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Socio-psychological contexts of taking on the role of employee by adults with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

This article presents the social and psychological conditions of entering the role of an employee by people with intellectual disabilities. The social and legal-organisational barriers to entering employment by this group are presented. The psychological aspects of becoming an employee, especially on the open labour market, are also analysed. Attention is drawn to the importance of work in the process of maturation of personality and identity and in the pursuit of autonomy.

Keywords: people with intellectual disabilities, role of the worker, determinants of adulthood, autonomy, identity.

Introduction

Human adulthood is a key concept considered in the field of social sciences. Whether analysed in academic discourse or in relation to everyday practice, it is currently considered an ambiguous and complex phenomenon (Malewski, 2013), especially when it concerns people with disabilities, especially women and men with intellectual disabilities (ID). This is due to the stereotypical perception of this social group through the lens of cognitive deficits (including the 'perpetual children' syndrome) (Cytowska, 2012).

The development and maturation of people with ID is the result of a continuous interaction between problems arising from their dysfunction and environmental barriers, especially those related to social attitudes (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, ratified by Poland in 2012). Therefore, their adulthood is entangled in a complex socio-cultural context and should not be judged in terms of developmental tasks ascribed to typical adults in the community. A growing body of research portrays this period of life for people with ID as a time of developing many of the social skills and competences that they failed to acquire in school and adolescence (cf. Cytowska, 2012; Southward and Kyzar, 2017; Strandova, Evans, 2015; Wolska, 2015).

One of the most important indicators of adulthood is entering paid employment. For every person, work is an important aspect of life because it allows them to experience their own development, increased self-esteem and social usefulness, independence and effectiveness in decision-making – necessary to achieve full independence and expanded social contacts. For people with ID, the benefits of work are similar and are most often observed in three areas: existential - maintaining and meeting the needs of daily existence; social - participating in a work group and building new interpersonal relationships; psychological – meeting higher-order needs such as self-realisation and self-development. Moreover, professional work shapes a person's socio-professional identity (cf. Cytowska, 2012; Krzemińska, Lindynberg, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to show the social and psychological determinants of the process of adults with ID entering the workforce.

The social context of work for people with intellectual disabilities

Work is an important area of adult functioning. It determines people's daily existence, but it also opens space for the realisation of dreams, ambitions and aspirations for improvement. People with disabilities (as well as their loved ones) are constantly trying to prove that work has a rehabilitative dimension for them, and therefore its existential significance is limited. In the case of people with ID, this is particularly evident, as their daily needs are most often met within the biological family, so that the earnings from work do not necessarily serve to support themselves and their loved ones but are merely an addition to the family budget. This attitude indicating that the efforts of people with ID are undervalued and even belittled is one factor in their discrimination (Barnes and Mercer, 2008, p. 59).

Others result from the impact of yet other external environment barriers - negative social attitudes reinforced by stereotypes and prejudices; inadequate

preparatory education for young people with ID; inadequate, outdated legislation; limited access to the labour market.

Among the social barriers faced by adults with ID on their journey towards employment, the negative attitudes of those around them, both those closest to them and those further afield not directly related to them, are significant.

Drawing conclusions from research conducted in 2011 on social attitudes towards people with ID, Zdzisław Kazanowski noted that the majority of respondents show the so-called *effortless tolerance* - they accept these people, but do not want to get involved in relations with them (Kazanowski, 2011), which may indicate an ambivalence of attitudes towards this social group, so despite the increase in acceptance resulting from better knowledge of them, we are still, as a society, shying away from undertaking activities that involve proximity with these people (interpersonal contacts, relations, direct support). People with ID "(...) have to face, above all, entrenched patterns of opinion about them, which become a fundamental barrier to the development of life activities. They can be said to define their life situation" (Erenc, 2008, p. 37).

Social attitudes, especially negative ones, are perpetuated by stereotypes and prejudices against a given social group, which correlate with superstition. Significantly, these three phenomena strongly affect the attitudes of people who are not in contact with the social group in question, so they cannot verify the stereotypes they have heard, triggering prejudice and fear resulting from superstition (Buchnat, 2008). Relating these correlations to stereotypes, prejudices and triggering superstitions towards people with ID, it is important to acknowledge that nowadays direct contact with these people is more frequent, almost daily. However, it only becomes possible to dispel stereotypes when one gets to know this group better, their capabilities, their needs, but also their weaknesses. Thanks to the fact that more and more people with ID are working, also in the open labour market, their potential is being recognised and the thinking about their incapacity, lack of stamina, fatigue, aversion to effort, etc., is being verified. Research on the employment of people with ID, particularly with employers and co-workers, supports the findings that those social groups that hang out with people with ID dispel unpleasant myths and stereotypes about them (Cytowska, 2008). Thus, the opening up of work, local, and previously school environments to work, leisure, and study together may contribute to a slow change in attitudes towards the population of people with ID and a more willingness to enter into relationships with them.

Negative societal attitudes combined with still strong stereotypes triggering prejudice are indirect barriers to discrimination against people with ID in the labour market. The direct cause of their poor participation in employment is inadequate vocational preparation and labour market constraints.

Preparation for work

As of 2017, preparation for occupation and work for young people with ID has been shifted to two forms of education: 3-year lower secondary trade schools and 3-year special preparatory schools - intended mainly for young people with more profound ID (Journal of Laws 2017, item 60). Pupils with mild ID can learn together with their peers in mainstream first-level branch schools (inclusion and integration branches) and in segregated school environments, i.e. in special first-level branch schools (Journal of Laws 2019, item 639).

Special lower-secondary vocational schools can prepare for the following professions: assistant carpenter, assistant catering worker, assistant hotel service worker, assistant mechanic, assistant tailor (Journal of Laws 2019, item 316). It should be noted that this list is quite limited, and the change compared to the previous group of professions intended for graduates of primary schools with a recognised intellectual disability (e.g. tailor, cook, confectioner) is that the qualifications acquired are limited to auxiliary activities in the profession. On the one hand, it can be agreed that this takes into account the limited possibilities of people with ID, but on the other hand, today's young people with a milder form of ID have higher aspirations, more similar to the contemporary labour market, they would like to work at a computer, in an office, in childcare institutions or for seniors, and such opportunities are not given to them (Cytowska, 2012; Woynarowska, 2020).

For young people with profound ID, special schools for work experience are organised. They are three years long and their programme, modified in 2019, emphasises independence, creativity, social communication and, above all, greater involvement of the student in the implementation of the work placement (Journal of Laws 2019, item 639). Schools can use the assisted practice model with a teacher-trainer (Antecka et al., 2018) along the lines of a job coach - the main element of supported employment, which will be discussed later in this article. The innovation of supported practice, the authors of the concept argue, is to implement elements of an effective supported employment method into education in order to give students the opportunity to gain practical work experience during their school education on the open labour market. In preparatory schools, the currently preferred system of apprenticeships is usually carried out on the school premises in thematic workshops. Such artificial conditions are not conducive to young people getting to know the realities of the labour market, the atmosphere of the workplace, the requirements of the job.

Graduation from a specialised vocational school of the first degree or from a special preparatory school is unfortunately not a sufficient achievement to open the labour market to graduates of these institutions. Unemployment among people with ID is very high, although hidden in the data for all non-working people with disabilities over the age of 16. (80% economically inactive). For

example, the employment rate for people with disabilities in 2020 was 16.7 % (for 10 years this has only increased by 2.3 percentage points), which is three times less than the rest of the population (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2021, p. 29). However, these figures come from Job Centres, so based on them we can talk about overt unemployment and formal employment, ignoring hidden unemployment, i.e. unemployment not reported to the Job Centre, and the shadow economy of employment, in which, unfortunately, there can be unlawful actions by employers – exploitation and even violence against employees with disabilities, and among them people with ID are the most vulnerable.

The employment of this group was particularly adversely affected by the period of political transformation, although at that time unemployment plagued the entire adult population. In 1991, a solution emerged for graduates of special vocational schools and preparatory classes who could not find work either in the sheltered or, even more so, the open labour market. It was then that the first occupational therapy workshops (*warsztaty terapii zajęciowej* – WTZ) were organised, and the 1997 Act on Social and Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons (Dz. U. 1997, No. 123, item 776) specified the scope of their activity, classifying them as forms of professional and social rehabilitation. Among the main goals of WTZs is the acquisition by persons with disabilities of independence and skills and qualifications enabling them to take up employment. WTZs implement many forms and techniques of occupational therapy, thanks to which participants learn activities of daily life and personal resourcefulness, as well as develop psychophysical fitness and basic and often specialist vocational skills.

More than 25 years of operation of WTZ in the system of socio-vocational rehabilitation reveals some inconsistencies with the requirements of the Act. First and foremost, for many adults with ID, especially when they have a combined disability, the WTZ turns out to be a destination because they do not have the opportunity to take up employment.

WTZs have been criticised on several occasions, especially in the context of the prevalent practices of control, the implementation of obedience and politeness, the excessive focus on artistic activities, regardless of whether someone has talent or not, the detachment from reality by organising events and games that are supposed to counteract boredom, but do not foster social maturation and, on the contrary, perpetuate passivity and an attitude of acceptance of the proposed solutions (Cytowska, 2013; Żółkowska, 2011).

Legal and organisational possibilities of employing people with intellectual disabilities

Regardless of whether the direction of vocational education was correctly chosen, whether the young person is satisfied with the choice made earlier (un-

fortunately, often limited by many factors, such as health, psychophysical capabilities, availability of a school with a specific vocational profile, pressure from the environment – parents, teachers, colleagues), when completing vocational education, he or she faces a serious barrier in the form of unpreparedness of the modern labour market to accept an employee who requires more care from the employer than the average trainee.

In Poland, the employment of persons with ID is regulated by the already mentioned Act on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (*ustawa o rehabilitacji zawodowej i społecznej oraz zatrudnianiu osób niepełnosprawnych*) of 1997, as amended. Currently, the work of this social group can be based on competitive conditions on the open labour market - the same rules apply to every candidate for a given position – and on special conditions on the protected labour market – organised workplaces, selected and adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities (Journal of Laws 2023, item 100).

Different solutions are proposed in both systems. On the sheltered labour market, there are sheltered workshops (*zakłady pracy chronionej* – ZPCH) and increasingly popular – occupational activity workshops (*zakłady aktywności zawodowej* – ZAZ). Without going into the ins and outs of their functioning, it is worth noting that both forms, according to legislation increasingly adapted to the requirements of the European Union, should only be a transitional stage to employment in companies on the open labour market.

Vocational activation of people with disabilities in the open labour market is to be supported by the Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 13 December 2007 on providing assistance to employers (Journal of Laws 2007, item 240), which provides for a compact system 'forcing' their employment. Companies with twenty-five or more full-time (or full-time equivalent) employees are obliged to take on at least 6% of their workforce with disabilities. If they meet this condition, they can count on subsidising the costs incurred for employing an employee with a certain degree of disability. The situation is similar for smaller companies, which are not forced to make the presented organisational moves. When a person with intellectual disabilities, visual disability, epilepsy or mental disorder is hired, the amount of the subsidy increases. It should be emphasised that the employer is obliged to take measures to adapt the workplace and the circumstances of employment. The subsidy programme for employers willing to employ people with certified disabilities (significant, moderate, light) automatically entails disciplining those who are resistant by imposing fees transferred to the State Fund for Persons with Disabilities (*Państwowy Fundusz Rehabilitacji Osób Niepełnosprawnych* – PFRON) (Cytowska, 2013).

Helping people with disabilities to be employed and remain economically active in the open labour market can involve the following forms (Cytowska & Wołowicz-Ruszkowska, 2013):

- Supported employment - according to the Act on Social Employment (*zatrudnieniu socjalnym*), means providing support of a counselling and financial nature in maintaining professional activity which makes it possible to undertake employment or socially useful work, establish or join a social cooperative or undertake economic activity (**Journal of Laws 2011 No. 43, item 225**).
- Supported employment - is defined by the World Association for Supported Employment (WASE) as: "gainful employment in an integrated environment in the open labour market, with ongoing support provided to the disabled worker. Gainful employment means the same payment for the same work as for a non-disabled worker" (Majewski, 2009, p. 15). In Poland, a preliminary definition of supported employment (in line with the EUSE – European Union of Supported Employment - approach) was proposed in May 2011: "providing support to persons with disabilities or other groups at risk of exclusion in obtaining and maintaining paid employment on the open labour market" (Cytowska & Wołowicz-Ruszkowska, 2013, p. 22). Supported employment has developed on the basis of the 'training through work' method for people with intellectual disabilities, taking into account their individual needs. The hitherto existing traditional model of train – place has been changed to a model: place – train – maintain (Gorący, 2011, pp. 134–137). Supported employment includes the assistance and support of a so-called job coach or job assistant (job coach), whose activities are two-pronged (aiming to employ the person with ID and for him/her to keep the job) and aim to provide the most targeted support possible. The person of the coach combines the functions of a vocational teacher, vocational counsellor, occupational therapist and support person.

Supported employment appears to be the most inclusive; it addresses the pressing problems of unemployment and inactivity in a population of people with ID who have vocational potential. Unfortunately, it has still not been formalised and job coach is not included in the list of professions. This system of employment is implemented by design, hence giving rise to a number of uncomfortable situations for people with disabilities and, in particular, restrictions on the continuity of employment.

In Poland, the Act on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities of 1997 (**Journal of Laws of 2011, No. 127, item 721**, as amended), which has already been cited several times, still treats disability too one-sidedly, as 'permanent or temporary inability to fulfil social roles due to permanent or long-term impairment of the organism's functions, in particular

resulting in inability to work' (art.2, point 10), thus shifting the burden of responsibility for the said incapacity to causes inherent in the individual, ignoring barriers located in the social and material environment. The greatest weakness of the Act and the definition of disability given therein should be emphasised, namely the failure to take into account the strengths of a person with a disability (even if only as an effect of compensating for impaired functioning) and thus to emphasise his or her individual capacity to undertake work.

Among special educationalists - theorists and practitioners - there is also a perception that people with ID have limited work opportunities. Although this group is very diverse, there is still a stereotypical thinking about the work activities they can undertake: they must be uncomplicated, repetitive, schematic. Even if this is the situation for contemporary employed people with ID, considering the pragmatic considerations of Richard Sennett (2008), routine and exercise play a positive role in the work of a professional who can always call upon the capabilities of his or her body. By giving meaning to even the simplest actions and activities, he derives dignity from them; he takes pride in his work. If one is proud of one's work, doing it brings more satisfaction.

Taking up work as an important step towards autonomy and fuller development personality and identity

From a psychological point of view, the most important marker of adulthood is the ability to satisfy all needs, especially those of a higher order, which makes it possible to become fully independent and self-reliant. Personality integration and the formation of an identity and world view take place, thanks to which a person becomes responsible for him/herself, can take responsibility for another person, is able to control his/her emotions, copes with difficult situations, and has the readiness to self-determine and decide for oneself (Oleś, 2011). These aspects of adulthood are developed to varying degrees by people with ID, some are able to achieve full independence or function with little accompaniment from loved ones or a social worker, others are almost entirely dependent on assistance or even care (e.g. people with profound ID). Thus, there is a group among this population with a formed self-awareness, able to make decisions independently or with support, and this ability entails the development of responsibility (Settersten, Ottusch & Schneider, 2015). However, many people with ID find it difficult to achieve psychological maturity, which may be a result of – on the one hand – social barriers and, on the other hand, their own barriers, often secondary ones being the aftermath of negative experiences from social interactions and relationships (Brzezinska et al, 2011; Pisula, 2008; Woynarowska, 2020).

Autonomy is one of the most important human needs, the pursuit of autonomy is inscribed in the challenges of adulthood. Synonyms of autonomy are independence and self-determination - these concepts are associated with freedom, self-realisation and individual dignity (Tylewska-Nowak, 2015). Achieving full independence is difficult and actually impossible, as we are always or feel dependent on someone or something. Autonomous living does not necessarily mean living on one's own or performing daily activities independently. Rather, it should be understood as the freedom to make choices and exercise control over one's own lifestyle and daily affairs (Zakrzewska, 2021).

Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities includes this as one of the principles of the States Parties' agreement: 'respect for the inherent dignity, autonomy of the person, including freedom of choice, and respect for the autonomy of the person'.

For people with ID, a number of personality and identity development factors are relevant to achieving independent living.

Table 1

Personality determinants of the development of autonomy of a person with ID

Cognitive determinants	Self-awareness
	Self-acceptance
	Self-esteem
	A sense of confidence
Instrumental determinants	Social skills:
	— empathy
	— communication
	— social insight
	Coping skills:
	— search for information
	— direct action
— refraining from - acting	
— asking others for help	
	Skills to use support:
	— emotional
	— of information
	— instrumental

Source: A. Zawiślak (2008, pp. 43–44)

Undoubtedly, entering into the role of a worker represents the development of the personal determinants of autonomy. The individual becomes increasingly aware of his or her own capabilities and limitations, accepts himself or herself, which fosters a greater sense of confidence, but also an understanding that everyone needs help and can always ask for it. Through varied social contacts, he or

she has a better insight into social arrangements, is increasingly open in communicating with others, and this develops empathy.

Erik Erikson, together with his student Jams Marcia, show two alternating phases of identity formulation: exploration – exploratory actions ('rehearsal' actions), making a commitment – making choices among possible alternatives, making decisions, committing to chosen roles and tasks, and taking responsibility for the near and far consequences of one's decisions. Such a commitment is undoubtedly taking on a job. Gathering exploratory experiences and making commitments fosters the development of self-knowledge and self-awareness, which forms the basis for the formation of a sense of identity. By observing one's own behaviour and its consequences, by following other people's behaviour and comparing oneself with them, one obtains direct information, which allows one to create social categories related to the awareness of belonging to specific social groups and to have insight into one's own personality (Trzebinska, 1998). Identity therefore has a relational dimension; it is the relationship with others that enables the development and subsequent continuous existence of the skills and abilities necessary for autonomous functioning.

The environmental context of independent living for people with ID is also important. From the earliest years, their lives are under strict control and protection, which both homemakers and educators explain by the well-being of the individual, their safety. Such educational attitudes are not conducive to the formation of independence, which is the basis of autonomy. The concern of caregivers and educators need not be a barrier to the development of self-determination for people with ID. The very fact of treating a person with ID subjectively implies consent to the development of his or her autonomy. Consequently, a person with ID should be created in such a way that he or she is able to decide about himself or herself and his or her life, supported in making decisions by providing information about the consequences of choices. Gathering experiences has a significant impact on the formation of personality and thus autonomy (Cytowska, 2012; Woynarowska, 2020).

In conclusion

The social attributes of adulthood are determined by an individual's ability to enter gainful employment and perform social roles, which requires them to develop a sense of duty and an understanding of social rules and norms.

Entering the role of an employee (especially on the open labour market) creates opportunities to build up one's self-image as an independent, capable, responsible and competent person. Through employment, a person both develops and improves and feels useful. Research shows that employment, especially in

a diverse work environment, has a positive impact on the daily functioning of people with ID. Among other things, they perceive the positives and negatives of employment, relate to their personal experiences, become more critical, but also understand the dilemmas of their working parents or other relatives (see: Cytowska, 2012; Lysaght, Ouellette-Kuntz and Morrison, 2009; Nota, Ginevra and Carrieri, 2010; Woynarowska, 2020).

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Spółeczno-psychologiczne konteksty podjęcia roli pracownika przez dorosłe osoby z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną

Streszczenie

W artykule ukazane zostały uwarunkowania społeczne i psychologiczne wchodzenia w rolę pracownika przez osoby z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Przedstawiono bariery społeczne i prawno-organizacyjne utrudniające podjęcie pracy przez tę grupę. Poddane zostały analizie również psychologiczne aspekty uzyskania statusu pracownika, w szczególności na otwartym rynku pracy. Zwrócono uwagę na znaczenie pracy w procesie dojrzewania osobowości i tożsamości oraz w dążeniu do autonomii.

Słowa kluczowe: osoby z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, rola pracownika, wyznaczniki dorosłości, autonomia, tożsamość.