

BOOK REVIEWS

Handikappning & Normalisering – Om Integration och Marginalisering av Anställda med Funktionshinder (Disabling & Normalizing – The Inclusion and Marginalization of People with Disabilities)

SANNA TIELMAN

Uppsala: Centrum för handikappforskning, 2003, ISBN 91 972637 7 X

Människor med Funktionsnedsättningar i Arbetslivet – intervjuundersökning av 409 Synskadade och Rörelsebegränsade Människor i Sverige. (The Working life of People with Disabilities – An Interview Study of 409 People with Visual and Mobility Impairments in Sweden)

BO HÄNNERSTRAND

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These two important reports on disability and working life, published by The Centre for Disability Research at Uppsala University, Sweden, are a part of a project entitled “Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in Working Life” managed by Mårten Söder and financed by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research. The aim of the study was to investigate the mechanisms that contribute to inclusion and marginalization of people with disabilities in working life.

The background of the study is the anti-discrimination law, which was passed in Sweden in the late 1990s. The law prohibits discrimination in the workplace due to disability. The project has been implemented through case studies at a number of workplaces in both public and private sectors. The purpose of the study was to form an overall picture of inclusion and marginalization in the workplace, with particular focus on people with disabilities. This was to be accomplished through interviews, observations and documents.

The first report, by Sanna Tielman, is in two main parts. In the first part Tielman focuses on the social processes that cause some employees to be seen as disabled. This definition influences how the performance of the employee is assessed and which working conditions are applied, as well as how informal social relations develop. To be categorized as “disabled” has, according to the author, a decisive influence on the individual. According to Tielman this can be expressed as a disabling process that precedes the process of marginalization.

The second part of the report provides a review of different patterns of marginalization and integration. A recurring theme in these patterns is the distinction between assimilation and inclusion as separate models of integration. Tielman discusses the interaction between working life and other areas of everyday life. Working life is not isolated from other parts of community life; there is an interaction between different parts that constitute the conditions for persons with disabilities. The author is perhaps rather too idealistic in the sense that she overlooks the fact that working life (i.e. the possibility independently to earn a living) is a tangible foundation in a person’s creation of self-image as well as how he or she is seen by others. However, Tielman has a point when she says that different areas of life interact in the constitution of relations, in a person’s working life and outside the workplace.

Six workplaces are included in the study. She performs case studies through which she interviews not only the disabled person, but also their colleagues, managers and other relevant persons. All employees carry wage subsidies. The report lacks a deeper discussion of how wage subsidies contribute to the disabling process, taking into account that this particular subsidy requires that the individual is defined as “disabled”. At most workplaces the wage subsidy is in itself a step in the process of stigmatization and this is difficult to avoid, due to the design of the current system.

The second report, by Bo Hännerstrand, is based on extensive empirical material. Of the persons interviewed, 210 were members of the nation-wide Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired (SRF) and 199 of the interviewees were members of one of the three organizations in Sweden for those with mobility disabilities. The interviews focused on the interviewees’ experiences of working life. There were also some respondents who had other forms of impairment, e.g. hearing impairment in combination with visual or mobility impairments.

As the material is extensive, there is a great deal of information to absorb. In most cases the material supports a wide range of other studies performed both in Sweden and elsewhere. One common denominator is the insight that higher education is fairly influential on the individual’s possibility of gaining employment. However, higher education is no guarantee that, for example, visually impaired people gain employment; e.g. the seriousness of the impairment can gravely influence the possibility of employment.

There are several interesting aspects to the chapters on income conditions. Two-thirds of those who had been employed for more than 3 months stated that they had the same wage levels as other non-disabled employees with

corresponding assignments, qualifications and age; one-quarter thought they were paid less. As many as two out of ten stated that they were clearly paid less than other comparable groups.

Negative treatment is another area that the study focuses on; as many as 93% of the respondents who were members of SRF stated that they had been disparaged on account of their impairment. The most common experience of negative treatment was that non-disabled persons with corresponding qualifications were preferred in delegation of assignments. Respondents with mobility disabilities had similar experiences of negative treatment to those of the visually impaired, but the pattern of various forms of negative experiences was somewhat different. There are several interesting data in this report, for example regarding gender differences, forms of employment and age differences, as well as varying work experience or starting point of the employment in relation to the occasion of impairment. Moreover, the study presents information on work satisfaction, deficiency in rehabilitation processes, spread of various work areas, etc. This enumeration emphasizes the wide range of various analyses for which this study can be used, particularly in relation to working life. It is obvious that the great majority of people enjoy their work; as many as 86% of the visually impaired respondents supported the statement that they enjoy their work, whereas only 9% claimed the opposite. However, the study does not relate the empirical material to the theories of working life research in general, or to persons with disability in particular. Even so, the empirical data speaks for itself. The many tables included in the report are a starting point for several ideas that can both strengthen and falsify a range of prevalent theories related to the vocational rehabilitation. Unfortunately the report suffers from several proofing errors in the tables; however, this does not diminish the fact that this is, in many ways, a very useful report.

All in all, this project has strengthened our knowledge of discrimination against people with disabilities in their working life. It has given us a more substantial understanding that people with disabilities rarely react automatically or mechanically to their vulnerable position in their working life as many researchers assert. The various multi-layered and complex structures working together on different levels of abstraction have not been entirely revealed within the framework of the project (and indeed that would be impossible); but the study has resulted in two enlightening publications.

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