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Perception of Limitations by Individuals Threatened with Social Exclusion upon Entering Employment: Report on a Study of Individuals with Chronic Mental Illnesses

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of qualitative research involving a group of 30 disabled persons, suffering from chronic mental conditions, and in most cases staying at residential care homes. The authors conducted targeted free interviews with an interview outline, i.e. a list of the required information. The research was conducted among occupationally active but unemployed individuals, i.e. ones who declared the willingness to work. The sample for the study was selected using purposive sampling: all the subjects were using the services of an employment counsellor at the time. The aim of the free interviews was to identify the barriers making it difficult for disabled persons to find employment. The research questions for the subjects were the following: 1. How important is it for you to enter employment?; 2. What knowledge of your own occupational skills do you have?; 3. What knowledge do you have about the possibilities of finding employment for someone with your qualifications?; 4. What barriers do you see that make employment difficult and result from your own limitations?; 5. What barriers do you see that make employment difficult and result from the specificity of the labour market?; 6. What hindering barriers do you see that result from provisions of the law?; The idea behind all the research questions that were asked was to attempt to answer the question concerning the importance of entering employment for the study subjects. It turned out that entering employment was a priority for most of the respondents.

Keywords: disabled persons, individuals with chronic mental illnesses, barriers, entering employment

Introduction. The labour market today

Problems with the activation of disabled persons are inextricably linked with changes in the labour market. One could give numerous examples of the changes at this point, involving both the nature of work itself and the market structure, including for instance the transnationalisation of labour markets, meaning that today's careers tend to be planned and pursued in a cross-border, international and intercultural context (Bańka, 2003), as well as the development of non-traditional forms of employment. The aim of this rapid development of flexible employment, as an organisational solution, is to reduce labour costs, and it entails a radical change of the HR policy. The mass-scale introduction of alternative forms of employment has led to the subordination of the way in which employees function to a different discipline, as well as to different requirements

and regularities than the ones described in the existing literature in the field of psychology and sociology of labour, concerning regularly employed workers. These descriptions, based on analyses of workers employed on a traditional basis, i.e. with what is referred to as a “full-time” or “permanent” job”, cease to be of use under the new conditions.

Disability is a social problem. The reasons for low occupational activity among disabled persons are complex. The most difficult target group, in the authors' opinion, consists of individuals with chronic mental illnesses who, due to the nature of the condition itself (relapse/remission), are burdened by the limitation of episodic presence on the market during the “recovery” phase, and of the inability to perform work-related duties in the “recurrence” phase. An additional problem which is not analysed in this paper is related to the aversion and stereotypes among co-workers.

Selected psychosocial limitations of disability vs. occupational activation and threats of marginalisation

The following barriers to the activation of disabled persons are emphasised most often in the context of changes in the labour market, as perceived by the disabled themselves:

- failure to accept one's limitation,
- perception of the limited possibilities of choosing one's occupation freely,
- low occupational and spatial mobility,
- difficulties with regard to interpersonal relations,
- low level of motivation to undertake occupational activity,
- low resourcefulness and being convinced about one's helplessness,
- low personal flexibility.

Disabled persons are one of the groups threatened with social marginalisation.¹ This is the case even though social campaigns and occupational activation projects intended for the disabled and for employers have recently been appearing.

It is no consolation that in the past, the problem of marginalisation affected, and continues to affect all kinds of societies, or that it is an endemic phenomenon, characterising virtually every social order.² Even though the phenomenon of marginalisation (including marginalisation among disabled persons) has been broadly discussed and studied both by historians and by sociologists, it continues to exist as a social problem.³ This is because, as sociologists point out, social marginality is in a way embedded in the logic of how social systems function. Thus, social marginality is not a new phenomenon and has existed in every society in history.

According to the concept of “social exclusion”, the individuals who are most vulnerable to marginalisation processes are those who lack appropriate defence against the mechanisms triggering such processes, due to certain deficits they have (whether cultural, income-related, or qualification-related). In other words, the individuals and groups doing worst in contemporary societies are those who find it most difficult to defend themselves against exclusion.⁴ Disabled persons constitute such a group.

What should be emphasised in the case of disabled persons is the fact that the barriers causing marginalisation and at the same time making it impossible to exercise the status-related entitlements may lead to the acceptance of their marginalised status on their part, i.e. to self-marginalisation. Disabled persons who succumb to self-marginalisation become passive and deprived of motivation to change their situation. Acceptance of one's marginalised status entails social isolation. This attitude on the part of the disabled individual is already in itself a barrier to full participation in social life.⁵ The mechanism of self-marginalisation can be considered in light of numerous concepts in social sciences. A. Ostrowska and J. Sikorska refer to the theory of social stigmatisation, among other things. This makes it possible to consider the self-marginalisation

¹ A. Ostrowska, J. Sikorska, Sytuacja niepełnosprawnych w Polsce. W błędnym kole marginalizacji?, [in:] *Marginalność i procesy marginalizacji*, ed. K.W. Frieske, Instytut Polityki Społecznej UW, Warszawa 1999, p. 83.

² K.W. Frieske, *Ofiary sukcesu. Zjawiska marginalizacji w Polsce*, Instytut Socjologii UW, Warszawa 1997, p.7.

³ The following, among others, study the problem of marginalisation: University of Warsaw: Institute of Sociology (K.W. Frieske, P. Polawski), University of Warsaw: Institute of Social Prevention and Resocialisation (J. Kwaśniewski), University of Silesia: Institute of Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28

⁵ A. Ostrowska, J. Sikorska, *Syndrom niepełnosprawności w Polsce. Bariery integracji*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1996, p. 167.

mechanism as an effect of a label applied to the individual. In conformity with that label, the disabled person is expected to behave in a specific manner, determined by the social image. This social image identifies the disabled person with traits such as weakness, withdrawal and dependence on others. Social control institutions exist in order to make sure that disabled persons' conduct conforms to the stereotype. As a consequence of the labelling process, the expected behaviours are accepted by the disabled persons, who create their social identity on that basis. Apart from imposing a certain role, the effect of the process is a certain social perception of the disabled that conforms to the stereotype.¹

It needs to be pointed out that there is a large dissonance between the negative stereotype of a disabled person that continues to function in the public awareness and the image created by mass media and social campaigns. This dissonance concerns the declared equality of rights, the life chances of disabled persons versus the numerous difficulties that exist in practice, or actually manifestations of discrimination against disabled persons. Some individuals may attribute themselves learnt helplessness and perceive it as a result of their own powerlessness, or of the operation of external factors, i.e. objective difficulties, such as inadequately functioning regulations of the labour law, or lack of accessibility for the disabled in buildings and streets.

The phenomenon of self-marginalisation results most often from the process of accumulation of various kinds of barriers which prevent disabled persons from full social participation. The most important aspect for the researchers is to identify the various kinds of barriers constituting factors that make it difficult for disabled persons to exercise their status-related entitlements to a full extent. It needs to be pointed out that studies of barriers are present in the research practice of psychology and sociology, and the aim of this paper is to extend knowledge about them, from the disabled persons' point of view. The authors realise that this is merely a small contribution to the identification of the barriers disabled persons encounter. It has to be pointed out, however, that the dynamically changing social reality, and the consequent changes in the labour market (both favourable and unfavourable ones) actively influence the emergence of new barriers and strengthening of old ones, or vice versa contribute to the elimination of some that existed earlier.

4. Analysis of barriers – presentation of selected research findings

Targeted free interviews with an interview outline, i.e. a list of the required information, were conducted in a group of 30 disabled persons, suffering from chronic mental conditions, and in most cases staying at residential care homes. The selection of that particular research method was dictated by the specific nature of the problem. The interview addressed personal matters, and it would have been impossible to obtain such information using methods with a higher degree of standardisation, in the authors' opinion. In a free interview targeted with regard to its specificity, the research questions tend to be open-ended ones, and not all questions need to be resolved. The interviewer is therefore to a large extent free to formulate the questions at their own discretion, as well as to adapt the contents and the language to the respondents' traits and capacities² (consequently, this interview type was considered to meet in the best way the goal which the authors had set themselves).

The research was conducted among occupationally active but unemployed individuals, i.e. ones who declared the willingness to work. The sample for the study was selected using purposive sampling: all the subjects were using the services of an employment counsellor at the time. The group included individuals of working age: nineteen women and eleven men. The study subjects were a group living in the Silesian Province in Poland, with moderate and severe disabilities, including: 2 subjects with motor disabilities, 3 subjects with mental disabilities, 2 subjects with intellectual disabilities, and 23 subjects with sight disabilities. The majority of study subjects had completed upper secondary education (n=13) and higher education (n=6), and some had completed only elementary education (n=3).

The aim of the free interviews was to identify the barriers making it difficult for disabled persons to find employment. The research questions for the subjects were the following:

1. How important is it for you to enter employment?
2. What knowledge of your own occupational skills do you have?
3. What knowledge do you have about the possibilities of finding employment for someone with your qualifications?

¹ Ibid., p. 171

² I. Przybyłowska, Wywiad swobodny ze standaryzowaną listą poszukiwanych informacji i możliwości jego zastosowania w badaniach socjologicznych, "Przegląd Socjologiczny" vol. XXX, p. 65.

4. What barriers do you see that make employment difficult and result from your own limitations?
5. What barriers do you see that make employment difficult and result from the specific nature of the labour market?
6. What hindering barriers do you see that result from provisions of the law?

The idea behind all the research questions that were asked was to attempt to answer the question concerning the importance of entering employment for the study subjects. It turned out that entering employment was a priority for most of the respondents. Three main attitudes towards work were distinguished among the answers:

1. *Work as a source of income.*

The study subjects pointed to the basic function of work, namely earning money. It should be pointed out, however, that they connected it with other aspects of employment, for instance: work as a self-esteem enhancer and as a confidence-boosting factor.

"I can't imagine going on without working... At work, one simply feels differently, more appreciated, without being at anyone's mercy..."

"I have a family, and to support them, I need to earn money somehow, especially now they've taken my disability pension away; my wife is also disabled, we have a child, and you have to cope in some way."

2. *Work as a place for interpersonal contacts*

The study subjects emphasised most often the aspect of work related to interpersonal contacts. Those were mostly people who did not have too much knowledge about their skills, about the potential job they could specifically do, or even about their potential scope of duties. What motivated them to make attempts to enter employment was the willingness to be with others, to go outside, to fill their time.

"I want to work with people, find employment, to break away from home, so as not to sit there all the time... to finally do something, to meet new people. The financial aspect doesn't interest me, because I don't even know how much money I can earn if I'm getting my pension at the same time."

"I want to go to work, to be with people, I don't want to stay home. I don't have any friends from school, there's only my sister. I watch TV all day along, I go for a walk sometimes. I would like to get to know some new people, so that they like me."

3. *Work as a self-esteem booster*

Most of the study subjects emphasised precisely that aspect of work, related to self-affirmation and boosting one's self-esteem. They emphasise the satisfaction with well-performed duties, resulting from the good rating given to their work by their supervisors, and from their co-workers' acceptance.

"I like working with people, I had my own association apart from my job. I miss that contact with others, but I also have the feeling of not being good for anything. You know, when I used to work, I had the feeling of doing it well, of helping others, of showing my skills. Now I'm the one who needs help – that's what I miss the most."

Barriers to entering employment

The study subjects consciously declared only one barrier, the one resulting from their disability. However, after analysing the collected material, one may distinguish as many as six categories of barriers that make it difficult for the study subjects to find employment, and often also constitute factors hampering their activity. Although all the study subjects declared their willingness to enter employment, many of them did not make attempts to look for a job, and if they did, the attempts were sporadic.

1. *Disability-related barriers*

When naming these barriers, the disabled subjects pointed to limitations resulting from the specific nature of their disabilities. For example, they pointed to problems related to commuting on their own.

"If someone helped me, I'd get there, but I'd need a guide or a co-worker who would accompany me."

The study subjects also pointed to health limitations which narrowed down their employment potential to a significant extent.

"I worked as a maintenance person for eight years. It was a good job and the boss appreciated me, but then my health issues started. I can't make any permanent declarations or plan anything right now, or do hard physical work, and it's impossible for me to resume that job."

Some study subjects were concealing their disability, thinking that they would be discriminated against on the labour market as a result of it.

"I've always had two versions of my CV on my computer. I most often used to send the one that didn't mention my disability, because I know that it would instantly ruin my opportunities."

2. Barriers related to labour market specificity

Certain sub-groups can be distinguished among the barriers resulting from the specificity of the labour market. The first one involves the disabled subjects' unfamiliarity with the labour market. The study subjects mostly pointed out that they were largely unfamiliar with the labour market. This was related to the fact that few of them had been actively seeking employment.

"I don't know the companies around here too much. This job should be something appropriate for disabled people, something to do with the office, with the computer, only I'd need someone to help me with the computer."

On the other hand, those who were moving actively in the labour market emphasised two things: the small number of jobs actually adapted to the capacities of disabled persons, often located far from their place of residence, and the lack of adaptation of the working hours and conditions to the provisions of the law and to the capacities of disabled persons.

"I don't know the companies around here too much. This job should be something appropriate for disabled people, something to do with the office, with the computer, only I'd need someone to help me with the computer."

3. Barriers resulting from the lack of knowledge about one's own skills, capacities and qualifications.

The study subjects were incapable of defining their skills and of describing their qualifications clearly, especially in the case of those who had not gone beyond secondary education, who had not worked in the past or worked for a short time, or worked a long time ago at a disabled workers' co-operative. Often, those subjects were also unable to determine the kind of activities they could perform at work, or the specific job they wanted to do. Barriers related to lack of knowledge about one's own potential have serious implications: since I don't know what I can do, I don't know which direction I would like to develop in, I don't know what positions to apply for, so consequently my activity as far as seeking employment is concerned is negligible or non-existent.

"I don't know what I could do, definitely something to do with computers, maybe copying some documents or something. Definitely something connected with people."

"Well, what I can do is what I used to do in my previous job as a maintenance person. Cleaning the machines, changing the oil, and that seems to be about it."

"I finished school as a cook, but I can't cook. I can wash pans, sweep floors, do the cleaning..."

"What kind of job am I looking for? Any job that's for me, whatever is available. However, I can't tell you precisely what job, I'm just looking around."

4. Barriers related to low self-esteem, lack of faith in one's own capacities

A group of people was distinguished among the study subjects for whom low self-esteem and lack of faith in their own capacities constituted a clear barrier. The group included individuals who had completed only elementary education, as well as people with higher education. What they shared was the lack of faith in their own strengths, the fear of failure, excessive self-criticism, and failures that discouraged them from further activity.

"I went to work for one day as a kitchen help, to try my hand at a normal job. They didn't want me, however, because I was too slow. Now, my dad has been driving me around various places, but they don't want me anywhere. It's because I'm so slow, I'm ashamed of that time, and I haven't told anyone about it."

"I've been visiting various schools, meeting with the headmasters and headmistresses, but to no avail. It seems to me that they don't like me, that I'm unable to make a good impression during these meetings. I'm starting to lose hope that I'll manage to get my dream job with children."

5. Barriers resulting from the lack of family support

Another group of barriers includes ones that result from the lack of support for disabled persons on the part of their families. The pension rights that are often granted constitute a source of income for the other family members, so the latter discourage the disabled person from seeking employment, because they are afraid of losing the regular income from the pension. Sometimes the family members also discourage the individual from activity out of "concern" for them, to protect them against working for little money and losing their pension.

"My parents tell me not to look for a job, because I'll lose my disability pension. It would be better if I got married."

"My mum sought to have them grant me a severe disability certificate and a pension. Now, she judges any attempts of seeking work on my part unfavourably. She says that the best thing I could do is work illegally."

6. Barriers related to legislative provisions.

Most of the study subjects complained about the "absurd" regulations governing the granting of pension and the possibilities of earning specific amounts. The study subjects emphasise that work under a contract is often unprofitable in their case, because as a result they will exceed the amount they are allowed to earn, and they will be deprived of the pension. Such regulations encourage some disabled persons to work in the informal sector, without a contract.

"I spend nearly three hundred zlotys a month on my medications, and if I go to work, it may turn out I'll earn more than my pension, but so what if they deprive me of the latter and it turns out that I have three or four hundred more working full-time."

"Many companies agree with the workers, put an appropriate amount in the contract so as to prevent them from losing their pension, and give the rest to them unofficially. However, this is always less than what one would make as an 'able-bodied' person."

Conclusion

To recapitulate, the barriers identified on the basis of the targeted free interviews can be divided into two fundamental groups: the study subjects' internal barriers and barriers of external nature.

It is worth pointing out that the study subjects who were supported by their families in their efforts to enter employment perceived fewer barriers, were more optimistic, and often better-educated. This means that a friendly social environment, including in particular the closest one, namely the family, is a factor that contributes to the surmounting of barriers. Internal barriers were identified more often among subjects with elementary and vocational secondary education: barriers resulting from the lack of knowledge about one's own skills, capacities and qualifications, which is reflected in the low cultural capital of the study subjects. All the subjects emphasised most strongly and were capable of identifying on their own a single barrier, namely the one resulting from their disability. That barrier, combined with other internal ones, was often the main determinant of status for the study subjects, it attributed a role to them, and at the same time stigmatised them and made them differ from the rest of the population of able-bodied people. In this sense, the assumed role of a disabled person conformed to the stereotype of someone who is relatively passive and not very flexible, who believes that the sole fact of being disabled places them outside the margin of society, and who at the same time accepts this status quo. It seems therefore that the barriers referred to as internal ones here, which are rooted most strongly in the study subjects, constitute factors that contribute to their self-marginalisation. Helping disabled persons to overcome such barriers should therefore be strongly stressed in the work of employment counsellors, personal trainers and psychologists in the process of occupational activation.

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