

**FACTORS IN STUDYING
EMPLOYMENT FOR PERSONS
WITH DISABILITY: HOW THE
PICTURE CAN CHANGE**

RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND DISABILITY

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RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND DISABILITY
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FACTORS IN STUDYING EMPLOYMENT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITY: HOW THE PICTURE CAN CHANGE

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION: EMPLOYMENT AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In the literature about employment among persons with disabilities, research results depend on the purpose of the definitions of work disability, the discipline within which it takes place, the model or paradigm of disability in which it is framed and the cultural context in which the employment occurs (Lederer, Loisel, & Rivard, 2014). The definition and the measurement of the conceptual elements of the definition of disability incorporates a variety of approaches and provides different results to the employment question. For example, the use of a functional limitation measure to identify the group with disability creates a larger population and somewhat different one than the use of a measure of participation, be it social or employment related, or the use of a self-proclaimed disability identity. This volume seeks to address those factors which have made describing, and examining the work experience of a person with a disability difficult. We encouraged authors to examine how employment for persons with disabilities has been defined, conceptualized and measured in practice, in policy decision making, in various industries, and in various social science research disciplines. We had hoped to get a variety of approaches to the conceptualization of work for those with disability, how they evolved over time or how they differ across cultures, organizations, and types of disability. What you get in this volume is the beginning of the examination of the variety of contextual framing of employment for those with disability, the well-being factor that employment provides and the continued impact as well as the interaction of gender, poverty and education and other socioeconomic characteristics on the workplace participation.

While we didn't expect to get all that we asked for we did receive and present in this volume an interesting range of what are important factors in employment for persons with disabilities from a rather wide perspective as well as the classic examinations of opportunities and barriers. Also we received exploration of these issues from a wide range of cultural contexts from South Africa to Italy. We also got observations from a variety of disciplines including Occupational Therapy, Sociology, Economics, Human Resources, Law, and Health Care Science.

We hope this volume will begin to broaden the social science perspective to examine some very important aspects of the work situation that do not get as much attention in the general social science literature. For example:

1. How does the organizational culture, which includes norms, traditions, values, and beliefs, impact the disabled worker? Are organizational cultures different across size, type or purpose of the organization? Do these impact the employee with disabilities differently and how do they impact the non-disabled workers as well?
2. How does organizational structure influence the work experience of a disabled worker? Does size, type, or purpose of the organization contribute to the accessibility of the job, discrimination on the job, the ability of the worker to advance, or the ability to maintain tenure?
3. What impacts the social dimension of a person's work experience when they have a disability? What kinds of relationships with colleagues, supervisors and clients are experienced and how do the types of work environments or social or cultural constraints influence those relationships?
4. How does the definition and measurement of the population with a disability influence the levels of employment? Does a functioning limitations definition and measure which identifies the person as "at risk" to experience discrimination or other barriers in the work place give a more realistic picture of employment or is being unable or limited in ability to work the better definition and measure? How does severity of the limitation or the duration of the problem factor in?
5. What and where are the physical barriers/physical supports to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the work setting? Are the issues workload, tools, chemicals or other processes, table heights, computer programs, repetitive motion requirements, lifting or carrying, communication issues, etc.? How balanced are the barriers compared to the supports?
6. What are the mental/emotional/behavioral factors that can be barriers/supports to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the work setting? What kind of demands are made and what kinds of stress or pressure are created in the workplace related to time, performance or productivity and other factors that would measure a person's success? What kind of autonomy and control of tasks or schedules are available to the person in the job? What help is available?
7. How do age, gender, race, education, or type of disability influence employment outcomes. Does it make a difference if one lives in a rural area, or urban. What impact does transportation have on the employment equation? Does the sector of the country or the type of cultural/religious norms embraced by the country, or whether the country is developing or undeveloped impact opportunities to be employed?

(adapted from Lederer et al., 2014).

There are also big picture influences on work disability that are influenced by the sociodemographics of the culture. For example, an aging society may mean that more jobs — but certain types of jobs — are available than people to

fill them, or there may be residual effects from an economic recession. Finally, cultural attitudes and norms related to gender (“women should not be in the work force”), race, or the appropriateness of a particular type of work can also subtly influence the employment of persons with a disability. One volume can’t possibly raise all the issues but it raises some of them and is an important step in identifying and exploring the many gaps in our employment knowledge as well as encouraging continued research. We have made a start in addressing these gaps and encourage the fields of social science to continue to pursue these issues.

This volume addresses four important areas of employment: (1) The impact of intersectionality on employment and income for persons with disabilities; (2) Disability inclusion strategies and interventions; (3) How employment contributes to well-being; and (4) The future of employment for the population with disabilities. Below, I explore several of the cross-cutting issues that this volume identifies as well which can also contribute to the elaboration of employment problems.

Definition and Measurement of Disability

Although a more standardized definition and measurement of disability has been established in the United States in leading census, health, and employment surveys sponsored by the Federal Government once again we are faced with a variety of definitions and measures of the disability population in the submissions to this volume. Since this is such an international group of papers that is not unexpected. However, readers should keep in mind that the definitions and measures vary somewhat extensively although there is a strong minority that have used a functional limitation definition and measure.

The definition and measurement of the population is an important element for the generalization and interpretation of these papers about work and should always be kept in mind. An examination of the measurement of disability as reflected by indications of limitations in physical, mental and emotional functioning referred to as Basic Actions in [Altman and Bernstein \(2008\)](#) differs considerably from measures of participation which is identified as Complex Activities in the same work. In the United States, the measures of Complex Activities (inclusion in social activities, work and other participation activities) identifies 14.3% of the population ages 18 and above while a measure based on Basic Actions identifies about twice as much of the population ages 18 and above, 29.5% ([Altman & Bernstein, 2008](#)). When we apply those two different definitions and measures to employment we find that only 23.3% of those measured by Complex Activities had a job in the last week while 41.9% of those who were measured by Basic Actions worked last week ([Altman & Bernstein, 2008](#); p. 63). This demonstrates the key role that definition and measurement play in elaborating the employment issues addressed.

So, for example, the Hanif, Peters, McDougall and Lindsey (Chapter 6) paper limits their scoping analysis to papers that address vocational interventions for young people with physical conditions defined by such conditions as spinal cord injuries, cerebral palsy, amputation, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, neuromuscular disease, scoliosis, movement disorder, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida, or stroke. They do not seem to include vision or hearing disorders or cognitive or mental health problems. On the other hand the Addabbo, Krishnakumer, and Sarti (Chapter 3) paper uses a broader functional limitations measure that includes sensory limits, intellectual and emotional limitations and of course mobility problems. The Pettinicchio and Maroto paper (Chapter 1) uses both a participation measure (limitations in work) as well as a functional limitation measure reflecting the standardized measure now in place in federal surveys in the United States. The Haley and Dajani (Chapter 2) also use the standardized measure as it appears in the American Housing Survey along with an indicator of fair or poor health. Finally, Scotch and McConnel in their essay about the future of work for persons with disabilities (Chapter 9) use the umbrella term “disability” as defined in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) to represent the population with impairments, activity limitations or participation restriction as elaborated in the American’s with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Small surveys are used in the well-being papers (Chapters 7 and 8) which both interestingly enough take place in Florida. The emphasis in those two studies is primarily on basic actions or limitations in physical functioning, although Chapter 7 has a strong ADL/IADL element. The case study from South Africa (Chapter 4) also approaches the definition and measurement more along ICF lines concerned with impairment, activity limitation and participation limitation.

Intersectionality of Gender and Disability

At least two of the chapters take a very extensive interest in the interaction of gender and disability as it impacts employment (Chapters 1 and 3). Both studies identify the important interaction effects between gender and disability, especially how it effects income for those fortunate enough to be in the workforce. The universality of this gender/disability interaction is demonstrated by the fact that one of the studies took place in the United States and the other in Italy. By highlighting how different types of disabilities interact with gender to produce varying degrees of negative labor market outcomes, the authors of Chapter 1 documents a hierarchy of disadvantage where women with multiple and cognitive disabilities continually have the lowest employment rates and earnings levels. When “all covariates were held at their means, men without disabilities had an employment rate of 82% and average earnings of

\$59,000 per year, but men with multiple disabilities had an employment rate of 17% and average earnings of \$37,000” (Pettinicchio and Maroto, Chapter 1). The analysis showed that women with multiple disabilities had a 16% employment rates and earnings of \$29,000, putting them at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

The case study (Chapter 4) has also approached intersectionality from a different perspective. In that chapter the organization studied realized that its diversity initiatives focused primarily on race and gender but failed to recognize how these identities intersect with (dis)ability amongst other identity categories and the impact those intersections may have on employment. So factors such as race, gender and class intersect to situate persons with disabilities in social positions of either privilege or oppression. In the South African context the effects of the apartheid stratification can render black women in townships of rural areas marginalized across the intersections of race, gender, class and disability. The authors of Chapter 4 indicate that the organization studied was mindful of the interactions and attempted to include those in the formulation of strategies in order to construct a comprehensive and coherent disability mainstreaming approach.

Chapter 2 additionally addresses the intersection of poverty with disability as it affects earned income using variables associated with housing support, food stamps and receipt of public assistance to identify the poverty status. While the analysis is limited to heads of households who are millennials (aged 19–25) it captures important indications of the transition period when young adults with disabilities attempt to follow the expectations for all adults of employment and earning a wage.

Type of Employment

An important finding by [Presser and Altman \(2002\)](#) about employment in the 24 hour economy indicated that more than one-fifth of employed persons with disabilities work late or rotating shifts, about the same percentage as nondisabled workers and receive wages similar to those of their nondisabled counterparts. So the types of work schedules as well as the types of actual work (manufacturing, desk jobs or service provision) of the employment that is available is important to take into consideration. However, it is not just holding a job that is considered important in the big picture but whether that job contributes to the well-being of the person. In Chapters 7 and 8 the well-being of the person with the disability is examined in relationship to either the autonomy or creativeness of the job (Chapter 7) or just having a job and/or social inclusion (Chapter 8).

Access to autonomous and creative work has been found to be important for the whole population. The authors of Chapter 7 document that such types of work are sought after by the population in general indicating that engaging in interesting work and having autonomy in the job are ranked higher or equal

to income among preferred job characteristics. Because persons with disabilities tend to have a higher incidence of depression the authors of Chapter 7 sought to explore whether or not having interesting work and job autonomy could also lift the well-being of those who have a disability and work.

In Chapter 8, the authors only investigated the impact of any kind of job on well-being. They found that differences in subjective well-being were explained by social inclusion of any kind and economic factors. Adaptive equipment, companion and caregiver services while important to facilitate social participation are also costly and only partially covered by insurance or government programs. The findings indicate less well-being for the population with disability because of the social and economic limitations they face.

Reciprocal Impacts: Person on Organization, Organization on Person

Some of the research in this volume examines the bigger picture of the organizational setting and the impact of the organizational values and strategies. Chapter 4 examines a case study of a health care organization's approach to increasing employment of persons with disabilities. Chapter 5 examines literature about organizations to establish a model of useful interventions and practices and Chapter 6 is a scoping review of vocational interventions for young people transitioning to the work environment.

In Chapter 4 it is important to have country legislation that encourages inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment, but that is really found to be insufficient to produce the desired changes alone. The anti-discrimination and fairness paradigm that results from legislation acknowledges that prejudice can keep marginalized groups out of employment but does not address the organizational cultural changes necessary to make the inclusion of "others" part of the organizational diversity. This ownership by the organization itself shifts the desire for mainstreaming disability internally rather than as an outward compliance with externally forced legislation. In some ways Chapter 4 becomes an actual case study of the model elaborated in Chapter 5 which emphasizes the internal organizational components essential to improving disability employment.

In Chapter 5 the model that is generated to successfully employ persons with disabilities also indicates a need for a change in organizational beliefs and culture. The model indicates that the starting point for improved employment of persons with disabilities is for senior management to recognize the business advantage in hiring persons with disabilities for both social responsibility and productivity. Such a vision must be communicated throughout an organization for managers and common employees so that eventually there is a cultural change for the whole organization. Once senior management makes the commitment to diversity and inclusion other employees throughout the

organization need to receive disability awareness training to sensitize them to the circumstances so they appreciate the need for accommodations and mentoring. At the same time the person with disability needs to be evaluated and held accountable like any other employee thus promoting job necessary expectations and improving relationships with co-workers.

While Chapter 6 focuses more narrowly on youth with physical disabilities, this review of the literature also records the numerous barriers to inclusion for that group as for the larger groups discussed in Chapter's 4 and 5. Similar issues of discrimination, lack of accommodations are also documented. While the review indicates that good research and evidence on interventions are limited, the pattern of intervention are not dissimilar from those found in the case study (Chapter 4) and the organizational intervention model (Chapter 5), but focus on the preparation and training of the youth rather than within the organization where the jobs take place. As such, the interaction of the vocational interventions for the youth with the organizations which supply the jobs appears to be a missing piece. While the model in Chapter 5 does include the use of vocational organizations to provide the persons with disability who can be employed none of the chapters seem to elaborate on how the vocational programs and organizations with jobs can effectively interact. That can be the subject of another volume.

Similarity of Cross Cultural Impact

The papers included in this volume come from Canada, the United States, Italy and South Africa and yet they seem to emphasize the commonality of the problems associated with employment for people with disabilities regardless of country or continent. As mentioned above Chapter 4 seems to be a case study demonstrating the model developed in Chapter 5, yet the model was written by a Canadian and based on a review of international literature (including Scandinavian, Australian, European and American) and Chapter 4 is a case study of a health care organization in South Africa.

In the same way Chapters 1 and 3 use data from the United States or Italy and yet the results while organized by different disciplines provide very similar findings. While Chapter 1 is more focused on the actual interactionality of gender and disability the findings are similar in Italy. Age, education and marital status effects are also very similar.

Future of Employment

The last chapter of the volume looks to the future and the potential for employment as the transition to a more technological and service based economy

continues. While work disparities related to employment for persons with disabilities have continued over recent years and even possibly declined the authors of Chapter 9 explore the changes in the context and types of work as we move forward into the future and examine how they feel the population with disabilities will or will not be included in that future workforce.

Advances in assistive technology and telecommunications may make work for persons with disabilities more easily accessible. However the changing nature of the economy and the types of work that will be available in the future may also negatively impact employment for persons with disabilities. On the one hand global competition, deregulation and the growth of the service sector in the Uber or Airbnb directions have created sharp changes in where and how work is accomplished. However, automation, computers, telecommunications are demanding fewer physical skills but greater intellectual ones requiring greater education and more flexibility in a variety of tasks. Even the 24 hour provision of services makes work different and not tied to when the sun is up which can be another influence on what, when, where employment is available for the person with disability or all persons who want and need to work. This paper raises a lot of research questions and insights into how the world of work is changing and may or may not change the conception of work for everyone not just those with disability.

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Editor

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