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Psychological Assessment of Visually Impaired Beneficiaries of Supported Employment Programs

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Introduction

Work in people life is very important. It gives the sense of meaning, self-fulfillment and improves self-esteem, however these are the disabled who are the most discriminated group on the open labor market. The vocational discrimination of the disabled has also the psychological aspects. Ossowski (2004) explains that being employed might prevent disadvantaged persons from social exclusion. According to the author, disabled people feel marginalized because of their deficits and limitations, and being unemployed may intensify the sense of being isolated and excluded. It is like a double labeling, and only being vocationally active may compensate the negative feelings of being aware of one's disability (Ossowski 2004).

Visually impaired people are a subgroup of a larger population of individuals with disabilities, who suffer from unemployment. In the USA data indicated by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) show that each year, the rate of employment for disabled people increases (Bell 2010, pp. 109). In Poland, however, the greatest coefficient of professional activity of the disabled people was 22,9 % in 2004 year (<http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/niepelnosprawnosci-w-liczbach>). "Only 5% of the business owners are eager to employ visually impaired persons" say members of the project called *Partnership for Facilitating the Accessibility of Labor Market for Visually Impaired People* (Moś, 2010 pp.313). Severely visually impaired people are still greatly underrepresented in the competitive labor market despite the combined efforts of country rehabilitation agencies; private or public service providers and consumers themselves.

From the perspective of the visually disabled people, this is the possibility to work that gives them a higher quality of life. Employment appears for them to be associated with an increased feeling of empowerment, independence, social belonging and integration (Kober and Eggleton 2005). According to Ochoczenko

(2010, p. 352), the majority of the disabled workers feel professionally “satisfied and fulfilled” by doing their work, they feel highly able in carrying out their tasks and duties. Work gives them the possibility of personal development or the promotion. According to the study conducted by the Ochoczenko (2010), when the disabled respondents were asked whether they wanted change their profession there was no one person who would have shown the willingness to do so.

Contradictory opinion had fully able respondents who themselves had no opinion when they were questioned if they want to change their job and similarly they could not assess what the disabled workers thought of changing the job. Ochoczenko (2010), stresses that this outcomes might provide a slightly different view on priorities concerning the work for people without disabilities and people with disabilities. The researcher wonders if the fact of having work increases the self-confidence and sense of possessing strong personal values (Ochoczenko 2010). Also, Hill (1989) reported that such factors as the severity of visual impairment, level and type of vocational rehabilitation services received have a significant influence on whether a person will emerge from the rehabilitation process to obtain the competitive employment.

Barriers of Employment of Visually Disabled Persons

In the literature many opinions are found that disabled persons are facing with numerous barriers, obstacles and problems concerning the employment or vocational rehabilitation. Rumrill and Scheft (in press) noted that also visually impaired or blind persons who are employed encounter numerous and appreciable barriers as they attempt to retain their current professions or advance to higher levels.

More than that, the research done by Rumrill and collaborators (1997) illustrated that even successful, professional employees who are blind encounter barriers at work that may thwart the maintenance and advancement of their careers. Tedder and McBroom (1989) surveyed 213 professional, managerial, and technical employees with visual impairments who reported various “career transitional” difficulties, including delayed goal attainment, discrimination by employers, transportation and mobility problems, and poor access to work-related information.

According to B. Szczupał (2006), the factors that determine the low level of vocational activities of the disabled can be divided into external and internal aspects.

The external are; the insufficient legal solutions aimed at supporting employment of the disabled, the unfavorable social attitudes, lack of sufficient technical equipment that might support the mobility of VI individuals, and the lack of good role models (Szczupał 2006). The outward reasons of the low level of job rehabilitation of sightless people are also caused by the myths and stereotypes. During the psychological assessment I asked visually impaired people what might be the

causes of the problems with their employment, many of them said that it is not only their disadvantaged condition, but the prejudiced and biased employers. Instead of objective assessment or at least unbiased attitude toward them many disadvantaged persons experienced distrust, psychological distance or even fear (Brzezińska et al. 2008).

“It might not be their fault” says one of the member of the project called *Supporting The Visually Impaired People On The Labor Market* “Most of the employers do not have enough knowledge, there are not educated and may not even now that visually impaired people have full potential to work and may be very useful on the labor market. What is more they do not possess any experiences that might face the stereotypical thinking”.

The other external barriers refer to additional costs for the company or institution to adjust the surroundings for the ‘disadvantaged worker’. These adjustments may concern the work station, transportation, adjusted light, extra labels, keeping all the things in the stable order or special computers, yet it is still worth to remember that any of the mentioned costs may be easily refund - it is regulated by the polish law (Kober & Eggleton 2005; Brzezińska 2008).

According to the Szczupał (2008) there are also the internal factors of the mentioned problem such as; the inadequate level of education and qualification, and the inability of the VI to manage the development of their own career. Marzec (2002) writes that there is a great disproportion between the qualities and education that have disabled people and the demands of the labor market. Gradually, the need for manual, mechanic and repetitive work is getting lower, and literally these are the job positions that visually impaired people mainly work in (Marzec 2002). Very often the internal problems of disabled people unemployment lay in their negative attitude, anxieties, or fears. Brzezińska and collaborators (2008) stress that the period when the disability occurred is a crucial factor for the vocational rehabilitation. The outcomes of researchers’ study show that these are mainly the individuals with incongenital disability who are professionally passive, have never worked or who are unemployed (Brzezińska et al. 2008).

Professions for the Visually Impaired

Many visually impaired people are thought to work in the field of ‘typical for them work’, which usually are simple, repetitive and demanding low level of cognitive operations (Brzezińska et al., 2007). The research conducted by the Domański et al. (2007) show that people with disability less often than the fully able persons occupy the managerial positions, specialists, positions and administrative positions, and relative more become skilled and unskilled workers, what position them in a very low level of the professional hierarchy (Domanski,

Sawiński, and Slomczyński 2007). Definitely, one of the world-wide most popular job position for the sightless individuals is the masseur, for example the massage therapy is the only job position in South Korea where an individual must possess a visual disability to receive a masseur license. In South Korea, when sightless masseurs found out that the country might begin licensing competitors who could see, many of them protested by threatening their lives of setting on fire other persons' cars (Park and Lester 2006).

In Poland, the regular education for blind people, that want to become masseurs begun in 1953 in Vocational Training Institution for Visually Impaired People in Krakow. Till now it is the one most occupied by visually impaired job position in Poland (Moś 2010). The other very popular among the blind people job is the callwork. In this sort of work employers use new tools of telecommunication. The callwork is not a homogenous and strictly defined process. Its dynamics causes that it is constantly changing as well in the qualitative and in quantitative meaning. Yet the notion of callwork can be understood as the method of organizing and executing work, because the employee works outside the place of work through a considerable part of one's own work time, providing to the employer the work results with the use of information technologies and the technologies of passing data, such as the Internet (Grabowska 2006). According to Moś (2010), the third very popular in Poland type of work is the self-employment. Self-employment occurs when independent subjects, who manage certain business activities, render services to other people. The labor legislations apply to the civil regulations, not to the entrepreneurs. Those self-employed who manage a personal company, take responsibility for the third party people. The independent workers are not under any supervision, they regulate the time and the amount of work by themselves.

One of the advantages of self-employment is the fact that under temporary personal or economical difficulties, one may not need to register the enterprise out, but the business owner may suspend it for a while (Moś 2010). Self-employment is a solution for blind persons to be professionally active by doing that what might bring satisfaction and independency.

Bad Employment Situation of Sightless Persons in Poland – Solutions

According to the National Disabled Persons Rehabilitation Fund (2009) one solution for the bad situation concerning the employment of blind people may be education. People should have more information about the disabled, they should be aware that the limitations of the disabled do not mean the inability to work. Employers must be assured that the human capital is the best investment. One satisfactory solution, is to create the possibility for employers to have an indirect con-

fact with visually impaired worker; the management should have occasions to gain the personal experience with disabled employers (PFRON, 2009)

The next beneficial action, would be the promotion of the companies or institution that employed the sightless workers, showing their mutual contentment and satisfaction. The best recommendation would be that personally received from the management (Brzezińska et al 2007).

One of the example of the key to improving the employment situation of VI may is the *Supported Employment for Intellectually Disabled –Trainer* program. One of the trainer – Beata Cytowska explains that the involvement of the disabled in the trainer program made them feel worthy and able to be employed in the free market. What is more, the realization of the program was received positively by the employers and co-workers of the disabled participants (Cytowska 2008, pp. 525). Cytowska (2008) writes that many programs of supported employment were established on the model of Supported Employment Agency from North Carolina. Theses programs are being realized by the non-profit organizations with the help of local authorities (Cytowska 2008). Creating such enterprise in Poland was possible thanks to joining the European Union. It was thanks to the European Union Social Funds that Poland started to launch many programs, workshops, projects that aimed at vocational inclusion of people with deficits into the labor market (Rabczuk 2005). Other researchers write that this is the Madrid Declaration from 2002 that changed the vision of the blind people in the labor market. The members of the congress want to fight for the status of disabled people as independent citizens, fully integrated and included into the society (*Deklaracja Madrycka*, 2002).

The aim of mentioned enterprises is to teach beneficiaries that thanks to work and acquiring new skills or qualifications they are able to become fully active member of the labor market. More than that, the disadvantaged individuals should be aware that they are able to reach the level of highly educated experts like lawyer, M.D., journalist, artist, politician or a manager in the international companies.

Most of the programs offer professional support and help, from many specialists, in creating the individual career or education path. The creation of the career path is an elaborative process that must be adjusted to the needs and abilities of the disabled (<http://www.pzn.org.pl/aktualnosci/896-zapraszamy-do-udziau-w-projekcie.html>).

Personal Characteristics of Visually Impaired as Employers

Working in the present day requires not only the knowledge and specific competences, but also certain personality traits and psychological characteristics. Many employers require the readiness to change and dynamic response to the development of the situation (Szczupał 2006).

According to Forcie and collaborators (2001) good employees should have an internal locus of control in matters related to workplace safety, have a high tolerance for work-related stress, and avoid engaging in high-risk, sensation-seeking activities. Regarding the individuals with disabilities the preparation to get along in the labor market requires from them having additional social abilities and developing certain psychological features. In the authors opinion, the visually impaired may have developed the ability of better functioning in the difficult situation, under pressure and stress than fully able workers. Very often desired psychological features might have been developed because of the good adjustment of blind to their situation. Yet, the negative traits may not be the outcomes of the maladjustment, but, because of the insufficient information provided to the employers and the stereotypes functioning in the society (Szczupał, pp. 351).

In the literature it is found that non-disabled people attribute more positive personal characteristic to the disabled workers (Ochoczenko 2010). In the research done by Ochoczenko (2010) when two experimental groups (over 80% of respondents) were referring to the disabled worker they used more such adjectives as; diligence, conscientiousness, obligatory, discipline, comradeship, effective communication skills. However, persons with disability assessed their qualities much worse than their non-disabled colleagues, what may indicate the underestimation of their self-esteem (Ochoczenko 2010, pp. 350) .

From the other hand, the researchers that deal with the socio-psychological functioning of sightless people say that fully able persons tend to overestimate the impact of visual disability on the other spheres of sensory functioning – in psychology it is called the generalization (Lukoff 1972). According to Lukoff (1972), it may lead to biased assessment of the potential and abilities of VI, overestimation of the their deficits and limitations, and consequently to social distance, lack of acceptance for the participation of VI in the social and professional spheres. Many perceivers ascribe to the blind individuals exceptional and outstanding auditory abilities, what in fact is misunderstanding of the function of developing the compensatory abilities. It is explained that blind people or those who have problems with using their visual perception have many problems with cognition, therefore they might use so called remedial mechanisms (Ossowski, et al., 2006). Thanks to the compensatory abilities blind persons could improve their cognitive abilities and visually impaired could lessen many limitations that concern seeking the information about the surrounding. The compensatory abilities have also their psychological function, because they help VI individuals adjust to new disadvantaged conditions. However, to develop such abilities one must possess motivations, sense of self-efficacy, and one definitely must believe in one potential (Ossowski et al. 2006).

Psychological Assessment in the Supported Employment Enterprises

What is common in mentioned programs of supported employment is the psychological assessment of the disabled. It is the first and the most crucial step toward the vocational inclusion by their participation. The lack of such diagnosis may practically diminish any further modernization activities.

The role of the assessment is to prepare people to the selection of the profession by informing them about their abilities, competences, personality strengths and weaknesses, and about the participants determination to work. It is helping people to be aware and to understand more their skills or even needs (Szczupał, 2006). According to Szczupał (2006, pp. 349) the psychological counseling is an aid to creation, planning and development of the disadvantaged individuals professional carrier or the educational path.

In order to make the comprehensive vocational assessment of the disabled people it should included the opinion of many specialists such as MD, pedagogues, psychologists.

The task of the psychologists in the creation of the career path is to conduct the psychological analysis by using psychological tests and inventories to assess the usefulness of possessed competences to the labor market. Furthermore, it should be indicated on which aspects, competences or skills the sightless beneficiary should work on in order to be better adjusted to the social and vocational world. The other task is to describe the general coping methods with difficult and stressful situations for those who still need it. The visually impaired should received the information, where they may seek psychological help or which psychotherapy would be suitable for his or her problems (<http://www.pzn.org.pl/aktualnosci/896-zapraszamy-do-udziau-w-projekcie.html>).

Nevertheless, the personal characteristics developed because of the disability create barriers in the conduction of valid, reliable psychological assessment. The loss of vision might lead to numerous problems of adjustment. Fitzgerald (1970) emphasized that normal psychological reactions to loss of sight include shock, denial, anxiety, anger and depression. Of these reactions, depression was found to be the most common and occurred in 85% to 92% of all cases (Fitzgerald 1970). Carroll (1961) also has noted that as individuals lose their sight, they become more socially dependent upon relatives and friends. With this opinion agree Lukoff and Whiteman (1972), explaining that the later in life one loses his or her sight the more socially dependent one becomes. To date, there haven't been many studies, that could indicate what variables influence adjustment to blindness.

The data suggest that prior to blindness individuals were viewed as assertive, independent, stubborn, venturesome, uninhibited, experimenting, freethinking, aggressive and socially bold. The individuals who became seriously depressed

could be characterized as humble, mild, obedient, conforming, shy, restrained, and conservative (Fitzgerald 1970; Ossowski et al., 2006).

Barriers of Psychological Assessment – Outlook of the Diagnostician

My aim as a psychologist in the project “The Support of the Visually Impaired People in the Labor Market” financed by the European Social Foundation was to provide the psychological assessment by the use of five psychological “pen and paper” inventories.

The first questionnaire was the *NEO-FFI Personality Inventory* developed by Paul T. Costa, Jr. and Robert R. McCrae, used for adults of both sexes. NEO-FFI is a 60-item measure of the Five Factor Model: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. It is used in order to outline the profile of the personality or to assess the participants’ personality domain levels and to give description on high, medium, and low level of each personality trait. The inventory may be used with great carefulness to anticipate the adaptation abilities of the subject (McCrae & John 1992)

The next inventory used in the psychological assessment was the *Questionnaire of Social Competences – KKS* developed by Anna Matczak. KKS is used for the assessment of social competences understood as acquired skills that determine the effective functioning of the individual in different social situations. The questionnaire may deliver the general indicator of social competences and three detailed indicators such as; social exposition (ES), assertiveness (A), and the competences that show good functioning the close interpersonal relationship (I). The later scale may indicate if the subject has good skills that are needed in the professions which require caring, protective or tutorial behaviors. The two first scales, however, determine good functioning in the profession, where the contact with people is on the regular basis, e.g. one need to negotiate, manage, discipline or influence other (Matczak 2007, pp. 62)

KKS consists of 90 items, among which only 60 are diagnostic. Subjects answer on the 4 level Likert-like scale. The inventory has norms for teenagers (15-19 years old) students and unfortunately only for adults who are employed. This is why the results from the questionnaire should be assessed with special carefulness (Matczak 2007). The other problem may stem from the fact that the inventory isn’t adjusted for the sightless people, therefore the outcomes from the test may be lower, what is caused not by the lower social competences or its lack, but because of the visual disability of the subject. Here is the role of the psychologist, who need to be very attentive, alert and thoughtful not to deliver a mistake. What is more, in the questionnaire there are many non diagnostic questions such as “how good are you in throwing the dart into the middle of the dartboard” or “how good are

you in throwing the ball into the basket". The aim of such questions was more relaxing and boosting one self-esteem, however in the case of blind or partially sightless subjects such questions were perceived as annoying, irritating, yet even amusing. It should be added, that according to the authors when the subject has very low results from the social competences scale, what in fact may indicate the social maladjustment, he or she may improve them by participating in the special training (Matczak 2007).

Third questionnaire – *INTE* - measured the level of emotional intelligence, thus the ability to be aware of one's emotional states, to understand, control, manage and use them. *INTE* consists of 33 items measuring two factors; the ability to recognize emotions and to use them in order to redirect the behavior. Subject tick their answers on a 5 point scale (Schutte et al. 2008). Again, the inventory isn't prepared for examining the visually impaired subjects. Practically, the questionnaire analyze various emotional skills among which might be found the ability to read the emotions from others' mimics. It is crucial to interpret the question correctly, not to allow the deficits in visual perception influence the results of the emotional intelligence. The majority of the blind subjects feel very confused at this level, many of them seek support of the psychologist in answering such questions, they are not sure how to "understand them". The example may be the question "I only need to look at other person to know what he or she might feel". The majority of blind subjects ask if they need to take into account their disadvantaged position or if they may change the word "look" into "stand by". Only some of sightless subjects decided that "they can not see anything, so they can't assess other person emotional states by "looking at them".

Both *KKS* and *INTE* questionnaires must not be interpreted automatically, the diagnostician must be constantly aware that the inventories do not have norms for disabled people, so there is always the possibility that the subjects' deficits may influence the overall outcomes.

The psychological diagnosis is easier with the *Multidimensional Questionnaire of Preferences WKP*. *WKP* allows to assess subject's interests and preferences of the types of activities and work conditions. From the results of the test the diagnostician generates the list of most preferable and undesired professions. Comparing to the mentioned *NEO-FFI*, *KKS* and *INTE* the *WKP* inventory is the longest one. The test consists of 133 items, which regard the type of activity and the preferable work conditions. The subject may display an interests of such activities as; languages, mathematics and logics, practical and technical, practical and esthetics, care and services, managerial, biological. The type of work regard both planning or improvisation and working in strongly or slightly stimulating environment. Subjects answer on a five level scale how strongly they agree with the statements (Matczak et al., 2006).

It might be stated that the questionnaire is good in assessing the preferences for as well fully able individuals and disabled individuals. Subjects indicated what they liked, disliked, wanted, didn't want, and were able or were not able to do. It is crucial in generating the list of preferable and nonpreferable professions to take in account not only what the subjects want to do, but also what they are not able to perform.

Conclusions

Being professionally active is an important issue for every person, it gives not only the material security, the meaning in one's life, but it gives also the sense of social inclusion and in the case of disabled individuals it may also have a therapeutic value (Brzezińska et al. 2008; Cytowska 2008; Moś 2010; Ochoczenko 2010; Ossowski 2004; Szczupał 2006).

The coefficient of unemployment of disabled people in Poland is very high and it is caused by socio-psychological, cultural, economical, technical, and educational factors (Brzezińska et al., 2008; Moś 2010; Szczupał 2006). In order to help visually impaired people be vocationally active, and even to find challenging and satisfactory job position, many programs of supported employment were launched, some of which are specifically targeted at visually disadvantaged individuals (Cytowska 2008; PFRON 2009). Such programs offer help from many specialists, among whom are psychologists. Sometimes psychologists work with the beneficiary on his or her motivation, on the improvement of the self-esteem, very often the visually impaired develop new interpersonal skills, but beforehand the specialists need to conduct the psychological assessment. In many programs psychologists are only asked to provide the diagnosis. Unfortunately, not many inventories are adjusted for the disabled individuals, in some cases the consequences are such that the individuals' limitations influence answering for the questions that concern other personal aspects.

Keeping a happy medium between personal independence and dependence on other people help is a condition for effective psychological, social and vocational adjustment. To participate in professional rehabilitation visually disadvantaged must overcome many psychological barriers; they need to accept their limitations and deficits, deal with other people, they need to be independent in everyday activities and have their own effective coping styles (Sękowski 2001). According to the personality psychologist, persons who lost their vision have different needs and different adaptation model from individuals who were born with sensory deficits. They may still not fully accept their situation, may feel frustration, anger or feel lost in the new reality (Carroll 1961; Fitzgerald 1970; Lukoff and Whiteman 1972; Ossowski et al., 2006). What is more, many visually impaired may feel miserable, they may have fear, anxieties, be oversensitive or even be overprotective (Sękowski 2001).

Surely, the psychological wellbeing has an impact on psychological assessment, yet neither of the presented inventories is sensitive on the individuals state of mind caused by the disability, nor they are sensitive on psychological wellbeing of those who lost their vision recently.

According to researchers, the fact the individual was born with the disability or lost his or her sight has huge impact on the psychological welfare, also the kind of the impairment influence the way disadvantaged people function in the society (Ossowski et al., 2006).

These factors should be taken into account while providing the psychological assessment, because they have a great effect on the overall test results, and the negative results from the psychological tests may become a next barrier in the vocational rehabilitation and employment of visually impaired persons.

The next potential danger is concerned with so called generalization, that is the misperception of the abilities that VI may possess. It happens when fully able persons tend to overestimate the impact of visual disability on the other spheres of sensory functioning (Lukoff 1972). This incorrect impression stem from the lack of understanding of the compensatory abilities, that sometimes VI develop. Again, here is the role of diagnostician that should become an unbiased observer and should not fall into impression that the blind beneficiary may possess some outstanding and eminent abilities concerning the touch or auditory senses.

Overall, there are many psychological barriers that VI may not have overcome while participating in the vocational rehabilitation. Thus, the diagnostician should precisely familiarize with the case of the visually disadvantaged individual and work out with him or her the individual approach, that include solutions adjusted to the perspective of disabled person. If the VI persona suffer from psychological drawbacks caused by the disability, it is a role of diagnostician to recognize them and suggest further psychological training or suitable therapy. It is a very substantial step, because how the vocational rehabilitation process with move along depends mostly on the attitude, motivation and psychological well-being of the VI. Nowadays in Poland, there are many psychological devices not adjusted for the assessment of disabled persons, yet it is still the task of the diagnostician to think outside the box and to have sufficient skills in conducting the diagnosis.

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Diagnoza psychologiczna niewidomych i słabowidzących uczestników programów wsparcia zawodowego (Streszczenie)

Przedmiotem rozważań w artykule jest sytuacja społeczno-ekonomiczna osób niewidomych i słabowidzących na rynku pracy oraz różne aspekty procesu aktywizacji zawodowej tej grupy. Problematyka analizowana jest z dwóch perspektyw – z punktu widzenia osób z uszkodzonym wzorkiem i z perspektywy psychologicznej. Autorka prezentuje rolę i znaczenie psychologa-diagnosty w całym procesie zatrudnienia i przygotowania do pracy osób z dysfunkcją wzroku. Analizuje proces orzecznictwa, uwypukla bariery związane z rzetelną diagnozą oraz wskazuje na problemy związane z doбором właściwych narzędzi badawczych.