

Experiencing life from the perspective of disabled youth

While maintaining contact with the disabled, non-disabled people experience a number of inner cognitive and affective conflicts ¹, which lead to a tendency to avoid or restrict contact with people with disabilities, as well as take actions against them, aimed at restricting their rights (behavioral aspect). Due to their objective though different deficits, people with disabilities have to meet higher expectations than the rest of the society, and it requires significantly more effort. Therefore, they “do not deserve compassion, but admiration and recognition” ², and first of all social support and stimulating their aspirations for self-realization.

Attitudes and behaviour of people without disabilities towards the disabled (stigmatizing the disabled and labeling them) certainly affect the quality of functioning of people with impairments, which means they determine the way the disabled experience their own life.

Life being experienced by disabled youth – empirical examples

The survey research was conducted in the years 2006-2007. Data was collected by questionnaires, which were circulated in the Salesian Education and Care Centre in Tarnowskie Góry, and in the Radzionków School of Occupational Adaptation_no. 2, and also through a questionnaire distributed via e-mail, and directed to post-primary and secondary school students. The research subjects were people with physical, mainly motor and sensory impairment, and with mild mental disability. The survey examined the ways of experiencing life, with regard to the following categories: self-perception; perceiving environmental attitudes towards visible disability; emotional and behavioral reactions to the patterns of behaviour displayed by the environment; assessing one’s own relations with other people; making an overall evaluation of the society’s approach to disability.

The first variable examined in the survey was self-identification among the disabled, who label themselves as different, and the positive or negative evaluation attached to it (Table

¹ Sieradzki M, *Niepełnosprawni w społeczeństwie i kulturze. Wybrane zagadnienia z socjologii niepełnosprawności i rehabilitacji*, (w:) *Spółeczeństwo wobec autonomii osób niepełnosprawnych. Od diagnoz do prognoz i do działań*, (red.) W. Dykcik, Eruditus, Poznań 1996, p. 84.

² Szczepański J., *Problemy ludzkiej sprawności*, (w:) *Świat ludziom niepełnosprawnym*, (red.) A. Hulek, Wyd. PTWzK, Warszawa 1992, p. 243.

1). The survey findings show that the negative evaluation of one's own impairment (0.81) predominates over the positive one (0.25). The results underscore a degree of ambivalence which has been observed in the character of the evaluations made by the respondents.

TABLE 1 Self-identification among the surveyed, who label themselves as „different” (N=114)

Response category	Positive evaluation		Negative evaluation	
	N	%	N	%
Yes (Y)	13	11,40	15	13,16
Rather yes (y)	10	8,78	36	31,58
Rather not (n)	35	30,70	22	19,30
No (N)	56	49,12	41	35,96
A ratio of (Y+y) : (n+N)	0,25		0,81	
Total	114	100,0	114	100,0

It seems more interesting, however, how the surveyed youth justify their self-evaluation. The justification the respondents provide is not varied, but it seems to be significant in the context of their general life situations, since it brings some additional meaning.

Their *positive self-evaluation* is most often related to common egalitarian principles, and regarding their difficult life experiences as a developmental mechanism, which accounts for the fact that the disabled feel more mature and emotionally richer, better prepared for life, cause fewer educational problems, and display pro-social behaviour more often than their non-disabled peers. Special attention should be paid to the response category related to lack of negative self-evaluation, which has been justified by “being in the circle of people with disabilities”. It might implicitly indicate that experiences of the disabled outside their own environment are completely different.

Justification of positive self-evaluation:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have more life experiences, which makes me more mature and more emotional - I feel equal to other people - because I do not hurt others - because I'm wise and I know what I'm allowed to do and what I mustn't do - because I don't use vulgar language - because I'm in the group of people like me |
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Justification of *negative self-evaluation* is grounded mostly on *the* process of rationalizing the quality of being different, regarding it as an obvious fact which, in a natural way, restricts the possibility for self-realization that non-disabled people have. The negative self-evaluation results also from the fact that people with disabilities realize their being different from the non-disabled, regarding themselves as helpless and unable to manage, labeling themselves as weak and worse, tending to compare themselves to people without disabilities in the context of their own achievements and failures, in various kinds of activities and spheres of life (e.g. sport achievements, school situations).

Justification of negative self-evaluation:

- because I can't manage in life
- because due to my disability I can't achieve what non-disabled people can
- because I'm disabled, and it makes me different from others
- because others are stronger
- because they are better at what they do
- other people are better than me in various kinds of activities, such as sport, foreign languages

The way the disabled respondents perceived other, non-disabled, people's responses to their "difference", regarded here as something negative, was the variable analyzed in the examination of the mechanism of positively or negatively evaluated self-identification among people with disabilities (Table 2). It can be implicitly regarded as a rate of negative stigmatization, which could justify inducing the phenomenon of self-stigmatization³. The survey results prove that the most frequent response category, concerning perception of social reactions to disability, was related to rejection of negative evaluation (n=95, 83.33%). It seems to portend well for social attitudes to impairment, as well as determination of proper social and emotional development of people with disabilities.

TABLE 2 Perception of social responses toward „difference” (N=114)

Negative evaluation	N	%
Yes (Y)	7	6,14
Rather yes (y)	12	10,53
Rather not (n)	44	38,59
No (N)	51	44,74
A ratio of T, t : n, N	0,2	
Total	114	100,0

And again, it seems that greater importance is attached to providing justification of the particular evaluation, and mainly to the criteria it is based on. There is a variety of justification of environmental *negative responses* to disability, but it is related mainly to the description of their manifestation forms (flippant treatment, mockery, ridicule). Sometimes the character of justification refers to general beliefs of the environment, concerning disability (devaluation, restricting rights, regarding "privileges" for the disabled as unfair), or frequently to the negative assessment of other characteristics (being different in various spheres), which are, or are not at all, linked with disability (different religion, faith).

Justification of negative evaluation of social responses:

- they don't treat me seriously, often laugh at what I say and do, etc. – and of course I ignore it
- because I'm disabled, I don't follow fashion, I've got my own style, my own opinions, I don't do what others tell me to , I am myself – they say I'm "different"
- I think it is like that because within the environment the disabled are placed in the margin
- people hold disapproving attitudes towards people with disabilities; sometimes, they even think that we do not deserve our privileges
- because I'm of different faith

³

Goffman E., *Piętno. Rozważania o zranionej tożsamości*, GWP, Gdańsk 2005.

Similarly, the lack of negative social responses to impairment was justified in numerous ways. At the same time, the justification is the basis for the positive perception of social responses to people with disabilities. Generally speaking, three categories of justification have been reported in the survey. The first, most common type, referred to personal experiences related to functioning in the group of people with disabilities (special school), or in the environment which is to a large extent “integrated” (the education and care centre for the disabled). Furthermore, the positive perception can result from the fact that social interactions and activities among the disabled have been naturally limited, as a consequence of encountering psychosocial and physical barriers (conscious and unconscious ones). The second category of justification referred directly to positive self-evaluation – assessing one’s own characteristics, competence, skills and abilities, and also displayed patterns of behaviour. Unfortunately, this category was rather incidentally reported by the surveyed. The third type of justification was grounded on general abstract egalitarian and ethnic principles, which underpin equal treatment of all people, regardless of any unintentional differences between them. It is worth mentioning one more category, which was reported by the disabled respondents. It was related to the disabled person’s inner scale of disability assessment. It means limiting the quality of being normal to mental health, which proves intolerance and entails regarding as normal only those categories of impairment which are not connected with mental diseases or retardation. It should be emphasized here that the collection of survey data comes from people with physical or sensory disabilities, who “feel normal, because they are not mentally sick”.

Justification of lack of negative evaluation:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - because I do not differ from other people, I do the same things and I behave like others, I normally talk to other people (in the environment of the disabled) - because they have no reason for that (they are disabled, too) - because I’m in such environment that I don’t have to be afraid, I have a very nice company in which there are also disabled people- my friends are understanding and tolerant (“integrated” environment) - I get on well with my friends and colleagues at school, because we are friends and nobody in our class is worse (the group of people with disabilities) - because other people like me, I share everything with others, and I help other people - because I can solve my own problems - other people say that I’m well-behaved and that I’m a good pupil, but some people think I’m stupid - I think everyone is equal, and there aren’t better or worse people, and others treat me just like this, they regard me as equal to them - I have many acquaintances who I get on with - others try to treat me as if I was a person without any disability - everyone is the same, created by God - because I’m a normal person – <i>I have a healthy psyche and mind</i> |
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Emotional reactions of the disabled respondents to being labelled as „different” (Table 3) constitute a variable which examines the prevalence of such experiences among disabled youth, and the ways they handle them. It is possible to discern a certain conflict between the

self-perception and ways of perceiving social responses to impairment. The majority of the surveyed describe their own reactions to the negative responses from the society, which means that they experience them (though the experiences are varied in intensity). It can be reaffirmed by the fact that the respondents' earlier evaluations were made in the context of their functioning among people with disabilities and in the environment in which disability was normalized. The survey data illustrated in Table 3 point to the fact that the evaluation criterion has been expanded to cover the "global" environment.

TABLE 3 Emotional reactions to being labelled as "different" (N=114)

Type of reaction	N	%
I rebel because I think its unfair	16	14,04
I accept it because it's true that I'm different	15	13,16
I accept it because I think it's my fault that other people treat me like that	2	1,75
I feel resentment at the way I'm treated	10	8,77
I try to show others that I'm not any different from them	67	58,77
Other people do not treat me as if I was „different"	4	3,51
Total	114	100,0

The variety of reactions reported in the survey includes: protest and variously justified acceptance, which occur in considerably high percentage (each of the two types constitutes 14%), less common feeling of resentment (9%), and prevailing emotions which stimulate self-development, aimed at proving one's own worth to the society (approx. 59%). It can be stated that expressing protest and taking action toward changing a social image prevail among the reported reactions (approx. 73%; which portends well for the development of this group, and certainly determines increase in its maturity). The less frequent (approx. 24%) but significant reactions, which are purely emotional, such as acceptance and passive resentment, hinder activity, which portends badly for development. It should be emphasized that only 4 of the surveyed didn't report any of the reactions pointed out above.

The next variable which examined social functioning of people with disabilities was the type of their social environment (Table 4).

TABLE 4 Prevailing type of social participation of disabled youth (N=114)

Type of environment	N	%
Comprised only of the disabled	25	21,93
Dominated by non-disabled people	21	18,42
Diversified environment	68	59,65
Total	114	100,0

The survey results indicate that diversified environment proves to be the prevailing type (approx. 60%), which obviously results from the fact that people with disabilities function within the family and school environment (the education and care centre for the

disabled). It should be noticed that the surveyed who reported functioning within the environment comprised only of the disabled, form a considerably high proportion (approx. 22%) of all the respondents. They identify with this group and feel more emotionally tied to it. It consequently limits social interactions and diversified experiences, which facilitate proper development, and thus determine social adaptation.

The last variable which investigates how disabled youth experience their life was related to generalized and thus fixed beliefs and convictions concerning social attitudes to people with disabilities (Table 5).

TABLE 5 Generalized convictions concerning social attitude to people with disabilities (N=123)⁴

Type of conviction	N	%	Ranga
Legal and social discrimination	24	19,51	3
Indifference	31	25,20	1
Social isolation	23	18,70	4
Unnatural behaviour towards the disabled	14	11,38	5
Negative behaviour and emotional reactions (ridicule, mockery)	29	23,58	2
Other (e.g. problems faced in the labour market)	2	1,63	6
Total	123	100,0	

And again, the survey results reveal the varied character of the convictions reported by the disabled. The most frequent response categories were indifference (approx. 25%) and negative social behaviour (approx. 24%). Discrimination and a tendency to isolate the disabled from the society, constitute a slightly lower proportion of the reported convictions (approx.19%), which results partly from inability to maintain relations with people who display various visible deficits (unnatural behaviour, approx. 11%).

Final thoughts

It should be concluded that providing the disabled with chances for the full development and autonomy (self-determination within the social norm limits), conditioning proper individual and social functioning, is not possible without extensive implementation of the idea of integration⁵. The concept is based on introducing changes in social attitudes towards disability, through eliminating the factors which contribute to ostracism and exclusion. Paradoxically, integration could stimulate the changes in attitudes toward impairment. Therefore, it is surprising that this theoretical idea, which has been commonly accepted for a long time, is so rarely implemented. What one should bear in mind is also a well-known fact, not grounded on any empirical evidence, that from a logical point of view

⁴ The estimated number of responses exceeds the number of respondents, since some of the interviewed mentioned more than one category of response.

⁵ *O autonomii w wychowaniu niepełnosprawnych dzieci i młodzieży*, (w:) *Spółeczeństwo wobec autonomii osób niepełnosprawnych. Od diagnoz do prognoz i do działań*, (red.) W. Dykcik, Eruditus, Poznań 1996, p. 23.

implementation of the idea of integration brings measurable and immeasurable benefits for both disabled and non-disabled members of the society.

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