

# THE DISABLED IN THE MIDST OF UNEMPLOYMENT, I.E. WHAT REMAINS UNSEEN IN THE SCIENTIFIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE DISCOURSE?

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**Abstract:** The problem of disability with the whole spectrum of correlated aspects has been repeatedly addressed by science as well as various administrative analyses for the needs of social policy. The perspective, frequently supported by extensive statistics, indicates the main recurring problems related to disability. The most visible are unemployment and poverty of this population. Concurrently, the studies tend to (frequently wrongfully!) stigmatize the disabled. The above-mentioned perspective effectively quantifies, copies, labels... and does not clarify the core of the problems. In his elaboration, the author presents a different approach that focuses on the perspective of the interested parties themselves – the disabled. With the use of heuristic analysis and sociological imagination, he addresses numerous aspects of the world, aspects that have been misunderstood, omitted or intentionally concealed in the past.

**Key words:** disability, administrative perspective, unemployment, exclusion, sociological imagination.

## Introduction

The aim of this elaboration is not to process information and reproduce further theoretical reflections, i.e. creating science for the sake of it<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, as a sociologist with a critical orientation I postulate focusing on relevant social issues, hence my pragmatic approach to practicing sociology as a utilitarian field of science<sup>3</sup>. In this respect, the information I present here may be beneficial for social practitioners, including present students and future administrative workers, especially those engaged in social help and social work. This article may be of use to them, not only from the point of view of social practice, but also as an introduction to perceiving the social reality in a broader perspective that transcends the institutional, administrative or scientific dimension. Such perspective, or rather a certain ability and quality of a researcher, is often referred to as sociological imagination<sup>4</sup>. According to the aforementioned A. Gidens, it is the main aim of studying sociology. In my analyses of the disabled and the professional sphere of these people in particular, I rely mostly on the studies of the field by T. Poplawski [5]. Certainly, there may be

many more up to date studies that I haven't researched, however, there was no need to do so. Firstly, I have deliberately chosen this report due to its quality as well as a broad spectrum of issues that it addresses and explains. To answer any potential allegations as to the age of the studies, I would like to quote the suggestive words of Isaac Newton: "If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants". Robert Merton referred to this metaphor in this way: "we should raise our knowledge on the shoulders of giants and not bury them" [6]. Secondly, despite the recent favourable changes on the job market in the form of unemployment decrease, they are not as clearly perceivable on the job market of the disabled, which seems to be quite resistant to such fluctuating changes. Therefore, the report I have chosen is still up to date. Lastly, regardless of how many new more or less current reports will appear. The science is not about "producing figures and new statistics. It is paramount to use them skillfully and transform them into useful information and, in my opinion, this report allows for a thorough use of all analyses and heuristic inference. I haven't found that kind of utility in works by other authors, that could be described, as paraphrased by Merton, as "dwarfs". What seems to be of relevance as well is my personal point of reference. I do not represent a strictly scientific and sociological point of view, I look at this field of interest through the prism of my previous non-scientific social experiences. After many years of working in marketing, I have become convinced that the client, the external recipient of our service and all our actions, is most important and they are at the heart of all concern. This experience allowed me to see the social space with a "critical managerial eye". Hence, it is my opinion that: officers

<sup>2</sup>T. Poplawski quite accurately comments on such idle practice of science: "[...] The modern intellectual aristocracy is mostly concerned with glorifying issues that have little to do with "the lesser needs of the vast majority of people" [...]" [1].

<sup>3</sup>A. Gidens arrives at similar conclusions when he contemplates about sociology. He states that: "Sociology practice entails the use of sociological imagination and breaking away from the existing ideas about social life [...], Sociology has a broad scope of practical application. It can contribute to social criticism and practical social reform in many ways. Even a better understanding of given social circumstances allows to control them better" [2].

<sup>4</sup>J. Szacki [3] has thoroughly described the notion. I encourage to familiarize with the source of the notion as expressed by the creator C.W. Mills [4]

ought to treat their applicants as paramount (the applicant as a voter and payer of taxes that finance the offices is the so-called superior of all bureaucracy – the fact that appears to be self-evident)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the point of view that should always be adopted is the applicant's and not the one, where the "I" dominates – I as the officer, administration, organization, norms, regulations, bureaucracy. Hence, in each case of an officer, social worker vs applicant situation, I advice an individual interpretation of the applicant, their problems, needs, situation, in general, deep commitment. I speak of an approach that sociology describes as interpretative, understanding, sometimes empathic, and other terms from the humanities [3]. Officers or social workers with such attitude will be able to understand the applicant better and help them solve their problems. Therefore, I will try to present a situation of an unemployed disabled person from this perspective. It may help the people who deal with such issues to realise how complicated and often absurd is the situation of applicants "wrapped" in social help. Help that is not always helpful, but can even complicate matters. The disadvantages and anomies that I will describe later often place the disabled in a desperate situation. However, in order to understand these anomies, it is crucial to reject the perspective where the normative approach dominates. The approach that frequently involves only "measuring, weighing, classifying, profiling". Such attitude that relies solely on quantification overlooks what is typical of humans – the unmeasurable. This official approach leads directly to reification and objectification of human beings.

### **The disabled and the job market in Podlaskie voivodship. General characteristics**

My intention is not to present figures related to the the job market of the disabled in Podlasie. I have reached my heuristic conclusions that I derived from the indicated studies earlier. Here, however, I present only the key findings. The statistics are available in the materials I refer to. My aim, rather, is to portray this issue from a different perspective. This area of study was described quite extensively on the example of Podlasie as well as the whole country. Individual data can be found in the report by T. Poplawski at al. [5], numerous studies of the Voivodship Employment Office or in periodically published results of the National Population and Housing Census. I personally recommend the first source as I have studied all the above and the first one contained the most significant information for the analysis. I intend to focus on the analytical dimension and

therefore I will present my findings below as a result of a several years long study of the area and personal research supported by numerous experiences and observations. All too frequently, other works deal with the problem in an abstract way, through the prism of statistics, expenses, rules, norms. During my study of the issue and my personal experiences, I have realized that Polish scientific literature and the administrative perspective<sup>6</sup> are far from the reality they deal with. Therefore, I believe that the point of view of those concerned, the disabled is what matters more to me. I do not want to discuss the point of view of the street-level bureaucracy either (this perspective was named this way by M. Lipsky). This point of view in Polish reality is described in an interesting way by K. Sztandar-Sztanderska [8]. The perspective of experiencing a government that is created by the citizens is relevant as an example of the flaws of a people-controlled system, the problem I address in other works. Taking the free market experiences as an example, I claim that in such relations, the most prominent person is the external client, as the receiver of all services, here – a disabled person<sup>7</sup>. This is the point of view that I would like to focus my attention on. Before going further, taking a broad perspective on the studied matter, it must be stated that: – the occupational situation of the disabled in the Podlaskie voivodship is particularly difficult. Not only are there insufficient job offers for all the inhabitants, but there are no jobs adapted to the need of the disabled. The low supply of jobs results in very high competition in the field. A relatively high level of unemployment in the whole voivodship, in relation to other parts of the country, is a problem for all its inhabitants. The impact on the population described here is particularly severe. The consequence is that the disabled are uncompetitive in comparison to other inhabitants applying for jobs, especially when such a limited number of jobs is available (even despite preferable employment conditions for these people, which I will refer to later). The employers interviewed in the Podlasie region, those that employ the disabled as well as those not interested in this occupation group, have numerous reservations and, what follows, reasons why the job market of the disabled is not very friendly or even unavailable [10]. The main reasons that can be enumerated are external "environmental" barriers, such as the lack of jobs, their inadequacy, or social as well as internal barriers (of the people themselves, e.g. worries of being perceived in a negative or disqualifying way by their environment). Also, the disabled perceive their situation on the job market in a negative way. The largest number of the interviewed disabled people view their health condition as the main reason for not being able to find a job,

<sup>5</sup>M. Lipsky's [7] perspective is a broad understanding of the problem. He proves that, among others, the street-level bureaucracy frequently forms their own interpretation of the political legislative rules, which I am about to present in the following part of the article.

<sup>6</sup>The administrative dimension and the world seen through the eyes of an officer is often referred to as street-level bureaucracy [7].

<sup>7</sup>A similar perspective is presented by the team J. Mair, J. Battilana, J. Cardenas [9]

which seems logical as they are really ill people. However, a comparable number of these ill people declare that they have not had any problems with finding a job, despite their health condition and other external barriers that they also mention. Since, the same amount of ill people can find a job despite the barriers, so maybe these barriers are only a way to escape the outside world and indicate the alienation of the group. Therefore, the barriers may only be an excuse not to work. This and other facts may be the reason for a widespread myth concerning the employment inactivity of the disabled. On the basis of the contacts with District Labour Office, I have heard on numerous occasions this exact opinion – that the disabled are lazy and they don't want to work. Likewise, when analyzing the report of T. Poplawski, one can draw similar conclusions that indicate the occupational inactivity of the disabled [5]. Nevertheless, in his studies he presents “the other side of the coin” that is often omitted by other authors. Due to this contrast, among others, that is missing elsewhere, apart from the information that indicates the occupational inactivity of the disabled, Poplawski and his fellows present data proving that work is one of the most, if not the most important life goal of this social group. I have attempted to explain this issue earlier [11]. Below I present only the main conclusions of my analyses. I have written them owing to my perspective of the unemployed disabled as the “clients of the job market” and at the same time recipients of many activating instruments. I suggest familiarizing with these conclusions and this point of view for the representatives of bureaucracy and social workers. Too often do they identify their role of reproducing mass job market activating instruments and implementing systemic measures that function in an instrumental manner for the system itself and not for the aim, for which the system was created. Below I present the explanation of the apparent occupational inactivity of the disabled and some other relevant absurdities that the unemployed disabled people encounter.

Low interest in jobs is not a result of the occupational inactivity of the disabled or, colloquially speaking, their laziness, as may be assumed, but rather low incomes that these jobs entail. There is a study related to expected incomes as a confirmation to this statement [5]. The amount that the disabled would find satisfying, as signalized in T. Poplawski's report, is considerably higher than the lowest national pay, which does not come as a surprise. However, this is highly unrealistic as the discussed region is one of the poorest in the country and the population is often not educated well enough (most often the case with the disabled). Nevertheless, the conclusion from the above considerations is that the high unemployment rate of the disabled in Podlasie is predominantly a consequence of not enough working positions, good working positions. Even if such exist, they are usually not adapted for a disabled person. Other fac-

tors are psychological and sociological barriers connected with the perception of the disabled by the society. Despite the fact that the aforementioned causes of unemployment of the disabled are particularly important, they are most frequently mentioned in the administrative and scientific discourse and are not especially “revealing” for the reader. They are a continuation of the “armchair philosophing”, as F. Znaniecki observed [12], commonly replicated in other works.

### Invisible facts about the disabled job market

The myth of occupational inactivity. Quantifiable data (that I have mentioned before and briefly their analyses as well) may indicate that the disabled are occupationally inactive. On the other hand, the studies of T. Poplawski [5] demonstrate that the disabled want to work. For them, professional work is equally an autotelic aim (the one mentioned most often and, indirectly, an indispensable part of other aspirations of this group). Therefore, a question arises: what is the source of the contradiction between the conclusions of the mentioned studies (some indicate occupational inactivity and stagnation, minimalism, others point to work and material fulfillment as the primary goal)? The answer is relatively simple. There is a need to separate different material goods, as indicated by Thomas Aquinas [13]. He asserted that all material goods can be divided into two groups: essential and surplus. Similarly, T. Poplawski, following Maurice Halbwachsen, indicated a certain path of social development: from meeting *besoins de nécessité* to *besoins de luxe* [1]. Therefore, if obtaining a job by a disabled person is treated as material foundation (that meets the essential needs), which provides a chance to think about any future development or social participation. The development itself or full social participation can be initiated only on entering the stage of accumulating surplus goods. Only the surplus can be freely disposed of, either for consumption or investment into becoming a social being. Hence, the view that an excluded person with minimal funds (either from “poor” benefits or equally low incomes) can immediately move from the marginalised to the participation phase is flawed. Such reasoning omits a significant transition phase – a stage of slow achievement. This life cycle from alienation and, sometimes, extreme “poverty” to participation and normal social functioning can be depicted in the Fig 1.

Thus, in order for a marginalised individual to emerge from exclusion, they must generate sufficiently high income (N on the Fig. 1): Phase I: from 0-A – the person is in the deep exclusion phase (lives in poverty) and, despite a low income rise, it covers only the elementary needs, or *besoins de nécessité*. Only after reaching minimum income M (that

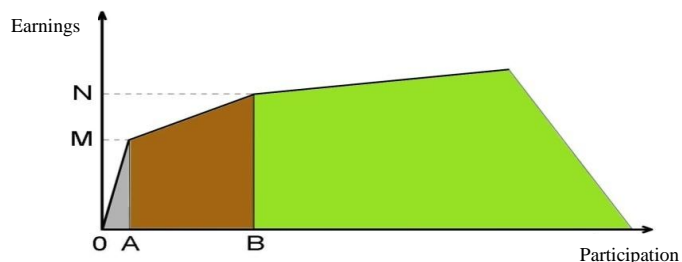


Fig. 1: Phases of social participation and income [11].

covers these needs), the next stage begins, a phase of emerging from exclusion, a phase of true satisfaction from work and noticeable positive social effects. Phase II: from A-B – at the level of income from M to N, surplus amounts start to appear that allow for any kind of investment in oneself and one's development, and, in consequence, a social life. Only the surplus enables them to establish any contact with the society – “step out of the shadows” and rebuild their social “self”. It is therefore a transition phase (currently omitted in the discourse on the matter), in which the individual is still excluded, but the surplus allows them for any kind of life development. In this phase, the person begins to form a kind of habitus that can be achieved only by connecting with the society.

Only with this “social suit” can the individual move to the phase of full participation. When reaching this phase, the person starts to “become convinced that consumption is a possibility”, as aptly noted by G. Nowacki and S.M. Marcinkiewicz [14]. It appears that this “awareness of possibilities” is essential, without it there is only ignorance, disbelief in oneself, nihilism, inability and stagnation, traits characteristic of alienation – they largely contribute to the unwillingness to take a, so to speak, fruitless job (with a minimal wage) that will bring no change in life. Phase III: in which relatively stable accumulation of surplus money enables them to emerge from exclusion and fully participate in the society. This phase is unfinished as the ongoing surplus allows for constant social development and fulfillment of one's needs by means of consumption, i.e. meeting *besoins de luxe*, and realizing this *illusio* of needs is a life-long process.

### A disabled X on the job market<sup>8</sup>, a theoretical and empirical study

The analysis of these theories from the perspective of a disabled person and applying the considerations into prac-

<sup>8</sup>I'm using here a fairly broad allegory, on the one hand, to the novel by F. Kafka, who depicted a situation of citizen K in a chaotic system. On the other hand, X as a mathematical symbol, unknown and unspecified, may be associated with the protagonist lost in an anonymous mass of applicants in “The Lonely Crowd” by D. Riesman, [15]

tice. For the needs of the analysis, the person shall be referred to as X. The following case study is not imaginary but rests on factual events that I have observed during previous research. Hence, the considerations take on a theoretical as well as a practical form. Even if a disabled person X can take a job, they will receive a minimal wage or even less (as such offers, often refunded, dominate for the disabled). The analysis of the graph above results in a conclusion that X with their new meager income will still remain excluded, in other words, their social position will remain the same. The question arises: What will they gain? Nothing apart from new responsibilities and forcing on their ill body (after all, they are disabled) new obligations, routine, rigour and constraint. Perhaps, in the long run, the new responsibilities will contribute to their higher fitness, mobility and life activity (which they will not feel directly and by getting a job one expects specifics in the form of decent payment, not soft, barely noticeable effects additionally delayed in time). Work is supposed to provide income and, subsequently, social participation<sup>9</sup>.

This barely sufficient income will not allow X to participate in the consumption co-existence of the modern social life<sup>10</sup>. These doubtful advantages, or rather a lack of them, do not encourage X to get a job. Moreover, X as a disabled person usually receives a pension lower than the minimum wage<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, theoretically speaking, the effort of finding and starting a job will result in that X will have a monthly budget only twice as high as when being without work. Still, it will only be a budget of about 2,000 PLN which is lower than the national average. It is worth remembering that X, as a disabled person, has a much higher cost of living than other people, they must, for example, cover medical appointments (frequently not covered by insurance) and spend money on medications. As a person with “limited mobility”, they are often forced to use paid transport like taxis. The cost of transport increases after getting a job and X usually has to get to a work place.

This calculation of the X's situation does not take into account one significant aspect, which makes finding a job completely pointless. X, as a disabled person, receives a pension. Due to the fact that there are no permanent pensions, during the next visit at the medical committee, X, as a person who started a job, will be categorised as a person capable of working. In the name of “questionable logic” of the administration, they will no longer have the status

<sup>9</sup>One may even risk a statement that, as K. Marx proposed, work is the basis of life. As he stated: “human does not work to live, but lives to work”.

<sup>10</sup>G. Nowacki follows J Baudrillard in suggesting the consumption character of human existence in the modern society, in *Integracja Społeczna: Polak nie-obywatel, Pogranicze tom XV* [14]

<sup>11</sup>These are the benefits that dominate in Podlasie. The over-stated by propaganda average nation-wide pensions need to be rejected as, just like the average national wages, they are usually an abstraction for such peripheral regions like Podlasie.

of a disabled person, will lose their pension, other benefits and advantages. At best, X will be in the same financial situation as before. If they take into account an additional effort and cost of, for example, transport, X will be in the red. Then why should X even look for a job?

The aforementioned “questionable logic” of the administration is full of similar absurdities and anomalies. Indeed, official administration makes it possible for X to earn extra money and keep the pension (there is an inconsistency here between the legislative aspect and the bureaucratic discretion, problem discussed by Lipsky, who was mentioned above). The current norms determine 3 income thresholds, without any specific numeric data. The first threshold describes the amount that X can earn without any restrictions and consequences. The second threshold, and exceeding it, defines the reduction in the pension. The third threshold results in complete pension elimination. However, the directives related to these thresholds are only an element of the normative system and... nothing more. Whereas, the sheer number of numerous administrative regulations and the breadth of the system directives form, as once stipulated by G. Barkley, “clouds of dust” in which the essence and main objectives of action are lost [16]. In such a matrix of various, often contradictory norms, rules and regulations, street-level workers have, as the founder of the term indicated, a discretionary decision. In this chaos, the officer chooses the norm and regulation to which they will adapt their decision, according to their own whim [7]. Therefore, it depends on their will, discretion, and sometimes even humour and goodwill, or the lack of it, whether the officer will follow the given rule or norm. This polisemous treatment of norms gives the officers, here the pension institutions’ assessment specialists, a practical authority over the legislator, whose directives can be almost freely interpreted. Thus, the officer becomes the autonomous “party” in social interactions. Superior to the legislative body.

Similarly, other systemic measures of the job market for the disabled should be assessed critically. The example of such measures are different occupational preferences. Indeed, they are an important element of the welfare state. However, the instrumental treatment of them by the street-level bureaucracy results in rigidity, wrongful, even pathological situations. Making use of the previous case that was described as person X, their other interactions with the job market can be investigated. As an unemployed person registered at the Employment Office, X is obligated to visit it regularly and contact employment agents. Despite the fact that his health condition impedes their mobility, they are required to present themselves in the employment office at each request of the employment agent, which is a strenuous expedition. Typically, the visit is purely instrumental (and very often... pointless) and is limited to the officer per-

forming his/her bureaucratic obligation and nothing more as they are usually not able to present any job offers to X. If the visit coincides with having funds for internships, X may be directed to undergo an internship, the activity, which, as often highlighted by the officer, is a great opportunity for permanent employment. X, an educated person, is delegated to, for example, a local administrative unit that offers to accept an intern. Every day, as a person on a wheelchair, they overcome difficulties related to getting to work, where they end up being redundant “workers” and so they are directed to perform functions that no one else wants to do (just so they do something and not be in the way of others). As X is refunded and, de facto, redundant for the organisation. Despite their level of education, they may perform, e.g. cleaning duties or duties that insult other workers’ dignity. Being redundant and oppressed, X struggles during the internship period (usually 3 to 6 months). They struggle with the strenuous way to work and an atmosphere that is demeaning, embarrassing, not as much related to their health condition but more to the fact that they are the least relevant, redundant person in the organisation. And they are treated as redundant with no perspectives for permanent employment, dignity and serious treatment; they are at the mercy of their beneficiaries that agreed to take them as interns. An argument that is often mentioned is that internship is an opportunity to learn the profession, however, in such relations, X can possibly only learn humility and patience. The only positive aspect of this situation is a remuneration in the form of internship scholarship. Once again, these are amounts way lower than the minimum wage. Hence, they do not influence the social status of X in any way. X may experience a similar situation when they find an employer who will hire them only for the wage reimbursement by the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled (PFRON). Once again, they will be employed because of the reimbursement and not as workers that bring a substantial generative value. Similar unhealthy situations can occur in supported employment enterprises, where reimbursement is frequently the main reason for their existence and the managers balance between profitability and subsidizing working positions. Such organizations may petrify due to unhealthy relations, in which the managing centres seek for their own personal profits while taking advantage of free workforce that generates funds from PFRON and that can be mistreated as they are at the mercy of their employers.

Likewise, professional activation in units such as Centres for Social Integration (CIS), Social Integration Clubs (KIS) or occupational workshops (ZAZ) deserve critical viewing. After applying to such an organization, X learns a profession, very often completely unrelated to the job market needs and personal qualifications, like confectionery manu-

facture or floristics. Although, none of the professions offer any prospects for continuing work or being employed, so again the X's social situation does not change, at least for the better, as now X is officially a participant of CIS or KIS and is labeled as socially excluded in exchange for a quasi-income in form of a social contract. If X is well educated and achieved a certain level of social awareness, they will soon realize that in all these hopeless relations, the people responsible for organizing these actions always construct all the processes in a way that they profit from them at the expense of the weaker - the excluded to create their own idyllic sinecures. Therefore, an observation of how the few, already affluent and highly-positioned can cannily increase their wealth at the expense of the majority, their needs and poverty, will surely be a constructive and invaluable experience for X<sup>12</sup>.

Of course, X can independently search for a job, a decent job with a good wage. However, if they are persistent in their search, it may happen that after many efforts, during the next "control" visit at the Employment Office, X may appear to be overactive, even if they do not actually find a job. For the officer may want to change the X's profile. Thus, their activity may be an argument for profiling X as a person who can move around the job market independently and they will no longer be eligible for any help from the authorities.

There is a large number of other absurdities and anomalies, especially in the system responsible for the disabled. The people who are, as one may risk to argue, one of the most vulnerable in the society, who usually do not have the strength, means and sufficient knowledge to "fight for their rights", are helpless and oppressed by the social administration. Thorough observation with the use of sociological imagination allows for finding such irregularities and anomalies that I will not refer to here any longer. I believe, however, that future or present administrative workers, who are now students of sociological courses, due to this broader perspective that takes into account the point of view of the applicant, will be able to find them themselves in order to implement positive changes.

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<sup>12</sup>Thus, it is a typical example of the "st. Mathiew's effect", which implies that: "those that are already affluent, will receive more and those who are poor, will have their possessions taken away"

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