and already this week in my student facing team I have one person who is taking compassionate leave. I also have one person who is doing a phased return and at about 75% capacity after having 3 months off leading up to Christmas. In my management team of 16, I have one off sick, 1 has just resigned and we are all struggling with workload. [...] I feel powerless to do anything beyond phoning them for a chat...but even that is hard because I don't have the time or energy to call them all regularly. (*Pink, Diary, January 26, 2021*).

Multiple body breakdowns (Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2019) disclosed in participants' diaries (Rauch & Ansari, 2022) were subsequently probed and elaborated in follow-up and/or exit interviews. Participants also shared surprising instances when they came to realize how one's own visceral experiences turned out to be unexpectedly useful to themselves and others, i.e., body breakthroughs. Both breakdowns and breakthrough elicited participants' explicit attention to physiological, flesh-and-blood, aspects of their body. What their bodies knew (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007) and did (Sergeeva, et al., 2020) at work generated relevant information (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Given the prevalence of body breakdowns and breakthroughs in our data, we adopted the sensitizing concept of body work, defined as purposeful, organizationally embedded efforts to shape human bodies (Lawrence et al., 2022). We became especially interested in how (self)employed workers deliberately engaged their bodies at work (Creary & Locke, 2022) during the global pandemic (Cai et al., 2021).

### Abductive Elaboration of Body Work

We then abductively elaborated Lawrence et al.'s (2022) concept of body work to conceptualize the lived experience of suffering or thriving at work. Our participants differentiated between dramas of body suffering triggered by micro-aggressions which culminated in body breakdowns and dramas of body thriving motivated by micro-affirmations which yielded body breakthroughs (Table 3). Participants purposefully enrolled their bodies in these two types of dramas by resisting work engagements that aggravated suffering (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021) and by representing those that amplified thriving (Jammaers & Williams, 2021; Jammaers & Ybema, 2022). We qualified both types of dramas as instances of body work (Lawrence et al., 2022) or body labor (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021) because they were purposefully chosen and clearly compelled significant expenditures of effort, energy, and affect that far exceeded those involved in the completion of normal tasks at work (Fotaki & Daskalaki,

2021; McCarthy and Glozer, 2022). Both types of dramas heightened attention to performers' own bodies, orienting awareness of their bodies as either oddities or opportunities (Jammaers & Ybema, 2022)—on rare occasions, as both.

One of the key arguments in the literature suggested that, as a response to bodily vulnerability (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021), workers deliberately enroll bodies in somatic experiences (Creary & Locke, 2022) in order to make meaning, especially in emotionally charged situations (Heaphy, 2017; Rond et al., 2019), or in encounters that threaten one's sense of identity or integrity (Courpasson & Monties, 2017; Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2019).

### Abductive Elaboration of Meaning-Making

Recent studies suggested that workers struggle for meaning (Mumford et al., 2022), especially in situations marred by persistent inequities (Monahan & Fisher, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2022). Extreme, morally injurious experiences (Kopacz et al., 2019) not only compel (Maitlis, 2022), but also sustain, deliberate efforts to make meaning (Vogel & Bolino, 2020). Notwithstanding the embodied nature of meaning-making foregrounded by earlier empirical studies and the recent theoretical attention to the meaning dimension of body work (Lawrence et al., 2022), it is not yet clear how bodies make meaning at work. In the second stage, we focused on changes in meaning-making accompanying key changes in physiological, flesh-and-blood, aspects of the body (Wacquant, 2005; Wolf, 2010) recorded in diaries and interviews to more fully understand the role of body dramas in making meaning in response to stressful life events (Park, 2010).

Our abductive elaboration revealed a cyclical nature of meaning-making. We chose the label of meaning cycles to underscore that corporeal processes of meaning-making continued to revolve around the suffering or the thriving of bodies at work. These meaning cycles neither began nor ended with a single episode of body suffering or thriving, but rather cumulated as participants encountered, and deliberately enrolled their bodies in, many similar experiences. We distinguished between two opposite meaning cycles: those that repeatedly challenged and progressively eroded participants' expectations at work (meaning deflation cycles) and those that occasionally surprised them with "wow," "nice," "proud of," even "tombstone" moments that punctuated their quest for additional forms of engagement at work (meaning inflation cycles).

### Process Modeling

In the third stage, we iterated between theory and data one last time to specify how body dramas sustained meaning cycles at work. We coded for process (Berends & Deken,

2021; Langley, 1999), aiming to challenge and/or confirm our intended contribution to theory (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). Both authors engaged in joint coding sessions, systematically comparing work experiences first within and then across participants. We looked for differences in patterns depending on whether disabilities were innate or acquired, visible or invisible. We also paid attention to any disclosed intersectionalities, exploring how combinations of disability with gender, race or gender nuanced participants' engagement in body dramas and/or their cycles of meaning-making. Last, we contrasted employed and self-employed participants.

Motivated by disjunctive versus conjunctive varieties of process theorizing introduced by Tsoukas (2017), Fachin & Langley (2017), and discussed in detail by Cloutier & Langley (2020), we reconstructed the complete sequences of body dramas and meaning cycles for the 19 of the 24 protagonists from which we had obtained longitudinal accounts. These reconstructions revealed a three-stage progression. At the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdowns, participants focused on suffering, enrolling their bodies in dramas of resistance in response to micro-aggressions. These dramas of suffering exacerbated the stress on the body, further depleting already scarce resources and thus escalating body breakdowns. Body dramas of representation followed, as participants enrolled their bodies in response to micro-affirmations in ways that enabled body breakthroughs. All participants iterated between the two types of body dramas, alternating between cycles of meaning deflation (Table 4) and meaning inflation (Table 5). We modeled the separation of the two types of body dramas primarily as a disjunctive process of meaning-making. We came to appreciate that disjunction loomed larger for the eight self-employed workers, who emphasized dramas of thriving notably sooner, more frequently, and more persistently than the twelve employed workers. During follow-up interviews, especially the exit interviews, as participants looked back over the full arc of their work experiences during the first two years of the COVID-19 global pandemic, they noted how they came to deliberately leverage precious instances of meaning inflation to stave-off, slow down, and purposefully counter-balance the progressive deflation of meaning at work. We thus re-modeled the combination of the two types of body dramas as an occasionally and eventually conjunctive process of meaning-making (Table 6). The conjunction was also greater for the eight self-employed workers, whose dramas of thriving quickly reversed lapses or losses in meaning.

In our findings section, we first introduce and illustrate our abductively elaborated constructs of body dramas and meaning cycles. We then follow key protagonists as they enroll their bodies in three sequential stages of meaning-making: focused, disjunctive, and conjunctive.

## Findings

Histories of paid and unpaid work for our 24 participants and key changes in their jobs and careers (Table 1) foreground the prevalence of suffering and thriving of bodies at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants disclosed a surge in their bodily vulnerability (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021) at the onset of the pandemic. They spoke about underlying conditions that disproportionately increased their direct susceptibility to contracting the virus, explaining how their increased bodily vulnerability added worries about heightened risks of discrimination at work. Hennie described such unwarranted instances of discrimination as “nastiness.” As legitimate requests for additional accommodations given changes in work arrangements had been frequently “held against” or even “used against” her, she felt not only more and more “exhausted,” but also more and more “excluded.”

“I’m currently feeling very exhausted/fatigued and that there is little to look forward to. [...] It’s really hard getting needs met at work through reasonable adjustments. It puts you in a vulnerable position. You have to fight so hard to get them and when you do, they are used against you.” (*Hennie, Diary, January 18, 2021*)

Employed workers reported feeling increasingly “body-stressed.” Some suffered due to work interruptions ranging from furloughs and reduced pay to worries about being “the first to go.” Herby, for example, complained about the deleterious effects of being cut off from co-workers: “Difficult day when there is no one to talk to face to face. [...] Putting people through horrendous isolation without simple human connections isn’t the way to support people, neither trapping them in lives that the local community deem worthless.” (*Herby, Diary, December 1, 2020*). The furlough imposed a hard to bear double negative of isolation and precarity on Herby’s physical and mental health. Other participants suffered because they were assigned grossly unsuitable tasks. Despite his dystonia, Thomas was asked to perform tedious, repetitions, fine motor control tasks. Legally blind Calvin was asked to design posters. Having to grapple with if, when, and especially how they should or could push back against such inappropriate changes took an additional toll on our participants: “It is eating at me more and more with each passing day.” (*Terpmontk, Diary, January 22, 2021*).

Self-employed workers experienced dramatic fluctuations in tasks and income, especially at the onset of the global pandemic. They appreciated how their underlying conditions heightened their vulnerability to COVID-19, which ranged from limited (Wills) to significant (Alan), being moderate, and deemed bearable by the majority of our self-employed participants (Charlie, Claudia, Maya, Lisa, and Timothy). However, self-employed workers had much greater latitude

in adjusting where, when, how, and with whom they worked, and took active steps to adjust their work arrangements to mitigate their bodily vulnerability.

## Body Dramas

Our data structure (Fig. 1) elaborates the theoretical construct of body work (Lawrence et al., 2022) to explain how disabled workers purposefully enrolled their bodies (Creary & Locke, 2022) in dramas of suffering or dramas of thriving.

### Dramas of Suffering

In dramas of suffering, resisting mundane micro-aggressions took so much effort and energy that it often culminated in body breakdowns. Pink noted in her diary: “As soon as I think about work I feel terrible. I keep thinking about requesting a sabbatical, or even just giving up and looking for another job.” She repeatedly admitted, both to herself in the diary entries, and to us in the interviews, to feeling “powerless,” “exhausted,” “burned-out,” often hardly having “the energy” to go on. “I had become exhausted,” she diaried. “I called me Head of School to complain. To start with he didn’t take it seriously and laughed it off. I set him straight that it was completely unacceptable and I am unable to do my work or be able to work without breaks.” (*Pink, Diary, November 15, 2020*) Breakdowns were predictable, even expected.

Pink’s diary entries prefigured that, unless workload abated rather than piled up, her body will break down: “I’m on sick leave for two weeks suffering from stress and anxiety—my job has finally broken me!” (*Pink, Diary, October 5, 2021*). Body breakdowns compelled a variety of recovery actions, ranging from momentary respite to prolonged leaves. All but 2 of the employed participants recorded multiple dramas of suffering, which some described as “never-ending.” Most complained repeatedly about the inappropriate accommodations. Some (Elaine, Maya, Pink) explored job changes. However, only a few (Herby, Kayaviveka) transitioned to different jobs during our study. Employed participants who had effectively juggled multiple part-time jobs before the pandemic, like Thomas, found it increasingly difficult to balance repeatedly changing tasks with their bodily vulnerability.

Although their work was also significantly affected by the lockdown and return to work, self-employed participants experienced much fewer micro-aggressions and, when they did, they quickly devised ways that better suited their respective bodily vulnerabilities. As we describe below, more than half of the eight self-employed disabled workers discovered, acted on, and profited from pandemic-related opportunities (Alan, Charlie, Timothy, and Wills).



**Table 3** How different mind-bodies make meaning at work during the COVID-19 global pandemic

Sensitizing constructs	Emergence of Polarized themes		Abducted constructs	
	Embodied experiences	bodies <i>Suffering</i> at Work	Bodies <i>Thriving</i> at Work	1st Order Internal-izing 2nd Order BODY DRAMAS
Body Work	<p>I feel like giving up. [...] but I won't. I'll slog on because that is just the way I am. I feel like nobody cares, everyone just wants more, more, more and just another thing. I'm knackered I'll go and plan my leave and hopefully that will make things look better. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 17, 2021</i>)</p> <p>I am constantly tired and on edge. [...] I still feel, like many disabled people, that many people don't really understand my condition [...], what isn't understood is how much effort goes into everyday living and how tired I get by the evening. [...] The report underlines that although I can work, the pandemic has disrupted my usual medical regime of treatments. This worsens my condition and has made working more tiring and stressful. Muscles tremor and spasm and morale is low. I have a copy that can go to my CEO and should follow this up with a meeting. People forget if one is working remotely and I am my own worse enemy in trying to minimise my struggle with my chronic condition. It would be easy to be pushed into long-term sick leave and job loss. (<i>Thomas, Diary, December 20, 2020</i>)</p>	<p><b>[Micro-aggressions]</b> I often feel things are out of control and then I am not fit to be doing my job because I don't know what I'm doing. (<i>Pink, Diary, October 21, 2020</i>)</p> <p>I'm getting hassled by my line manager to catch up on the tasks that I left undone. [...] I think it is worse for me because I am dyslexic and I get easily confused and lose things. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 10, 2021</i>)</p> <p>Disabled people get a lot of hate crime, a lot of isolation. Sometimes your voices are not heard. [...] Because of the stigma in our communities, people are not coming forward with their own disabilities. They think they're the problem. [...] That's what the system wants us to feel because they don't want to include us. [...] That's how they hold me back. They've held me back in every which way. (<i>Lisa, Follow-up, February 2021</i>)</p>	<p><b>[Micro-affirmations]</b> I'm probably in contact with [team member] every day or every other day, on social media, online, and stuff like that. I get together with [team member] probably once a fortnight, where we've got some specific projects we're doing, where it is a bit difficult to do it online. You really need to be for 'Look, here's where the hole needs to be for the pin socket.' Although we don't program it in, we generally see each other face-to-face every 2 weeks or something. It's a nice balance, then, to keep things going. [...] The chat bot saves us loads of work. That came from [team member] taking her dog for a walk. She said, 'Oh, I thought, while I was taking the dog for a walk,' because I'd been away for a couple of weeks before, and said to [team member], 'Can you just answer people and tell them how you measure, how you do it, this is all they ask.' [Competitor] had done it, and she said, 'If it's that repetitive, can we not put a chat bot in?' I'd never even thought of it, so we put a chat bot in. That came from [team member] taking the dog for a walk, and I don't think we'd have had a chat bot yet if we were still just sitting here in our old ways. (<i>Wills, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	

Table 3 (continued)

Sensitizing constructs	Emergence of Polarized themes		Abducted constructs	
	Embodied experiences	bodies <i>Suffering</i> at Work	Bodies <i>Thriving</i> at Work	1st Order 2nd Order
		<p><b>[Breakdown points]</b>                      I feel in a constant state of anxiety and struggling to concentrate or focus at work and I am not sleeping again. [...] So much of the other stuff is draining the life out of me! (<i>Pink, Diary, March 30, 2021</i>)                      I just think it leaves you with no dignity, you know, as a disabled person [...], just to get that bloody benefit that then opens the doors to like Access to Work (government employment support scheme) benefits or the blue badge (disabled person's parking permit). (<i>Lisa, Follow-up, February 2021</i>)</p>	<p><b>[Breakthrough points]</b>                      We've definitely seen a change since we've started opening up. I've started visiting limb centres again, and teaching them with covers, 'Look, this is how it fits, and this is how it opens,' all these kinds of things. Although, during the pandemic, and I know we're still technically in the pandemic now, but during the lockdown period, everyone just switched to Zoom and Teams, and you did everything online. You go, 'Oh, this is actually quite good, I don't have to drive there or do anything,' and you can pretty much get it all done online. It's only now, when you're starting to visit people, visit teams and talk to them face-to-face, you realise how much more you get out of those conversations. (<i>Wills, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<p><b>Discovering</b></p>

Table 3 (continued)

Sensitizing constructs	Embodied experiences		Abducted constructs	
	Emergence of Polarized themes bodies <i>Suffering</i> at Work	Bodies <i>Thriving</i> at Work	1st Order	2nd Order
	<p><b>[Resistance]</b> This has got to stop because I just can't go on like this. [...] The reality of my situation [is that] I'm working more than my contracted hours to do my job to a poor level. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 17, 2021</i>) So I've now gone to an appeal. [...] I've put in a complaint to the tribunal. [...] I think they need a bloody kick up the backside. [...] Really need some training by service users like us to say: your negligence, the discrimination that you do to us, this is the impact [it has] on our life and on our quality of life. [...] I want bloody justice for what you put me through, the direct discrimination that you've done has destroyed my life. So that's why I think I have to go through that complaint again. (<i>Lisa, Follow-up, February 2021</i>)</p>	<p><b>[Representation]</b> I realized [...] that what were doing is just working every day. Nobody was thinking about new ideas and bringing stuff forward, because nobody had time. [...] I've forced everybody-, I wouldn't say forced, because everyone was really wanting to do it, that everybody takes a 10.30 coffee break in the morning. Sometimes, we do it remotely. Usually we listen to Popmaster on the radio, and we have a 15, 20-min break. Turn the phones off, don't look at emails, don't catch up on other stuff, and just have a chat about the way things are going. Also, everybody, and they charge me for it, takes an hour a week to go do something that's not work. Go take the dog for a walk, or something, during the day, for an hour. That's when you get your thoughts. All I ask from them is, when they've done that, and they've done their hour a week, we've got a chat room, they put some little notes about what they thought about during that hour's talk. [...] To be honest, I started doing that because I realised I was just doing meetings back-to-back-to-back and not thinking about anything. I thought, 'Well, if I can do it, then let's put it into the whole team.' Now, everyone does it. (<i>Wills, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<b>Enrolling</b>	

Table 3 (continued)

Sensitizing constructs	Embodied experiences	Emergence of Polarized themes		Abducted constructs	
		bodies <i>Suffering</i> at Work	Bodies <i>Thriving</i> at Work	1st Order	2nd Order
Meaning-making	<p>One of my colleagues the other week said she felt like she wasn't doing anything well. Lots of us feel like that and it is really difficult when you have that feeling. (<i>Pink, Diary, March 13, 2021</i>)</p> <p>I'm getting zero job satisfaction because I feel like I'm doing everything badly. I used to take pride in doing a good job, now I just have to accept that I make things less bad and that is the best I can hope for. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 17, 2021</i>)</p> <p>This is the direct discrimination that I'm fed up of. The attitude towards us disabled woman of color. That's the institutional racism part. It's just so horrendous. [...] My quality of life has been [...] a lot worse than it used to be. And it's because of their emotional, psychological bullying practice that they've done to me by stopping Access to Work (government employment support scheme), stopping me from earning my financial means to keep myself. (<i>Lisa, Follow-up, February 2021</i>)</p> <p>After 13 or more weeks of lockdown and one visit into work this last week it feels as though there is more light at the end of the tunnel. [...] Also I am now on the Trustee board of [NGO3], the charity that helps people with my disability. Quite an achievement and one I can be proud of. (<i>Thomas, Diary, April 3, 2021</i>)</p> <p>After interviews and an induction in April, DBS check, skills audit, first meeting, decent photograph of myself and profile I will appear shortly as a Trustee in person on the [NGO3] website! (<i>Thomas, Diary, June 5, 2021</i>)</p> <p>For me the work is important as it gives me purpose and the Trusteeship is a new venture. (<i>Thomas, Diary, July 23, 2021</i>)</p> <p>I don't know if we can ever actually truly accomplish true inclusion. If I'm being really honest, I don't think we can. I think we could probably get 80 to 90% of the way there, but there's always going to be that stigma, that, you know, just people don't listen or take any notice of it. [...] The idea is that when they go into employment and they're thinking of business solutions and ideas for the future, that they naturally think about accessibility subconsciously. At the moment, we really have to think about it. (<i>Alan, Interview, May 2021</i>)</p>	<p>[Anomalies] It is not recognised that this is a particularly onerous task for me because I am dyslexic. (<i>Pink, Diary, October 21, 2020</i>)</p>	<p>[Assets] I'm 27 years old. I've got spinal muscular atrophy, [...] it's a neurological condition effectively where the muscles get weaker. [...] Then in 2017 set up my own business, providing specialist, uh, equipment to other wheelchair users who are unable to basically independently self transfer in and out of their chair. [...] So, actually being a disabled entrepreneur, um, is really helpful because you can effectively fit your work around your disability rather than you, you know, fitting around your employer. [...] Um, and I think the fact that we provide products to other disabled customers is really nice. (<i>Alan, Interview, May 2021</i>)</p>	<p><b>Pivoting on mind-body differences</b></p>	<p><b>Meaning cycles</b></p>

Table 3 (continued)

Sensitizing constructs	Embodied experiences		Abducted constructs	
	Emergence of Polarized themes bodies <i>Suffering</i> at Work	Bodies <i>Thriving</i> at Work	1st Order	2nd Order
	<p><b>[Fitting In]</b> I don't feel I can get the right support from people properly just now. [...] I really need [someone] to help me through. [...] I want someone to notice that I'm not ok, I want a hug and a cry. (<i>Pink, Diary, March 30, 2021</i>)</p> <p>Colleagues have started asking me if I am ok on a regular basis. What I hear in their voice is concern that I'm not ok mixed with frustration that they are completely helpless and unable to provide support. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 17, 2021</i>)</p> <p>My muscular pulling tremor is very evident in zoom meetings so the disability is clear, which leads to other staff trying to help out but in doing so making me feel that they are taking medical view not really discussing things directly with me. (<i>Thomas, Diary, March 7, 2021</i>)</p> <p>In each job I'm the only one who seems to want to go in and is encouraged to go in. Others stay away except for the brave few. [...] I go in with my Access to Work taxi and work alone there. [...] The Access to Work taxis and supportive chairs at work help. (<i>Thomas, Diary, November 22, 2020</i>)</p>	<p><b>[Standing Out]</b> What [COVID-19] enabled us to do, is because we weren't traveling and wasting all that time, you know, traveling up and down the motorways in the UK and going to meetings here and there, it, all of a sudden gave you all of these hours in the day to come up with new ideas. It's easier for me to work at home, it takes less energy. And it just gives me more time in the day, certainly for personal care and stuff like that. [...] Just because you are disabled, it doesn't mean you should work from home [exclusively]. You should absolutely be able to go into the workplace and meet colleagues and interact like everyone else. [...] Actually, that balance is really, really good for someone like me because it saves the traveling. [...] If you look at it from a disability point of view, actually remote working is really, really good. [...] The benefit for disabled people is huge because obviously technology has enabled us to integrate more with society and, you know, open opportunities to employment that we wouldn't have had otherwise without technology. [...] I think there's been loads of benefits</p> <p>(<i>Alan, Interview, May 2021</i>)</p>	<p><b>Normative-meaning-making</b></p>	



Table 3 (continued)

Sensitizing constructs	Embodied experiences	Emergence of Polarized themes		Abducted constructs	
		bodies <i>Suffering</i> at Work	Bodies <i>Thriving</i> at Work	1st Order	2nd Order
		<p><b>[Leveling norms]</b> I'm forever behind, forever failing to do things and worried that I'm not even managing to achieve good enough! (<i>Pink, Diary, November 15, 2020</i>) This has got to stop because I just can't go on like this. [...] The reality of my situation [is that] I'm working more than my contracted hours to do my job to a poor level. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 17, 2021</i>) I've written a report for them about just how bad London was because I don't ever want anybody to experience that. (<i>Timothy, Exit Interview, September 2022</i>)</p>	<p><b>[Leveraging norms]</b> We were approached last year, as well, by [the oldest manufacturer]. They're just celebrating 100 years old. They were formed in 1921. We've signed an agreement with them, so they exclusively sell our product into [national provider], which means that any amputee in the UK can now just go into their limb centre and say, 'I want my leg finished in a [brand] cover,' which is fantastic for us. About 80% of our business, now, is supplying the [national provider] direct. We've gone from doing a few covers a week to pallets per week, now, into the [national provider]. It certainly keeps us busy. (<i>Wills, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<b>Counter-normative meaning-making</b>	

After experiencing body breakdowns both employed and self-employed participants re-prioritized their bodily vulnerability over work. Pink vividly described the efforts she was taking to prevent future body breakdowns.

“I know I’m not alone in having taken a massive negative hit on my mental health over the past few months. [...] I’m feeling much better already, and I still have another 10 days of my 2 weeks. But I’m still suffering from anxiety. [...] I am concerned about what happens after my 2 weeks—actually the first bit is ok as I’ll just have 1 day of work and then a week’s leave that was already booked. But what happens after that? How do I get back to work without ending up back in the same place again? Actually a worse place because this time I’ll already be on anti-depressants so I’ll be upping the dose each time I return to work and discover I still can’t cope? I guess I’ll return part time and gradually get back to full time, but I’m not sure how that is going to work. I don’t know how I can make it better without the cause being sorted out. I think I was able to do my job ok before because there was enough slack that the extra time I needed because of my disability I could find and still have a bit of time left for myself. Now that I have so much work to do, I can’t fit in the extra stuff that I need because I’m dyslexic. I can no longer find the extra preparation time for meetings, or the extra time to double check things. (*Pink, Diary, October 5, 2021*)

As body breakdowns recurred, Pink described her resistance as increasingly “militant”:

Things need to change, I need people to take account of my needs more when I go back. I am glad that I finally got some help, that I’m having a break, but I fear that this is just the start and to really make things different I now need to start a long battle to force the system to take account of my needs. (*Pink, Diary, October 5, 2021*)

Our participants recognized that abuse, stress, and the resulting fatigue would continue to break their bodies down. They also realized that enrolling their bodies in acts of resistance further depleted their energy, precipitating breakdowns. They chose to perform dramas of suffering to deliberately resist, aware of the additional toll such acts of resistance would take on their bodies.

“In each job I’m the only one who seems to want to go in and is encouraged to go in. Others stay away except for the brave few,” tired and body-stressed Thomas entered in his November 22, 2020 diary. On my own initiative with my part-time job at [NGO1]. [...] At my other part-time work at [NGO2] I have been in occasionally with a member of

staff and done essential work. (*Thomas, Diary, November 22, 2020*). As the pandemic unfolded, both NGOs struggled. Thomas felt that some of leaders' "frustrations over organisational progress had fallen on me and my autistic assistant who has helped me keep the post with his diligent work." The combination of tasks ill suited to his disability and lapses in his pre-approved accommodations, quickly aggravated his bodily vulnerability.

I've continued to go in when I can to both organisations to do office work on a scale nobody else does. Other staff have been in but only very rarely and it almost seems as though because I have access to work taxi journey there and back that I'm the ideal person to do this. In spite of all the fatigue, pain and mobility issues I have not to mention delayed treatments which have made my symptoms worse. Also work at [NGO1] is very data input based and the transfer of information from one system to another is complicated. This exacerbates my condition and I don't have the meetings, recognition and trust that the others seem to have. I need a recharge. (*Thomas, Diary, July 23, 2021*)

Two months later, dramas of suffering intensified so much that Thomas began preparing himself to "be totally leaving a post I've held for 9 years this October. He explained to us this was a compromise hard to make, as he could not know all the consequences. Thomas hoped, however, that renouncing the one part-time job that so taxed his body would "give me more time and energy to work at [NGO2] and may possibly lead to a larger role there and also time to work as a Trustee for the charity organisation who represents people with my disability. (*Thomas, Diary, July 23, 2021*).

In the absence of bodily vulnerability, dramas of suffering were described as "principled."

I'm telling you when you confer with others and what other people are taking, comparing to what I'm supposed to do and the skill that's required to do what I'm doing, yeah, I do get frustrated because it's unfair. Uh, now they asked me to renew my contract. It was for 6 months and now they asked me to renew it for another 6 months. And I did say that I, you know, for them to look at the salary again for me, because that's what they told me. And they didn't take my PhD degree into consideration. What they gave me is for someone with a master's degree. [...] Bottom line they didn't accept. [...] For them, it's like, take it or leave it. And I tried to tell them that I don't want to, they're just, it's not the salary. Like, it's not me who's going to say, you don't want to give me this, I'm going to drop out. That's not me, but it's you. If you want to be fair, you just say you didn't consider my PhD degree in the salary. So you be fair and treat me in a fair way. For the bottom line the

HR even wrote to me that they already set a budget for that. So this cannot change. And, yeah, [I made it very clear that] I am not happy with that. It's not because of the amount, it's the principle. It's the principle! (*Maya, Follow-up, February 24, 2021*)

### Dramas of Thriving

In dramas of thriving, representing micro-affirmations spared effort and replenished energy in ways that yielded occasional body breakthroughs. Both employed and self-employed workers described "wow," "nice," "lovely," "proud" moments as discoveries of surprising resourcefulness in the midst of adversity allowed them to reclaim control over their lived experiences of work during the global pandemic.

It's amazing, it is. And then to start winning awards and being flown out [by foreign royalty], doing stuff at the [national institution]. It was like, wow, you know, this is, this is crazy. This is, it's a wonderful job. [...] I'm going for commissions and shortlisting for stuff. And it's like going for interviews constantly. [...] Everything's interesting. And because I've got to the stage where I can be really choosy about what I do, I don't have to do anything I don't want to anymore. I can kind of say, well, you know... That's, what's really lovely at the moment, I can, I've got complete control. That's all about having control of your life. (*Timothy, Interview, January 2021*)

Perhaps the most extreme example in our sample was Charlie, who had tallied more than one thousand rejections for a period of 10 years pre-pandemic before pitching, founding, and rapidly scaling a social enterprise that capitalized on his disabilities to design more inclusive modalities of program delivery at the peak of the lockdown.

All participants experienced at least one breakthrough. These body breakthroughs ranged from incremental gains in perspective and peace of mind (Moolady; Pink) to radical repositioning of one's overarching purpose (Charlie, Thomas), activities (Alan), and capacities (Timothy). Alan told us about body breakthroughs that inspired new prototypes and new approaches of interacting with consumers: "Actually that was something I'd never thought of before COVID, about actually doing virtual assessments. And so that kind of grew on me. So now if customers want a virtual assessment, we can absolutely give that to them." (*Alan, Interview, May 2021*). Although many aspects of Alan's pre-pandemic venture were no longer viable (his products assisted travel so the travel ban rendered them less useful), Alan emphasized that "it's quite rare that you hear that a business can be in a better position before, you know, after

**Table 4** How body dramas induce meaning deflation cycles

Processes	Illustrative quotes	Self-employed
2nd Order	employed	
1st Order		
<b>BODY DRAMAS</b>		
Internalizing (Micro-aggressions)	I know when I'm moving towards it, but I don't know where the break point should be. I continually try things and then it's like, it's not working. I need to do something else. [...] I'm not sure how to protect myself. [...] Just trying to step back from stuff more, trying to be more aware of how many hours there are in the day and how many of those I'm giving to different things. ( <i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i> )	I haven't passed an interview for a job since night, since 2000. And I've been to loads of interviews and that sticks with you. It sticks with you. I'll answer your question, but it's a bit of, bit of, a bit of, a bit of a difficult one. I'm still trying to get the grip with it really. [...] It makes you feel you are, I'll cry now, but makes you feel you're not, sorry, worth anything. You know, it doesn't make you feel you're worth anything. [...] Sorry, sorry. It's, it is, it is difficult. [...]
<b>Discovering</b> (Breaking points)	Last summer before I went off sick, it was very clear that I was in significant trouble. I was having physical symptoms from the level of stress that I was under. So like my hearing wasn't right. My vision wasn't right. I wasn't sleeping. All those things. So kind of similar to, I dunno if you know the experience, just before you faint. It's kind of similar to that and that whole, your body shutting down kind of way. So that was, you know, the extreme, and I had no choice there, but I had to, had to call it and take a break. And then of course, various people have spoken to me since then and said, well you need to call it before you get to that point in, in future. Um, I'm not sure that I really know where that point is. ( <i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i> )	It's the rejection of all the jobs. It was, is, overwhelming. ( <i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i> ) [Things]ve really improved immensely, in so many ways. And me too, really, because I think the diary really helped me immensely. [...] I did it for 2 months. I did hand write it, [...], and I was surprised. It was very random, I must admit, it wasn't focused. It was quite a random thought at the time, and I thought maybe that's a good thing, random, but it did keep me on track in a way. [...] What it's done, it's opened my mind in some ways to read more, be more structured, look at certain things, how I work, and also I can be quite a rigid person. You probably saw it's been a bit of a journey for me and it hasn't been easy, but I'm trying to be less rigid. ( <i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i> )
<b>Enrolling</b> (Resistance)	When work is just horrible, I'm just like, alright, sod that, I'm going over there [...] for the rest of the day because I'm done with work. [...] Some of the times it was, it's been really useful to escape. [...] I'm very aware that it is about time away from work and, and that's both kind of physically away, but also mentally away. So possibly doing things that are quite immersive, is useful. [...] I might be doing something and then afterwards I'll think, oh, I, you know, that was good, I've not thought about work for however long. ( <i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i> )	I'm reading a few things about writing as a therapy anyway, writing can be therapy with people maybe more so people with trauma, it can be a very useful tool to take things out of your head and offload them onto paper. So, it's made me read more, made me think more, made me keep on a path that I want to go on, and more focused. ( <i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i> )

Table 4 (continued)

Processes		Illustrative quotes	
2nd Order	1st Order	employed	Self-employed
<b>MEANING DEFLATION CYCLE</b>	<b>Normative meaning-making</b> (Fitting in)	<p>I'm on sick leave for two weeks suffering from stress and anxiety—my job has finally broken me! (<i>Pink, Diary, October 5, 2021</i>)</p> <p>I've now been back at work for a week, I feel constantly tired and have a headache most of the time. This is unlike me. I think I am burnt out! [...] I am again feeling that there is a complete lack of consideration for my disability at work. [...] I met a friend for coffee and she asked me about work, immediately I felt terrible again. (<i>Pink, Diary, September 13, 2021</i>)</p> <p>I am a bit unwell at the moment and have tested positive for COVID. [...] I'm stubbornly not doing any work whilst I'm feeling unwell. I think there is an expectation that I should try to work as we are all at home anyway, but I need to rest and recuperate. I think having had some time off with stress it has really focused on making sure I put my well being at a higher priority. (<i>Pink, Diary, November 22, 2021</i>)</p>	<p>I was a very bad state this time, last year and I've turned it around. [...] Having a month off has been, goodness, admittedly I had COVID for the first 2 weeks I was off, but having that time off was really beneficial. I didn't open my laptop from 31st March until 3rd May, and I've never that in my life. It's a very impressive thing, so I think you need to do that sometimes, not to look at anything. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>
	<b>Pivoting on mind–body differences</b> (Anomalies)	<p>You know, when I took the odd weekend to go away somewhere for a couple of days, run a marathon, I come back and I'm like, ah, yeah, that's, that's good. I feel like me again. I feel like I can achieve things and I can do things. [...] I guess that I need to be better at looking after myself because no one else is gonna do it. So I really need to [...] consider more about a quality of life rather than career trajectory. Possibly dump that career nonsense because what's happening right now is much more important. If I'm not well, then it doesn't matter. Career is secondary. (<i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<p>[My therapist] has helped realign me because of what I've gone through and what I've experienced, which should have never happened or could have been avoided by earlier intervention, but also made me realize that I'm important and I've got to, I need to, start recognizing the importance of me. It's really strengthened my resolve to think, well, actually, yes, I do help other people, but I, I want to, I need to, help myself. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>

Table 4 (continued)

Processes	Illustrative quotes	Self-employed
2nd Order	1st Order	<p>Every time I go [for therapy], that's strengthening. [...] The last session I had with [her], we had five days and we just looked at my work in my life. And it was probably one of the toughest of all the six sessions I've had with her because of it's been such a fundamental thing. That's really brought to the surface really what I need to start doing. [...] Work-wise, it's really made me thinking about work in a different way. So, I was very anti-work and I wanted to change it. [...] I'm approaching it in a very different way. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>
<p><b>Counter-normative meaning-making</b> (Leveling)</p>	<p>Every day I have things which I should be doing and I am having to actively tell myself not to care because I am more important. Whilst this is helping short term I don't think it is long term sustainable. (<i>Pink, Diary, December 2, 2020</i>)</p> <p>I'm not enjoying my job and have been looking around to see what else is available. I doubt I will actually leave, but the chance that I'll just move on is growing. (<i>Pink, Diary, August 26, 2021</i>)</p> <p>I've stepped back from work a bit in the last couple of weeks and feel better for it. Whilst it is good that I'm promoting my well-being I struggle with the fact the only way to achieve it is to decide not to care about aspects of my job. (<i>Pink, Diary, December 2, 2020</i>)</p> <p>I've learned and, and that I'm not invincible. Um, you know, I, I, I don't think I've ever really before thought about how resilient am I. [...] Never before have I really been in this kind of situation where I can't cope with my workload. [...] Suddenly I'm like actually I'm having to push back, because before I guess my workload was always such that I could just absorb a little bit more and a little bit more. And of course we've eventually got to, actually no it's, it's full up now. (<i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	



**Table 5** How body dramas induce meaning inflation cycles

Processes	1st Order	Illustrative quotes	Self-employed
2nd Order	Internalizing (Micro-affirmations)	employed	
Body dramas	Internalizing (Micro-affirmations)	<p>When I was in my data collection phase, the actual talking to students was really lovely, even though several of them had had really traumatic experiences that had interrupted their studies. Just their enthusiasm for learning and them being so grateful for the support that they'd got, but also they were grateful to talk to me about their experiences as well. It was lovely to be able to talk to them. I offered some of them support within the interview as well. That was really nice, I think because I was actively helping someone, they were interesting because they were a new person from outside my bubble. (<i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p> <p>I liked being on strike recently because whilst there was on strike there were no demands on me. When you go on leave, when you come back, there's a whole load of work that's built up whilst you're on leave. Because you know, enough people were on strike that that work didn't build up and I felt completely okay about just dumping it when it came back, cuz I was just like, well that's stuff that should have happened whilst I was on strike therefore it won't happen full stop. So that, that was good timing. (<i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<p>I have a new support worker. Who's brilliant. Um, she's a mentor and coach to other businesses, so she's sort of helping me empower me, I suppose. She's empowering me to be, to do my, my job well, which is a good thing. And, I'm achieving all the things I'm setting out to achieve. [...] So that was really, I think we sort of broke through something which is great. [...] I'm proud of that, really. [...] She strengthened my thinking of how I want to define work. [...] Well, maybe I could find work with the skills I've got. [...]</p> <p>I don't always see my strength. She is helping me see my strengths. She's trying to strengthen my strengths so the other bits deplete and they don't overwhelm me. That's the idea. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p> <p>[My therapist] is trying to make me feel that I actually have a lot to offer because of what I've done. [...] I've started and run a business by myself. That's a big thing, it's a big achievement, isn't it? I suppose to. I found all the funding myself. That's a big achievement. I've established relationships with lots of people. That's a big achievement. I've written, you know, grant bids by myself. [...]</p> <p>I've just got on with it and I've achieved tonnes. I mean, I can't describe how much I've achieved, really. Really think about it, I think, 'Oh, my goodness, we've done that, it's amazing.' You don't always reflect on yourself, you just do it, you know? So, I'm trying to learn to reflect on what I have achieved, because sometimes I will overlook that. It's important to stop and think, 'Actually, I have achieved this and I've done this, this, and this.' So, I'm trying to learn to step back and understand what I have achieved. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>
	Discovering (Breakthrough points)		

Table 5 (continued)

Processes		Illustrative quotes
2nd Order	1st Order	employed / Self-employed
	Enrolling (Representing)	<p>It was really useful time where I made, I felt like I made significant progress in my research. That was nice. [...] I think also because it's a long term investment, it feels like, oh, I'm doing something that's for, for the future and the future a long way ahead. So that's quite quite positive in, in that... Yeah, I'm preparing something for the future, possibly opening opportunities in the future. And actually when I think about it and reflect back on other periods where I found work really hard, actually what I always do in a difficult period of work is go and collect qualifications. [...] I just get my CV and go, right where's the holes, how can I make myself as best prepared as possible for moving on? Now it doesn't necessarily mean that I will move on, but I feel like I'm, I've kind of got all this stuff. And that reflection back to go, oh yeah, I am valuable because I've got all these things that I offer. (Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022)</p>
Meaning inflation cycle (Standing out)	Normative meaning-making (Standing out)	<p>I hang onto I guess the mission statement and the fact that we change student's lives and I desperately hang onto that and hope that the other stuff will change and it will get better. I think I still fundamentally like helping people, so when people come I try to pick out the impact things that I can do. [...] Actually, it was quite a nice thing for me to be dealing with because I'm like 'right, I can get hold of this one, I know what the problem is, I know what I'm going to do'. I can go through the process and it's quite clear what I'm doing with that. [...] So, I'm going and picking out quite a few of the simple problems, if there's something easy to do I'm like great, I can do that and then feel like I've achieved something and feel like I've helped someone and someone says thank you and that's nice. (Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022)</p>
	Pivoting on mind-body differences (Assets)	<p>The ADHD doesn't go away, but it's definitely given me more purpose. Does that make sense? I don't know. Makes sense or not. It sort of, it's made me realize I probably can do more than I realized cuz it hasn't been easy journey, so I'm achieving more than I've felt I can. And that, really, it's been a good thing. I can't say more than that really. (Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022)</p>

Table 5 (continued)

Processes	Illustrative quotes	
2nd Order	1st Order	Self-employed
	<p><i>Counter-normative meaning-making (Leveraging)</i></p> <p>I understand more about the value of work and how I value work, but also how work values me and the importance of work valuing me. So when I feel valued, then everything's much better. [...] It's about value, but also about impact. If I can see the impact of my work [...] that it's positive then, well then I guess I value it more and therefore it, it all just works much better. And so part of the problem I've got is where I don't have the resources to do the work well, then I value it less. [...] Whereas if I'm, if it's going well, then I think, ah, yes, actually this is, this is important and it's useful and I should keep going. (<i>Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<p>I got feedback and I felt, yeah, I felt very proud that I've worked really hard to ensure those children who struggle, who who've had, you know, maybe not get the chances that some people get a chance to try new things. I'm proud of that. [...] I'm setting the ball rolling there, which is quite amazing, really. And it's made me, um, really content. That's really what I want to aim for. So that's the one. That's a great, that's a good thing. I'm still on track with that. [...] I've achieved that by myself, on my own, through my steadfastness of believing in what I do. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>

lockdown than what they were before. [...] We've now got a whole set of new products coming out of COVID than what we did at the beginning.” (*Alan, Interview, May 2021*).

### Meaning Cycles

Dramas of suffering and thriving not only rendered mind–body differences visible to oneself and others at work, but also instigated meaning-making. Participants made meaning of their mind–body differences by referencing norms that influenced whether they fit in—or didn’t.

The data structure in Fig. 1 differentiates between normative and counter-normative meaning-making. Under the construct of normative meaning-making we grouped those instances of meaning-making at work when participants grappled with how established norms impacted them, both absolutely and relatively to co-workers. The polar opposite construct of counter-normative meaning-making encompassed those instances of meaning-making when participants explicitly challenged (i.e., pushed-against) existing norms, labeling some of these norms ableist, and taking steps to educate others and advocate for greater inclusion. Single episodes could include both normative and counter-normative meaning-making, as participants distinguished between the norms they would challenge. For example, Lisa worked with mothers to secure her own designation, while pushing for changes in norms to allow better support for her self-employment activities. She described her counter-normative meaning-making as an overdue “bloody kick on the back side” (*Lisa, Follow-up, February 19, 2021*). Lisa further explained that counter-normative meaning-making led her to escalation of complaints, appeals, and litigation to reclaim her rights. As part of her self-employment she also made counter-normative meaning for others who had been similarly silenced by the system yet should fight for dignity and inclusion.

Normative and counter-normative meaning-making differed depending on how participants related to their own bodies—either as anomalies that stood out among co-workers and had to be leveled or as assets participants felt they could leverage further. Thomas explained: “Working alone with only zoom meetings or telephone calls my disability isn't really given much room by fellow workers and I don't help myself by not openly mentioning it much.” (*Thomas, Diary, November 26, 2021*). He tried to downplay the ways in which his disability made him stand out. In stark contrast, Alan, Charlie, Lisa, and Timothy referenced their disabled bodies as assets that allowed them to emphatically respond to the needs of key stakeholders. Timothy welcomed the “limelight and new challenges” of the lockdown and hoped that “the imposition will be worth it with lots of new commissions, due to the attention.” (*Timothy, Diary, March 26, 2021*) Jammaers & Ybema (2022) showed that disabled

**Table 6** From disjunctive to conjunctive meaning-making cycles

Participant	Meaning-making cycles	
	Disjunctive	Conjunctive
Employed	<p>She came into work about ten to eight or half-past seven, and found I was in there. And then, she asked me to leave [...] I said, 'No, I'm rota'd in.' So, she got a bit upset about that she did and then she had to disappear. So, yes, well, to be fair, that's the first time we've had any strife. [...] I've tried to solve the relationship with people there but that hasn't really worked very well. [...] It hasn't been all that successful so far. [...] That's probably the biggest strain at work. [...] The person who came on early Friday, I must admit, she didn't want to work with me on Friday morning. So, she just disappeared somewhere. [...] But again, you can live without it. [...] But to be fair, is there anger inside me telling me a bit more than what happened? To be honest, probably yes, there's probably more anger and frustration there probably. Because obviously, he'd been forced to fess up to stuff in many ways, or even forced to do stuff. So, that's obviously made you have a think and catch up a bit more than he had in the past. So, yes, you're different to where you were two years ago. (<i>Herby, Exit Interview, April 2022</i>)</p> <p>I'm actually working 5 days a week now. So, I work. Well, basically, I work 2 days in the kitchen, which is the mornings, early mornings, which lasts until about ten o'clock in the morning. I do all day Sunday in the maintenance team, and most of the time Mondays as well, and tomorrow I'll be in there in the morning again. So, I'm doing, well, put it this way, so far touch wood, I have been able to earn enough to pay my stamp. So, that's been a bonus, so it means that my State Pension is being paid. So, that's a bonus at moment. Yes, because my State Pension, well, if I keep on paying my stamp, it'll be £175.60 for my State Pension at the moment, well, that's the forecast. At the moment, it's £133 a month. But by 64, £185. So, yes, so that's obviously work as well. [...] I must admit, to be honest with you, I've been fairly lucky with work because I got 0 points on my PIP assessment again last week. So, obviously, my only income is still work at the moment. So, yes, so, work has been basically, kind of been a lifesaver really, at the moment, because at least I can survive at the moment. (<i>Herby, Exit Interview, April 2022</i>)</p>	<p>I'm still here, so I must be good, isn't it, just about. Well, okay, yes, just about alright. [...] I think I'm just about ticking by. [...] Been working [...], I've just been really trying to work really, doing my best staying in the workplace, so that's been good, really. [...] I've been doing a bit more on the rowing machine a bit more at work, so my muscles are a bit harder than they were. [...] I'm stronger than I probably was. [...] You certainly feel more. The loneliness aspects I probably feel much more now. [...] Yes, so probably you need people more than you probably thought you would probably need. I'm probably stronger than they probably are. (<i>Herby, Exit Interview, April 2022</i>)</p> <p>"I still enjoy stuff. [...] I was asked by [NGO] if I would be willing to do a comic strip, which I did, and that's been put across to them as I speak. So I got paid for doing that. Yes, I got paid for doing that. What else have I been doing? I'll possibly be speaking at a UN event because I put some stuff towards a report what was done back in 2016–17. So, I've been asked to possibly speak, to be at that, probably, the launch event for the United Nations. [...] I've done a little poem about Cornwall. [...] So, they actually came on to one of my support groups, what I occasionally attended and they basically fed into that as well. Some of the artwork that I did for that meeting has actually been put on to the report itself. I wanted to keep a first contribution to that. So, that's what I've basically done because I sent the report in about Cornwall and I got an email back saying, 'Would you be willing to present that possibly when we do another launch of it,' and I said, 'Yes.' So, if that goes ahead, I'll be hopefully be doing that. [...]</p> <p>It's been nice once again to represent Cornwall as I always do. [...] Cornwall hates people being put in things like this because I know I will tell the truth, basically. That's the problem. So, they can't hide anything when I do stuff like this. They don't like it very much. Never mind, I do it anyhow. I'm too old to change now, so bugger it. (<i>Herby, Exit Interview, April 2022</i>)</p>

**Table 6** (continued)

Participant	Meaning-making cycles	
	Disjunctive	Conjunctive
Self-employed	<p>I suffer from social anxiety dreadfully, but we were given money to do classes online, which I never really wanted. I'm not a YouTuber, I don't even do social media, I don't even do Facebook, and we had to do these classes online, a bit like you see Jamie Oliver, all these people do them. That's not me and it's in a road I don't want to take. To be honest with you, I'm not interested. I'm not interested in social media, I'm not interested in all these upping yourself up. [...] I didn't like people who didn't have their camera on or their mic on because I learned physically, I teach physically, and you see a lot of people struggle, how they are, when you physically are more aware of them. I didn't like that bit. Also, I didn't like working on my own. I do need someone to motivate me, so I have a support worker twice a week and I have 10 h, 5 h on a Monday and 5 h on a Thursday, and she's a physical presence. She's not there to hold my hand, it's just having that presence, I feel more accountable, I get my work done. [...] Whereas on my own, I'm not away with the fairies but my mind does wander a lot. We couldn't do much about that in the pandemic, unfortunately, that was the frustration. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p> <p>Having the funding from the Foundation was positive. We've just opened a community kitchen, that's a positive thing. It's really interesting. So, when I had people around me, what's really fascinating, and I'm also really interested about this, is that when I did have people around me to try and get the kitchen open, I had to go back and forth getting people. Whereas now, I haven't got those people around me, I've got to open on my own. I'm still very diligent. I've got to show that in my business. For example, if I do banking, I get someone to watch me do it. So, I'm very careful. But, actually, without those other peoples' distraction, working with another partner, not in my business, but the partner in this kitchen who owns another business, the two of us have now achieved something that we weren't achieving with other people around us. Because they were saying, 'You can't do this, you can't do that,' and it was actually hard work going back and forth. We've still got people who want to support us, so that's a very positive thing. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>	<p>My support worker, she knows what I want to do, and she says that's not a problem because that's what happens in life. You want to change and you want to move on, so I've set myself a goal of just under 3 years to do that, so it's all pretty positive. [...] You've also made me want to do something I've wanted to do since I was a young man, so that's quite nice. So thank you for your patience and pushing me in what I want to do in the future. That's a good thing. [...] I'm working through stuff and I'm reading and planning and, um, still want to go to university. As I mentioned in the last of our meetings, I had conversations with different people from different universities. [...] You know, you want to change and you need to move on. And so [...] I've set myself a goal of three years or just under three years to do that. So, yeah, so it's all been pretty positive. [...] One of the goals, the last thing you asked me, when I spoke to you last time, was if you had a genie's lamp. So, I'm setting the ball rolling there, which is quite amazing, really, and it's made me really cement, that's really what I want to aim for. So, that's one. That's a good thing. And I'm still on track with it. I'm connecting with people and I've had conversations. I'm looking at doing some courses. I haven't ever studied in this sort of depth before, but it's strengthened my resolve to know what I want to do in the future, really, and what I want to achieve. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p> <p>This book I'm reading, called Emotional Agility, you're just re-framing your negative thoughts to a more positive approach. Maybe just little tweaks here and there makes you feel better about what you do. They're not big things but they're little tweaks and that's what I'm trying to do. I'm also trying to be more aware of how I put myself across to people. I'm also pushing myself out of my comfort zone anyway, but I do anyway, but it also makes you realize I know what I want to do. (<i>Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022</i>)</p>

entrepreneurs often pivoted on oddity to craft opportunity. Timothy explained how he came to think of his odd, anomalous body as an asset (Jammaers & Williams, 2021): "My grumpiness is a superpower cause you know, if you're in pain and you're knackered, constantly. [...] So I think you've got to be real, but I do try and do things that sort of have an impact for other disabled people. And the only way that things will improve is by grumpy people like me is sort of talking about them and being honest. [My grumpiness]

became like a super power really." (*Timothy, Interview, January 2021*).

We further noticed that both meaning-making cycles depended on whether workers referenced their bodies as anomalies or assets. In our study, self-employed workers were much more likely than employed workers to refer to their own bodies as assets than anomalies. However, both employed and self-employed workers identified specific



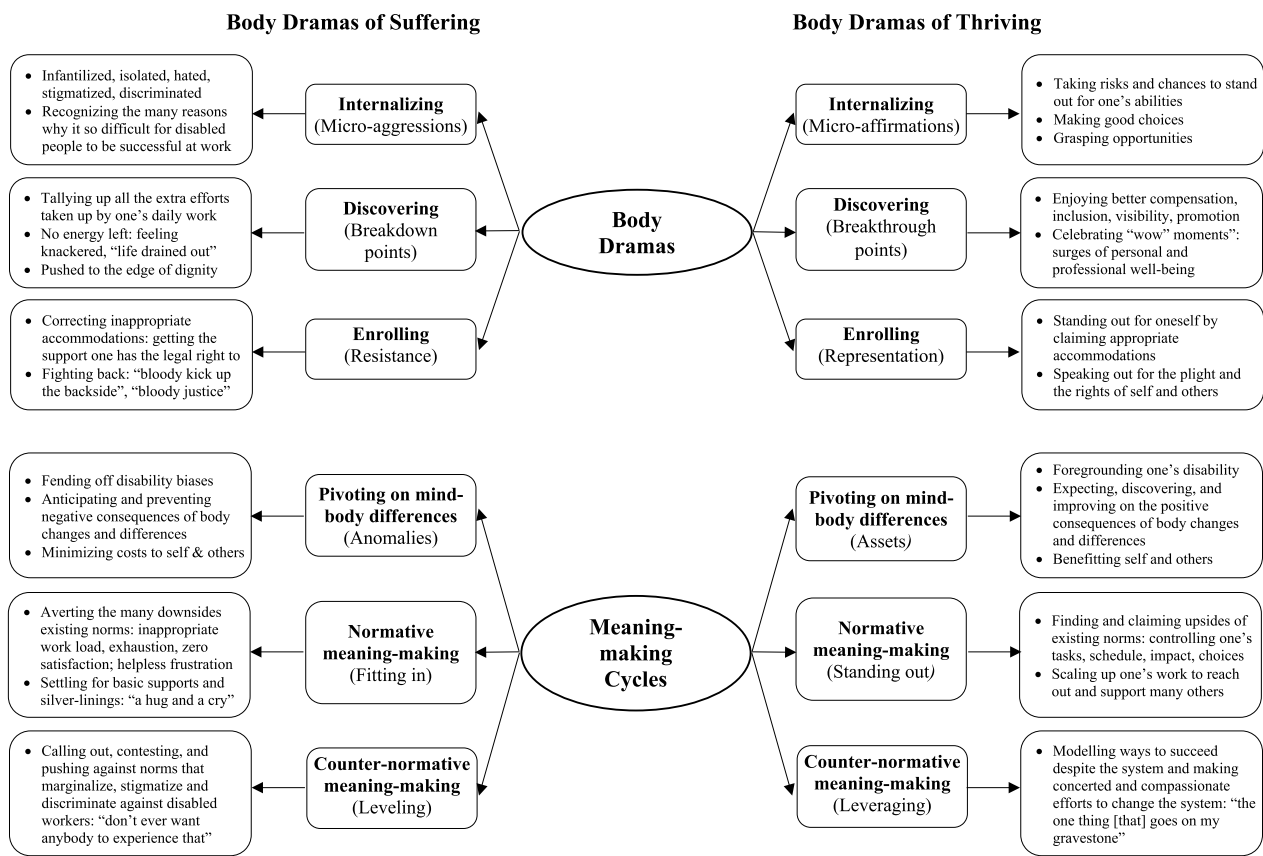


Fig. 1 Data structure

ways in which leveraging their mind–body differences as assets could help themselves, and also many others.

For example, Maya’s job involved the development of modules for inclusive education. “These modules have the potential to bring change [...] due to the limited available related materials.” (Maya, *Diary*, January 15, 2021) She was especially excited about “the opportunity to bring the change to the way inclusion or inclusion and education is applied in the middle East and North Africa region.” (Maya, Follow-up, February 24, 2021) Maya told us that “the work I was involved in was very enjoyable and stretching, which would definitely make such an opportunity be greatly missed.” Maya countered the unfair treatment during the renewal of her contract (which she felt tarnished the importance of her work) not only by reminding herself of her degree, principles, and long-term opportunities but also by emphasizing the further impact she could keep having on others. Several months later, Maya noted in her diary that she had applied for a similar task but in an organization where she would fit in better without diminishing her impact: “Last week, I have received an invitation to apply for a very similar role to what I have been doing internationally for a while now. The only difference is that the post is based in the UK. I am very excited about this opportunity [...]. I have applied for

it. Currently I am awaiting to see if I'd be shortlisted and whether I'd get it.” (Maya, *Diary*, June 20, 2021).

### Meaning Deflation Cycles

When our participants struggled to morally fit into their normative context, dramas of suffering exacerbated their bodily vulnerability. Enrolling their bodies in repeated acts of resistance, they experienced “isolation” (Herby), “paralysis” (Moolady), “frustration” (Wills), “devaluation” (Hennie), even “despondence, shame and guilt” (Annmarie). Annmarie described feeling “stupid or lazy,” “not trying hard enough,” “not [being] good enough.” She even began second guessing whether she was perhaps “making too much of a fuss” at work. Annmarie explained to us that she had come to “internalize ableism.”

Workers coped with unwarranted interruptions, inappropriate accommodations, and “incredibly tiring” tasks by making meaning of their suffering. “This morning I filmed a piece for the [Network] and spoke about the effects of lockdown on me...it pretty much came down to me being able to cope, with almost anything, if I can continue making art, and making strides forward in my creative practice. Even though I am living like a prisoner, behind bars, it doesn't seem to be

stopping me from doing the thing I love.” (*Timothy, Diary, January 27, 2021*).

Pink coped with “just hard staff” by noticing and documenting the disproportionate toll norms had been taking on herself and her colleagues who were all overtly suffering at work.

There's been a lot of just hard stuff. My own mental health hasn't been great and a lot of other people's hasn't been great. For example, last week I had three conversations with different colleagues about how often they cry at work. And if I think back, you know, to a couple of years ago, someone telling me that they'd cried at work at all, I would've considered a crisis and now people are saying, oh, well, I'm crying a bit less at work now. Like that's a good thing, which is obviously good that they're getting a bit better, but it's still actually, that's what we use to consider crisis. And it's, it's uncomfortable that that's no longer crisis, that's acceptable. (*Pink, Interview, May 2021*)

Grappling with the inappropriateness or existing norms kept deflating meaning. Such normative meaning-making underscores discrimination and the toll it took on workers' bodies.

I find myself overthinking everything, which isn't healthy but I can't seem to stop the cycle. I'm almost paralysed by indecision! I've spoken to my line managers about this. [...] I find myself trying to work out what value I am being in my role and I am not sure that's helpful either! (*Moolady, Diary, April 12, 2021*)

Most of our participants actively tried to challenge and change norms. Such counter-normative meaning-making was also deflationary when attempts were deemed to be risky, or repeatedly refuted despite their merits. Hennie, for example, was “biding her time,” trying to “be in a calm state” until she could confront discrimination.

I will be addressing [repeated dismissals of her requests for accommodation] with the person who said it at some point. Saying, you know, I'm entitled to this by law and using it as a sort of argument against something is not really what that's there for. That actually could be seen as disability discrimination. I'd want to do that calmly and in a way that isn't going to be completely accusatory, because I don't want to make difficult working relationships, but equally it's not okay to say these things. And it's, it's a hard one. It's a hard one. Because I'm going to have another, you know, something else will come up in a couple of months time and it'll be the same sort of thing. You know, it's, it's a constant battle. Isn't it? (*Hennie, Follow-up, March 2021*)

Hennie's proposed changes had been repeatedly turned down, even when they were offered to help many others. She told us that none of her suggestions had been listened to. “Now they've spent thousands on getting a disability specialist to come in, who's proposed all the same things I've proposed for thousands and thousands of pounds more and still hasn't spoken to the disabled staff about it.” (*Hennie, Follow-up, March 2021*) She felt “devalued” and “frustrated.” Yet she kept persisting in her attempts to challenge existing norms, hanging on to her belief that she will eventually succeed in feeling, and making others like her also feel, “less unsafe” and “less excluded” at work.

I'd hope that the lessons of inclusion [...] would be taken forwards. I think there's a lot of fear and worry about what the future holds for a lot of people. I don't know how we're gonna make people feel safe. [...] Um, yeah, I think we'll have to see and take it slowly, but I hope that we can, we can use some of the things we've done to be more inclusive to a lot of people. (*Hennie, Follow-up, March 2021*)

Once instigated by dramas of suffering, cycles of meaning deflation were hard to break. Respite from meaning deflation cycles was often short-lived. Despite taking multiple leaves to rest and recover, Pink, for example, dreaded the exhaustion accompanying the return to work. Participants continued to recall the toll their bodies took long after the micro-aggressions had stopped as a result of job change (*Kayaviveka*) or organizational exit (*Thomas*). Cycles of meaning deflation could, however, be permanently broken if participants decided to re-prioritize self-care over work and planned out alternative career trajectories with built-in supports. Charlie told us how the stakeholders in his social venture and his therapist buttressed his new trajectory.

### Meaning Inflation Cycles

When disabled workers chose to stand out by breaking free from normative constraints through dramas of thriving, they enrolled their body “assets” in repeated acts of representation, they felt “amazed,” “wow-ed,” “blessed,” “grateful,” and “proud.”

Cause what I do now through this job, it enables me to support people that had less chances than I have. And so a lot of the work that I do is about supporting, telling their stories through art and stuff, which is fantastic really. And you know, they've got a whole lifetime of stories that no one's ever listened to. And I feel very honored that they sort of trust me enough to share them with me and, and give me the sort of, you know, the permission if you like to tell them, on their behalf. (*Timothy, Interview, January 2021*)

When enrolling one's body to represent similarly stigmatized or marginalized others, our participants made new meanings. We refer to such meaning-making as inflation, because the added meaning could be real or fictitious. Alan, Charlie, and Wills leveraged their different mind-bodies to emphatically understand the experiences of others, innovate new products, and engage in highly specific forms of advocacy for policy-change. Wills, for example, was "feeling frustrated that the restrictive NHS system won't allow innovation that is better for patients, employees and cost saving cannot be implemented for years." (*Wills, Diary, April 22, 2021*). He devised alternative processes that quadrupled the impact of his venture. Calvin found meaning in his writing: "I've done more writing since the start of the first lockdown, but as I started the year 2020 ignorant of COVID-19 and with the resolution to write more, it is perhaps not correct to credit the pandemic with my increased output." (*Calvin, Diary, May 19, 2021*) "Fantasizing about earning money from creative writing" sufficed to help Calvin feel "motivated," and "in a good mood." Herby fantasized about inclusion while struggling with isolation during his furlough, then begun drawing and curating his experiences during his furlough. Timothy "thought I'm going to work really hard to make sure that, um, I stay resilient. So I was like open armed with new technologies and um, new experiences and new, new ways of working." (*Timothy, Interview, January 2021*) For Timothy, fantasizing spearheaded, and later materialized, novel creative endeavors. Timothy told us, for example, how hearing heart-wrenching stories about do not resuscitate orders and denials of basic care rekindled him resolve to demonstrate resilience: "That supercharged me really." (*Timothy, Interview, January 2021*).

Enrolling one's body to represent others deepened appreciation of the (potential) utility of mind-body differences. Charlie eloquently put this as "the importance of me." He explained to us how he learned to help himself by helping others: "It has made me read more, made me think more, made me keep on a path that I want to go on and get more focused even though I'm still, I'm still scatterry." (*Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022*) Charlie came to think of ADHD as a good thing because it allowed him to help others who did not have chances and choices feel they can fit in too. Their positive feedback, in turn, "strengthened his resolve" to do even more for others. "I don't think the ADHD goes away," he told us laughing, "but it's definitely given me more purpose. Does that make sense? I don't know. Makes sense or not. It's sort of made me realize I probably can do more than I realized cuz it hasn't been easy journey, so I'm achieving more than I've felt I can. And that, really, it's been a good thing. I can't say more than that really." (*Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022*).

As the travel ban paused demand for his pre-pandemic product lines supporting assisted travel, Alan leveraged his

own experience of living and working with innate dystrophy during the global pandemic to come up with new prototypes and new approaches. Alan did "a lot of good work to kind of capture the community's thoughts on about how they would travel during COVID. [...] And actually it's [brought] quite a lot of useful information to the industry about what they need to do in order to help passengers that want to travel during COVID." (*Alan, Interview, May 2021*) "For me, it was just that, that different way of operating. [...] Actually, that was something I'd never thought of before COVID, about actually doing virtual assessments. And so that kind of grew on me. So now if customers want a virtual assessment, uh, we can absolutely give that to them." (*Alan, Interview, May 2021*) He rapidly developed and virtually tested new offerings, then begun manufacturing them within only a few months, at the peak of the pandemic. "We've now got a whole set of new products, coming out of COVID than what we did at the beginning. [...] It's quite rare that you hear that a business can be in a better position before, you know, after lockdown than what they were before." (*Alan, Interview, May 2021*).

Once instigated by dramas of thriving, cycles of meaning inflation continued to self-amplify, as long as participants did not confront, or could at least effectively counter, micro-aggressions. Several participants returned to university in their 50s, others launched new ventures and charities, many took on important volunteer roles like advocates, ambassadors, or trustees of national organizations or reached out to politicians. There were two notable limits to meaning inflation. First, the contemplation of transitions to new tasks, roles, or jobs (Kauf, Maya, Pink) offered instant inflation by allowing participants to fantasize about the many benefits of experiencing lesser exclusion and/or greater inclusion at work. However, many of these fantasies were later curbed by workplace realities.

Second, unmet expectations, set-backs, and rejections associated with new tasks, roles, or jobs at least temporarily suspended meaning inflation cycles. For example, Calvin confessed: "I've been full of negative anxieties and low spirits at times, for various reasons, but I've also had moments where I think, 'Oh well, it could be a lot worse.' There are a lot of worse jobs I could be doing. And I was hopeful when I applied, because I applied for a couple of jobs but without success." (*Calvin, Exit Interview, May 2022*).

## Meaning-Making Sequences

Body dramas instigated meaning cycles. Dramas of suffering deflated meaning; dramas of thriving inflated it. With the benefit of longitudinal accounts, we reconstructed the disclosed sequences of body dramas and meaning cycles for 19 of the 24 participants in our study. Dramas of suffering remained common among participants. Even those who

experienced multiple body breakthroughs like Alan or Timothy, continued to experience, and resist, micro-aggressions which occasionally reduced their mind–body differences to anomalies rather than assets. Initially, participants cleaved off dramas of thriving from dramas of suffering. This cleavage was particularly salient for self-employed participants, who often juxtaposed their acts of representation, and the associated inflation in meaning at work, with the plight of others who still had to face, and resist, micro-aggressions. However, over time, all 21 participants drew connections between dramas of suffering and thriving, composing meaning through both deflation and inflation rather than one or the other. We introduce these three stages below.

### Disjunctive

Our model in Fig. 2 explains the role of body dramas in meaning-making as an either/or process. When participants enrolled their bodies in dramas of suffering, they deflated meaning (Table 4). When participants enrolled their bodies in dramas of thriving, they inflated meaning (Table 5).

Although participants experienced both types of body dramas over time, meaning-making at a given point in time was dominated by the most recent episodes. This was particularly true when participants had just experienced body breakdowns at work, because the erosion in dignity and self-worth compelled greater awareness and attention to bodily vulnerability. The diaries we solicited eloquently captured the embodied feelings of exhaustion, and the compounding effect of spending precious effort and energy to explain one's exhaustion to co-workers. Many participants recorded in their diaries issues that were too hard to speak about in the open (Rauch & Ansari, 2022). Most also commented on the helpful routine of keeping a diary:

I think quite nice actually doing the diary and you maybe get more down days than up days. To start with I had it in my diary and I was religiously doing it I think each week or each 2 weeks or something and it was very much on a pattern. Just because it's nice to write stuff down, I think it just helps you process it a little bit. [...] The process of writing does make you just pause and collect it together and decide is everything reasonable or not and can I think about how to react differently. (*Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022*)

Diaries disproportionately captured dramas of suffering, especially episodes that recurred. These work experiences were generally understood as negative, through a lens of bias, ill-suited accommodations, and an overall absence of appropriate supports. Specific micro-aggressions were often described in detail, followed by meaning-making. Participants interconnected micro-aggressions across different bosses and organizations, noted changes in work interactions

that, and grappled with how they could make things “less bad” at work.

It probably looks in your data like things have gone seriously downhill but I think it's that I told you less positive things. [...] Now I'm struggling. I think that there have been positive things, there has been stuff around people being grateful for stuff that I've done but it's in the context of despite the environment. So, they don't necessarily shine as positive because there's a lot of doing stuff just about well enough or good enough all things considered, rather than coming away with that intrinsic satisfaction that I've done an excellent job. So, there's a lot of I've made things less bad rather than I've made things good. (*Pink, Exit Interview, May 17, 2022*)

Participants' own dramas of suffering sensitized them to notice the suffering of their co-workers:

Last week I had 3 conversations with different colleagues about how often they cry at work. If I think back to a couple of years ago someone telling me that they'd cried at work at all I would have considered a crisis and now people are saying, 'Well, I'm crying a bit less at work now.' Like that's a good thing, which is obviously good that they're getting a bit better but it's still actually that's what we used to consider crisis and it's uncomfortable that that's no longer a crisis, that's acceptable. [...] There was a colleague in a meeting apparently, I wasn't at the meeting but there was a meeting I think it was end of last week where a colleague just at one point just went, 'Right, I'm done, I'm resigning' and left. They were serious that they were going to resign, [...] Previously I couldn't imagine that kind of thing happening, someone might flounce out of a meeting but they wouldn't resign and flounce out, they would just be 'I'm really annoyed' and then go and calm down but the environment has got so bad that people are just saying no, I can't deal with it anymore. Which is not a good place to be. (*Pink, Exit Interview, May 17, 2022*)

The more participants attended to their own, and others,' suffering, the more their meaning-making cycles focused on body breakdowns. Pink for example described her efforts to cope with and level the effects of norms which had repeatedly “broke her body down”:

It's difficult definitely, just recently I've asked to go to 4 days a week because I've run out of other ideas of things to try basically. So, I've asked to step down from my team leading role and go to 4 days a week which will hopefully reduce my workload, but several colleagues [...are] saying don't expect to just get

that whole 5th day off because it may well not happen, I may end up working 5 days for less pay but that's still better than working 6 days for more pay, if that makes sense. So, something will change, although I haven't got agreement yet for that to actually happen, I think there's a resignation that they can't turn me down because I'll just say well, it's on mental health grounds and under the Disability Act you have to allow this. So, they know they can't turn me down, they tried to dissuade me and I haven't yet got a date for when it will happen. So, there's a lot of pressure on me to find other people to be able to take on my work to enable it to happen but of course other people haven't got the capacity to take on my work. (*Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022*)

Cycles of meaning deflation drew further attention to dramas of suffering, creating a self-reinforcing circuit of anomalous bodies repeatedly breaking down:

I'm finding it difficult to think of positive and exciting things, because the whole thing has just been a bit of a long trudge through stuff, but it is largely around implementing our new contract, and all the change that goes with that, and systems problems. It is also quite demoralising to look at academia in general, the whole reason we've been on strike is because the conditions are so poor, and people are really struggling. Yes, I'm afraid I'm struggling on the positives (laughter), but I'm still here, I'm still doing it. That's got to be a positive, maybe. (*Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022*)

Participants like Herby, Maya, Lisa, Pink, and Thomas also experienced dramas of thriving at work, for example by getting to feel "like me again, I feel like I can achieve things and I can do things" (*Pink, Exit Interview, May 2022*), which induced occasional meaning inflation cycles. However, they remained focused on enacting and interpreting dramas of suffering.

Despite occasional suffering, self-employed participants like Alan, Charlie, Timothy, and Wills focused on dramas of thriving, which rekindled cycles of meaning inflation. Especially when experienced for the first time and/or in contrast to recurrent micro-aggressions, micro-affirmations elevated the body as a key asset. They chose to represent others that had been marginalized or stigmatized due to mind–body differences (Kreiner et al., 2022).

Will's experience as an amputee inspired his business venture:

I went to [vendor], a couple of months ago now, and one of the prosthetists there said, 'To be honest, [Wills], I didn't realise you had one leg. You don't see it.' 'Does it make sense now?' I often thought, how did

you get into this business? It kind of makes sense now. (*Wills, Exit Interview, April 22, 2022*)

Wills had just transitioned from a corporate position to full-time self-employment before the global pandemic. The success of the venture sustained a long cycle of meaning inflation.

I was a bit nervous of how [the venture] was going to go. [...] Yes, and throw a wheelbarrow full of pandemic into that, as well, at the time, just to make things a bit more complex. Since then, we absolutely haven't looked back. Every day has been busier than the day before, every week has been busier than the week before, and every month has been busier than the month before. (*Wills, Exit Interview, April 2022*)

The lockdown changed the way business was done. Wills transitioned sales calls to Zoom and MS Teams, and used virtual channels to market his products and forge global partnerships. Instances of body suffering (overwork, not taking sufficient breaks, lack of interactions among co-workers) occasionally deflated meaning. Like Wills, self-employed participants recognized cycles of meaning deflation and stopped the erosion of meaning quickly and effectively by devising experiments and updating norms to more accurately represent their changing needs.

### Conjunctive

Our model in Fig. 3 explains the role of body dramas in meaning-making as a both/and process. Participants who had previously described dramas of suffering and thriving as separate work experiences transitioned to a conjunctive model of meaning-making by comparing and comparing body breakdowns and breakthrough. The comparison afforded additional meaning-making by connecting suffering and thriving in composite dramas. Participants who had experienced long cycles of meaning inflation, like Alan, Timothy, and Wills, singled out instances when lack of appropriate accommodation and support reduced their body to an anomaly, their many accomplishments notwithstanding. Participants who had been mired in long cycles of meaning deflation, like Herby and Lisa, singled out instances when appropriate accommodation and support elevated their body to an asset. Lisa, for example, explained how she could become self-sufficient by offering in-home assistance to neighbors. These retrospective juxtapositions of suffering and thriving created composite dramas. These composite dramas stabilized reflections on how differently work could make one feel, and how micro-interactions shifted meaning at work from good to bad or vice-versa. Conjunctive meaning-making spotlighted one's worth as the joint product of one's acts of resistance and

acts of representation, fading the micro-interactions that preceded and motivated these acts to the background. It also rebalanced the role of the body in meaning-making by reclaiming its duality, as both an anomaly and an asset, at once fragile and resilient.

Table 6 illustrates the difference between disjunctive and conjunctive meaning-making. Whether or not micro-interactions actually caused thriving or suffering in any given episode was less relevant than the necessity to take into account the possibility of both outcomes. By preparing, and twinning, acts of resistance with acts of representation, conjunctive processes increase the centrality of the body in meaning-making. Whereas disjunctive cycles of meaning depended on whether workers had experienced either micro-aggressions or micro-affirmations, conjunctive cycles of meaning-making hinged on workers' own choices to resist and/or represent their mind-body differences.

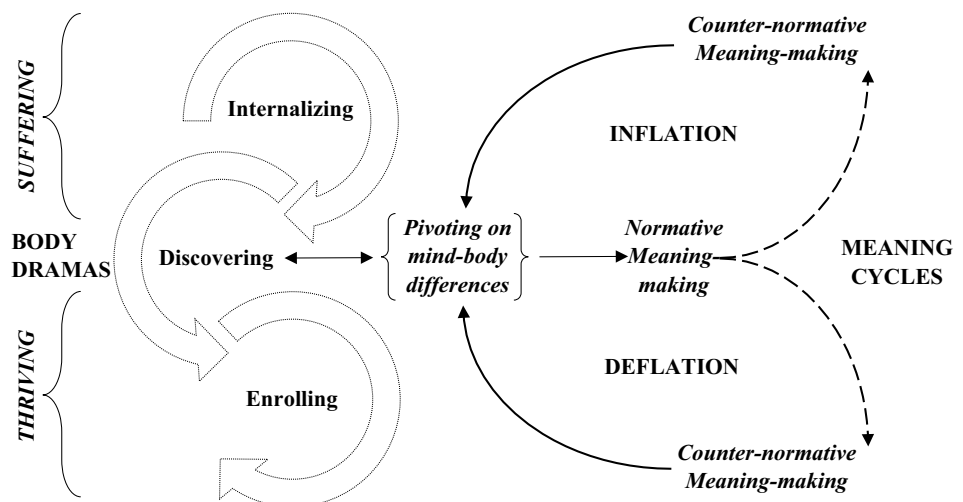
People who are not in the mainstream are approaching me because they can see my skill in nurturing people who have struggled. So, I've had organisations who want to help autistic adults, I've had mental health, I've even had private special needs schools approach me. They want me to help nurture their children through my food classes because they've heard about my approach, my approach is a bit different and I'm very good at adapting to the needs of the, say, special needs children or people who struggle, because I felt that all my life. So, I can adapt. So, that's really interesting, and [the venture] itself is changing as a business to the sort of clients we're going after and want to champion, which is really interesting. I'm still getting money thrown at me and people are coming to me and I'm always amazed at that, so I'm very lucky, really. I feel very blessed at the moment. (*Charlie, Exit Interview, May 2022*)

Once disabled workers had repeatedly experienced, and therefore came to expect the recurrence of, both kinds of dramas, they approached work interactions prepared to at once resist and represent their mind-body differences. Dramas of suffering and thriving were no longer relevant by their presence or absence but rather by the future likelihood of co-occurrence. Body breakdowns or breakthrough were not only disclosed together, but also deliberately juxtaposed in ways that created a dual reference for most work-related decisions. The duality of one's mind-body differences (as both anomaly and asset) helped disabled workers not only better fit into exiting norms, but also stand out and begin to champion alternative norms. Meaning-making at work came to revolve around their own acts of resistance and representation, rather than dramas suffering or the thriving that had originally motivated these acts.

### Discussion

Our study was motivated by the increased attention to the role of the body in meaning-making at work (Heaphy, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2022; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). Our research question focused on mind-body differences, aiming to understand the differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on meaning-making at intersectionalities of disability with age, gender, and race. Disabled workers had been stigmatized (Kreiner et al., 2022), excluded, and discriminated before the global pandemic. However, their awareness of bodily vulnerability (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021) elevated the role of the body in work experiences. We aimed to bridge the literature on body work and meaning-making by applying an ethics of embodiment to understand suffering and thriving at work during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Fig. 2 A disjunctive process model of meaning-making through body dramas





## Contributions to Theory

Our primary contribution is to theory. This study began with an intention to elaborate the literature on meaning-making by exploring the role of the body. Prior studies had noted the centrality of the body at work for well-respected occupations (Christianson, 2019; Sergeeva et al., 2020) as well as for stigmatized and marginalized (Kreiner et al., 2022) and dirty and precarious occupations (Shepherd et al., 2022). However, they did not explore the processes by which bodies made meaning at work. Several studies drew explicit attention to the intensity of suffering during crises, such as career interruptions due to body traumas (Maitlis, 2009) and abusive supervision (Vogel & Bolino, 2020) and during episodes of stress (Michel, 2011), strain (de Rond et al., 2019), and illness (Heaphy, 2017). Yet these studies did not specify how meaning can be made from such suffering. A few of these studies also underscored the possibility of thriving, for example by listening to the body (Michel, 2011) or even elevating the body (Creary & Locke, 2022), prefacing, but also without elaborating the type of body-centric processes of meaning-making at work we model in this paper. Hardly any studies had previously paid explicit attention to the role of disability-related intersectionalities in meaning-making at work, despite recent evidence of the disabled body as an opportunity, capital, and/or resource (Jammaers & Williams, 2021; Jammaers & Ybema, 2022).

## Meaning-Making

Our process models show how suffering and thriving instigate cycles of meaning-making at work. We make three key contributions to meaning-making. First, we abductively elaborate the concept of body dramas as an intersubjective form of body work that depends on the types of micro-interactions with one's co-workers. Body dramas reflect workers' choices on whether to respond to micro-aggressions by enrolling their body in acts of resistance or to respond to micro-affirmations by enrolling their body in acts of representation instead. The concept of body dramas draws attention to the corporeal consequences of micro-interactions. Our participants spoke about how work broke their bodies down or allowed their body differences to breakthrough (Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2019). They also explained how escalation of suffering results in body breakdowns at work while thriving punctuates work with body breakthroughs. While body work is understood as purposeful efforts to deliberately shape one's body to fit organizational norms (Kenny et al., 2019), our concept of body dramas explains why body work begins in the first place (Lawrence et al., 2022). Recent studies argued that bodies are not always engaged at work, but rather require awareness, elevation, and

enrollment (Bigo & Islam, 2022; Creary & Locke, 2022). Our findings show that disabled workers enrolled their bodies in acts of resistance or representation depending on the micro-interactions they experienced at work (Little et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2018).

Second, we abductively show that meaning-making is cyclical. Suffering at work instigates cycles of meaning deflation while thriving at work instigates cycles of meaning inflation. By specifying the role of the suffering or thriving body in meaning-making at work, our study complements prior cognitive, affective, and discursive accounts with somatic accounts (Creary & Locke, 2022). Our findings show that workers rely on their bodies to make meaning of a wide range of work experiences in a nuanced and moral way (Cuilla, 2019; Michelson, 2021). The distinction between a lesser evil and a greater good common across our participants reveals important asymmetries in the inclusion or exclusion of different bodies at work. For example, participants differentiated between lesser exclusion and more inclusion, and between less negative versus more positive work experiences. These body-centric gradients capture not only the toll micro-interactions can take and their cumulative effects, i.e., body breakdowns or breakthroughs, but also the ways in which corporeal experiences shape meaning-making at work. We believe that the concept of meaning cycles is particularly relevant to understanding how workers manage meaning during chronic crises that may radically and persistently disrupt work arrangements, like the COVID-19 global pandemic.

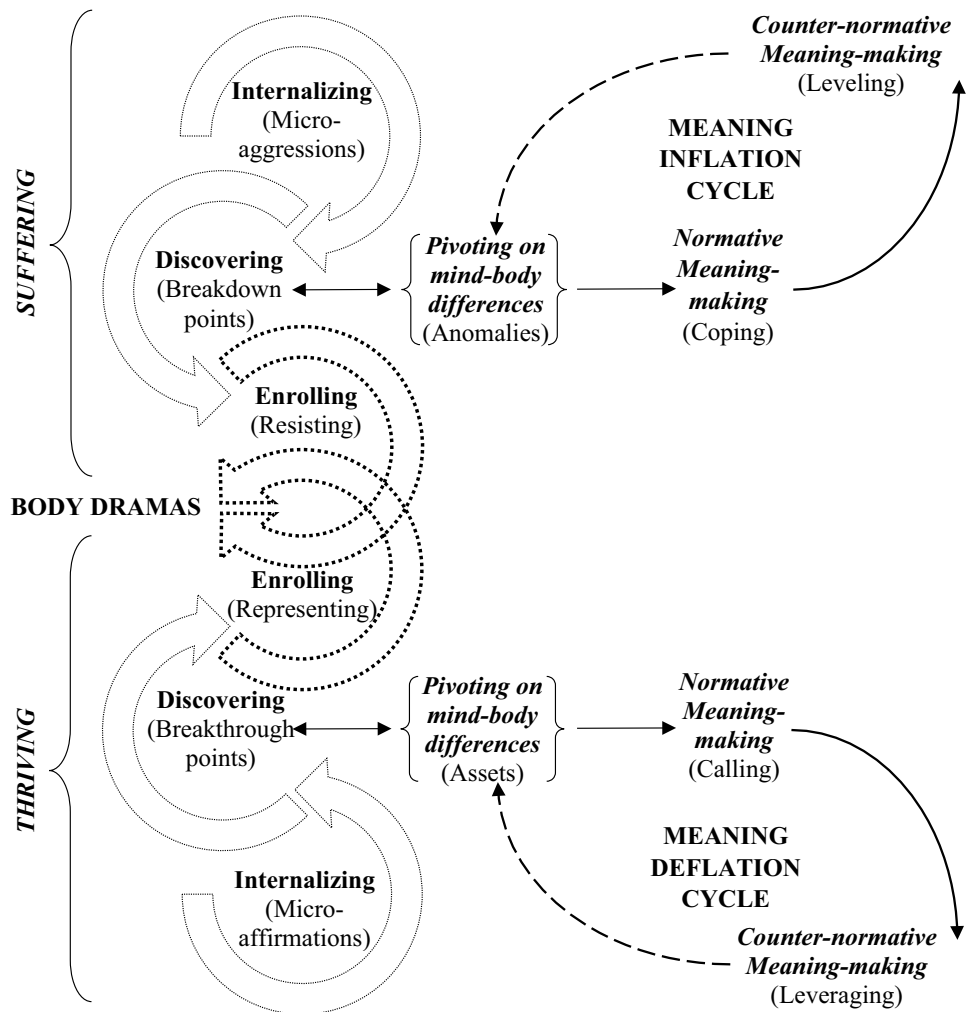
Third, we inductively model the increased centrality of the body in cyclical meaning-making. Two insights emerged empirically at the beginning and respectively the end of our study. In their initial interviews, all participants underscored the dramatic effects of work experiences on their body. They disclosed dramas of either suffering or thriving, and explained the ways in which living through these two types of dramas tended to lock them in separate cycles of meaning-making. Participants made different meaning from dramas of suffering and from dramas of thriving, even these opposite work experiences overlapped in time or interplayed in the execution of key tasks. Largely because one type of drama tended to overshadow the other, each participant focused on a dominant meaning cycle. Although work experiences offered the opposite cycle on occasion, meaning-making quickly reverted back to the dominant cycle.

The separation between the two cycles of meaning was cathartic for the few participants for whom dramas of thriving accelerated cycles of meaning inflation (e.g., Wills, Timothy, Alan). Because self-employed participants also had the means to realize these new meanings by adjusting norms and practices, the benefits of dramas of thriving were also extended to, and enjoyed, by others. Conversely, this was taxing for the majority of participants for whom recurrent

dramas of suffering locked in cycles of meaning deflation. In our sample, locking in cycles of meaning deflation proved especially taxing for employed participants, who did not have the opportunity to redress norms and practices that took a toll on their bodies, dwelling on the escalation of suffering and the predictable consequences of recurring body breakdown. The dominance of cycles of suffering further sensitized participants to the suffering of their co-workers. Their empathic witnessing of others' experiences of suffering at work tended to exacerbate their own bodily vulnerability. Efforts to represent co-workers depleted participants energy which further deflated their expectations of fair treatment (Maya), human rights and dignity (Lisa), even continuance of basic human connection (Herby, Thomas). Participants vividly captured the deleterious effects on their self-worth: work experiences of suffering on repeat not only broke down their bodies but also dampened their outlook on the future of work by raising constant doubts and worries about whether the workplace actually valued them.

Much later in our study, and especially during the exit interviews, when participants looked back on their experience of work during the first 2 years of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the dramas of suffering and thriving were relegated to the background. Participants focused on their own acts of resistance and representation instead of the original reasons for such acts. They connected, rather than separated, instances of body breakdown and body breakthrough in ways that purposefully polarized their experience of work in ways that increased the visibility of diverse mind-bodies. In stark contrast to reverting back to a dominant cycle of meaning, participants oscillated or explicitly overlaid cycles of meaning deflation and inflation. By choosing how to enroll their bodies in acts of resistance or representation irrespective of the micro-interactions they experienced at work, disabled workers not only reclaimed control over meaning-making but were also more likely to recognize, and call out, discriminatory practices.

**Fig. 3** A conjunctive process model of meaning-making through body dramas





## Future of Work

The specificity of our context and the limitations of our data allow us to only tentatively address how cycles of meaning-making shape the future of work. Neither our protocols nor our process models explicitly addressed meaningfulness. However, the central role of the body in meaning-making across different types of jobs, disabilities, and intersectionalities offers two cautionary tales, and three militant tales, for the special issue call on meaningfulness.

First, our empirical findings suggest a progressive erosion of meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Lysova et al., 2022) as repeated dramas of suffering break down different mind-bodies and risk to progressively damage the self-worth of disabled workers. Despite efforts and energy spent on making meaning at work, disabled workers often find themselves locked in cycles of meaning deflation, second guessing if they can do anything right or whether the accommodations they need may be too much to ask for. Aptly described by our participants as an internalization of ableist norms, meaning deflation likely detracts from the experience of meaningfulness. It also reduces disabled workers' future expectations of meaningfulness. Our models further suggest that even when disabled workers try to shore up the erosion of meaningfulness, their acts of resistance often further deplete it in multiple ways: by drawing their attention to norms and practices that marginalize and stigmatize them, by sensitizing them to the suffering of co-workers, and by demanding further sacrifices as workers spent additional time and energy to make meaning in response to micro-aggressions.

Second, our empirical findings offer body dramas as one plausible avenue for centering meaningfulness on what disabled workers can control: the enrollment of their body in acts of resistance and representation. Such enrollments, at first triggered by micro-interactions, progressively broaden their latitude over meaningfulness, as disabled workers both attach and detach meaning-making to existing norms and practices. Rich accounts of how the duality of the body (as both anomaly and assets) motivates normative and counter-normative meaning-making at work adjust the continuum of work experiences from "less bad" to "more good," from "lesser exclusion" to "greater inclusion." The majority of the participants in our study worked up the "less bad" end of the continuum, but were often set back by body breakdowns. Even for participants whose work held intrinsic mandates to support others with similar mind-body differences (Lisa, Maya, Pink, Thomas), such set-backs kept deflating meaning, to the point where some sought out alternative jobs (Lisa, Maya, Pink) and others exited their organization (Thomas). Most held on to meaningfulness as best they could, given how micro-aggressions kept impinging on their

legal and human rights (Lisa), principles (Maya), and needs (Herby, Thomas).

Third, acts of resistance became more meaningful over time in their own right as disabled workers chose to "put up a fight" against micro-aggressions. They did so not only to protect their worth and dignity but also to ensure their ability to serve the organization and their co-workers. Some acts of resistance were overt. For example, Alln, Herby, and Lisa reached out to political representatives. Many considered filing formal complaints against discriminatory norms and practices (Timothy did so); Lisa considered filling a discrimination lawsuit. Others were mundane or even "hidden in plain sight," for example, disabled workers sought, took, and waited for the right occasion to educate their micro-aggressors (Moolady, Pink). Some disabled workers came to think of such acts of resistance as the most meaningful part of their jobs (Maya, Pink, Thomas).

Fourth, acts of representation added meaningfulness when as part of their work disabled workers began to purposefully extend micro-affirmations that had benefitted them to similar others. Charlie described how being appreciated as a social entrepreneur by various stakeholders enabled him to be of greater service to others like him. Alan and Wills searched for disabled job applicants as their way to further "why not?" inclusionary norms and practices. As the COVID-19 global pandemic unfolded, representing became more important in its own right for employed participants, especially those who had stepped up before as spokespersons or union reps for example (Elaine, Lisa, Kayaviveka) and for self-employed participants who had launched ventures related to their disability (Alan, Dan, Lisa, Wills). It also emerged as important in its own right for participants who had not yet taken such roles before the global pandemic (Herby, Moolady, Thomas).

Fifth, as disabled workers purposefully forged new connections between acts of resistance and representation, they rethought the very role of work in their future. All looked for greater meaningfulness, but did so by rethinking the role of the body. Some prioritized the body so they could "hang on" to the tasks they already found most meaningful (Elaine, Maya, Pink, Lisa). Others recognized how changes and differences in one's body were inherently meaningful, for example, by disclosing bodily vulnerabilities or underscoring the relevance of bodily practices as one way to contribute to others and/or organizations that had done so much to help them (Charlie, Josh, Thomas).

Taken together, these five tales warn that changes and differences in workers' bodies may deplete meaningfulness via body-centric cycles of meaning deflation or foster it via body-centric cycles of meaning inflation. The abductive elaborations and inductive models presented in this paper broaden the research agenda called for by this special issue in three new directions. We draw attention to populations

under-studied in the literatures on meaning-making and meaningfulness. We believe renewed attention is urgently warranted given the disproportionate brunt of the COVID-19 global pandemic on disabled workers and the still very limited understanding of how work may be experienced in distinct ways by different mind-bodies. We also synthesize and apply an ethics of embodiment perspective to meaning-making. Research on different modalities of resistance and representation at work had already made room for the body and embodied perspectives (Lawrence et al., 2022). However, our study opens new research questions concerning the role changes and differences in bodies may play in the future of work by underscoring the centrality of the body in how work is being experienced in the first place.

Last, we underscore the cyclical nature of meaning-making. While prior literature explained how meanings are sought and found in other types of crises, our empirical findings suggest that the processes of making meaning may be as important as the meanings made. Research on post-pandemic organizing may thus become more inclusive by attending to the nuanced processes by which meaning is being made by workers at different intersectionalities.

### Contributions to Practice

We contribute to practice by rendering visible the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on disabled workers in UK-based organizations. The body at work had long been understood as either a constraint or a resource (Michel, 2011). Disabled workers can construe their different and/or changing bodies as anomalies or as assets (Jammaers & Williams, 2021); as oddities or as commodities (Jammaers & Ybema, 2022). Across a broad range of intersectionalities of disability with age, gender, and race, suffering or thriving at work instigates the making of new meanings. New meanings were notably made of workplace norms as more or less ableist.

Norms that discriminate against diverse mind-bodies, i.e., ableist norms, became more visible, and more influential, during the global pandemic (Shakespeare et al., 2021; Zeyen and Branzei, 2020). Although some of the changes in work arrangements aligned with long-sought accommodations and were thus welcome by the disabled workers in our study, many others rescinded or even reversed prior accommodations. Our study is also among the first to show how disabled workers enrolled their bodies to morally fit in or stand out in their normative contexts.

Disabled workers viscerally felt changes in work arrangements (Harding et al., 2022). Ensuring dramas of suffering and thriving drew further attention to ableist norms, instigating both normative and counter-normative meaning-making (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021; Jammaers et al., 2019). Our findings underscore the effort and energy disabled workers

expend to slow down cycles of meaning deflation when their bodies suffer as a result of ableist norms (Michaelson, 2021). Revealing the impact of ableist norms on the body, and the additional work required to make work experiences “less bad” should motivate organizations to include attention to different mind-bodies in their diversity and inclusion practices. Specifically, our findings suggest that organizations need to pay close attention to body breakdowns and the micro-aggressions that cause these to recur. Acts of resistance and representations often provide both problem diagnoses and solution plans, but unfortunately such acts are more often dismissed rather than heeded. Disabled workers are also more likely to witness and help others suffering at work, and are often willing to educate their co-workers on the adverse impact of ableist norms.

The positive impact of anti-ableist norms also stood out in our study. Such changes kept making the workplace “more good” not just for the disabled workers but also for their colleagues. They created opportunities for body breakthroughs that granted visibility to different mind-body and the benefits they can offer at work and beyond. We hope that post-pandemic organizing attends to the normative and counter-normative meanings being made by disabled workers, and by other under-studied populations, making future workplaces more inclusive of varied intersectionalities.

### Contributions to Policy

We speak to policy, and especially against ableist policies that overlooked the critical importance of accommodating diverse mind-bodies as work arrangements transformed during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Many policies were rushed, then revoked, during the pandemic, some with serious consequences on disabled workers. Access-to-work was largely ignored. Transferring accommodations from the workplaces to remote arrangements took time, and often incur significant frictions. Despite legal requirements and prior approvals, many of the accommodations in place were undone by sudden shifts in work arrangements. When disabled workers rendered such inequities visible, they felt their requests were dismissed. They were laughed at, found themselves at the end of others’ frustrations. Our findings cannot speak directly to the effect specific policies had on meaning-making at work during the global pandemic. However, the patterns we describe make a strong case for anti-ableist policies in the future. Such policies would acknowledge the diversity of minds and bodies, quickly equalate prior accommodations, and incent organizations to take the lead in matching accommodations for disabled workers who are required to shield in place or cannot return to work. We would like to end by also advocating for policies that take into explicit account the growing prevalence of body suffering at work, anticipate body breakdowns, and lean into acts

of resistance to co-imagine more inclusive accommodations and interactions.

## Conclusion

This study bridges the literature on body work and meaning-making to advance an ethics of embodiment perspective on meaning-making at work. Our longitudinal approach combines multiple waves of long interviews with solicited diaries to reveal a continuum of suffering and thriving at work for both employed and self-employed workers across intersectionalities of disability with age, gender, and race. Our inductive process models explain how disabled workers made meaning at work by repeatedly enrolling their bodies in acts of resistance or representation. We suggest how taking body changes and differences into explicit account can begin to make the future of work more meaningful and more inclusive.

## Appendix

### Appendix A: Protocols

#### Long Interview

- Please tell us about your disability.
- Please tell us what kind of work you do. (Probing questions about hours per week, self-employment versus employed; probing key turning points in one's work/career history).
- What do you enjoy about your current job?
- Please tell us about workplace accommodations you have.
  - How did they come about?
  - How well do they cater to your needs?
- Tell us about typical work experiences prior to the pandemic (November 2019)
- What were your thoughts/what did you think when you first heard about Coronavirus at the start of 2020? How did it impact you and your work?
- Please tell us how your work and your perception of it changed (or not) once the UK had its first case and social distancing was introduced in late February 2020?
- Please tell us how did you experience the first lockdown (March to June 2020)? How did it impact you and your work?

- When things started opening up towards the summer, how did you feel about this? How did it impact your work?
- What are some—if any—positive changes that you experienced at work due to the pandemic that you would like to keep into the future?
- If you had a Gini, what would you wish for?

#### Follow-up Interview

- How have the last months been for you? (since the latest interview). What was good and what was not so good about this window of time?
- [Referring to incidents recorded in Diary Entries] Please elaborate. How do you feel/think about it now?
- [*Referring to incidents recorded in Diary Entries engaging and/or leveraging the body*] How do you think you experience these changes through and with your body?
- [*Referring to incidents recorded in Diary Entries engaging and/or leveraging the body*] Have these changed in any way the meaning of your work?
 

(second follow-up interview included the two co-interpretation questions shown in italics)

#### Exit Interview

- How are things? How have you been?
- Anything that stands out to you as you look back over the entire course of the pandemic, you know, both good or not so great.
- Are there one or two critical incidents moments that stand out for you as you look back to your diary entries that you can talk us through as, as an example?
- Customized follow-up based on diary entries. (i.e., could you talk us through a bit how you are trying to still deal with all of the accumulating challenges over the last couple of years, your own workload, then the managing of others who are overworked and struggle with their mental health. So how are you trying to, to keep “afloat”?)
- *Customized probes based on references made to the body, meaning-making, meaningfulness of work.*

#### Diary

- Please write about events/incidents/experiences at work that you particularly enjoyed/found easy or challenging, particularly difficult/annoying/frustrating.

- Please also write about any changes to your work (tasks, routines, etc.)
- Please reflect on what was good and not so good.
- What else has influenced how you feel at work?
- How connected did you feel today/last 2 weeks? (two Likert scale questions)
- How well do you think your needs were met today/last 2 weeks (two Likert scale questions)

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**Data availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** We declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This project received ethical approval by Royal Holloway University of London. The data collection for this study was financially supported by a British Academy Grant (COV19\200111).

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