

RÉKASI, Nikolett

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Doctoral School of Education,
Special Education Program

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Education

John Wesley Theological College, Department of Education

rekasinikolett90@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9845-9087>

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“It was a well-known fact at the time, in the ’90s, that physiotherapist was a profession for the blind.” – Experiences of physiotherapists with visual impairment

Abstract

Work is an essential part of everyone's life. It frames our days, gives us income, and allows us to contribute to society. For persons with disabilities to go to work and do the work successfully, crucial circumstances need to be implemented. In this paper, I introduce the narratives of two Hungarian blind men, both physiotherapists. I mixed two qualitative methods to explore their experiences: I used the narrative life story interview and the Grounded Theory. I seek answers to the following questions: What motivated the narrators to choose physiotherapy as a profession? Is there a connection between rehabilitation and further education in the narrators' stories? If so, what is it? In my investigation, I concluded that they chose physiotherapy as a profession because it was an obvious choice based on their information. My research has led me to conclude that rehabilitation played a crucial role in both of their narratives regarding their profession choices.

Keywords: physiotherapist with visual impairment, visual impairment, career path, rehabilitation.

“It was a well-known fact at the time, in the ’90s, that physiotherapist was a profession for the blind.” – Experiences of physiotherapists with visual impairment

1. Introduction and theoretical background

People with disabilities are a marginalized social group. Their fundamental human rights, e.g., their right to work, have to be emphasized and strengthened from time to time. If they can work, they may face oppression in the workplace. Researching this kind of oppression is an important task in the field of disability studies because it contributes to our knowledge about the layers and extent of oppression, which is a significant research task (Shakespeare, 2006).

Work is one of humanity’s oldest concepts. People always had to participate in some working activity. In the early Middle Ages, the “work day” was not necessarily defined; people adjusted themselves to the times of the day and the seasons. This changed with industrialization when productivity became an expectation, and workers had to adapt to that (Berzsenyi, 2023, 2024). Today, work is expected to play a crucial role in our lives. It should give us financial security, frame our everyday lives, and make it possible for us to contribute to the economy. We might be expected to feel valuable based on our work and the money we make through it. For persons with disabilities to go to work and do the work successfully, crucial circumstances need to be implemented. The physically accessible work environment is insufficient; a comprehensive and well-adjusted public transport system is also needed to get them to the workplace. In a broader context, we must also consider the importance of personal assistants who make working for persons with disabilities possible (Csángó, 2020). In terms of persons with visual impairment, the advanced level of digitalization is also not enough for employees; computers and other devices should be equipped with assistive technology. Apple products have built-in accessibility options that work really well with visual impairment; Windows and Android products also have their built-in options, and all smartphones can be used as electric magnifiers to some extent by means of their cameras, but several applications can also be installed to assist the users, e.g., applications that recognize bank notes or colours (Gombás et al., 2021; Rékasi et al., 2021). They should also be provided with the preferred hand magnifier if users need it for reading and writing.

In the context of work and career, two models of disability meet in the model matrix: the human rights model and the social model. According to the social model,



disability, therefore visual impairment, to a certain extent, is a social construct, so it is not the individual's task to adjust to societal expectations regarding work (Könczei & Hernádi, 2011; Shakespeare, 2006, 2013). Still, the workplace has to include disabled employees. The human rights model states that work is a fundamental human right and must be secured for everyone. Prioritizing working over social benefits as the primary income source for persons with disabilities makes them tax-paying citizens who can heavily contribute to society instead of relying on just benefits. This leads to a higher quality of life for them.

2. Legislative background and good practices of implementation

When we examine the legislative background of work, we emphasize the human rights model. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) provides in Article 27 the right to work and employment of disabled persons. It says: *"States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities."*

The Hungarian legislation on the rights of citizens with disabilities also states the rights to work and employment of persons with disabilities. Also, it rules the employer's obligations to ensure a safe and inclusive work environment for disabled employees (Act XXVI of 1998 on the rights of disabled persons and ensuring their equal opportunities). Act I of 2012 on the Labour Code mentions disabled workers in only one sentence: it requires employers to make reasonable accommodations. In Hungarian jurisprudence and labour practice, the concept of an employee with reduced working capacity is known, but it is not the same as that of a disabled employee. Still, a disabled employee can also be an employee with reduced working capacity. Act CXCI of 2011 regulates their employment in detail on the Benefits of Persons with Disabled Work Ability and on the Amendment of Certain Acts. The Act also significantly benefits employers who employ persons with reduced work capacity: they are exempt from paying the so-called rehabilitation contribution.

When the implementation of legislation and creating an inclusive work environment are discussed, the focus is on the social model of the disability. According to Csángó (2020), some good social entrepreneurship practices exist. Hangya & Mecséri (2017) and Mecséri (2020) introduce us to the good practices of a state company in Hungary (the National Lottery Company). Csillag et al. (2020), Csillag et al. (2021), Svastics et al. (2020), and Svastics et al. (2023) discuss the challenges, motivation, and opportunities for people with disabilities to become entrepreneurs, and the intersections of the disabled identity and the entrepreneur identity.



3. Career opportunities for persons with visual impairment

According to WHO statistics, ca. 2,2 billion people worldwide have moderate or severe visual impairment and blindness. The leading causes of visual impairment and blindness are refractive errors, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, and age-related macular degeneration. In Hungary, according to the Population Census conducted by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in 2022 (CSO, 2022), there are 273 558 persons with disabilities (adults and children altogether). According to the Census data, there are 67 385 adults with visual impairment (low vision and legal blindness) and 17 328 adults with blindness. When analyzing the data, it is worth bearing in mind that while all Hungarian citizens are obliged to participate in the Census, the reporting of data on disability and various illnesses is voluntary and also self-declared. This means that more visually impaired adults may live in the country.

In Hungary, persons with visual impairment may decide to participate in the so-called occupational rehabilitation. This process usually takes place after rehabilitation, i.e., after the person has learned the adapted methods and techniques of daily living necessary for being independent. The following areas are parts of the rehabilitation process: Orientation and Mobility, which are fundamental if the person wants to work, and Daily Living Skills, e.g., cooking and household chores. The person may also learn Braille and Computer Skills and receive Functional Vision Training where they can explore the best magnifier options for themselves (Dávid et al., 2008; Gombás & Prónay, 2022; Pajor, 2023). According to Dávid et al. (2008), occupational therapy must always be preceded by the acquisition of independent living skills. Rehabilitation is indeed a crucial condition for working or starting occupational rehabilitation. It contributes to the individual's confidence and self-esteem and enables them to live independently. In the frame of occupational rehabilitation, the jobseeker with visual impairment gets thorough information about their possibilities in the labor market. A social worker conducts an exploratory interview about their plans, schooling, skills, etc. A contract is signed if someone with visual impairment wants to use the service. The cooperation starts with a complex assessment. After that, an individual career plan is drawn up, and the person with visual impairment will receive mentoring. Ideally, at the end of the process, the person with visual impairment will be offered a job that matches their plans (Dávid et al., 2008).

Naturally, every person with visual impairment can compete in the free labour market according to their degrees, certificates, and other skills. However, research shows that persons with visual impairment often face negative attitudes at the workplace or during the application process (Forgács & Jekli, 2015; O'Day, 1999; McDonnall, 2014; McDonnall et al., 2014; McDonnall & Lund, 2019). They also have fewer career choices than their sighted counterparts because many professions have aptitude requirements that they cannot meet because of their visual impairment (e.g., persons with low vision often cannot lift heavy objects because their retina is affected). It seems to be an understandable choice on their part to prefer intellectual occupations that require them to draw on their intellectual resources. Such professions include foreign language teaching, translation and interpretation, law, psychology, computer science, social work, and physiotherapy. Next, I will describe



in detail the profession of physiotherapy as a traditionally taught profession available to persons with visual impairment. The life stories of two blind Hungarian men, both qualified physiotherapists who have worked in the profession, are presented.

4. Physiotherapists with visual impairment

The first records of blind girls learning to be masseuses date back to the late 1800s in Britain. By the early 1900s, there were 50 certified blind masseuses all over Britain. The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) has trained blind masseuses since World War I (French, 2017). According to the October 2018 issue of *World of the Blind* (*Vakok Világa*) magazine, the Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted (the Federation) started training blind masseurs in 1960, and classes were running continuously for four decades. For ca. 40 years, the Federation was the only place to study to be a physiotherapist as a person with visual impairment or blindness. The Federation no longer organizes courses, but the Central Hungarian Regional Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted has been cooperating with adult education institutions for the past years, organizing special courses for visually impaired people (N. a., 2018).

5. Research

5.1. Methodology: the combination of qualitative methods

In the research, a mixed methodology of qualitative methods was used. A combination of different qualitative approaches was implemented, which is not a common phenomenon, but we can see some examples. It is most often used when one wants to explore layers that cannot be accessed by traditional methods or when one wants to put reality into a different perspective (Lal et al., 2012; Morse, 2009). The narrative life story method and Grounded Theory (GT) were combined in my study. The purpose of combining the narrative life story interview and GT was to explore a dimension of the lives of men with visual impairment through interview analysis that is otherwise difficult to access. I sought to combine the strengths of the two methods. Rosenthal's (1993) approach to narrative interviewing gives interviewees space to express their perspectives and to tell their narratives. GT allows researchers to reflect highly on their work and the literature (Mitev, 2015). Besides, the coding method allows researchers to work without an existing framework and, at the same time, to construct their theoretical framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). While narratives foreground individuals by focusing on what narrators say, GT provides the opportunity to construct a theoretical framework (Bruck, 2005; Morse, 2009, 2010). Combining these two reflective methods provides the opportunity to focus on the narratives of individuals while framing and comparing them to the narratives of others. Rékasi et



al. (2024) have conducted research using this combination of methods focusing on the school path of women with visual impairment.

In my research, which is part of my doctoral project, partial results are reported. Narrative life story interviews were conducted that focused on the narrator's experiences of fatherhood and masculinity. Regardless of this, in both cases, we can see a typical career path as a physiotherapist, which is worth examining separately, as there is very little literature on this topic in Hungary.

5.2. Research questions

In my analysis, I sought answers to the following questions:

- What motivated the narrators to choose physiotherapy as a profession?
- Is there a connection between rehabilitation and further education in the narrators' stories? If so, what is it?

5.3. Research ethics

The research was carried out with the research ethics license KEB/2024/01 issued by the Scientific and Research Ethics Committee of Eötvös Loránd University, Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Education. The interviews are anonymized, and the narrators are not identifiable. Pseudonyms refer to them. I do not use numbers or letters because I want to indicate that they are subjects of the research, not objects that can be indicated by numbers or letters.

5.4. Participants

Narrative life story interviews were conducted with two Hungarian blind men, Zoltán and Ferenc. Zoltán is 47 years old. He worked for years as a physiotherapist, although today he works in another field. Ferenc is 43 years old and works as a part-time physiotherapist. They both live in Budapest and went to the special course organized by the Federation. They both became physiotherapists as young adults and went to higher education afterward. They both went blind in their young adulthood, although they both have a congenital eye disease. They both participated in rehabilitation organized by the Hungarian Institute for the Blind (the Institute). Ferenc went through rehabilitation before studying to be a physiotherapist; Zoltán had already been working when his eyesight started deteriorating. As a result, he decided to start rehabilitation. As we can already see, the stories of the two men are very similar, which could point in the direction that their life story is not extraordinary. For certainty, we would need further research.

Convenience sampling was used in my research. I reached out to them through personal contact because I had known them before and knew they would fit the research criteria. They are both well-spoken and are used to being interviewed in different situations.



5.5. Results

The analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA 2022 software. GT usually indicates the usage of Atlas.ti, but the MAXQDA is also very suitable for it. Researchers (see e.g., Mile et al.; 2023; Rädiker, 2023) use MAXQDA for GT, among other reasons, because the software structure is logical and gives the researcher all the tools for analysis. In addition, the software also provides creative tools to make the results understandable and visually appealing.

Since a full life story interview was conducted with the men in the study, the coding process was not limited to their professional narratives. According to GT, the coding was done in three steps: 1. open coding, 2. axial coding, and 3. selective coding. A lot of codes were generated in the open coding phase, which were sorted into more extensive categories in the axial coding phase. Then I created the larger categories that define the narratives in a selective coding stage. In both narratives, visual impairment, permanent vision loss, rehabilitation, physiotherapy school, and work were defining categories. In this paper, I will focus on the parts about rehabilitation, physiotherapy school, and work experiences.

5.5.1. „...and then I would have a profession, and then I would have some chance to stand on my own feet...”

Ferenc's eyesight started to deteriorate during his last year of high school. He took the final exams with low vision, and his vision loss influenced his plans for higher education.

“So it was always in my mind, and that is how things turned out, so I thought that I would have to learn it, and then I would have a profession, and then I would have some chance to stand on my own feet, even if it wasn't what I originally wanted to do” (Ferenc).

Zoltán's choice of profession was straightforward as he knew he had to study something that he could do as a visually impaired person, and he knew physiotherapy was something like that.

“So, it was a well-known fact at the time, in the '90s, that physiotherapist was a profession for the blind. Back then, every hospital and every spa had blind physiotherapists” (Zoltán).

In Zoltán's life, the physiotherapist course had another significance. It provided him with an opportunity to learn how to live more independently away from his caring but overprotective family. As he lived in the Institute's dormitory, he already knew about the rehabilitation course, which was “some magical world”, as he put it. This would play an important role later.

“They told me that the training will take place in Orfi, which is an hour-long drive from my hometown. I had not always been so independent because my mum had a bit of an overprotective side. [...] They asked, »Well, are you going to live in or are you going to commute?« Then I said, OK, let's do the living-in. My mum said I would commute because it would take me an hour, and then they said, »Calm down, mum, it will be very good; the child will be a bit more independent.« Of course, I really needed it anyway” (Zoltán).

5.5.2. "The rehab course was also a big boost..."

Both Zoltán and Ferenc participated in the rehabilitation course for persons with visual impairment organized by the Institute. Zoltán had already worked as a physiotherapist when his vision started to deteriorate again, so he decided to take a break from his work to do the three-month live-in course in Budapest. Ferenc lost his eyesight during the last year of high school. Right after high school, he had the opportunity to enrol in a rehabilitation course. In both of their lives, the course was a milestone. Ferenc got a brand-new perspective on his new life, which helped him make serious decisions, e.g., about his future work. Zoltán met his peers who went to college after rehabilitation. This inspired him to apply for college. As a result of the rehabilitation course, they both became more independent and empowered, which played a crucial role in their later professional life.

"From then on, the world opened up in a different sense. I saw, I met visually impaired people, people of different ages, from different life situations, who had become visually impaired. And yes, so I got a completely new perspective, so to speak, and I was struck by sentences that I thought about a lot or was able to think about a lot, and I think they contributed a lot to my ability to move on or to move up a level" (Ferenc).

"The rehab course was also a big boost either in terms of independent living or in terms of processing the whole thing (hesitates). They managed to put together quite a good group at the time, which was almost all young people, and the others waited a year afterward and then went to higher education, and that became a pull for me, and I thought about it" (Zoltán).

After the rehabilitation course, both Zoltán and Ferenc went to college as full-time students. Ferenc, at the time, applied for a spot at the physiotherapy course at the Federation, and he was accepted into both. He decided to enrol in the physiotherapy school first. After he graduated from that, he went to college. Zoltán, feeling inspired by his peers, applied to be a full-time student and was very happy to be accepted.

"It was a big advantage that I had three years of work experience, but I didn't want to do it as a part-time student, I was really interested in it, so I actually started as a full-time student and did it all as a full-time student" (Zoltán).

"So, I started to go in a completely different direction, but in the meantime, I was also flirting with higher education. I was surrounded by a lot of [...] students, ah, that's a »Mickey Mouse degree«, anybody can do that. I said it could be, but I said I probably wouldn't be accepted. But okay, so what then? At worst, I won't get in. And so I went to the admissions, the physiotherapy, and the college. Unfortunately, I was accepted for both; I say unfortunately because now, suddenly, out of nowhere, I had two options, and again, this strange situation that we have been stressing ever since, that if you lose your sight, you are always in such a vulnerable position, but if you don't have information to make decisions, responsible decisions, and then suddenly I found myself even being able to choose between my options. How awesome is that already? And then, as a careful person, I said, let's do one and then do the other. And so I did. So, I went the school for physiotherapy. I really enjoyed it, and I got into a really good team" (Ferenc).

6. Conclusions

The professional paths of the two men are clearly very similar. This is not a coincidence; they are from the same generation and lost their vision entirely before they could choose a career path. From both narratives, it is clear that they chose the profession of physiotherapist because they knew that people with visual impairment could do it. Zoltán's narrative, in particular, confirms this. In Ferenc's case, according to him, he had an interest in massage as a teenager, but it would not have been his first choice before he went blind. Regarding motivation, in both cases, it can be concluded that they chose this profession because it was the obvious choice based on the information available.

Rehabilitation played a crucial role in both of their lives. Although they did not go through occupational rehabilitation, one can say they did not need it because the rehabilitation gave them perspectives on their work lives. This supports the view that rehabilitation is an essential part of being able to work. In both Zoltan and Ferenc's case, it contributed to their independence and boosted their confidence and self-esteem so that they could continue with their studies. Rehabilitation training is important in this case, and in the community it creates peers can inspire each other, as we can see in Zoltán's life. They were most probably empowered by successful rehabilitation.



7. Further research directions

There are no studies on Hungarian physiotherapy training for persons with visual impairment and blindness. This study has the exploratory purpose to examine the motivations of the individuals who choose this profession. It may be worth examining motivation on a larger sample. The relationship between career choice and rehabilitation, as well as the one between career change after vision loss and rehabilitation are also exciting research topics.

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