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Work in the Experience of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities. A Focus Group Research Report

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Abstract

Although the literature recognizes the benefits of work and employment for people with intellectual disabilities, there is little research devoted to their experiences presented from their own perspective. This article is a report on a phenomenographic focus study conducted in four groups of adults with moderate or mild intellectual disabilities. The main aim of the research was to understand the experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities related to work and employment and the meanings given to them. A total of 34 people took part in the research. As a result of the analysis, three areas were identified to which the participants referred when talking about work and employment: (1) their own person – dreams, expectations, imaginations, opportunities, beliefs, and experiences, (2) the environment – environmental patterns, support and barriers, recruitment for work and labour market opportunities, and (3) meanings given to work – a source of income / fulfilling material, social, emotional needs (satisfaction) and an opportunity for self-development / self-realization. The obtained findings have

important implications for families, practitioners, and social policy regarding the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: work, employment, people with intellectual disabilities, focus group.

Introduction

The literature on the subject regards work as a significant element of an individual's identity, which affects his/her functioning in many spheres (Fryers, 2006; Lindsay, 2011; Hutton et al., 2012). It has been emphasised that it not only provides an opportunity for gaining an income and, consequently, achieving financial independence (Van Campen & Cardol, 2009), and being a part of social identification (Moore et al., 2002), but it also shapes an individual's social relations, his/her social status, daily routine and makes his/her life meaningful (Van Campen & Cardol, 2009).

For individuals with disabilities, employment can be a method for overcoming the barriers arising from their disability, for the development of social skills, developing self-efficacy, achieving the state of health understood as mental and physical well-being, as well as an area of self-determination (Kober & Eggleton, 2006; Verdugo et al., 2006; Flores et al., 2010; McDermott & Edwards, 2012; Santilli et al., 2014; Firkowska-Mankiewicz et al., 2017; Bigby et al., 2019; Devine et al., 2020). A person with a disability playing the role of an employee, which is regarded as socially acceptable, according to Wolf Wolfensberger's theory of valuation of social roles (Żółkowska, 2016), increases this person's chance of obtaining socially valued goods (e.g., material goods, prestige), development of his/her skills and contributes to an improvement of this group's public image. Work – along with love and family, friendship, and independence – becomes one of the basic areas of plans and dreams for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) (Włodek, 2013; Kijak, 2016; Ćwirynkało, 2022). In turn, employed persons with a disability point to a higher quality of life, understood as subjectively felt satisfaction with one's life (Kober & Eggleton, 2006; Verdugo et al., 2006; Jahoda et al., 2007; Anasz et al., 2012; Fekate et al., 2014; Santillet et al., 2014; Firkowska-Mankiewicz et al., 2017). Work allows these people to enter other social roles than those associated with functioning in the family, to become mature and to start per-

ceiving oneself “in the categories that go beyond disability and the restrictions arising from it” (Firkowska-Mankiewicz et al., 2017, p. 176).

Despite seeing numerous benefits from employment and conducting many campaigns and regular actions as part of various programs supporting work opportunities for persons with disabilities (Książkiewicz, 2008; Gorący, 2011; Lindyberg & Wojnarowska, 2016), these persons still experience a number of barriers with respect to employment, and the employment rate in this group remains considerably lower than in the general population (Firkowska-Mankiewicz et al., 2017; Janiszewska-Nieścioruk, 2020). For example, it was 17.5% in the third quarter of 2020 (including in a profound disability – 5.5%, in moderate – 20.6% and in mild – 26.3%) (GUS, 2020). Importantly, persons with intellectual disabilities are the most discriminated against among all the people with disabilities, with the lowest employment rate (Firkowska-Mankiewicz et al., 2017). The professional passivity of people with intellectual disabilities is an effect of various factors. These include bad health, being afraid of losing one’s benefits if one starts working, being afraid of work, insufficient professional qualifications, negative experiences, lack of architectural accessibility, restricted mobility and contactability, a negative attitude or insufficient knowledge among people around them (including the employers’ concern and aversion for employing people with disabilities), an employment policy disadvantageous for people with disabilities and a lack of suitable job offers, especially for people with more severe intellectual disability levels (Siperstein, 2006; Gorący, 2011; Niedzielski, 2014; Kobus-Ostrowska, 2015; Firkowska-Mankiewicz et al., 2017; Patulski & Godlewska-Bujok, 2017; Janiszewska-Nieścioruk, 2020).

Although the issue of work and employment of people with disabilities, especially intellectual disability, lies at the centre of social policy and practitioners’ and theoretical researchers’ attention, studies in which people with disabilities could express their opinions and which would allow one to understand their perspective with respect to employment, are still scarce. The authors of the research report presented below hope to fill this gap.

Objective of the study

This study takes the emic approach, in which the researchers strive to obtain information from the study subjects about their experiences as they understand them (Brown, 1993). The objective of the study is to understand the experiences of adult males and females with intellectual disabilities associated with work and employment and the meanings ascribed to these experiences as well as to identify implications for families, practitioners, and social policy in the area.

Method

In order to accomplish the research objective, the authors had to follow the “soft” approach, i.e., the qualitative study procedure rooted in the interpretative paradigm. Focus interviews in groups of persons with intellectual disabilities were chosen as the method for collecting data. This helped to apply the emic perspective. Owing to this approach, the research subject could be studied in greater depth. The analysis was conducted by means of phenomenography, which enables studying various phenomena and events of interest to the researcher as understood and experienced by the participants (Marton, 1988; Tan & Prosser, 2004). Phenomenography results in discovering a secondary perspective. According to Marton, the primary perspective is a description of various aspects of the surrounding world, whereas the secondary perspective is a description of human experiences, and interpretations, of how the participants understand the surrounding reality (Marton, 1981). Data were gathered by the focus interview method (Flick, 2010), which allows for collecting material from interaction within a group between the participants talking on subjects (foci) defined by the researcher (Morgan, 1997, p. 6). The focus groups were moderated by the authors of this article. The moderators were external with respect to the group and the everyday surrounding of the study subjects, so they could exhibit curiosity about the subject, thus stimulating the participants to talk. They were interested and yet passive at the same time, which gave the interviewees space to participate in the discussion. The subjects discussed included general issues related to work, e.g. “With what do you associate the word *work*?”, “How important

is it to have a job for men/women?” as well as the subjects’ own experiences associated with employment, e.g. “Please, tell us about your work.” The data analysis involved isolating thematic sequences in the participants’ utterances, followed by determining the structural aspects of the phenomenon under examination, and, in effect, allowed for determining various description categories (Marton 1988; 1994; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Marton & Pong, 2005).

Characteristics of the study group

The study group comprised the participants in four focus interviews conducted in the years 2019–2021 in three towns in the northeast of Poland. Representatives of three institutions within the Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability were invited to recruit the group for cooperation. These individuals – in cooperation with the authors of this article – pre-selected potential study participants. The following selection criteria for the focus group were adopted:

- in the first two groups: being a non-incapacitated adult, being diagnosed with intellectual disability (mild to severe), consenting to participation in the study,
- in the third group: as in groups 1 and 2, and another criterion – being male,
- in the fourth group: as in groups 1 and 2, and another criterion – being female.

Preliminary meetings with potential study participants were held at the next stage, during which the study objective was presented, and detailed explanations were provided about what participation in the study would involve. Moreover, the consent for participation forms, based on Rapley’s (2010) guidelines, were collected.

Ultimately, 34 adults with ID participated in the study. Individual focus groups are briefly characterised below.

Group 1

Twelve persons with intellectual disabilities aged 20 to 49 years (mean age: 32.7), including five females and seven males. These persons were em-

ployed at the Professional Activity Facility (*Zakład Aktywności Zawodowej – ZAZ*) or participated in Occupational Therapy Workshops (*Warsztaty Terapii Zajęciowej – WTZ*). Eight of them were diagnosed with mild intellectual disability (and one – with autism spectrum disorder), the other four – with moderate ID. Moreover, two participants move in a wheelchair. Four participants live with their loved ones (e.g., with a partner and/or child) without their families of origin, and the others live with their parents or other family members who support them. Eight group members were involved in the self-advocate movement (a group of people with ID who advocate for their own rights).

Group 2

Seven persons – self-advocates, WTZ participants with ID, aged 27 to 59 years (mean age: 39.0), including four males (two with paralysis of the limbs, moving in wheelchairs) and three females. All of them were diagnosed with moderate ID. They live with their parents (both or only the mother – 6 people) or a different relative who looks after them (1 person). As participants of WTZ, they also take part in professional work placements (e.g., in shops and a shelter).

Group 3

Six men with mild (three persons) or moderate (three persons) ID, aged 31 to 41 years (mean age: 33.3 years). Moreover, one person used a wheelchair. Three study subjects took part in WTZ and were involved in the self-advocate movement. Four men lived without a family of their origin (alone or with a partner and children). The other two lived with their parents.

Group 4

Nine women, WTZ participants, with mild (three persons) or moderate (six persons) ID, aged 21 to 60 years (mean age: 36.0 years). Moreover, two persons used a wheelchair. One lived with her partner, while the others lived with their families of origin (parents or siblings). Seven participants were also members of a self-advocate group.

The subjects' sex was identified with a letter (K-female, M-male) and a number was assigned to each subject.

Results

The analysis of the gathered material revealed three main areas in which the participants talk about their jobs and employment related to:

- 1) the subject him/herself,
- 2) the living environment,
- 3) the importance that they attach to work.

The first two are rather closely linked. They make two intertwined and compatible groups of various thematic subcategories. Research has shown that – under convenient circumstances for both sides (the subject and the environment) – they can make groups of factors which favour the employment of a person with ID (Table 1).

Table 1. Work-related factors in the subjects' statements

Person with disability			Environment
Dreams/expectations/ideas			Environmental models
Opportunities			Support and barriers
Beliefs			Recruitment for work
Experiences	Informal	Family	Labour market opportunities
		Among one's acquaintances	
	Formal	Voluntary work	
		Work	
	Practical training		

Source: Authors' research.

Person with a disability

The considerations on work can begin with such areas as **dreams, expectations, and imagination**, because these can provide the prime impulse for initial consideration and then making the first steps and taking specific actions aimed at finding a job.

K2: I'd very much like to work in a town library in B.

M13: I'm just starting thinking of it, too [...] and I'd also like to work in a firm, I'd like to represent our Association, I'd like to work with a computer.

Dreams about work alternate with ideas about what it could look like and what it would require of the interview participants:

M9: One cannot allow arguing with someone because the employer may hear it and say, "I'm sorry, you're fired, you're making scenes here, etc." You should know that you should avoid such situations, and when someone provokes you, say "I don't have time, I've got work to do [...]" because everyone knows that work is needed to earn money, to help your relatives, your mum, because her pension is low, etc. And to support everything and to help yourself.

Having dreams and ideas is one aspect which many interviewees juxtapose with reality (including limitations). The study subjects are aware of the requirements with respect to qualifications and documents to confirm them:

M11: And when it's good, you have a paper. You should take the papers and go. Because if he sees the paper, he will hire you.

M16: I have several professions. I don't know who else has something like this. I have a licence as a road machine operator, tools, saws, and chainsaws of different kinds. I have a forklift truck driver's licence, I'm an unqualified carpenter, and I can assemble furniture, and do paving.

M5: I try taking various courses to make life easier for my family so that I can find a job, and now I'm thinking of something new, of another course, if I can.

According to what the subjects say, some of them are convinced about their skills, sometimes greater than average, but there are also a few who see a long way ahead of them before they get a job. This is going to require some sacrifices ("Because you have to be enthusiastic about it" – M9), resourcefulness to find a suitable training course for oneself, and everything should be completed by acquiring a formal licence ("You must go with papers" – M1).

Another element which can be of help in the process of getting a job, but which can also be an obstacle, are the subjects' **beliefs**. A particular empha-

sis in the focus interviews was placed on men's and women's work. Most participants perceive the man stereotypically as an active and working person, whereas a woman, as they believe, should devote her efforts to the family. These beliefs seem to favour men and demotivate women:

M14: The man must feed his family, work, and provide support to everyone in the family... simply, he has to be head of the family. The woman's job is to cook, do the laundry, and look after the children.

This topic came up in the category of environmental models, and it was not so one-sided.

The interviewees' own **experience** associated with doing various jobs is also an extremely important element. According to what they say, this includes informal (e.g. for friends and family) and formal work (as paid or voluntary work). Their answers indicate that the activities they take up are diverse.

The following dialogue shows a potential which can reveal itself in informal jobs, e.g. helping relatives:

K7: My sister is married. She has four children. And I like looking after them very much.

K4: So, do I.

K7: Because my sister sometimes lets me... I look after them.

K11: When my sister's daughter, Ilona, comes to the kitchen with her child to do something, I always rock him and make him sleep. And I. says to my sister, "Mum, how does she do it?", that I always make the child fall asleep [she laughs].

Some people become involved in voluntary work, which also enables them to use their potential:

M1: I go to the animal shelter in C. To the dogs. We clean there. I like it. I remove snow, and when there's no snow, I bring wood. It's hard too. And when there's no snow, I rake the leaves and sweep. And I take out the rubbish.

A large number of the participants attend the WTZ, and for them, this is work (both within the workshop and outside it, as part of the work placements); some participants found their place in ZAZ:

M4: (ZAZ employee): I work at the assembly department as an assembly worker.

M8 has been working for a year. In his statement, he stresses the routine in his work:

M8: My work starts, I change into working clothes, and I sign the attendance register. For example, if I don't finish something, I'll be polishing on Friday, and when the time comes to finish work, I leave it for Monday, I know I have to finish it, and then I complete what I finished on Friday, but what I didn't complete.

M7 talks about his tasks in a similar manner:

M7: I have papers. At the shredder. I'm here at the plant.

Another interviewee, M12, a WTZ participant, earns some extra money in the stud (in exchange, he receives allowance and dinners from the owner). This is his account of his work experience:

M12: I have to have this job! [...] when Ms M. calls me, "Will you help there? Then you'll have dinner..." I say, "No problem!" Ms M. calls in the morning, "Ms M., what are we doing with this stallion, because there's no hay there?" "P., take him out!" And there! I fixed the longe quickly and let's go!

M3 is an interesting case, deviating from the other participants. The interviewee had his own idea for voluntary work. As a football club member and fan, he started running its website and writing match reports.

Researcher: How did you start this job?

M3: Nobody was interested in it, at a meeting, when it started. [...] they came to the conclusion that I could do it, because they know what knowledge I have.

What the subjects say shows their diverse work experiences or such that can become work experience in future.

Environment

The comprehensive experience of the participants is shaped not only by their individual predispositions but also by the environmental impact. It is the external conditions that often have the liberating or limiting potential. The interviewees talk about work in connection with patterns, support received, and barriers experienced. Some of them took part in the recruitment procedures. They also have good knowledge of the local labour market.

The **models** with which the study participants are in contact are often important for getting a job.

K6: It was like this in my home: Mum was at home because she was on a pension, whereas her work duties were taken over by Dad. He's been working until now.

It is, on the one hand, an opportunity to observe another person (including one with a disability) who works. On the other – especially in the case of women – an opportunity to meet working women:

K11: I have a friend. She goes to work [...] And when she gave birth to a kid, her husband stayed with the kid, and she went to work.

M17: Women can work too. They can earn and provide for the family. I know such women.

These models are of special importance if you juxtapose them with the previously discussed issue of the subjects' beliefs, with their topics of the traditional role of the woman as the mother and a person who stays at home. In the case of women with ID, it can be a strong conviction about the naturalness of their double exclusion. Seeing other models makes it possible to go beyond that pattern.

The second topic concerns the **support** received, and the **barriers** experienced. These topics proved to be closely connected in the participants' utter-

ances. The support often proved to be an obstacle at the same time or support for one person with a disability – an obstacle for another, e.g., finding a job by someone with the use of the person's connections:

K2: You get a job because you have connections. (four persons nod in agreement)

If it comes to an assessment of the possibility of finding a job by persons with ID, it is often not too high. The interviewees indicate the need for having a skill, experience, but also connections. Frequently, the subjects blame other people for their failure to find a job.

Additionally, it turns out that formalities (including those that were created for support) can be an obstacle in their professional activity:

M4: It's difficult, very difficult (to find a job – author's note), because officials create problems, and the state creates problems.

M1: This may be that they'll take back the pension. Because if you earn less, they won't. And if a lot, they will.

Documentation from certificate-issuing teams, which can find persons with ID to be unfit for work, including for benefiting from professional activation, can be an external barrier:

K2: My certificate said I didn't need work in ZAZ, or occupational therapy, eh, and something else. I had to change the certificate because they [...] took the occupational therapy from me, right? And again, I had to argue with them so that they insert something or other.

The environment also offers specific job-finding opportunities and recruitment, which usually precedes employment. Many subjects find the recruitment stage to be particularly difficult. Some of them mention that they can apply for a job over the Internet. This is very convenient for people with disabilities, but according to what the focus interview participants say, they (being digitally excluded) are not enthusiastic about such a possibility:

M9: Everybody knows it's difficult. Because you have to know your way with computers. There are websites about jobs. You have to search for them, if there's anything. If you find something, you have to note the phone number, make a call, make an appointment, talk.

K2: Internet, advertisements – some people's fears about using the Internet: well, you can, but the Internet is more dangerous then. You never know what you can come across.

Making use of online job advertisements and recruitment in this way is rather difficult for people with ID. They require additional support in this area.

Some people use various traditional possibilities, which is shown by K2's statement:

My fiancé and I have put up an advertisement on a noticeboard in [name of town] that we're looking for a job, we'd like to find a new job and that we are persons with disabilities, but we're looking for a job.

Researcher: what kind of job?

K2: for example, in an office.

B: did you have any responses?

K2: none.

Sometimes, despite looking for a job actively (e.g. writing notices, sending CVs), the participants report failures. They see the labour market opportunities as insufficient, to say the least:

M2: Because there are no jobs.

Or there are, but not in the areas of the subjects' qualifications:

K15: I'm a trained office assistant, but I do something completely different.

Job offers are limited, which strongly affects people with ID, who find it difficult to get additional qualifications in any area.

Importance of work and employment

According to what the interviewees say, work is important because it allows one to meet their various needs, for example:

- material,
- social,
- emotional (satisfaction),
- self-development/self-fulfilment.

Many participants focus on the importance of work in satisfying their **material** needs:

M11: If I didn't work, I wouldn't be able to make it. Because with the pension alone... Well, of course, you can pay the bills and you can buy something small to eat, but not more than bread, water, or butter.

Some of the subjects talk about their jobs, stressing mainly that it is their source of income. They emphasise that work gives them an opportunity to earn money, which enables them to pay the bills and satisfy their needs.

Satisfying their material needs is a condition for self-fulfilment in other roles. Following is a dialogue between women who see the correlation between earning money and being a responsible mother:

K6: First you need to find a job, then a place to live and the family comes next.

K3: How much does it all cost? Go and see.

K11: Milk.

K4: And diapers. A pram.

K9: A woman has to be independent and responsible. To pay the bills and all.

This dialogue shows the responsibility not only for oneself but also for others. It also appears in what other subjects say, stressing that when they have money, they can satisfy their **social** needs associated with playing various roles and assuming responsibility:

M9: Of course, I'd like such a job in a factory. My mum doesn't want it, but I'm willing, because it's very important to earn money for myself, and not only for myself but to help my mum and to save some for the family.

Some interviewees stress the ability to support their families (e.g., the partner or parents/guardians) with the money they earn and to help by doing useful work:

M9: Work is not only for me. Because you have to earn money, but you also have to help your family and support it. [...] Because work is very important, when you do renovations in homes, you help people.

Owing to their jobs and the money earned in this way, the participants see themselves as rightful adults making up family communities. Even if they do not establish their own families, they can function under different conditions in their family of origin.

For some interviewees, work is an opportunity to be with people, which is also a considerable value. Meeting other people on a daily basis is an important element of satisfying their social needs:

M8: You go to work not only for the money, but it's a great pleasure to be with people.

M4: It's important to have a job because you don't stay at home all the time.

The participants usually see their work as consisting in fulfilling their duties. As one of them says: "work is when you do something" (M1). And being paid is not always regarded as the necessary condition for seeing what one does as work. This approach is particularly manifest among those interviewees who attend the WTZ. The individuals who do voluntary work, or work

for symbolic pay, argue that, for them, it is much more important to be able to meet other people, as well as to experience joy and satisfaction with one's work, which shows that **emotional** needs are satisfied:

K8: I sweep and wash the floors. I wash, dust... It's a little tiring, but it's good. That you've done something.

Several participants mention elements of **self-fulfilment**. They stress that they achieved a kind of prestige and a sense of "normality" by earning and having their own money, but also a feeling of a job well (or – to be more precise – better than other workers) done:

M1: I'd like to have a job so I can have **my own** money.

M11: I'm **an ordinary worker** because I don't make such errors as they [other workers] do. They make such a mess that you don't know how to tidy it up.

These statements show the high diversity and multitude of meanings assigned to the basic work-related categories – its importance, benefits, as well as barriers and the subjects' concerns. The narratives show that work is seen as an efficient activity, being with people as well as shared responsibility for the family. The interviewees focus less on the specificity of employment with respect to persons with disabilities, pointing not only, or not as much, the need to be "an ordinary worker" but rather the "normality" of their role.

Discussion

This study has identified three areas in which persons with ID addressed the issue of work and employment. They were related to: (1) the study participants themselves, (2) their living environment, and (3) the meanings that they ascribed to work.

The employment-related plans and dreams of the study participants were one of the categories in the first area. They were diverse, both with respect to the object (finding any job, changing a job for a better one, higher pay, finding a job in line with one's qualifications), time (short- and long-term) and

the possibility of fulfilment (more or less possible). The findings indicating the great importance of work in plans and dreams are consistent with those of earlier studies conducted in groups of persons with ID (Włodek, 2013; Kijak, 2016; Ćwirynkało, 2022). On the other hand, some interviewees did not dream of a change or of going beyond taking part in WTZ or working under protected conditions (ZAZ). Various drawbacks of the protected system (e.g. low pay, no social integration or career opportunities) (Szabała, 2020) were not reasons for them to find it worthwhile to look for a job in the open labour market.

Another category of the first area involved their capabilities for finding and keeping a job, as perceived subjectively by the study participants. What they said in this regard varied, dominated by a focus on internal barriers and difficulties, and the need for development. Such issues among individuals with intellectual disabilities were also noted by Taylor et al. (2004), who pointed out that some people with disabilities valued their comfort and safety associated with their activities (e.g., as occupational therapy) higher than a paid job, although many of them could do such a job after acquiring proper qualifications. Some of the WTZ participants under study perceived their situation in a similar manner because not being paid for their “work” was not a problem for them.

The interviewees had diverse experiences regarding employment. However, satisfaction with these experiences was a dominating emotion. The appearance of positive emotions associated with one’s work is consistent with the findings of research conducted by Santilla et al. (2014), which show a correlation between the ability to adapt to work and the feeling of satisfaction with one’s work and life. Having a satisfying job can be important for improving the quality of life of individuals with ID (Otrębski, 2007; Anasz et al., 2012).

The participants’ opinions on work, taking into consideration their sex, were an interesting issue. Many of them expressed their opinions about the superiority of the traditional model of roles assigned to women and men. This issue has been analysed in the literature on the subject (Ćwirynkało et al., 2017), where the particularly difficult situation of men with ID was emphasised, as they have to reconcile their ideas about themselves as persons with ID with what is expected of them as men. However, some interviewees in this research – especially women – emphasised the need to abandon the tra-

ditional image of the woman as a weaker person or one reluctant to take up a job, which, in turn, is consistent with the findings of a different study (Barnikowska, 2019), in which women – self-advocates with ID – indicated employment as an important area which determined men's and women's maturity.

Regarding the second of the identified areas (environment), the models taken from it, indicating differences between men and women in their approach to employment, were a significant category. These differences were not only noted but even stressed in many participants' statements. Other studies have shown that the situation of men and women with disabilities reflects that of fully able men and women, i.e. women in this population work fewer hours and earn less, just like in the general population (Jahoda et al., 2008).

The interviewees stressed that it was difficult for them to find a job. This is a problem emphasised by study subjects with ID in other countries, pointing to the significant role of intermediaries and those supporting the recruitment process (Reid & Bray, 2009; Donnelly et al., 2010). A marked presence of barriers in the environment, as perceived by the subjects, was also noted. They make it difficult to find a job. Interestingly, the study subjects encountered them more frequently in the current system and legal solutions (risk of losing their pension after taking up a job) than in specific individuals (e.g., parents or potential employers). Problems of this kind (e.g., those related to instability and inadequacy of legal solutions in Poland with respect to the needs) have also been noted in the literature (Kirenko & Sarzyńska, 2010). As a comparison, individuals with ID taking part in a study in Australia mentioned stigmatisation and discrimination at work, as well as employers' and colleagues' disrespectful and discouraging attitudes to their work as the main barriers to finding and keeping a job (Meltzer et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the issue of looking for a job and looking for information online also came up. This shows that some study subjects took an active attitude, which is consistent with the findings of other studies, which show persons with ID as taking actions aimed at fulfilling their plans (Ćwirynkało, 2022).

In the third of the identified areas (the sense given to work), the subject pointed out that work allowed them to satisfy their social and emotional needs. The satisfaction that they gain from work (but also from their activities in WTZ), improving the quality of life of working individuals with ID,

enabling them to make responsible decisions and self-determination – these are also the findings of other studies in this regard (Verdugo et al., 2005; Otrębski, 2007; Flores et al., 2010; Anasz et al., 2012; McDermott & Edwards, 2012; Santilli et al., 2014; Bigby et al., 2019; Devine et al., 2020).

This research has some limitations largely related to the choice of the qualitative research strategy and the purposeful selection of the group. Although the study group was diverse with respect to age, work experience (WTZ participants, employees at ZAZ and on the open labour market), and level of self-sufficiency (individuals living with their family of origin or on their own or with their families – partners, children), the study findings certainly cannot be extrapolated to the whole population of adults with ID. Moreover, the participants could be more aware of their rights than the general population of individuals with ID and demonstrate an active attitude because some of them were active as self-advocates. Only individuals using spoken language for communication were enrolled – there was no one using alternative or supported communication whose professional situation can be more complicated. All interviewees live in towns in which WTZ or ZAZ operate (individuals living in the country, who may have different job opportunities, were excluded). It is also significant that all the subjects live in north-eastern Poland, as the unemployment rate in this region is extremely high, which affects the situation of individuals with ID in the labour market. The study could reveal a broader spectrum of work experiences if more people working in the open labour market could be enrolled. Nevertheless, the study allowed a view of their unique perspective in the area of work and employment to help understand their experiences and identify the internal and external factors which could act as facilitators or barriers to employment. Future research could focus on those individuals with ID who experience greater difficulties with respect to their self-sufficiency or communicative skills or – conversely – who do not use the support of WTZ or ZAZ. Research in this area could cover the issue of recruitment of employees with ID and those already working – it would be worthwhile to identify the factors that help these individuals to find and keep a job.

The study allowed for developing some practical implications. Given the great importance attached to work by the participants, it is our opinion that a system should be built which would support adults with ID in preparing

them for the role of an employee and in finding and keeping a job. Various institutions are already active in this area. However, it would also be worth using models developed in other countries. For example, there is a training platform for women in Australia, which provides support to them at the stage of recruitment, and which is a source of a lot of useful information, for example, on protection against discrimination and sexual harassment (Platform for women..., The Australian Jewish News, 2022). It would sometimes be important to take actions both by adults with ID and by their parents/guardians, by which they would leave their comfort zone, ensured by a safe environment of day-time institutions providing support to these people (e.g. WTZ). According to what the study subjects say, some of them make an effort, but this is not common. Given the fact that stigmatisation and discriminatory practices are significant barriers to employing individuals with ID (Shier et al., 2009), it seems essential to promote social/media campaigns (Głowacka, 2021), which provide stories of individuals with ID from a positive perspective – as committed individuals and good workers.

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