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Work, Law, and Vulnerability in Late Modernity: Changed Work Capacity and Institutional Exclusion through a Life-History Narrative

Abstract

This article examines how the institutional and legal mechanisms of the late modern labour market shape the life course, social recognition, and labour-market participation of people with changed work capacity. It argues that these mechanisms not only regulate access to work and social protection but also actively produce vulnerability through moralized expectations and fragmented forms of legal governance. The theoretical framework draws on risk society theory, individualized responsibility, and critical disability studies. Conceptualizing disability, based on the experience of acquired functional loss, not as an individual deficit but as a socially and institutionally mediated position relative to a previously work-capable status, the analysis is based on a narrative life-history interview, interpreted as a hermeneutic and interpretive case using Didier Fassin's framework of moral, legal, and institutional evaluation. The study shows how work becomes a moral obligation, how legal classification and administrative routines function as gatekeeping practices through which institutional exclusion is reproduced, how institutional exclusion is reproduced through legal and administrative practices, and how the ethos of independence and a helping identity are organized simultaneously as resources of agency and as mechanisms of self-responsibilization within experiences of changed work capacity in late modern societies.

Keywords: changed work capacity, disability studies, work and law, institutional vulnerability, social recognition

Munka, jog és sérülékenység a késő modernításban: Megváltozott munkaképesség és intézményi kizárás egy életút narratíváján keresztül

Absztrakt

A tanulmány azt vizsgálja, miként alakítják a késő modern munkaerőpiac intézményi és jogi mechanizmusai a megváltozott munkaképességű személyek életútját, társadalmi elismerését és munkaerőpiaci részvételét. Amellett érvel, hogy e mechanizmusok nem csupán a társadalom tagjainak munkához és szociális védelemhez való hozzáférését szabályozzák, hanem a morálisan terhelt elvárások és a jogi kormányzás fragmentált formái révén aktívan hozzájárulnak a sérülékenység termeléséhez is. Elméleti keretét a *kockázattársadalom*, az individualizált felelősség kritikai értelmezései és a fogyatékoságtudomány kritikai megközelítései adják. A fogyatékoságot – a szerzett funkcióvesztés tapasztalatából kiindulva – nem egyéni „deficitként”, hanem egy korábbi munkaképes státuszhoz viszonyított, társadalmilag és intézményileg közvetített pozícióként értelmezve az elemzés egy narratív életútinterjúra épül, amelyet hermeneutikus és interpretív esettanulmányként dolgoz fel, Didier Fassin morális és intézményi értékelésekre fókuszáló keretrendszerét alkalmazva. A tanulmány bemutatja, hogyan válik a munka morális kötelezettséggé, miként működnek a jogi besorolások és az adminisztratív rutinok kapuőr-gyakorlatokként az intézményi kizárás újratermelésében, hogyan termelődik újra az intézményi kizárás, és miként szerveződik az önállóság ethosza és a segítő identitás az egyéni cselekvőképesség erőforrásaként és az önfelelősség tétel mechanizmusaként együttesen a megváltozott munkaképesség tapasztalatában.

Kulcsszavak: megváltozott munkaképesség, fogyatékoságtudomány, munka és jog, intézményi sérülékenység, társadalmi elismerés



Work, Law, and Vulnerability in Late Modernity: Changed Work Capacity and Institutional Exclusion through a Life-History Narrative

“While in a courtroom a defendant is presumed innocent, at the CNDA, the alleged victim is considered suspect.”
(Fassin and Kobelinsky, 2012, p. 446)

Introduction

In this study, we examine how the structure of late modern labour market shapes individual life courses, with a particular focus on the social construction of disability, understood here as changed work capacity, and its role in the world of work. The continuous transformation of labour markets, driven by globalization, individualization, digital networking, demographic change, and the expansion of atypical forms of employment, has intensified exposure to risk at the individual level. These processes place a disproportionate burden on marginalized social groups, including people with changed work capacity, who are increasingly expected to navigate unstable employment conditions and complex institutional environments on their own.

The fragility of democracy becomes particularly visible where the structural characteristics of the late modern world of work produce arrangements in which

individuals with functional limitations are exposed to institutional vulnerability and left to manage labour-market expectations, administrative procedures, and legal classifications without adequate collective support. In such contexts, responsibility for coping with uncertainty is individualized, while the institutional conditions that generate exclusion remain largely unaddressed. This dynamic is especially pronounced for those in already disadvantaged social positions, for whom the relationship between law and work is experienced not as a source of protection, but as a fragmented and often inaccessible system of regulation.

Against this background, the study asks how legal regulations and labour-market institutions shape access to work, social protection, and social recognition for people with changed work capacity, and what mechanisms contribute to the reproduction of marginalization in the late modern labour market. Rather than treating disability as an individual deficit, the analysis conceptualizes it as a socially and institutionally mediated position, shaped by norms of productivity, activity, and deservingness that define who counts as a legitimate worker and citizen.

The theoretical framework of the article is developed through an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology, disability studies, and socio-legal research. We examine power mechanisms that structure social relations in the world of work, the role of legal regulation as a gatekeeper of participation, and the ways in which institutional arrangements influence not only material opportunities but also forms of social recognition and misrecognition.

In the second part of the study, we rely on a narrative life-history interview, incorporated into the analysis as a hermeneutic and interpretive case. The empirical material is analysed using an interpretive framework informed by the work of Didier Fassin, which foregrounds the moral, legal, and institutional evaluations through which social positions are produced and stabilized (Fassin, 2013). Through this approach, the case study illustrates how institutional responses to changed work capacity shape life trajectories, work-related identities, and possibilities for participation in the late modern world of work.

Theoretical Framework: Risk, Responsibility, and the Individualization of Social Vulnerability

Late Modernity and the Individualization of Risk: Beck and Bauman on Work and Vulnerability

The theoretical starting point of the study is provided by critical interpretations of late modernity. The analysis argues that the labour-market and institutional experiences of people with changed work abilities cannot be understood as marginal anomalies, but rather as manifestations of structural processes accompanying the transformation of work, social protection, and responsibility. Drawing on the perspectives of Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman, individual life courses affected by illness, disability, or reduced work capacity are interpreted in the context of the individualization of



risks, the retreat of institutional responsibility, and moralized expectations of activity (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Bauman, 1993, 2000, 2001). Within this framework, uncertainty appears as a normalized feature of late modern labour-market regimes, increasingly addressed at the level of individual biographies and moral self-assessments rather than through collective guarantees (Bauman, 1993; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). While labour-market uncertainty is not unique to late modernity, the specificity of late modern transformations lies in the institutionalization and individualization of these risks, as responsibility for managing structural insecurity increasingly shifts to individual life trajectories (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

This approach provides the macro-theoretical background for the subsequent analysis of disability, labour-market regulation, and narrated institutional experience.

Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society provides an analytical framework for understanding this transformation. According to Beck, late modern societies are characterized not primarily by the distribution of wealth, but by the distribution of risks, many of which are produced by modern institutions themselves (Beck, 1992). While these risks are socially produced, responsibility for managing their consequences is increasingly shifted onto individuals as institutions withdraw from responsibility and reframe structural insecurity as a matter of individual adaptation and choice (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity further deepens this analysis by highlighting how instability becomes a defining feature of contemporary social life. In *liquid modern societies*, durable social structures give way to fluid arrangements in which individuals are compelled to remain flexible, adaptable, and mobile in order to avoid exclusion (Bauman, 2000). Stability, once a collective aspiration, is replaced by an ethic of constant self-adjustment. Here stability refers not only to employment continuity but also to broader forms of institutional predictability, including welfare guarantees, stable career trajectories, and the expectation that social institutions provide relatively durable frameworks for participation (Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

This transformation produces what can be described as a moralization of endurance: suffering becomes acceptable insofar as it is borne quietly and responsibly and rendered institutionally legible. This resonates with Sik's account of social suffering as a socially mediated moral experience linked to disruptions of social integration and to institutionally patterned responses to vulnerability (Sik, 2018).

Bauman's notion of the "corrosion of character" further illuminates how virtues once associated with stability—such as reliability, endurance, and commitment—lose their social value under conditions of permanent uncertainty (Bauman, 2000). In a context where flexibility becomes the primary moral expectation, these traits no longer guarantee recognition or security (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Standing, 2011). Instead, they may contribute to exhaustion and self-blame, as individuals struggle to reconcile internalized moral expectations with structurally constrained opportunities.

These macro-processes materialize in concrete labour-market positions and regulatory arrangements, producing structurally precarious forms of participation. The following section turns to Guy Standing's concept of the precariat to capture how individualized risk and moralized expectations are translated into enduring labour-market insecurity.

From Individualized Risk to Precarious Labour-Market Positions

Guy Standing (2011, 2014) conceptualizes the persistent insecurity of late modern labour markets through the notion of the precariat. By employing this concept, he does not refer to a temporary or transitional employment situation, but to a structurally produced social position characterized by insecure and discontinuous work, unstable income relations, and fragmented access to social rights (Standing, 2011, 2014). In this sense, precarity can be understood as a structural feature of late modern labour markets rather than an exceptional condition.

General Concepts of Disability, Introduction to Disability Studies

What is this much-invoked normality? Rather than a fixed or self-evident category, normality is a historically and culturally contingent ideal type, produced and stabilized through social power rather than collective consensus. Conformity functions as a circular demand: it is continuously expected, yet structurally unattainable for many, and cannot be individually redefined because societies retain the symbolic and institutional authority to define what counts as “normal” (Könczei et al., 2015). The power to name and classify carries symbolic capital in the Bourdieusian sense—recognition, prestige, and legitimacy—which structures hierarchies even when not expressed directly in economic terms (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 164–170). From a disability studies perspective, analysis must therefore begin with the power structures into which individuals are born, as these structures shape the initial conditions of participation and recognition (Kiss & Tóth, 2021, p. 28).

These dynamics are intensified by globalization driven regulatory transformations. Dominant transnational policy discourses—often modelled on U.S. governance templates—privilege individual responsibility and discursive negotiation over structural compensation, weakening welfare frameworks and reframing inequality as discursive overlap rather than a material condition requiring redistribution (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 7–9; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2014, p. 48–49). In disability-related labour policies, this shift manifests in support systems justified through sustainability or non-distortion logics, producing systemic insecurity instead of ensuring participatory parity (Fraser, 2012, p. 44–45). Disability is thus governed not as a collective responsibility, but as an individualized deviation from an implicitly able-bodied norm.

Within disability studies, competing models of disability function as distinct regimes of recognition. The moral model—still influential in many social contexts—interprets disability through inherited blame and moral failure, legitimizing contempt while excluding solidarity as a social response (Könczei & Hernádi, 2011, p. 30). The medical and paternalistic models, although widely criticized, remain institutionally dominant, constructing disabled people as defective subjects to be corrected or protected, and displacing responsibility from social and institutional arrangements that generate exclusion (Könczei & Hernádi, 2011, p. 31). The social model, which gained prominence in the 1990s, marked a critical shift by framing disability as a socially produced exclusion from rights rather than an individual pathology. However, even this model is further expanded by Critical Disability Studies, which



rejects universalist assumptions, foregrounds internal differences within disabled populations, and critically interrogates power, resistance, embodiment, and normality without imposing fixed definitions (Könczei & Hernádi, 2011, p. 32).

From this perspective, justice-oriented disability research cannot limit itself to normative critique or policy design in isolation. Instead, it must map social space, dominant discourses, and structural positions in order to identify how exclusion is reproduced. Attitudes and material regulations change only when the mechanisms sustaining them are rendered visible and subjected to institutional transformation (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 167; Kiss & Tóth, 2021, p. 29; Fraser, 2012, p. 48–49).

Disability-related injustice is maintained not only through material distribution but also through socially produced imaginaries that operate as regulatory truths. Stereotypes about “normal” and “deviant” bodies shape group valuation beyond direct experience, a process strongly amplified by media representations that grant authority to narratives rooted in informational absence rather than lived knowledge (Katz & Braly, 1935, p. 182; Nunnally, 1961, p. 250). Psychiatric and welfare institutions further reinforce these discourses through procedural practices that replace personal narratives with expert-driven classifications (Bacsák, 2024; Foucault, 2000, p. 50).

The governance of disabled bodies reveals how power operates through the normalization of the human body as a historically contingent ideal, particularly via medical, bureaucratic, and moral framings that individualize responsibility (Fraser, 2003, 30–32; Bourdieu, 1994, p. 167). Foucault’s concept of biopower captures this logic by describing institutional control over bodies in domains especially salient for psychosocial disability, psychiatric rights, and guardianship regimes (Foucault & Sutyák, 1998, p. 94; Memmi, 2012, p. 15–18).

Memmi’s concept of delegated biopolitics further illuminates how regulatory responsibility is shifted into the private sphere through care and guardianship structures, while the state assumes a supervisory role. Although framed as supportive, these arrangements often re-privatize regulatory labour and construct an idealized “activation-compatible” subject. Responses shaped by the existential and bureaucratic complexity of disability are frequently interpreted as irrational or non-compliant, resulting in symbolic or material sanctions, despite the fact that governance itself produces the conditions that make conformity structurally unlikely (Memmi, 2012, p. 15–18; Fraser, 2012, p. 48–49).

Disability studies must therefore conceptualize stereotypes, classification practices, and welfare regulation not as external distortions of otherwise neutral systems, but as constitutive dimensions of institutional power. Structural change becomes possible only when the mechanisms that generate and reproduce these normative truths are systematically identified and transformed (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 167; Kiss & Tóth, 2021, p. 29; Fraser, 2012, p. 48–49).

The Role of Law in the Lives of Marginalized Groups

Law plays a decisive role in structuring power relations in the lives of marginalized groups, including people with disabilities. Rather than operating solely as a system of formal rules, law can be understood as a complex assemblage of norms, procedures, and institutional practices through which power is exercised and distributed. Foucault

emphasizes that in modern societies, the significance of law lies not primarily in sovereign command, but in its entanglement with disciplinary techniques and micro-mechanisms of power that regulate everyday conduct (Foucault, 2000, p. 321). From this perspective, legal analysis shifts from abstract legality to the examination of everyday techniques of governance and normalization.

Julia Black further refines this approach through her theory of decentered regulation, arguing that law and regulation are not distinct domains but rather overlapping descriptions of governance processes. Regulation, in this sense, extends far beyond the state and is embedded in institutional, professional, and social contexts that are only loosely connected to formal state power (Black, 2002). This framework enables the identification of regulation in unconventional sites and helps explain regulatory failures in societies marked by weak or fragmented governance (Zsille, 2024). In disability-related labour regulation, control is often exercised through administrative routines, expert assessments, and organizational norms rather than direct legal sanctions.

Alan Hunt, while sharing Foucault's emphasis on governance and discipline, criticizes what he sees as an underestimation of law's continuing importance in modern societies. According to Hunt, law has not been displaced by disciplinary power but remains a foundational element of social regulation. Law and discipline should therefore be understood not as oppositional forces but as complementary mechanisms: law establishes the formal framework within which power operates, while disciplinary practices shape individual behaviour and ensure compliance within that framework (Hunt, 1992). This complementarity is particularly visible in labour and welfare systems, where formal rights coexist with discretionary institutional practices.

When examining the legal situation of members of subjugated groups, it is crucial to recognize that law is not experienced as a unified or coherent system. While legal professionals tend to perceive law as an internally consistent whole, marginalized individuals often encounter it as a fragmented and sometimes contradictory set of rules, procedures, and decisions that manifest differently across various areas of life. This experiential fragmentation produces uncertainty and undermines legal predictability, particularly for those whose access to resources, representation, and institutional knowledge is limited. From this perspective, the apparent difference between legal professionals' understanding of law and the experiences of non-lawyers may not simply reflect divergent perceptions. Rather, it may point to the fragmented institutional structure through which law is encountered in everyday life. For individuals navigating welfare, labour, and administrative systems simultaneously, law often appears not as a coherent normative order but as a series of partially disconnected procedures and decisions.

This fragmentation is not merely experiential but reflects broader structural features of the legal system and society. As Tóth and Kiss (2021) argue, Hungarian society's relationship to public affairs is marked by fragmentation and ambivalence. Even individuals who appear politically passive engage in reflection on public issues, indicating that their relationship to law is not characterized by indifference but by constrained or non-institutionalized forms of engagement. This dynamic is reinforced by the weakness of community spirit and participatory involvement in decision-



making processes, which further restricts the ability of marginalized groups to shape legal and political outcomes (Mikecz, 2021).

Fragmentation is particularly evident in access to justice and the enforcement of legal protection. Marginalized groups frequently face obstacles in asserting their rights, not only due to limited legal knowledge but also to procedural complexity, administrative systems, and the lack of effective legal representation. As Tóth and Kiss (2024) emphasize, participation in public affairs takes diverse forms beyond conventional political action, a point that is especially important for marginalized groups, whose legal status often fails to reflect lived social reality and whose grievances rarely reach formal arenas.

These difficulties are further intensified by what Swidler (1986) describes as a “state of non-settlement,” a condition in which individuals struggle to develop stable strategies for action due to ongoing institutional and normative uncertainty. Hungarian social history, marked by successive systemic transformations, has contributed to this condition, shaping adaptive practices and coping mechanisms that differ significantly from those found in more stable contexts. As a result, marginalized groups develop forms of resistance and survival that operate outside formal legal and political channels, further distancing them from effective legal protection. As Róbert and Susánszky (2022) note, patterns of political participation in Hungary diverge from European averages, reflecting the enduring influence of historical and political conditions on civic engagement.

Taken together, these dynamics show that law operates not only as a formal normative order but as a social institution that shapes individual life trajectories. Access to law and effective legal protection are conditioned by social norms, political will, and historical context. Legislation and law enforcement must therefore account for the specific vulnerabilities of marginalized groups, ensuring that law produces not only internal coherence but a livable and just institutional reality for those most affected by its operation.

Normative Order, Legitimation, and Structural Subordination in the Labour Market

Normative Regulation and Legitimation of Participation

In late modern societies, the labour market functions as an institutionalized space in which participation is shaped not only by economic allocation but also by normative expectations and logics of legitimation. Paid work has become a central criterion of social integration and access to rights, linking labour-market position to institutionally stabilized norms of activity, employability, and adaptability, while also conditioning eligibility for welfare entitlements such as social protection, pension systems, and health insurance. Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis of contemporary capitalism provides a key framework for understanding this normative regulation, emphasizing that late modern capitalism is stabilized less through coercion than through moral regimes of justification (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Within this justificatory order, values such as autonomy, flexibility, and self-management are embedded in the

organization of work, rendering project-based employment and fragmented labour relations legitimate forms of participation.

Within this framework, discourses of activation and employability operate as languages of legitimation that individualize responsibility for adaptation while obscuring structural constraints. Labour-market exclusion is thus framed as a problem of misalignment with institutional expectations rather than as the outcome of structural barriers, a dynamic closely linked to the stabilization of precarious labour-market positions characterized by insecurity, income volatility, and fragmented social rights (Standing, 2011, 2014).

Normative regulation also generates tensions at the level of action. Bernard Lahire's theoretical approach highlights how institutional expectations presuppose a coherent and continuously mobilizable actor, an assumption that aligns imperfectly with heterogeneous and fragmented life courses (Lahire, 2011, 2012). From this perspective, difficulties of participation are more accurately understood as problems of alignment between institutional norms and heterogeneous dispositional structures than as individual deficits. Structural subordination thus encompasses not only material inequalities but also normative regulation and institutional expectations, producing forms of vulnerability that unfold within individual life-course narratives.



Methodology and the Interpretive Framework

"In a little more than half a century, we have moved from a regime of trust, in which the account of an applicant was sufficient for the OFPRA in more cases than not, [...] in which an accumulation of evidence is increasingly necessary but rarely sufficient [...]" (Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012, p. 455)

Methodological Approach: Life History and Interpretation

The empirical material of this study is based on a narrative life-history interview conducted with Ella (56), a former healthcare worker living in precarious conditions with changed work capacity.¹ The interview is incorporated into the analysis as a hermeneutic and interpretive case, enabling us to examine how an individual life course unfolds in interaction with the legal, institutional, and normative conditions of the late modern labour market. In this study, the life-course interview functions as both an empirical data source and a qualitative research method, allowing for the reconstruction of how institutional structures are interpreted and function within individual life trajectories.

¹ Parts of the life-history interview used as empirical material have been previously published (see Gyursánszky & Zsille, 2025). The present article employs a different theoretical framework, conceptual vocabulary, and analytical logic; the overlap is limited to parts of the empirical interview material. The pseudonym of the interviewee differs in the present study.

The methodological approach draws on the life-history tradition associated with Gabriele Rosenthal, who conceptualizes the life course as a socially constructed field of meaning and distinguishes between lived and narrated life histories (Rosenthal, 1993). This distinction serves as an interpretive orientation: the interview is treated not as a chronological reconstruction, but as narrated experience whose meaning is produced reflexively in the act of telling. Rosenthal's approach has been elaborated in Hungarian biographical research, notably in the work of Éva Kovács and Júlia Vajda, who emphasize that life-history narratives do not simply reproduce a "past as it happened," but constitute interpretive processes in which personal experience and social context are mutually implicated (Kovács & Vajda, 2002; Vajda, 2003).

Accordingly, the present study does not aim to reconstruct Ella's life course in its entirety. Instead, it focuses on analytically salient phases and interpretive junctures where labour-market regulation, legal classification, and institutional routines shape agency. The quotations function as analytic condensations: selected excerpts embedded in the broader trajectory, rendering visible the cumulative effects of structural constraints. This is consistent with methodological reflections that frame selective interpretation and contextualization as a core responsibility of qualitative research (Kiss & Tóth, 2021).



Interpretive Framework: Moral and Procedural Evaluation

Interpretation is guided by an interpretive framework informed by Didier Fassin, directing analytical attention to the moral, legal, and institutional evaluations through which social positions are produced and stabilized in institutional decision-making contexts (Fassin, 2013; Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012). The interpretive framework of the analysis draws on two closely related but analytically distinct approaches developed by Didier Fassin. Fassin's work on moral evaluation highlights that institutional decision-making is not merely a sequence of legal or technical operations, but a normative arena in which individuals' credibility, deservingness, and moral worth are continuously assessed and negotiated (Fassin, 2013), shaping expectations related to work, activity, and independence as conditions of institutional recognition. In parallel, Fassin and Kobelinsky's analysis foregrounds the operation of legal and administrative procedures, showing how access to law and social protection becomes contingent upon classificatory practices, evidentiary requirements, and procedural gatekeeping mechanisms (Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012). As they note, *"while in a courtroom a defendant is presumed innocent, at the CNDA, the alleged victim is considered suspect"* (Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012, p. 446). Taken together, these two perspectives allow us to conceptualize changed work capacity not as an individual deficit, but as a socially mediated position produced at the intersection of legal classifications and morally charged institutional evaluation through which vulnerability is generated in concrete institutional settings.

From this perspective, disability is approached not as an individual deficit, but as a relational and institutionally produced social position that shapes access to recognition, rights, and opportunities across the life course. The interview therefore

functions as an interpretive extension through which the institutional production of vulnerability and exclusion becomes empirically intelligible (Fassin, 2013).

Empirical Case and Analytic Orientation

The interview was conducted with *Ella* (pseudonym), a 56-year-old woman with a professional background in healthcare work, who had been living with changed work capacity following a workplace accident. Prior to the accident, she had had an extended employment history in care-related occupations. Since her reclassification, she has been engaged in prolonged interaction with labour-market institutions, disability-assessment authorities, and welfare administration. At the time of the interview, she was living in socio-economically precarious conditions while navigating partial labour-market participation alongside disability-related administrative procedures. Across the interview, the analysis is structured by three recurring moral logics: (1) *the helping identity*, (2) *the moral relation to work*, and (3) *the ethos of independence*. These are not external themes imposed post hoc; they appear as narrative resources through which Ella claims competence, frames deservingness, and evaluates institutions. The interpretive case examines how institutional classification, activation expectations, and administrative routines produce evaluative chains shaping the life course, analysed through three recurring moral logics—helping, work, and independence—at points of institutional gatekeeping.

As the analysis is based on a single life-history interview, the case is not intended to represent the full diversity of disability experiences. Rather than statistical representativeness, the interpretive case is used to illuminate the institutional mechanisms that shape lived encounters with labour-market regulation and legal classification.

Interpretive Case: Institutional Vulnerability and Moral Evaluation

“After I had a workplace accident I was classified as disabled and from that point on it became difficult to find employment...” (Ella, 56)

Ella's narrated trajectory links early exposure to psychiatric institutions and repeated experiences of instability to a later vocational commitment to healthcare and care work. A workplace accident constitutes the decisive rupture, initiating prolonged bureaucratic and legal struggles and reclassifications that reshape her social position. In analytical terms, this rupture marks the point where Ella's biography becomes subject to institutional classification and eligibility decisions.

The subsequent trajectory can therefore be read as a sequence of gatekeeping encounters in which access to support and work is negotiated through procedural requirements and moral evaluations of credibility, compliance, and effort. The case is analytically productive because it concentrates how changed work capacity is institutionally managed and morally evaluated under late modern conditions.



Legal-Institutional Landscape

Within the interpretive framework proposed by Fassin and Kobelinsky (2012), the Hungarian system of disability-related benefits can be understood as a classificatory regime that produces vulnerability through routine legal and administrative practices. The unified benefit system introduced by Act CXCI of 2011 on the Benefits for Persons with Changed Working Capacity and the Amendment of Certain Acts institutionalized a complex assessment procedure, in which rehabilitation authorities classify individuals with changed work capacity into standardized categories (such as B2 or C2). These categories simultaneously allocate material entitlements and impose behavioural obligations, linking eligibility to expectations of rehabilitation, labour-market activation, and compliance.

Although the legal terminology reflects elements of the social model, the operative logic of the system remains predominantly health-based: medical diagnoses and functional impairment continue to play a decisive role in determining access to support. Classification is not a one-time decision but a repetitive administrative process structured by reassessments, standardized forms, and procedural routines. Through these practices, disability is constituted not merely as a medical condition but as an institutional position, continuously evaluated through moralized criteria of rationality, cooperation, and deservingness, thereby shaping claimants' lived experience of the law and its boundaries (Kiss & Kenéz, 2017).

Helping Identity as a Claim to Competence and Deservingness

The helping identity functions as a moral language of competence and deservingness through which Ella positions herself as a legitimate subject of recognition in institutional contexts. Ella narrates care work as a biographically grounded commitment rather than "just a job," rooted in early encounters with institutional vulnerability:

"My mother suffered from schizophrenia * From the age of 4, I visited the psychiatric ward as a visitor, and there I experienced what I experienced and saw what I saw * This motivated me to * go into nursing."²

Here helping functions as an identity anchor and provides moral legitimacy. Later, after institutional exclusion, this helping identity reappears as peer-support and procedural guidance, showing how agency is reclaimed through relational contribution:

"Because they get this three-page assessment form that they have to fill out, and there are provocative questions like, 'What are we doing to help you enter the workforce?' So now, what do you answer? Well, I told them what to answer."

² The transcription conventions follow the Hungarian narrative interview transcription system used by Kovács (2007) and Kovács and Vajda (2002), in which pauses, emphases, interrupted utterances, lowered voice, laughter, unintelligible passages, uncertain hearings, and rapid word-linking are marked in the written transcript in order to preserve analytically relevant features of spoken narration. In the excerpts, "-" indicates a half-second pause; a colon at the end of a word, for example "yes:", marks elongated pronunciation; a note in parentheses, for example "(laughs)", marks a metacommunicative signal; "/:no" marks the beginning and end of a commented passage; bold type indicates emphatic or loudly spoken text; a word-final hyphen, for example "ye-", marks an interrupted utterance; "(...)" marks omitted or unintelligible text; a word in parentheses, for example "(no)", marks uncertain hearing; and linked repetition, for example "yesyes", indicates faster-than-usual word-linking. See especially „III. 2. Melléklet: interjúgépelési szabályok" for the transcription notation (Kovács, 2007).

This is also a moment where lived experience is translated into administratively legible categories: the biography is reorganized into the format of the case file, and participation becomes dependent on mastering institutional forms. This movement—from professional caregiver to community “translator” of bureaucracy—illustrates how the helping identity is reconfigured rather than abandoned under changed work capacity. From a Fassinian perspective, this reconfiguration illustrates how moral worth and competence are renegotiated within institutional contexts that simultaneously exclude and demand activity. This reconfiguration does not occur in a social vacuum: it is shaped by institutional procedures that translate lived experience into administratively legible categories, thereby redefining competence and deservingness in procedural terms.

Work as Moral Recognition Under Conditional Support

Here, work operates as a moral criterion of citizenship: it is the lens through which institutional recognition is granted or withheld. Support is therefore experienced as conditional recognition, continuously subject to proof through narratives of activity and endurance. In Ella’s narrative, work organizes claims to legitimacy, worth, and social belonging. Work is narrated as a primary source of self-worth, social recognition, and family responsibility. The accident disrupts not only income but the moral architecture of selfhood:

“Well, it was a huge blow for me. First, I had to come to terms with the fact that I was no longer working at the hospital. My daily routine was to go to work every evening, come home every other day, cook, clean, raise my children, and then suddenly, from one day to the next, it was all over and I was left with four walls. There was a period when I was depressed because of this... That’s right. I managed to get through it on my own, but it was difficult. It was difficult. It wasn’t an easy story.”

The interview repeatedly frames welfare and legal procedures as moralized tests of legitimacy, where support must be fought for and suffering must be proven:

“For me, it really hit home when I was put on disability. It was really cool that I was supporting myself, that I was bringing home the bigger paycheck, that I was able to give my kids everything they needed. And when you break down and really need help, you find closed doors everywhere. I tried, I did my best for two years, of course, I didn’t expect help from the state in the first place, but it’s so difficult to fight for it, to prove that you are sick and that you really need some support.

Under such conditions, access to institutional support is experienced as a form of continuously negotiated conditional recognition, structured through procedural requirements and evaluative judgments, rather than as an automatically activated social right (Fassin, 2013; Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012). This experience is intensified by the fragmented nature of legal governance in the field of changed work capacity, where different institutional domains—medical expert assessment, labour-market regulation, and social administration—operate according to partially autonomous



and often incompatible logics. For affected individuals, navigating the system therefore requires the constant “translation” of their condition and legitimacy across institutional registers that do not communicate seamlessly with one another.

In this sense, the metaphor of the “closed door” does not refer to an isolated bureaucratic failure, but to a systemic condition produced by institutional disjunctions. In this moral economy, being “active” is not merely an economic expectation but a condition of recognition. The paradox is that activity remains demanded even when institutions withdraw pathways to dignified participation.

Independence as Self-Management Under Institutional Opacity

Ella repeatedly narrates herself as someone who acts, learns, and persists—an ethos shaped by early instability and later reinforced by labour-market and welfare regimes that individualize responsibility. Her first response to disability classification is immediate self-activation:

“Well, of course, in 2015, when I was classified as disabled, the first thing I did was try to find a job. I wrote a resume saying that I was looking for work in healthcare with more than 25 years of experience, a high school diploma, computer skills, and knowledge of Russian. So, I wrote my own little resume. * I went to the employment center and asked for help in writing a resume that would be good for me.”

At the same time, independence also appears as boundary-setting: she rejects forms of work experienced as humiliating and making her excessively vulnerable:

“There is a job agency here that deals with people with changed work abilities --- [...] they would have offered me a call center job, but then * I worked there for one day, and then what, I couldn't handle more calls * I made 150 calls, and what do you mean, that's all? * They treat people so badly and are so condescending that I can't stand it anymore * I don't want to, I don't want to -- I don't want to put myself in such a vulnerable position ---”

The ethos of independence is therefore double-edged: it enables resistance to degrading inclusion, yet it also intensifies self-responsibilization in a system that remains opaque and conditional. This is captured in the moral demand to work under exclusion:

“* and then you get asked where you work, I'm on disability, I'm at home, what do you mean you don't work, give me a job, damn it, and then I work * well, that's about where I am right now * to be honest * because it's really hard”

“But I would like to work, I just can't do a full-time job, only part-time, in a place where they can take into account that I have to get up sometimes, I have to walk a little because my back hurts.”

Independence thus emerges as a double-edged moral orientation: it enables resistance to degrading inclusion, while simultaneously reinforcing the individualized responsibility demanded by opaque institutional regimes.



What the Case Makes Visible

Taken together, the methodological approach and interpretive case show how late modern institutional arrangements produce vulnerability through moral, legal, and procedural evaluations (Fassin, 2013). Ella's narrative demonstrates that changed work capacity is governed not only through benefits and categories, but through expectations of activity, self-management, and worth, articulated through a sequence of institutional judgments linking eligibility to moral credibility.

Following Fassin's analysis of institutional moral evaluation, these expectations operate as forms of moral judgment through which eligibility, credibility, and deservingness are continuously assessed and stabilized in administrative practice (Fassin, 2013; Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012). The three pillars—helping identity, moral relation to work, and independence ethos—function simultaneously as resources of agency and as sites where institutional pressures are internalized and negotiated.

Summary

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates how late modern labour markets and fragmented legal regimes produce structural vulnerability that is individualized through moralized expectations of activity and self-reliance. Law operates not merely as a framework of rights but as an institutional gatekeeper shaping access to work, recognition, and social membership. Under these conditions, exclusion from work functions as a democratic deficit, revealing the limits of institutional responsibility in contexts where labour remains the primary medium of social integration.

The interpretive case demonstrates that the governance of changed work capacity is grounded in the alignment of legal classifications, moral evaluations, and labour-market norms, through which individual life courses and modes of participation are structured beyond the specific empirical context examined. This highlights how, in late modern labour and welfare regimes, the governance of vulnerability emerges as a key site through which the boundaries of institutional responsibility are articulated. However, the case raises broader questions that future research could explore. Experiences of younger individuals, as well as those of persons with intellectual or other forms of disability, may involve encounters with different legal institutions and labour-market regulations. Comparative qualitative research across disability groups, age cohorts, and life-course stages could therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutional arrangements shape encounters with law and the lived experience of legal regulation.

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