

Pathways into the labour market for Norwegians with mobility disabilities

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This article explores pathways into working life for Norwegians with mobility disabilities through a life span approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 15 employed individuals with mobility disabilities to gain an insight into their interpretation of events and conditions over the course of their life as either obstacles or facilitators for entrance into employment. We identified three categories of narratives: the 'straightforward', the 'supported' and the 'barrier-prone' path narratives. Higher education appears to be the main facilitator to a smooth transition into employment while certain aspects of welfare service provision are the main impediments. The analysis also demonstrated that barriers to employment do not pertain to isolated events but rather are obstacles that the interviewees experience recurrently over time.

Keywords: disability; employment; narrative; transition; welfare services

Introduction

In Norway, employment and labour market participation are important indicators of the social integration of people with disabilities. Since the late 1960s, the main objective of disability policy has been to increase the number of people with disabilities in the workforce (see St.meld. nr.88 1966–67; St.meld. nr.23 1977–78; St.meld. nr.39 1991–92). Nevertheless, as in most European countries, a substantial gap in employment rates still persists between people with and without disabilities for all working age cohorts (AKU 2008; Shima, Zólyomi, and Zaidi 2008). The estimated employment rate for people with disabilities in Norway is 45.3%, compared to 77.3% for the total population (AKU 2008). Between the ages of 25–39, an estimated 51.6% of people with disabilities were gainfully employed in 2008 as opposed to 86.7% of the total population (AKU 2008). Policies and programmes for bridging this gap have not sufficiently levelled the playing field for people with disabilities. With the number of young disability pension recipients increasing (Bjerkedal and Gogstad 2000; Grue 2006), gaining insight into conditions that impact the outcome of the transition from education to employment is particularly important.

The aim of this article is to identify conditions and events that significantly influence the transition into employment for young people with disabilities. Previous research on transition has focused primarily on the assessment of an

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individual's personal characteristics (Doren and Benz 1998; Horvath-Rose, Stapleton, and O'Day 2004; Wells, Sandefur, and Hogan 2003) with less attention on their experiences and perceptions of the actual process of becoming employed. In contrast, we draw on narrative methodology to investigate people's real life problems (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998, 5) and challenges of transitioning into employment.

The Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway approved the study.

Research question: How do individuals with disabilities perceive events in their life as facilitators or barriers to employment?

We were interested in identifying what conditions and events, over their life spans, interviewees interpreted as obstacles or facilitators to their path to employment. We seek to elucidate how certain conditions and events were perceived as either facilitators or barriers by different narrators, focusing on conditions and events within five areas of the interviewees' life span: parents, welfare services, childhood, higher education and job searches.

Norwegian policy and programmes

In the late 1960s, the focus of national disability policy shifted from segregation to integration. The integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education was a manifestation of this shift (Grue 2001). Research documents that the probability of employment increases substantially with the level of education, especially for people with disabilities (Bliksvær and Hansen 2006; Borg 2008). Nevertheless disparities still persist between the educational and employment outcomes of people with disabilities and people without disabilities (AKU 2008).

The Norwegian government has taken several initiatives to bridge the employment gap between people with and without disabilities. Comprehensive labour market schemes support the Norwegian social policy of prioritizing employment over the allocation of social security benefits. Along with Sweden and Denmark, Norway spends far more on labour market programmes aimed at integrating people into the labour force than other OECD countries (OECD 2003).¹ Vocational rehabilitation programmes are the most frequently used provision for facilitating employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Eligibility for this and other welfare services is contingent on the results of a medical assessment conducted by public health agencies (Grue 2006).

Previous research

Most international research on the transition into employment identifies individual characteristics such as type of disability, gender, family income, high school job experiences and level of education as factors predicting employment outcomes for young people with disabilities (e.g., Doren and Benz 1998; Horvath-Rose, Stapleton, and O'Day 2004; Wells, Sandefur, and Hogan 2003). The few qualitative studies that explore transition into adulthood, including employment, do so from the stand point of social constructionism, i.e., viewing disability as 'the result of a social, linguistic or cultural *construction*' (Gustavsson 2004, 60). These studies address such issues as the

conditions for and perceptions of autonomy (Barron 1995), the social policy options for parents of children with disabilities (Pascall and Hendey 2004) and the implication of the relationship between young adults and welfare services for the transition into adulthood (Barron 1995; Grue 2001). Our article also looks at these issues but with an interest in examining how the individuals perceive such conditions as obstacles or facilitators and their impact on their narratives about transitioning into working life.

In Norway, Solvang (1994) and Anvik (2006) identified different obstacles along this path such as individual ways of relating to the labour market (Solvang 1994, 175) and attitudes towards disability among welfare service providers and employers (Anvik 2006, 100). Although rich in empirical findings, neither examines how these conditions appear and interact, facilitating or creating road blocks along their informants' pathways into employment. In analyzing our interviewees' stories, we investigated patterns of support and constraints and identified types of narratives on pathways into employment.

Methodological framework

In our approach to life stories, narratives are 'simultaneous creators and creatures of social, cultural, and psychological dynamics' (Peacock and Holland 1993, 375). We do not regard narratives as accurate representations of reality. Nor do we understand them as fiction. Individuals use narratives to construct and understand the meanings of events (Mishler 1986, 244). Narratives are identity performances (Mishler 1999, 19) but 'usually constructed around a core of facts or life events' (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998, 8), they offer windows, 'though not perfectly transparent' (Peacock and Holland 1993, 374), into social and cultural processes. Any narrative is always 'but one instance of *the* life story' (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998, 8).

Drawing on findings from previous studies, we asked the interviewees to tell their stories of family, schooling, higher education, welfare services and job searches to investigate their transition into employment from a life span perspective. We used semi-structured interviews, allowing the interviewee and the interviewers to engage in a conversation on important experiences and explore details emerging in the conversation in greater depth. Inviting the interviewees to speak in their own voices and give responses in the form of narratives, we strived for a dialogical process where the content and form of the interview is influenced by both interviewer and interviewee (Mishler 1999, xvi). We offered the interviewees the flexibility to tell their own stories of family, schooling, education, welfare services and job searches.

The sample

We recruited interviewees who either replied to individual letters or responded to ads on disability organizations' websites. We sent the letters with the support of a disability organization. This self-recruitment process put us in contact with interviewees particularly motivated to share their experiences: some were eager to recount how they managed to enter the labour market; others, how they struggled with structural and cultural obstacles in finding a job. The need to narrate the importance of having successfully entered the workforce was the common denominator. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality.

The 15 interviewees, seven men and eight women, were between 24 and 43 years of age at the time of the interview (median age = 33). Many use wheelchairs; some walk without assistance but self-reported having mobility difficulties. All are to some extent in need of different assistive aids; a few require daily assistance in the form of a personal or home care aide.

Five have secondary education, three a master's degree, six a Bachelor's and one a two-year vocational tertiary education degree. Eight work full-time, the rest part-time in a wide range of occupations, both in public and private sectors. Seven combine part-time work with graded disability pension, which is provided to persons with partially reduced work capacity (Lov om folketrygd, § 12-11). Nine live alone, five with a cohabitant or spouse and one with parents. Five have children, of which two are single mothers.

To examine how disability may have affected the informants' pathways into working life, we wanted to interview individuals who had impairments from birth and had recently experienced the transition into employment. Despite repeated attempts to recruit interviewees who experienced the onset of impairment early in life, we found this criterion difficult to meet. The final sample contains ten persons who were born with impairments, one who acquired impairment in early childhood and four who acquired impairments late in their teens or early twenties. We included these last four in the sample because their experiences of higher education and the job search are highly pertinent to the research.

Data analysis procedure

To study how our interviewees construct and understand events, we followed a five phase procedure in our interpretative analysis. Both researchers were involved in the data analysis to strengthen the validity of our interpretations. First we attempted to understand the interviewees' narrated experiences of their pathways into working life, a process that started during the interview (Kvale 1996) in which we actively gathered the data in a dialogical process with the interviewee. Second, the two researchers discussed the main experiences and events that acted as obstacles and facilitators, and reflected upon the interview session itself. Third, we analyzed the transcribed interviews by alternating between holistic-content and categorical-content analyses of the important sub-themes (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998), i.e., we analyzed the entire story revolving the foci of pathways into employment and also focused on the sub-themes on parents, childhood, education, welfare services and job searches. This stepwise procedure represents a dialectical movement between a content category and a holistic perspective where one is dependent on the other. Fourth, we examined the content by looking for recurrent topics across the 15 interviews. Fifth, we configured the interviewees' stories into three different narratives on pathways into employment: the 'straightforward', the 'supported' and the 'barrier-prone'.

Categorizations of narratives on pathways into employment

The interview material, which spanned 700 pages on transcription, is complex and rich in variations among the stories told by different participants. By focusing on the main types of obstacles and facilitators featured across the narratives, we could categorize them into three groups. Five interviewees narrated a straightforward

pathway into employment. They obtained jobs matching their educational degrees without significant hurdles. Five recounted a supported pathway in which provision of adequate employment services and/or participation in informal social networks were prevalent features. The remaining five interviewees narrated a barrier-prone pathway that disclosed a manifold of obstacles to participation in schooling, higher education and in their entry into employment.

Results

This section describes the researchers' interpretations of the impact of different aspects in the narratives – parents, welfare services, childhood, higher education and job searches – on the employment outcomes of the interviewees. Then the stories of three participants, here named Thomas, Jan and Nina, are presented to elucidate the differences between the straightforward, supported and barrier-prone paths. The three narratives are not presented as cases that can be generalized, rather as narratives that also resonated with experiences and events told by the other interviewees.

Parents

Parental support was a prevailing feature in all three types of narratives. Interviewees recounted the importance of both practical and economic assistance from their parents. Interviewees who acquired disability early in life described their parents as supportive parents who emphasized their children's abilities to take part in activities other children their age engaged in, as seen from this statement by one interviewee: 'It was never a question whether I could or could not participate, but how I could take part'.

'To manage on your own', or the self-made man mentality that Solvang (1994, 151) discusses, was a message parents had passed on to their children either verbally or nonverbally. For example, one interviewee mentioned that his father always went to work irrespective of his health condition; another interviewee described his father as a workaholic. From an early age these interviewees observed their parents' attitudes towards working life and absorbed messages about the importance of work to maintain economic self-sufficiency.

The interviewees' parents did not want their child's disability to prevent them from participating in society. Such support is important when faced with different structural obstacles. Their parents' positive attitudes may have contributed to the interviewees' high self-esteem and sense of natural belonging in society. The parents' emphasis on their children's right to participate in society reflected an inclusive attitude.

Welfare services

Interviewees' accounts differ substantially concerning the kind of welfare services they were provided and how these services were rendered. Those narrating a barrier-prone path revealed several examples of obstacles in the provision of needed welfare services. Such obstacles were less systematically presented in the supported and the straightforward narratives.

A significant obstacle was service providers who recommended disability pension as the most obvious future alternative. One barrier-prone interviewee was offended and disappointed when disability pension was brought to the fore:

Just after the accident, they [rehabilitation counsellors] wanted me to become a disability pension recipient. But I said 'No, I don't want to, I want to . . . I want to work, get an education'. 'Oh, is that what you want', they asked. So, all the time I was the one who had to convince everyone else that I really wanted to work.

She described a service system that easily handed down passive benefits such as disability pension; not one that provided active support towards employment.

In encounters with the welfare service apparatus, a recurrent obstacle for the barrier-prone interviewees proved to be what Scheer et al. (2003, 227) refer to as lack of provider knowledge, namely that 'the person is not perceived – or treated – as a fully competent person'. The barrier-prone interviewees interpreted such offers of disability pension as lack of provider knowledge and as a means of exclusion from participating in society. Contrary to the purpose of disability pension, which is to secure income for persons with reduced work capacity (Lov om folketrygd, § 12-1), the interviewees usually interpreted full time disability pension less as an economic benefit than as an obstacle to taking part in society.

Childhood: schooling and disability networks

The lack of accessible educational institutions challenged interviewees' socialization with classmates. The new Education Act of 1975 ended the earlier segregation of children with disabilities in school (Grue 2001), but universal design, i.e., products, buildings and environments usable to everyone (see UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 2), was not part of the new law. Many interviewees who used wheelchairs when attending primary and secondary school reported lack of accessibility – which affected opportunities for socializing with others, a finding in line with Grue's (2001) study.

Inaccessible educational institutions sometimes applied adaptation measures to facilitate accessibility. Nevertheless, the effect of individually-centred adaptations at times invoked feelings of segregation for the student with a mobility disability, as illustrated in the following story. A barrier-prone interviewee recounted that her school installed a stair glide with the purpose of making the first floor accessible for individuals with mobility disabilities. The interviewee minimized the use of the stair glide and never used it during recess because she felt on display whenever using it. While in use, the stair glide would cover the whole staircase and make a beeping sound going up and down. Although the stair glide provided her access to the first floor, she did not experience the stair glide as a facilitator for social integration with peers as it seemed to put her on display, which may be a particularly difficult experience for a teenager.

Interviewees with an early onset of disability emphasized the importance of their parents' and their own engagement with disability organizations. These networks provided their parents with information about available services and the opportunity of meeting other parents of children with disabilities. The interviewees themselves became acquainted with peers who shared experiences of having a disability, making them feel less distinctive. These networks also offered social arenas to discuss common challenges. Curious about future education and employment options, the

interviewees underscored the importance of meeting older employed peers. These disability networks provided the interviewees with greater awareness of themselves and their opportunities in society.

Higher education

In particular, interviewees who experienced a straightforward path focused strongly on getting an education. They emphasized the importance of obtaining educational skills that would enhance their subsequent employment opportunities and they related educational achievement to a question of identity. As one interviewee said, he 'was always conscious about getting a higher education and felt that it was a necessity to obtain a University degree. [...] To manage on my own, I had to be clever and make sure that I used the best of my abilities. For me it was a question of identity'.

The interviewees who had undertaken higher education described the significance of accessibility in educational institutions. In all three narratives, lack of accessibility was discussed but it was especially emphasized in the barrier-prone narrative. An interviewee who experienced a barrier-prone path talked about her failed attempts to receive better accommodation at college:

Well in advance I had made contact with the Technical Aid Centre² and the local National Insurance Agency and the municipality and that like, to inquire about placing a ramp there temporarily. But no, that was just impossible. They said it would take years to get a temporary ramp. So when I was there [at the college] I had to crawl ... so, I crawled up the stairs dragging the wheelchair, every time I needed to use the restroom.

The consequences of this lack of provider knowledge and timeliness of services (Scheer et al. 2003, 227) impacted the interviewee's social interaction with peers and her social standing: crawling up stairs is not associated with dignified behaviour.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of the special welfare benefit of a rehabilitation allowance. Eligibility for this benefit is contingent on the results of medical assessment. Rehabilitation allowance supported most interviewees' education, and the interviewees appreciated this economic benefit. Some also reflected upon the fact that the allowance would not have been available to them if they had been younger or had started their education later because in 2004 the government tightened the regulations. The allowance is now primarily provided to persons who aim for a three year post-secondary degree and who are older than 26 years of age (see Ot.pr. nr. 13 2003–2004; Rundskriv om yrkesrettet attføring 2005 [Circular on Vocational Rehabilitation; not available in English]).

The job search

In searching for jobs the interviewees assessed their qualifications for vacant positions and also researched the accessibility of the locations. Some made a decision only to apply for positions in the public sector due to an assumption that flexible work schedules would be easier to arrange there than in private companies. Others wanted to pursue careers in the private sector due to presumed possibilities of creativity and growth. One interviewee started working in a disability organization, which was more of a coincidence than a specific drive to work with disability issues.

Concerning disclosure of disability in their CVs, most interviewees tried different approaches. They linked their rationale for disclosure to the issue of not negatively

surprising the potential employer when called in for an interview. Not disclosing their disabilities reflected that the interviewees in the job application wanted to be pre-assessed according to their qualifications; not their physical make-up.

Three narratives of employment entry

This section lays out the straightforward, supported and barrier-prone path narratives along with the descriptive examples of Thomas, Jan and Nina, to further tease out the differences in the narratives.

The straightforward narrative

These interviewees hold educational degrees that give them a formal qualification for the positions they applied for. Three hold a master's degree, one a bachelor's degree and one a high school diploma in commercial studies. For Thomas and those narrating similar stories, the transition from education into employment was relatively smooth. They obtained jobs matching their educational competence within a few months upon graduation. Although the interviewees described some challenges concerning the need for adaptation, their narratives disclosed encounters with inclusive employers and a confidence in these employers' effectuation of necessary accommodations, a confidence that may be born out of interviewees' self-belief about their own competence and suitability for the job due to their educational qualifications. In general when these interviewees described obstacles the interviewees often reduced their significance to their everyday lives or they would emphasize ways in which they handled these temporary impediments. For instance, one interviewee recounted how he set aside one day each week to deal with applying for assistive devices or filing complaints for lack of such provision. Another would have his wheelchair fixed by sidestepping the procedures of the technical aid centres: rather than waiting for service providers to come and check out his broken wheelchair, he would just turn up at the garage of the technical aid centre and ask the service guys to help him out, a strategy they did not approve of but, nonetheless, responded to.

Thomas uses a wheelchair and sometimes crutches. He applied for 10 different jobs before graduating. He was called in for two job interviews, in which concerns about his disability were limited to a few practical questions while the main focus was on his qualifications for the job. The employers asked if he needed any accommodation, which he did not. He was also asked to tell if he had any special needs. Thomas explained that when he obtained his first position he received the offer due to his qualifications.

The supported narrative

The five interviewees who narrated a supported path struggled with the job search. Two of them have a bachelor's degree, one a two-year vocational tertiary education and two a secondary education. Entrance into the workforce was either facilitated by participation in labour market programmes or by informal networks or a mix of these two, evident in Jan's story below. Their employment was partly dependent on this kind of external support and these interviewees shared a few, but important stories on engaged and positive Public Employment Service providers. Being

dependent upon assistance, their supported narrative conveys vulnerability. Everyone in this group wanted to become employed but their successful entry into the workforce was more a result of some sort of external support provided at the right time and place, as illustrated in Jan's story.

Jan walks unaided but with restricted mobility. His narrative displays vulnerability and also elucidates how coincidences played out on his pathway into employment. Jan described events in which people, including welfare service providers, apparently assumed that he had an intellectual disability, contrary to his actual abilities. For instance, the Public Employment Services offered him sheltered employment – a programme with the purpose of offering 'adapted employment for participants who have little prospect of obtaining work in ordinary employment' (Regulations Concerning Labour Market Schemes 2005, § 9-1) – without any evaluations of his capacities and skills.

Jan underlined the role of coincidences in his life. He traced his pathway into employment to his teenage years, accompanying a friend to an activity arranged by a non-governmental organization (NGO), which became the start of a long lasting engagement. In between college studies, he worked at the NGO as a vocational rehabilitation programme participant. He initiated this relationship and was supported by the Public Employment Services, as they defined his work within the NGO as a labour market scheme and provided him vocational rehabilitation allowance. While temporarily working for the NGO, Jan kept up with the job application process but never managed to secure a position.

After the vocational rehabilitation programme, Jan returned to his studies and completed a bachelor's degree. Shortly after, the Board of the NGO quite unexpectedly decided to offer Jan a full-time position in its administration. In his own narrative the pathway into employment is framed as a coincidence. Jan's pathway was later supported by both a labour market programme and his own NGO network.

The barrier-prone narrative

Three of the participants who narrated barrier-prone paths into employment have a bachelor's degree and two a secondary education. The interviewees spoke about obstacles that several times during their life span threatened their participation in society and, in particular, their entrance into working life. All of these interviewees struggled with their job searches. A common theme in these stories was that of a welfare system introducing disability pension to them early in their lives contrary to their own employment aspirations, threatening to block their pathways into employment. Their access to employment was dependent upon their own determination and in the end facilitated by labour market programmes. Nina's story is used to demonstrate these challenges to employment participation.

At the age of 24, Nina, a wheelchair user, without education above high school level or a job, was forced to apply for a disability pension. Her service provider at the Public Employment Services believed that her alternatives were either to become a social security recipient or apply for disability pension, which she was entitled to due to her medical diagnosis. Nina had never thought of herself as a disability pension recipient – up until the day she received one. As someone who aspired to participate in society through gainful employment, Nina stated that: 'when receiving a note stating you're one hund ... one hundred percent unfit for employment ... that did

not feel . . . not feel good'. To Nina this was an alarming perspective. Nonetheless, she remained a full time disability pension recipient until, according to her, a turning point occurred when with support from a new network of friends she managed to deal more positively with her everyday challenges that had restrained her from focusing on getting employed.

Nina again contacted the Public Employment Services and convinced them to let her take part in a labour market programme, which she had read about in the local newspaper, targeting employed individuals who were on long term sick leave. However, being a disability pension recipient, Nina was no longer a client of the Public Employment Services. She was therefore not entitled to their services:

So, the Public Employment Services said 'sorry, you are not part of our portfolio anymore since you are a 100% disability pension recipient, and therefore you won't be able to take part in any of our programmes unless you get a vocational rehabilitation status [an entitlement issued by the National Insurance agency]'. And then, the people at the National Insurance agency said 'you will not be provided a vocational rehabilitation status before you are taking part in a Public Employment Service labour market programme'.

To Nina, the Public Employment Services' insistence on following regulations was not only a question of formalities but actually conveyed reluctance to support employment participation for individuals with disabilities. But Nina was very determined to succeed: 'To take part in working life, it's a very significant part of life. It's almost what makes living worthwhile, yes . . . Like, who am I and what am I?' Her determination helped her complete a Bachelor's degree. By coincidence, Nina got a new case worker at the Public Employment Services. She succeeded in convincing the new case worker to let her participate in the labour market programme that provided her with important on-the-job-training. Thereafter Nina managed to get a temporary position in a public agency, which later turned into a permanent position.

Discussion

We have interpreted the differences in the interviewees' experiences, categorized into three types of narratives, mainly in terms of their encounters with the welfare service apparatus. Other phenomena, nevertheless, may influence the interviewees' narratives on their pathways into employment. To further explore the differences in narrated experiences, we will particularly discuss the meaning of gender, severity of disability and education in their narrative. In this discussion we draw on the two aspects of narrating: identity-performance and reference to the world.

Gender and severity of disability

Gender, otherwise an important social category impacting the route into employment, remains a relatively unexplored issue in disability studies (cf. Barron 1995). Barron (1997, 236) argues that women from an early age are more subject to others' definitions of their roles and requirements than men, therefore exploring the extent to which gender plays a role in creating barriers is important. Labour force data indicate a gap in the employment patterns of men and women with disabilities: 47.9% of men compared to 43.2% of women are employed (AKU 2008).

Among our interviewees, four out of five narrating a straightforward path are men, while in comparison all interviewees narrating a barrier-prone path are women. These

women described instances where other people, mainly within the welfare service apparatus, defined their needs and offered solutions such as disability pension without involving them in the decision-making process. Such definitions and solutions no doubt represent hindrances to employment participation, carrying possible implications for the women's self-identity. Nonetheless, we interpret these interviewees' narratives to convey a decisiveness not to let other people define who they are or should be and to hold on to their aspirations of gaining a foothold in the workforce.

How does severity of disability impact the narrative of pathway into employment? Persons with severe disabilities tend to rely on more support, such as personal assistance or home care, to be active participants in society. Consequently they are more vulnerable, for instance, to the lack of timeliness of services recounted in the barrier-prone narrative. Although we identified persons in need of different welfare services in all three narratives, we acknowledge that persons in need of several services may have rougher pathways into employment than persons without such needs (Anvik et al. 2007).

We argue that neither gender nor severity of disability *alone* can account for the differences in the three narratives on pathways into employment. Bearing in mind that narratives are told by persons occupying particular positions and with particular experiences, the differences in types of narratives pertain to how educational specificities and experiences with the welfare service apparatus are interconnected.

The significance of welfare services and education

Before further exploring this interconnection, we will address an important but so far less emphasized aspect of the interviewees' stories on the provision of welfare services. As noted earlier, most interviewees who narrated a supported and a barrier-prone pathway were provided necessary labour market training to enter the workforce. Although Nina's story on access to public employment service revealed a lack of willingness to help her to become employed, many interviewees stressed that their competence and abilities remained the primary focus in their interactions with supported employment providers of the former Public Employment Services. The interviewees described service providers who acknowledged their formal qualifications and addressed their competence as well as accurately understanding how much or little follow-up and support they needed. These service providers primarily assist persons with severe disabilities and, as labour market programmes aim to enhance employment opportunities, providers may hold more inclusive attitudes towards disability. Such programmes are often vital in facilitating employment opportunities for people with disabilities, especially when employers may be reluctant to hiring people with disabilities (see Dalen 2006).

Lack of provider knowledge and timeliness of services were more prominent in the narratives told by the barrier-prone interviewees as compared to the straightforward and supported interviewees. There may be two reasons for this disparity in the narratives. Firstly, different experiences with the welfare service apparatus may impact employment outcomes. Secondly, and importantly, these interpretations are drawn from personal narratives which are naturally influenced by the storyteller themselves. We examine both these reasons.

Important conditions for the straightforward interviewees' relatively smooth transition are their lack of negative welfare encounters and their attainment of jobs upon graduation. We make two alternative interpretations of this. These interviewees

may not have experienced a manifold of hindrances and therefore they perceive their pathway into employment as more or less straightforward. Additionally, irrespective of the pathway itself, they are telling stories from the present position of having a job they are qualified for. Narrating from this more satisfactory position may have influenced their selection of, and emphasis on, what to tell the researchers (see Riessman 1993, 10).

This second aspect links their entry into employment to the significance of their educational background. The straightforward interviewees are the ones with the highest education and training for specific occupations. Their level of education and their training may confirm their self-identity as belonging to the work-force and this self-identity may make them define barriers as temporary. Overall these interviewees described employers whose attention was drawn to their qualification for the position, although they also mentioned interviews in which potential employers did not only relate to their formal qualifications and accommodation processes that did not go smoothly.

Goffman's distinction between 'virtual social identity' and 'actual social identity' (1963, 12) can help us to understand the straightforward narrative on experiences with employers. While virtual social identity refers to certain assumptions about attributes of the person, actual social identity refers to attributes the person can be proved to possess. In employment interviews, employers could assess the straightforward interviewees on the premise of their actual social identity related to educational achievement since the employer had a good understanding of their educational skills. The interviewees' virtual social identity as a person with a disability, often carrying with it presumed negative attributes, became less prominent in their interaction with employers. Therefore their educational background helped to facilitate the transition into working life.

While higher education is one important facilitator, certain aspects of the welfare service system presented hindrances along the interviewees' pathways into employment. We believe that the differences in their narratives about welfare services stem from their experiences of the welfare service systems as incidental in the way they deliver their services. At least two factors affect how lack of provider knowledge and timeliness of services are perceived in the interviewees' narrated experiences – case work procedures and gaps in coordination between different service agencies.

The outcome of the relationship between the eligibility criteria in the provision of welfare services and the use of discretion in case work procedures can become an incidental barrier in the transition into employment. In order to apply for welfare services the public health agency must first conduct a medical assessment (Grue 2006). If the person is eligible for the services, then service providers have to assess the need for support while also making balanced decisions about the allocation of often sparse resources. This process can result in provider actions or decisions that are perceived by some interviewees as the primary barriers to their entry into gainful employment. Many of the interviewees' stories on this allocation process bear resemblance to service providers as 'gatekeepers' (Lipsky 1980): they are seen to impede or delay the rendering of services needed to support the interviewees' aspirations of becoming employed.

The lack of coordination between service agencies can add to individuals' vulnerability in their efforts to become and stay employed, as illustrated in Nina's efforts to take part in a labour market programme. Interviewees also narrated how lack of assistive aids from the technical aid centres impacted their participation in labour market programmes provided by the employment service agencies.

On considering the case work procedure and the coordination of services, we interpret the interviewees' experiences of being denied services or being provided inadequate services as incidental outcomes of how the welfare service apparatus operates. At least two aspects can elucidate how such incidental welfare service delivery barriers are not systematically present in all interviewees' narrative. First, looking at (interpreting the) narratives as windows into social and structural processes the narratives disclose the provision of needed services as incidental and, consequently, have impacted the interviewees' pathways randomly. Second, understanding narratives as vehicles of identity performance, the extent to which the interviewees relate to and emphasize their encounters with the welfare services as hindrances, depend in part on the narrator's present standing/position. The experiences of these encounters with the welfare service apparatus are interpreted by the barrier-prone interviewees *over time* as barriers to their transition into the workforce. Obstacles that the interviewees experience repeatedly and extensively over time turn into barriers and make the pathway into employment barrier-prone.

Conclusion

In investigating facilitators and obstacles along the pathway into competitive employment, we have examined the narratives of employed Norwegians with mobility disabilities. In Norway, as well as in other European countries, the employment rate of people with disabilities is low, even among those in the younger age cohorts. In their narratives, interviewees described conditions and events significant for their entry into employment. Applying a narrative framework and a life span approach, we investigated these 15 narratives and identified a pattern of three primary narratives of pathways into employment: a straightforward, a supported and a barrier-prone path narrative. In line with previous research, the article demonstrates that higher education is vital for a smooth transition into employment. The main impediment along the pathway into employment, particularly recounted in the barrier-prone narrative, was the lack of adequate provision of needed welfare services.

Lastly, we should recall that all interviewees are employed and that our findings are related to young people with disabilities with a relatively successful employment history. Nonetheless, the interviewees' stories call for changes both on a structural and a cultural level if the government's policy objective of increasing labour market participation is to be fulfilled.

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Notes

1. Fourteen percent of disability related expenditure is allocated to active labour market schemes (OECD 2003).
2. There is one such centre in every county with the purpose of securing high quality services to people with disabilities in compliance with rights according to the National Insurance Act.

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