

Perception of disabled people on their image and status in society

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Abstract

This article provides a theoretical analysis of the concept of disability in the context of highlighting the stigma and prejudices at the society level. Three theories relevant in the conceptual frame of this material will be presented, such as: labelling theory, reference group theory and the concept of social dramaturgy. The second part of the article will present the results of a sociological inquiry accomplished by using focus group, conducted in Dolj county in the rural and urban environment, through which will be highlighted the perception of the disabled people on their image and status in society and on the prejudice level perceived in relation with other people.

Keywords: *persons with disabilities; prejudice; stigmatization; Romania.*

1. Explanatory theories of the stigmatization of disabled people

The term handicap refers to the loss or limitation of an individual's chances to take part in community life at a level equal to the other peers. The handicap can also be defined as a disadvantage resulting from a deficiency or inability that prevents or renders the individual unable to fulfil a normal role (Dumitrescu 2011: p. 3). According to Law no. 448/2006 on the protection and promotion of the rights of disabled people, "the disabled people are those people whose social environment, not adapted to their physical, sensory, psychological, mental and/or associated deficiencies, totally hinder them or limit their access to equal opportunities in society's life, requiring protection measures in support of social integration and inclusion" (Law no. 448/2006, article 2, paragraph 2).

Prejudice is a negative attitude of rejection of an individual only because he/she belongs to a particular group and is based solely on stereotypes. Prejudice means the judgment formed previously to any experience, and refers to response predisposition (of action, manifestation) preexisting to interactions with individuals about whose group we have stereotypes, and updated in the context of some interactions. (Horváth 2009: p. 37)

Labelling theory

The labelling theory is frequently found in the field of sociology of deviance and has as a promoter Howars Saul Becker, who considered that "deviance is not a quality of the act committed by a person, but rather a consequence of the application of the rules by others and the sanctions of an offender" (Becker 1963, p. 8). Thus, an act appears as deviant to the extent to which others react to it as such. When the stigmatization process occurs, the person being perceived as deviant, none of his/her

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characteristics are reliable anymore and the dominant trait tends to imprint a certain colour to the overall image that others structure regarding him/her. Erving Goffman identifies three types of stigma: physical stigma, characteristic stigma and tribal stigma (Goffman 1986). The people with different deficiencies have long been (and still are) labelled as deviant, as “disabled” by the medical services, although the difficulties they face are not entirely related to medicine. Once the process of attributing such a statute takes place, it has the effect of enrolling the person on a trajectory of “assisted” life. (Manea 1997: pp. 54-56)

The perspective of social dramaturgy

Erving Goffman asserted himself as a promoter of *social dramaturgy*, the author basing his analysis on the specific aspects of social interaction. For the author, social interactions are those entities of social life that are manifested each time one or more individuals are in the immediate presence of another or others. He resorts to the analogy between social interaction and theatrical representation; thus social interaction has the meaning of “a series of small dramas in which actors present their own images, trying to manipulate the reactions of others (the public), they protect their identities and develop rules that guide their behaviour in everyday life” (Goffman 1972 apud Manea 1997: p. 60). The individual plays several different roles depending on the context, and each such interpretation means the exposure of aspects of his own identity to certain risks- in detail we find specific aspects in the "paradigm of risk factors" (see Pricină 2017: pp. 11-16). Each individual tries to define the situation so that interaction becomes predictable and each has the interest to present himself/herself in ways that will enable him/her to get the most beneficial results. Taken together, the roles played make up the “social scenario” and the whole world can be seen as a stage in which individuals are actors, controlling the impressions about themselves. A series of aspects of the social identity of disabled people are highlighted by Goffman through the analysis of the stigma (Manea 1997: p. 60). In nowadays society, the term is applied to people who are subject to disgrace, occupying a marginal position in society. In fact, “society establishes the means of placement of the people in categories and the complement of attributes felt to be natural, common to the members of each category. The social frameworks establish the categories of people who will likely be found there” (Goffman 1972: p. 11 apud. Manea 1997: p.61). The people who consider themselves “normal” build a stigma theory, an ideology that serves to explain the inferiority of those with such an attribute, and to warn of the dangers they represent (Manea 1997).

Reference group theory

According to the reference group theory, people have prejudices in the context in which they perceive as a norm of belonging to the group the manifestation of a negative attitude, hostile to certain other groups, in this way, they see in prejudice a way to accommodate the group norms and not necessarily an inner psychological need. According to this theory, it is possible to reduce the prejudices of a person by redefining the identity of individuals, understood in terms of significant belonging to certain groups (Horváth 2009: p. 46). Thus, a person considered “normal” tends to have prejudices against a person whom he identifies as having a disability and is not part of his group.

2.The results of the sociological inquiry: The perception of the disabled people on their image and status in society

The hypotheses and objectives of research

The hypothesis from which we started is that in the Romanian society because of the low information reported to the situation of the disabled people, the prejudice degree is high.

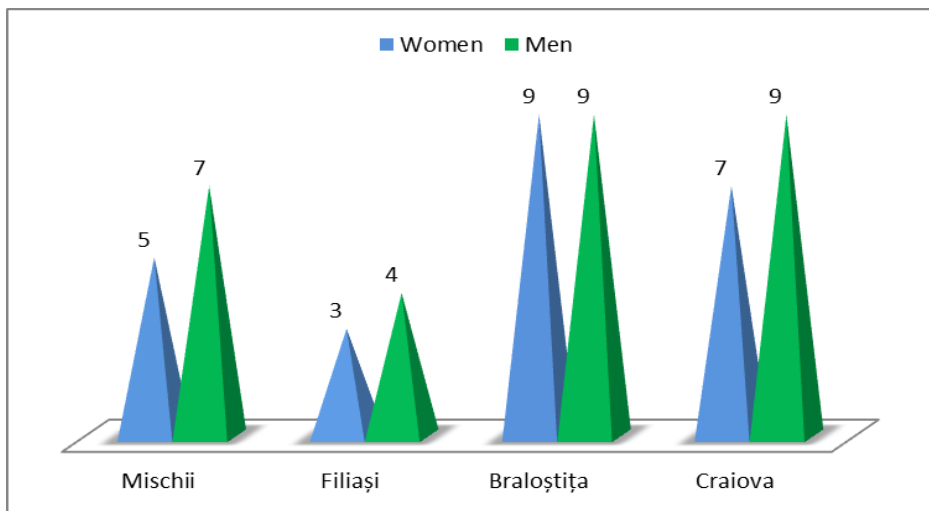
Therefore the main objective of the research is that of identifying the prejudice degree felt by disabled people.

The selection of the sample

For the selection of the sample, the persons interviewed in focus groups came from urban and rural.

So, were interviewed by the focus group method: ”53 people: 29 men and 24 women, from 2 cities (Craiova and Filiași) and 2 villages (Mischii and Braloștița) which are distributed as follows: Craiova: 7 women and 9 men; Filiași: 3 women and 4 men; Braloștița - 9 women and 9 men and Mischii: 5 women and 7 men” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 11).

Figure no. 1. The distribution of interviewees according to the place of residence



Making ”rural-urban ratio, we see that 30 people were interviewed in rural areas, representing a rate of 56.6% and 23 people representing a rate of 43.4% in urban area men” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 12).

Table no. 1. The distribution of interviewed persons by area of residence

Residence	Women	Men
Rural	14	16
Urban	10	13

Data collection

Data collection was made by holding four focus groups in each one of the localities, in March, 2014.

Analysis of research results

In this section we present the results of the sociological research. The results of this research are part of a complex study, conducted in four states, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Cyprus (Vădăsteanu, Ilie Goga, Niță, Sorescu, Voinea, Costescu et al., 2015) and highlights only a few of the elements identified within the investigation carried out in Romania.

§§Question number 1: "Describe yourself (character, personality, desires)"

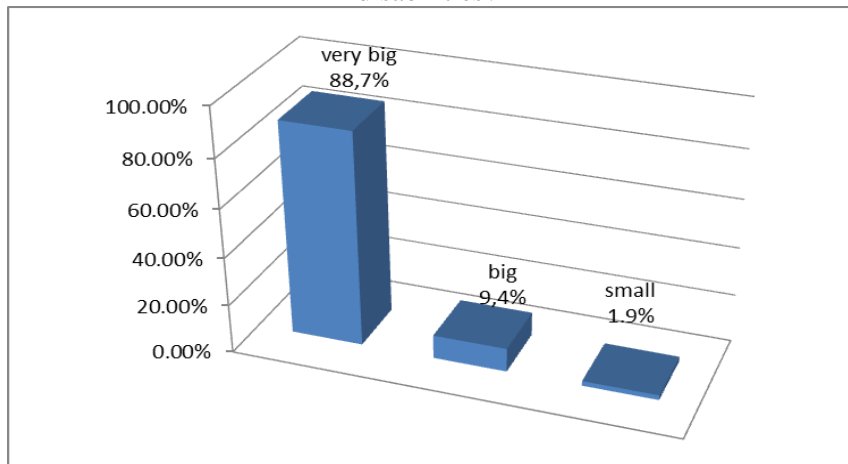
In the first question, "each of the 53 interviewed persons presented, describing the suffering disability and how it affected, while describing the desires that each of those individuals has and which often is related to personal needs and of the need for straightening the attitude of state institutions and citizens (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 12).

Disabilities of interviewed persons were varied, falling into different categories: the physical, mental, psychological, somatic, auditory, rare diseases, HIV / AIDS.

Most people interviewed were described as sociable person, willing to work and willing to socially reintegrate or on the labour market if they are given this opportunity men" (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 12).

§§Question number 2: "What is the level of prejudice in Romania towards persons with disabilities?"

Figure no. 2. "What is the level of prejudice in Romania towards persons with disabilities?"



A percentage of "88.7% of respondents, i.e. 47 people in absolute figures, found that the level of prejudice against people with disabilities is very high and a rate of 9.4% had the opinion that the level is high. It should be noted that only a person with physical disability, considered the prejudice level as small. This person lived in a centre for disabled people and it seems that, just because most of the time he came in contact

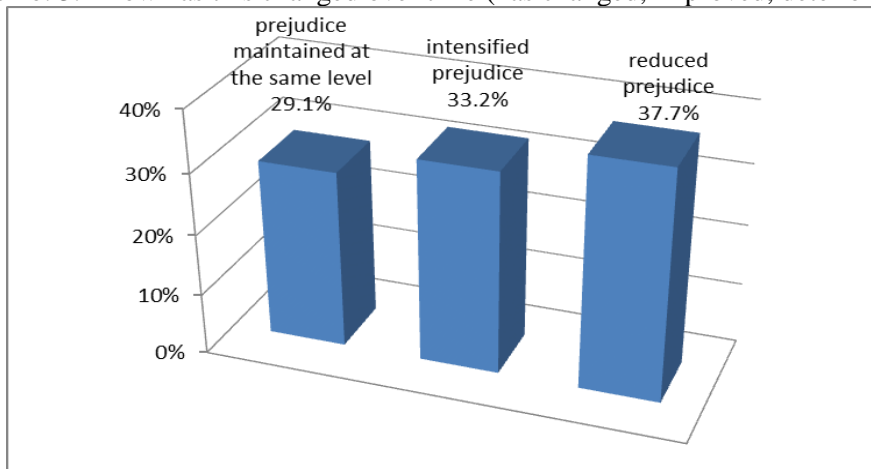
with people with disabilities, led him to affirm that he often had contact with the rest of the society” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 13).

Interviewed person show how they are qualified by others, listing a number of attributes such as "disabled", "garbage", "sick", etc. By qualifying them in this way, most tend to treat them, as mentioned by those surveyed, with a "defiant attitude", "aggressive attitude", "cut", "mock / insulting" etc. (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 13).

A 45 years old man from Braloștița said: “A percentage of 80-90% of people look at us as if we bother, as if we stand in their coast men” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 13).

§§Question number 3: ”How has this changed over time (has changed, improved, deteriorated)?”

Figure no. 3. ”How has this changed over time (has changed, improved, deteriorated)?”



A percentage of ”37.7% of respondents considered that the prejudice was reduced, a percentage of 29.1% of those that remained on the same level, and 33.2% that is has increased” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 14).

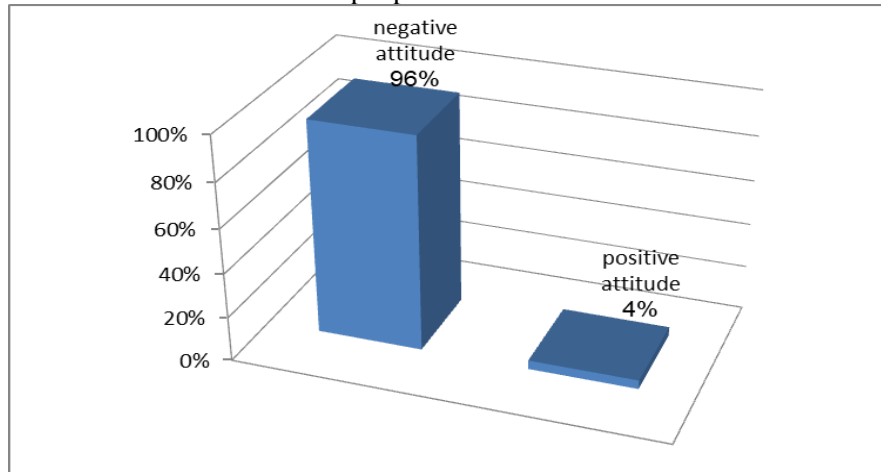
Most of the persons ”interviewed, that perceived a reduced prejudice, specified that this personal perspective relates to the prejudice felt throughout their lives, so that in childhood, in contact with other children, the level of prejudice and discrimination was more higher than the level of perceived prejudice as an adult” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 14).

Persons ”who have specified that bias has intensified, showed that the appearance of bias they mean generally felt by people with disabilities in our society” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 14).

Many respondents noted that a reduction in the level of prejudice is required in special education in schools, towards increasing tolerance towards people with disabilities men” (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 14).

§§Question number 4: "Do you think we can talk about a positive or negative attitude towards people with disabilities?"

Figure no. 5. "Do you think we can talk about a positive or negative attitude towards people with disabilities?"



A "percentage of 96%, the respondents considered that in general, we can talk about a negative attitude of the society in relation to persons with disabilities.

A 45 years old man from Braloștița said: " They are seen as junk" and a 18 years old woman from the same village said " It happened to me, that they didn't want to sit on the bench with me and to clean the bench after me for not to take the disease" men" (Ilie and Niță 2015: p. 15).

3. Conclusions

From the conducted analysis we see that the self-image of the interviewed disabled people is a good one, considering themselves as "sociable person, willing to work and willing to socially reintegrate", but on the other hand it seems that they feel a strong resistance from the rest of the society and the people they come into contact with.

For those with disabilities, these prejudices are a factor affecting their quality of life, regardless of the state's effort to provide education, health, social protection services, etc. (Spasova and Kancheva 2017: p. 8).

It is noticed that the assumed hypothesis has been confirmed, the level of prejudice experienced by over 98% of the disabled people who participated in the focus-groups is high and very high. Prejudice, seen by Gordon Allport as "an antipathy based on an inflexible generalization that can be expressed or just felt" (Allport) is apparently felt deeply by disabled people in our country. In Romania, a country with 797.104 disabled people (ANPD 2018), the causes of stigmatization of these people can be found in theoretical explanations such as those offered by the labelling theories, the reference group or social dramaturgy, or even by complex theories what they see the discriminatory attitude as being stimulated by prejudice and a combination of constitutional, psychological, economic and genetic factors (Botoșineanu 2011). However, we believe that the lack of education in the idea of accepting and helping people with disabilities is the main cause of this attitude.

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