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Able-bodied vs. disabled people – infrahumanisation of students with disabilities (a case study)

Keywords

disabled students, group relations, infrahumanisation, rites of passage

ABSTRACT

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The article discusses the phenomenon of infrahumanisation in academic relations between able-bodied people (both students and academics) and students with disabilities. The main goal of the article is to show that infrahumanisation may make it difficult for young people with disabilities to build their capital for the future in the form of interpersonal relations. The paper uses Arnold van Gennep's concept of the rite of passage as a model of entering adulthood, and focuses specifically on the stage of university education as the one which completes the transition into adulthood, and marks the beginning of a "normal" life (i.e. one consistent with social expectations). The phenomenon of infrahumanisation shown here on various levels of academic life disrupts this process, and may hinder the inclusion/integration of disabled people into society. The relations between disabled students and non-disabled people who are part of the academic community in which the students operate may, however, also bridge the distance between the two groups, and thus contribute to paving the way to a respectful society, i.e. the way of equality.

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Introduction

Acquiring university education, which is a determinant of social status and an opportunity to find satisfying employment, has become common in recent years. It is a truism to say that for people with disabilities obtaining education constitutes a particularly important issue and a chance for a “normal” adult life. Universities, therefore, are increasingly trying to meet the needs of people with various disabilities. Rector’s Representatives for Students with Disabilities and Offices for People with Disabilities operating at most (and all public) universities work intensively on removing architectural barriers and adapting the educational environment to specific needs of students with disabilities. As a result of their activity, more and more disabled people are taking up higher education year by year. Statistics show that the number of disabled students in 2013 reached 31.6 thousand, of which 2.1 thousand were deaf and hard of hearing, 2.7 thousand were blind and visually impaired, 8.5 thousand students had a locomotor dysfunction with the ability to walk, and 0.6 thousand students had a locomotor dysfunction without the ability to walk. 17.8 thousand students had other disabilities. In comparison, in the previous year (2012), the number of students with disabilities came to 30 thousand (*Informacja Rządu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej...*, 2012).

The situation, therefore, seems to be getting better, but everyday observations and experiences of the last few years suggest that the better functioning of people with disabilities at universities is frequently only apparent. The increasing support may, in fact, evoke superficial acceptance, provoking behaviours that are not always beneficial to this group of students. The purpose of the article is then to show the situation of a student with a disability in various areas of academic space in which the phenomenon of infrahumanisation occurs, in the context of the relationship between able-bodied people and disabled students, and embedded on the axis of the subsequent phases of the rite of passage. The present considerations are part of a broader research project aimed at exploring the situation of people with disabilities who undertake university education, in the context of interpersonal relationships. The research problem is the question of the reality of people with disabilities in the academic space, with the focus on both, interpersonal relationships, and expectations of society. The analyses are based on the focus discussion conducted on 17 January 2015 at the University of Silesia. The study group consisted of first-year full-time students of pedagogy, music education, visual arts education, and computer graphics. In total, 8 disabled students took part in the discussion: Student 1 with Asperger Syndrome, Student 2 with Asperger Syndrome, Student 3 with neurological disorders, Student 4 with Severe visual impairment, Student 5 with

severe hearing impairment, Student 6 with severe hearing impairment, Student 7 with blindness, and Student 8 with Asperger Syndrome. The selection of students for this research was based on the type of disability criterion (the assumption was that the statements should come from students with various disabilities), the support from the Office for People with Disabilities, and the help of an assistant or a sign language interpreter. In the following part of the article, I try to validate the thesis that, despite the seemingly improving situation of people with disabilities at universities, the propensity of people to infrahumanise becomes an obstacle to the rite of passage, which makes it difficult for disabled students to reach the phase of inclusion and to transition to adulthood.

Students with disabilities and the rite of passage

The period of studies is often the time of significant changes in the life of a young person. Many scientists have tried to find the right place for it in the developmental stages of human life, but its character is difficult to determine. I suggest, therefore, that this period can be interpreted through the prism of the anthropological models of the rite of passage. Referring to Arnold van Gennep (see: Sińczuch, 2002; Lipska, Zagórska, 2011), these models relate to breakthrough moments in human life, which in our culture often include the maturity exam and taking up studies (*Ibidem*). All rites of passage are characterized by three phases: the separation phase, the marginalization phase, and the inclusion phase (Turner, 2010: 115).

The first phase is separation, otherwise known as the preliminal phase, during which one experiences a loss of status, or of the position held so far (the status of a child at home, a pupil at school or a mate from the playground). The young person leaves the family home, his/her life, and former friends. For a disabled person, who until that moment could usually count on the support of parents and family, which granted them a sense of security, it is often a breakthrough point. As such, it is associated not only with the changes related to abandoning the current lifestyle, habits, and rules, but also the necessity to deal with difficult situations without the protective bubble they used to live in thanks to their family, to overcome barriers, and face their limitations. For any young person, it is a period of trial, searching for oneself as well as shaping the “self” and one’s worldview. For a person with a disability, it is also a collision with another reality. Even if, at lower stages of their education, s/he participated in integration or inclusion education, it most often took place in the local environment. However, during studies, the change of the city, the environment, friends, and place of living are important factors of the

transition. All these elements are a test for a young person, and even more so for a person with a disability.

Entering new interpersonal relations, as well as the quality of these relationships, depend on many factors, such as individual character predispositions, upbringing experiences, coping mechanisms in new situations, the sense of security, and the willingness to take up new initiatives, all of which can be described as internal. Whereas external factors depend on the environment a person enters, and revolve around this environment being either friendly or hostile. They apply to both physical and mental spaces, and consist in adapting the infrastructure to the capabilities of a person with a disability in such a way that they can move safely and without restrictions or constantly counting on help from others. Undoubtedly, qualified staff, both administrative and academic, also facilitate the rite of passage by making it less stressful. For most students, dealing with bureaucracies at dean's offices and secretariats is often aggravating. For a person with a specific dysfunction (e.g. of hearing, sight or motor skills), it can be a barrier that does not only evoke stress, but also creates resistance rooted in the feeling of being misunderstood. In consequence, the student often gives up taking up certain activities or limits them to the necessary minimum. Individual conditions of a given person, as well as those related to the socio-cultural space (which the university unquestionably constitutes) in which a student with disability lives and functions, build their sense of identity and create their reality (Bełza, Prysak, 2014: 26).

The second phase of the rite of passage is one in which the features of the ritual subject (the "traveller") are ambivalent. S/he passes through a cultural area that has some attributes of the past (i.e. of the separation phase) and future (i.e. of the inclusion phase), or is completely devoid of them (Turner, 2010: 115). A young disabled person comes into contact with people from different backgrounds, different cities, different environments, different homes, who have different educational background, and thus represent diverse views of the world and various issues related to its functioning, including those related to disability. During his/her studies, s/he comes across the attitudes of acceptance, respect for dignity, support, assistance and equality, and, therefore, which may remind him/her of the time s/he was "cared for." The support provided by universities, both material and mental, or, in some cases, in the form of a student assistant accompanying the disabled student every day, is not the same as the protective bubble provided by their family, but it gives them some sense of security. The relationships which the young people enter are extremely important because, as Martin Buber asserts, the essence of human life is neither what is individual nor what is social (and hence one should not look for it in the community), but what is interpersonal and what we experi-

ence with others (Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2007: 36). Relatedly, more and more interest is now directed to the way we experience and get to know other people (Tischner, 1998: 168). The way in which a student with a disability perceives a non-disabled person, and in which a person without a disability sees a student with one, determines both, the joint coexistence of individual members of a given group, and the length of the phase and the transition to the last phase of inclusion. However, as shown by Ferenc's research among emigrants (who, like people with disabilities, can be categorized as "Others"), the access to certain identity states / statuses, and the passage to the "new world," is at times prohibited for some people (after all, according to van Gennep, rites of passage are used to maintain a specific social order) (Jaskulska, 2013: 11).

The third phase (joining, reintegrating into society) is the phase in which the transition has been made (Turner, 2010: 115). A person with a disability is in a stable state, thanks to which their rights and obligations towards others have a clearly defined "structure." They are expected to behave in accordance with the customary norms and ethical standards imposed on those who enter social positions in a given system (cf. Turner, 2010: 115). After a reconnaissance, research and shared experiences, a student with a disability becomes part of a group (assuming that they accept the norms that prevail in it).¹ Through acceptance *by* the environment and acceptance *of* this environment they enter a state of connection and become an integral part of the community. This is the most desirable outcome, thanks to which a disabled person undertaking university education can build human capital, which in the future will allow them to function as a "normal," adult member of their community.

The phenomenon of infracommunication towards students with disabilities

The phenomenon of infracommunication is closely related to the concept of social relations, and, in particular, group relations. Groups are characterized by social interactions between people, which take the form of either social interaction or social conflict (Znaniński, 2011). A social relationship, regardless of its type,² begins to function when two parties involved in it accept each other as "partners" in active

¹ The rite of passage, ideally, leads to the inclusion of a person with disabilities into the society. As the article shows, however, it is not always the case.

² Znaniński's list of relationships includes, among others, domestic, public, fraternal, matrimonial, erotic, mother-child, and social ones (see Znaniński 2011).

cooperation. Both should evaluate each other well and both should aim to perform specific actions for the good of the other, expecting reciprocity. These activities are not an arbitrary manifestation of individual feelings or intentions but the result of accepting the norms of conduct recognized as binding by the participants of a given community and based on evaluation criteria (Znanięcki, 2011). These criteria cause the division of society into social groups that are the result of categorization (Sekerdej, Kossowska, Trejtowicz, 2012). In turn, such categorization leads to various intergroup relations considered herein from the perspective of social psychology, rather than sociology or political sciences. This means that the aforementioned relations are not deemed to form a social structure, but are seen as relations between an individual and the society (social group). As Henri Tajfel notes, people forming such relations have a natural tendency to organize their worldview, and thus to classify people into social categories, which promotes intra-group assimilation (overestimating similarities between members of the same group) and inter-group contrast (overestimating differences between members of other groups) (Tajfel qtd. in Kořta, 2004).

In the process of such classification, a disabled student gains his/her place in the group, and the starting position that builds their relationship with others. The human tendency to categorize people into “my own” and “strangers,” referred to as *infrahumanisation*, consists in treating “humanity” as the essential property of one’s own group, and denying it to “foreign” groups. It is important to note that this is a subtle process that does not consist in openly denying that the Other belongs to the human species, but in forming the belief that they are not fully valuable human beings (Demoulin, Leyens Yzerbyt, 2006; Leyens et al., 2003; Paladino et al., 2002; Gaunt, Leyens, Demoulin, 2002, qtd. in: Baran, 2011). As Amadeusz Krause writes, despite many initiatives aimed at bringing together people with and without disabilities (Krause, 2005), the emergence of the so-called “subtle marginalization” can be observed, where declarations of acceptance are accompanied by social distance towards the disabled (Krause, 2010: 56). Despite the fact that inter-group relations are not considered here from the sociological point of view, it is worth taking a closer look at the phenomenon of group rejection, created by the dominant group, which thereby allows itself to strengthen its self-esteem and position in the social structure. The group searches for mechanisms that enable it, e.g. by creating some ideas about the opposing group, such as disabled students. Although people with disabilities themselves may not identify with a particular group, they will be forced to accept its existence (Erenc, 2013: 15). Social distance is not always fixed – it is partly determined by situations (Hall, 2009: 31). Situations of direct contact with people with disabilities may shorten or deepen this

distance. University education opens up different spaces in which people with disabilities confront the expectations of a group that seems to be dominant, which is usually the matter of numerical superiority. Such spaces include the physical ones (i.e. the physical space of the university, dormitory, residence, etc.), as well as all the spaces where the appropriate interpersonal relations take place, including relationships with colleagues, lecturers, or administrative employees. In this article, I limit my research to the space of the university itself, excluding living spaces, and the relations formed within them, from the scope of this article.

In the context of students with disabilities, one deals with what Piotr Sztompka describes as pluralism of social positions (operating language), multiplicity of belonging (group language), multiplicity of cultures (cultural language), and multiplicity of rules set within each individual role assigned to a role given to a person (Sztompka, 2012: 325). A person with a disability has more than one role assigned to them. Unlike their fellow students, whose basic socially assigned role is simply “the role of a student,” a person with a disability is also given the role of a “disabled person” (see Chodkowska, 1997, 2005; Barnes, Mercer, 2008: 10; Gajdzica, 2011: 118). The frequent inconsistency of normative expectations leads to various forms of antinomy, ambivalence, conflicts within the role, and conflicts between roles, as well as the resulting tensions that the individuals must somehow resolve (Sztompka, 2012: 325), both in themselves and in interpersonal relations. It is of great importance which role is central and which is peripheral in the person’s perception of herself/himself and in the way in which they are perceived by their environment (see Sztompka, 2012: 149). These roles can be assumed depending on the phase of the rite of passage as well as on the space to which the person belongs. As the spaces discussed by me often overlap, certain roles and activities will also overlap or duplicate in them. In this article, the university is the “bubble space” which contains most of the other spaces that are mentioned.

The functioning of a student with disabilities in selected spaces

The university space is filled with people from different environments with whom a student with a disability must interact. His/her everyday life (like any other student’s) consists largely of class attendance. While lectures require the least attention and allow for the greatest anonymity and inactivity, especially in terms of entering into relations with others, these are difficult to avoid during classes, tutorials, seminars or labs. Here, the student must confront himself/herself with both

the lecturer and the members of the group. Classes involve specific activities during which interactions can lead to the formation of positive or negative attitudes in the relationship between students with disabilities and non-disabled people. There may be explicit disapproval of the students' behaviour, as expressed in the following comment:

(...) it happened a lot, I heard that the group was mad at me, because I talk a lot with teachers during lectures or classes. I was talking about something all the time; it made them furious that I was talking about something all the time.
(Student 1)

Despite such attitudes on the part of able-bodied students, there are attempts by students with disabilities to counteract hostile attitudes, as exemplified by the following statement:

In addition, I was a bit withdrawn, so I decided that I would try to get along a little better with the rest. And I heard that the group often jumped at me. (...) In the second year Marta was an assistant, and she was also outside the group, so suddenly they started talking about her impersonally, like they talked about me. (Student 2)

As the statement shows, the attempts to bond with the group are not always successful. Treating someone by impersonally addressing them is not only a sign of exclusion from the group, but explicit discrimination and dehumanization. Denying humanity to a person means that instead of eliminating the effects of disability and moving towards natural, equal relationships, one deepens the distance in the relationship between disabled students and non-disabled people. It can also cause defensive reactions in students with disabilities, which can further broaden this distance:

(...) at that moment, I treated the group simply as a group of fleas which you should not worry about, but reject and completely ignore.

Fortunately, these negative examples are not a norm, because among the statements there are also those that testify to greater acceptance, or at least tolerance, of Otherness. This can be demonstrated by the statement of the music student:

I am lucky to have a very, very nice, warm group. Probably in other groups I would have interpersonal problems but not here (...). (Student 7)

Such attitudes are conditioned by various factors. It should be noted that among the students surveyed there were people studying the arts (music and visual arts) and pedagogy. It is interesting that the more positive experiences were described by students of artistic rather than pedagogical faculties. Among pedagogy students, who are required in advance to have the right attitude of empathy and understanding by virtue of their future profession, manifestations of overt or “subtle” discrimination appear more often; infrahumanising students with disabilities is stronger by attributing them with less human characteristics and assigning them on this basis to the group of “Others.” The anxiety resulting from the disapproval of the behaviour exhibited by a person with a specific disability, as well as strangeness that arises in contact with that person, becomes a way of understanding the “Other,” i.e. understanding or not understanding of his/her appeals or conduct (see Filek, 2004: 15). Although future artists could be stereotyped as more prone to infrahumanise than pedagogy students due to their possible lack of knowledge about disabilities as well as certain personality traits one associates with this group of professionals, their statements, in fact, are markedly more positive. Perhaps, it is not despite but because of these “artistic” personal traits that they see “Otherness” as desirable and interesting. As infrahumanisation consists in defining someone through differences and similarities, it is easier for students of artistic faculties to categorize a student with disabilities as their own (their “Otherness” is seen as interesting and original), and accept their behaviour, offering support in place of stigmatization and exclusion.

The relationship between a disabled student and the rest of the group is not the only one that develops at universities. Even though the lecturer-student relationship is a hierarchical one, it should be shaped by getting to know each other and through forming opinions, without prejudice and labelling. It should be a relationship of mutual respect and trust. It turns out, however, that in many cases the relation is burdened with obstacles that cause an unusual behavior on the part of the lecturer. It may originate in their lack of knowledge about disabilities, common stereotypes (usually negative, but also the positive ones), and a sense of irrational duty. It can also be a reaction to a student’s behavior both in the classroom and in direct contact with the lecturer, e.g. during office hours. This relationship, as shown by the statements of the surveyed students, takes the form of extremes. On the one hand, it can be highly discriminatory, on the other, excessively protective or lenient. In both cases, it has a stigmatizing character:

(...) because, for example, the lecturer asks ten times what form of exam – oral or written – I want to take (...); just asks and asks (...). And there are also situ-

ations when Mr. X, when they had already explained to him what the situation was, finally raised the grades of disabled students because it was harder for them. (Student 2)

There have been more of such “favourable” approaches to students with disabilities, such as reducing the course requirements, even though there is no such need to do so:

(...) e.g. Marek had some questions during the oral exam, asked in such a way that he had no chance of having a lower grade than four. The lecturer simply helped him. (Student 3).

The opposite situation is one in which the lecturer ostentatiously discriminates against a disabled student by publicly discrediting their abilities and undermining their place in the group:

One of the lecturers in early childhood education, asked how on earth I graduated from high school, since I have such problems with spelling, and how I imagined studying. She said I stood no chance of getting a master’s degree, and that the bachelor’s degree would be the maximum I could do. (Student 5)

Such overt aggression lowers the student’s self-esteem, and asserts the abled-bodied students’ in whom the tendency to infrahumanisation is strong, belief in the rightness of their opinions.

However, different attitudes can also be observed in the relationship between students with disabilities and their peers. When asked if he ever experienced any unpleasantness from his colleagues, a law student with Asperger’s Syndrome answered in the following way:

At the university? No I didn’t. Well, unless the unpleasantness is the reaction of a colleague who was pissed off that I kept repeating the same thing (...). He was really pissed off. He said that if I repeated it again, he didn’t know what he would do to me. (Student 8)

The lack of understanding of the specificity of a given disability means that the responses of able-bodied students are manifest in their lack of patience, empathy, and self-control. Disabled students, especially the “troublesome” ones (i.e., those whose behavior attracts attention during classes and interferes with their flow),

often become uncomfortable for their colleagues and are categorized as “Others” rather than “our own” and thus marginalized. Sometimes it takes the form of overt discrimination:

I heard that, for example, in one class a friend said that she couldn't work with me because we just didn't like each other, we didn't stand each other. So she couldn't work with me in class. (Student 3)

Often, the relationship depends on the type of disability:

For example, that group, if they saw a visually or physically disabled person, or disabled in any way they are familiar with, they would work with them. But if they had a person who for some reason would be like me or [Name A.] who, for example, talks a lot about a given topic... I know a little about it, because some of these people tell me that I get smart often. I do it unconsciously and my group is very annoyed with it. (Student 2)

At times, however, there is a 180 degree shift in the attitudes able-bodied students assume towards their disabled peers. It happens when there is an element of exchange or rather the “use” of these students by classmates. When there is an area in which the student is attractive (his assistant makes good, conscientious notes, has electronic readings that are difficult to access in the library, or is able to prepare a task well), s/he is temporarily qualified as accepted and desirable part of the group. For the sake of creating a good future for students with disabilities and making their transition to the phase of inclusion easier, however, one should consider the opinions that testify to the experience of acceptance, as expressed by Student 2 (“In general, I now have a nice group;” “The first group fully accepts me”), as well as the previously quoted opinion about happiness associated with finding such a nice group which shows not only acceptance but also cordiality and subsidiarity. This would not necessarily take place in another group, as the experience of other students shows, which is very much appreciated by the student. As the above statements make clear, the relationship between students with disabilities and able-bodied people within the academia is still tainted by the categorization into “Us” and “Others,” regardless of the fact that universities are dynamically changing. The determinant of this relationship is the difference in appearance, behavior, comprehension, and speech. On this basis, students with disabilities are infrahumanised and it is often difficult for them to enter adulthood well and with an appropriate attitude.

Conclusion

The period of studies for many people with disabilities is not only a time of change, but also of a redefinition of their self-perception. It would seem that this is a period during which you can get rid of the stigma of a person with a disability, and start to be seen through the prism of your own capabilities, not restrictions and the specific feature (“prime”) that defines someone as disabled. Referring to the discussed phenomenon of infrahumanisation, it turns out that, despite the increasing awareness of disability and the support for students with disabilities, the human tendency to categorize people into a group of their own and one of strangers still determines the relationship between disabled students and non-disabled people. It is observable on each of the planes discussed, although I am aware that not all of them have been clearly outlined here. The fragments of statements by disabled students originating from the focus study constitute an exemplification of such practices, which will be subjected to further research and will include my analysis of both linguistic and visual material.

Describing the functioning situation of students with disabilities and learning about the mechanisms of group inclusion, marginalization, exclusion, and various forms of discrimination, should not be limited to theoretical considerations, but is intended to have a pedagogical effect. The question which should be asked is how to incorporate our knowledge about infrahumanisation into the system of education, in order to eliminate the negative effects of disability at the level of university education. The goal is to make it possible for people with disabilities to go through all the phases of the rite of passage, achieve full acceptance by the environment, accept this environment, become its integral part, and feel like a legitimate member of a given community.

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