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The Sense and Meaning of Work in the Life of Intellectually Disabled Adults

Work constitutes one of the most important values in the life of every person even though as a form of activity it refers mainly to one's adulthood. However for the professional work that gives us financial income and social autonomy we are being prepared all our life. This process is undoubtedly connected with the acquisition of belief that work is a means not only to secure one's existence but generally to increase the quality of one's life and the lives of close relatives that he/she feels responsible for. Hence we can say that the possibility of starting work constitutes an indicator of the normality of one's adulthood.

The literature of the subject most often underlines three dimensions of understanding of the meaning, sense or role of work in our life:

- Existential – work as a source of income and satisfaction of needs related to our everyday existence.
- Social – work gives a feeling of being a member of a professional group and of building new interpersonal relations, it shapes the socio-professional identity of a given person.
- Psychological – work offers a chance to use one's abilities to fulfil higher order needs like: self-realisation and self-development.

For the disabled, especially with intellectual disability, work in the first place has a remedial meaning. From psychological perspective, professional work allows the disabled person to forget about „his/her otherness”, to feel needed and appreciated. In the social sphere work influences in a positive way the development of life skills, it enables the achievement of maximum level of independence (Wolan – Nowakowska, 2005, pp. 172-173). Biological readiness of disabled people to take up employment can be described with the words of a classic of rehabilitation – Aleksander Hulek: “no work requires from the person performing it to use all of his/her physical, mental and social abilities” (Hulek, 1969, pp.164-168).

Equally positive as the approach of people who deal with the matter of professional activity of the intellectually disabled people are the legal regulations concerning the employment of such persons, especially the rules of their equal treatment at work.

However the practice reveals a completely different picture – high index of unemployment among the intellectually disabled people and quick assessment of their inability to work by the assessment teams for social security purposes.

This is the shortest way to describe the half-hearted approach to the question of employment of this group and its actual state. Taking into account these differences I have decided to examine the attitude towards work of the intellectually disabled people themselves.

The material for this analysis was collected during the survey conducted among the intellectually disabled adults (28 people) who work in different places – in hotels, KFC and McDonald's restaurants, in the office and canteen of the House of Social Help, on a farm. Work of the surveyed persons was of various character: some were (and still are) employed on terms dictated by the free labour market most often on a part-time basis ($\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a full-time position), a few of these have already signed full-time employment contracts; the second group were the people during the training period preparing them to work on the open labour market (the "supported employment – trainer" programme); the third group were the residents of the houses of social help who took up work for their own environment, without any financial gratification.

The survey was carried out by students under my supervision, as well as myself. The researchers contacted the respondents at their workplaces or during the Activity Therapy Workshops (trainees).

The procedure of gathering the data and analysis of the material were subject to the quality paradigm. D. Urbaniak – Zajac and J. Piekarski (2001, pp. 28-29) indicate that within the quality examination one can very often encounter conduct in accordance with the forensic examination logic, proposed by Charles S. Peirce. Forensic reasoning leads to the formulation of theoretical answer that refers both to the existing theory and empirical knowledge that is the source of research problems. Hence the main research problem of the conducted survey took on the form of a question: **what sense and meaning do the intellectually disabled people attribute to work?** Referring to the suggestions of S. Palka (2006, p. 76), so the humanistic model of scientific cognition is inspired by theoretical orientations, my research was rooted in personalism.

The modern trend of philosophical personalism deliberates on a human being, underlining its value, dignity and exceptionality. In his book *Person and act* Karol Wojtyła explicitly confirms the value of each person, the subjectivity of individual understanding and the perception of community as a whole that exists due to the participation of active people. The emphasis on the individual as an active person that makes choices and who cannot be treated mechanically can be seen also in other than catholic points of view. They underline the meaning of a person as an

inseparable part of a community and his/her active participation in this community is treated as an element necessary to achieve this person's goals.

I have quoted these few ideas because they depict the most essential elements of understanding work as an activity of people who create a community and who are at its core. Their active participation in the community of working people allows the realisation of their goals and making choices.

The main method of the research involved interviews and conversations in various work-related situations, as well as observation of these situations.

The collected material was examined according to the method of qualitative analysis of the content of transcribed interviews and conversations. It involved the creation of analytical categories and assigning them the content of talks. The pattern of categories is always of selective character – its creation is not about capturing all that was said but about finding expressions and wordings that indicate – in this case – the sense and meaning attributed to work by those surveyed. The assignment to particular categories is based on semantic similarity – various articulations of identical meaning are being reduced to one category. During this process of data categorisation first hypotheses, conjectures are being created. Once the actions and statements confirming these initial guessing are separated, the next step is to find the disparate cases, i.e. the cases supporting the rejection of these conjectures (see: M. B. Miles, A. M. Huberman, 2000)

During the qualitative analysis of the content of interviews and conversations I have distinguished the following categories:

The sphere of personality:

Work offers the intellectually disabled people a chance to become more independent. The examples of statements: “I go to work and come back home myself”, “I maintain a flat myself (inherited from parents – note BC)”, “I did it myself” – showing a cart to dispose of rubbish – note BC, “I bought these trousers with my own money”, “I prepare this mixture myself” (for pickling meat – note BC), “I’m taking unpaid holidays and I’m going to Africa to help the poor” – as a volunteer with an organisation for young people – note BC, “I can arrange different dishes myself”, “I can operate a copying machine”. Even though in different ways, the majority of the working people in their statements stressed the aspect of independence.

Disparate cases. In a few cases a working intellectually disabled person was still dependent on his/her parents – “my mother buys clothes for me” or “I do not know what I am going to buy (for the earned money), I do not know how much I have”, “my father takes my money, because I can lose it”. Such statements came from the people more dependent on their caretakers especially due to their deeper disability.

Work boosts confidence in the intellectually disabled people (faith in one's own abilities). The examples of statements: “if I learn how to peel potatoes, Kasia (the trainer – note BC) will not have to watch me”, “come, I will show you (a student – note BC) how to bake a cake”, “I take care of Piotr and I will teach him to take the cows out and clean them”, “I like travelling, with my boyfriend, we go to the mountains paying with our money”, “you have to aspire to a goal in order to achieve it” (respondent for a long time could not convince his parents to let him work – note BC), “if I do not do it, who will?”, and even a very confident statement: “I would have done it better” (this person for years has been helping his father in construction works, he had a flair for it and was aware of his skills – note BC). These were the examples of statements confirming that work develops confidence in the intellectually disabled people.

Disparate cases: Sometimes a person who was prepared to take up professional duties and seemed confident of his/her skills, under the influence of various factors, e.g. hurry, more instructions given by different people, would start to get confused and lose faith in the possibility of making it – “I will not work without Piotr” (the trainer – note BC) or resort to illness “today I'm not going to work, I have a fever”.

Social sphere

Work frees aspirations to “normality” of the intellectually disabled people. The examples of wordings of similar meaning: “I have to get up in the morning, which I hate, and like every normal person go to work”, “I do not go any more to the meetings (with intellectually disabled young people at WTZ), because I work and I do not have time”, “now, when I have money, I have to pay for the flat”, “I do not want P. (the trainer – note BC) to come to me and watch me, I can manage myself”. These statements indicate the aspiration to normality and stress placed on it, it proves that the majority of the intellectually disabled persons wants to get rid of the label.

Disparate cases: There are people who feel best among their own or under care of their close ones, their family and do not show the will to “break free” from the circle of the disabled – “I like it most here” (at WTZ in free time – note BC), I like cycling but mostly with my dad”.

Work improves communication skills of the intellectually disabled people. These are a few semantically similar statements: “Yes, I talk to my friends, I ask them about girlfriends, about work”, “before I did not talk to people, because they laughed... now I tell them about different things”, “I like talking to Ms. L.”. The need to communicate is one of the most important needs of human beings. Barriers and handicaps in this matter cause that an individual withdraws from relations, closes to the contact with another. Hence it is not surprising that the intellectually

disabled persons try to interact, and this is encouraged by achieving a certain level of confidence.

Disparate cases: People with deeper articulation problems, with deeper disability have bigger problems with communication. From observation it results that they are waiting for a hint, answer with single words, become embarrassed.

Material sphere

Thanks to work the intellectually disabled people understand the function of money and can use it. The statements confirming the assumed category of analysis: “I have a bank account and I am saving money”, “I have to give some money for the maintenance”, “I buy my clothes myself”, “I am saving for a camera and I will shoot the nature”. The material meaning of work was most often stressed by the respondents. Every earning person thought to be somebody important, because he/she had money and plans related to spending it.

Disparate cases: concerned persons who did not understand the value of money so well. They were aware that they had the means but were unable to manage them. In such cases most often the family controlled the finances of a working intellectually disabled person, unfortunately often taking advantage of his/her insufficient understanding of the value of the money earned.

Instead of summary.

The presented analysis of statements of intellectually disabled adults constitutes an attempt to understand, or maybe decipher the meaning that work can have for them. It is important to underline that at present the research on the issue of employing the intellectually disabled people is well received since a lot has been changing in the policy of employing such persons. For the researchers, very interesting can be to infiltrate the gap between what the reality shows and what is being declared within this field. In case of the intellectually disabled people the facts that are described and the facts that are declared are historically and culturally conditioned. On the one hand, the notion of intellectual disability encompasses the stereotype of perceiving the people suffering from it as unfit for work (they need constant supervision and help, they are not very efficient workers), on the other hand, closer to those who think that effective employment of the disabled people is conditioned by adjustment of work to the person's needs and abilities – and not the opposite – maybe we are witnessing something that M. Foucault called positiveness, i.e. the process of softening stereotypes. Maybe it is just becoming a part of social expectations, as Elżbieta Zakrzewska writes – Manterys (2003, p.117), it is conduct in the spirit of the times, an example of “modern stereotypisation related to the socially expected political correctness”.

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