

★ Worker 'value' in the context of disability

It is the *expectation* that people must climb stairs – not the inability to climb them – that is disabling. Joanna Fadyl writes about working with, challenging, and transforming notions of worker 'value' in the context of disability.



We often take for granted that having paid work will reduce negative experiences for disabled people. However, sociological research indicates that the workplace can be a site of some of the most confronting experiences of disability – especially for those whose abilities have significantly changed. Is this something that sits within the scope of vocational rehabilitation and career development? What can we learn from other fields that can inform our practice to help ameliorate these concerns?

Disability Studies starts from the notion that disability is socially contingent – that the profound disadvantage and marginalisation that characterises the experience of disability is something created in society. People are disabled by the mismatch between the way their body or mind works and the structures in society (e.g. it is the expectation that people must climb stairs, not the inability to climb them, that is disabling). In the context of work, the 'norms' about what a worker is and what makes them valuable are key in creating experiences of disability.

It seems this is incredibly hard to address because it is so ingrained – the practices and assumptions that create disability are the fabric of our everyday lives – the stuff we don't question because it seems to be 'common sense' – even if we ourselves experience disability as a result. Because of this, researchers in Disability Studies have turned to philosophy to help make some of these things, and their alternatives, visible.

Along with colleagues at AUT University, I recently conducted a study that uses philosophy that shows disability as socially constructed in order to analyse, compare and contrast the experiences of four individuals who experience ongoing disability. The study looks at how societal discourses of worker 'value' can constrain or broaden vocational opportunities available to individuals who experience disability. You can read the case discussions and the full study in *Disability and Rehabilitation*¹. I have outlined the key conclusions below:

Experiences described by our participants overwhelmingly illustrated a perpetuation of messages in which disability is seen as a deficit. However, they also described a variety of worker identities that were not focused on impairment, and that enabled positive trajectories in terms of work acquisition and career development.

This is where we see this study highlighting an opportunity for positive interventions. There are several key discussion points based on the findings of this study that are particularly useful in thinking about the contribution to practice and policy:

1. Constructions of 'human capital' and available identities and actions

An important notion within understandings of 'human capital' is that qualification for and value within a role goes beyond the skills and work experience that a person possesses, and includes aspects of self, such as knowledge, life experiences and personal attributes.

However, the ways in which this is interpreted into job roles, job descriptions and desired employees is variable.

An article by Foster and Wass published in 2012² argued that in the UK one of the main problems that results in the inaccessibility of employment for disabled people is a job being conceptualized as a disembodied role – designed around ideas of what workers should be able to do (based on a gendered, ableist expectation of what humans are capable of), with the idea that the ideal worker will be the person who happens to best meet pre-defined criteria, created before a ‘real’ potential worker even has opportunity to apply for the job.

This doesn’t allow space for potential attributes of a worker that may not be directly job-related but could enhance the functioning of the role and contribute to a workplace.

Participants in our study clearly described a similar phenomenon, although also highlighted different and nuanced experiences of these sorts of encounters – e.g. where while one participant experienced an inaccessibility of the job market because she did not fit employers’ ‘aesthetic’ expectations for a person in her role despite having the skills and experience, another challenged employers to consider her value even though her abilities may not fit the standard job description. Conversely, another participant described a workplace in which his experiences of disability were valued as one of the most important qualifications for the job, and the role structured around his contribution.

In each case, the person’s understanding of how their ‘value’ in the job was constituted (i.e. what made them a valuable worker to the employer) structured the actions that were possible for them in their particular worker identities – including seeking work, behaviour with clients and customers, developing the role, seeking more hours or higher pay, and so on.

Identities and actions were also described by individuals in terms of prior social experiences and the underlying understandings this re/created about how “someone like me” is perceived in the world. Our participants’ experiences of having disability inscribed in their appearance, and its social meanings always part of every interaction, greatly affected experiences of seeking and doing work.

This shaped the ways of engaging with actual and potential employers, clients, colleagues, that were possible for that individual. For example, in one participant’s description, her ability to limit the rejection she experienced to the individual employer, and know herself to be capable when others denied her value was grounded in her identity as a competent and valuable worker, backed up by years of fulfilling this identity successfully.

These insights have implications for the ways in which rehabilitation and career development professionals approach vocational goals and aspirations with the individuals they work with. The various interactions and experiences that have constructed an individual’s knowledge and presentation of their ‘value’ as a worker have an impact on the opportunities that are genuinely available to them. Thus, a background knowledge of both societal discourses and individual interactions with them may be vital to enabling opportunities that people experience as valid options, as well as affording information with which to navigate situations that could potentially reinforce negative identities and experiences.

2. Potential for expanding possibilities for worker identities and actions

The next question concerns the extent to which there is potential to help open possibilities for individuals who are experiencing disability to take up new worker subject positions through rehabilitation and career development practices.

One point clearly highlighted by the present study is the importance of seeing the potential for changing the scope of identities available to people as something that is a social as opposed to an individual exercise.

Interactions and practices in rehabilitation form an important part of the social landscape for people who experience disability. An important aspect of this may be in facilitating practitioners to see 'barriers' not in terms of what is preventing a person being able to get or do a job, but in terms of what is limiting a person's ability to embody an enabling identity. This necessarily involves developing a nuanced understanding of the identities and actions that are available to the individuals accessing their services – taking social history and current milieu into account. This would then make it possible to reflect on ways in which it might be conceivable to work with them and their communities to open up options.

The importance of mentors and employers who can see the experience of disability as part of an authentic worker identity, employers and communities who see more than 'disability' inscribed in a person's presentation, and the availability of new experiences that have the possibility of producing a more positive social experience for people who have consistently experienced discrimination and disadvantage seem to be essential ingredients.

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Notes:

1. Fadyl, J. K., & Payne, D. (2015). Socially constructed 'value' and vocational experiences following neurological injury. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, doi:10.3109/09638288.2015.1116620
2. Foster, D. and Wass, V. (2012) Disability in the Labour Market: An Exploration of Concepts of the Ideal Worker and Organisational Fit that Disadvantage Employees with Impairments. *Sociology*: 1-17. <http://soc.sagepub.com/content/47/4/705>