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**UNEMPLOYED DISABLED PEOPLE**  
(Adjustment to Unemployment)<sup>i</sup>

As it is widely demonstrated in the literature, work is an organic element of life. In the modern society work and employment are so closely related that unemployment causes alarming harms for most of those who are left without a job (see e.g.: Allen, 1986, Jahoda, 1982, Warr 1987).

Employment is fundamental for a healthy and normal way of life not only for the healthy but also for the disabled.<sup>ii</sup> Employment is the main source of income and it also means a source of information, it creates the framework of social contacts, it determines the time budget of the people and it is also a basis of social status. Those who are unemployed suffer a great deal of financial, social and psychological difficulties even when they are not fully aware of that. In short: employment is a basic necessity for many people in the modern society because it is one of the main determinants of quality of life.

Still—at least in Hungary—when it comes to the disabled, people tend to neglect this very important aspect of life and they think that, for some reason, employment is not so much a need for living a healthy way of life for the disabled as it is for other individuals. So when disabled people are unemployed people refer to their alternative source of income (e.g. welfare programs for the unemployed or help from the family) and they forget that unemployment does not only mean a financial difficulty but it is also a social and psychological challenge for the unemployed. It goes as far as not counting the disabled living on welfare as part of the labour force and officially they are not considered as unemployed either (see about it: Bánfalvy, 2002, 2003).

### **About the research**

In the following pages we use the findings from two research projects to demonstrate some of the problems connected with unemployment and the situation of the disabled in Hungary. We will also raise some theoretical questions concerning the meaning of unemployment in the case of disabled individuals and we will try to formulate our “involvement model” as a theoretically explanatory model.

One of our research projects was conducted in the early and mid 1990s in Hungary focused on the adjustment problems of the unemployed in general, but we also collected data about the state of health and the possible handicaps of those in the sample. In that research, promoted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, we used written questionnaires and altogether there were some 5840 people questioned. In a later phase we made some one hundred taped interviews with unemployed people, public administration experts in unemployment offices and also with company managers. We also made a content analysis of four local and national newspapers writing about unemployment or the situation of the unemployed.

In a parallel research project we interviewed hundreds of adult slightly mentally retarded (ex so called special school pupils) adults about their life and among other quality of life issues we asked them about their labour market history too.

## Socio-demographic characteristics

There were 169 people among the unemployed in the sample who declared to have some kind of disability (4.7%). 105 of them were men and 64 women. At the same time there were only 69 disabled persons among the employed or self-employed (the economically active), which means that the rate of disabled was 4.1% among the not-unemployed and that 61% of the disabled in the sample were unemployed. The rate of unemployed was higher among disabled than among non-disabled people and a majority of the disabled in the sample were without employment.

As far as marital status is concerned it is not only a fundamental determinant of the quality of life but it is also important from the economic point of view since the one person `family` is more sensitive for the economic losses coming from unemployment than the two or more (adult) person families.

*Table No 1  
Marital status of the unemployed and the economically active*

Marital status	UNEMPLOYED		ACTIVE	
	Disabled	Not disabled	Disabled	Not disabled
Married or live in couple	47.6	57.6	71.0	71.7
Single	38.1	30.5	21.7	19.5
Divorced or separated	12.5	10.5	5.8	6.8
Widowed	1.8	1.4	1.4	2.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As it is indicated by the data above disabled people live more frequently out of the traditional family relations and they live alone more often compared to the normal population. It has very serious financial consequences when they become unemployed since there is not a helping hand nearby who could ease the economic difficulties coming from the unemployed status and there is no partner who could help the unemployed during the emotionally very problematic unemployment period.

Even when we compare the two disabled groups we can see that those who are unemployed are living alone much more frequently than the economically active disabled people.

If we take into account that living alone is the economically, socially and psychologically most disadvantageous situation for the unemployed and the employed, then we can summarise our findings as the employed normal and disabled people are in a better position than the normal unemployed but the unemployed disabled have the worst position of all.

Still, we can point out very clearly that the fact that somebody has a disability does not automatically mean that the certain person is in a more disadvantageous position in the labour market than those who have no disability whatsoever. Some of the disabled are in a better position than some of the non-disabled. The socio-economic and the medical-pedagogical factors influence one's fate in a complex combined way.

Educational qualification is a determinant of quality of life and at the same time it is a factor that has a very strong influence for the employment possibilities of the individual.

*Table No. 2*  
*Level of education of the unemployed and the economically active*

Educational level	UNEMPLOYED		ACTIVE	
	Disabled	Not disabled	Disabled	Not disabled
Max. primary school	30.8	30.8	27.5	19.1
Secondary vocational	40.9	39.2	40.5	49.0
Secondary grammar	18.3	12.3	14.5	16.4
Higher education	10.1	7.7	17.4	15.5
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	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Disabled people are over represented in the less and the most educated groups among the economically active; they are either much less or more educated than the normal employees. The fact is that the highly educated among the disabled, in most cases, are not disabled by birth but they became disabled during their adult life (as a consequence of accident or age). The born disabled are, as a rule, less educated than the normal population. Very few of the born disabled have higher education degrees, most of them reach only the secondary school level as a maximum.

The low educational achievement itself is an important reason why the disabled are over represented among the unemployed. But it goes together with low income and job insecurity as well.

As a conclusion, we can point it out that has its influential disadvantageous role as far as employment possibilities are concerned but in many cases its influence is indirect (works through factors like marital status, schooling etc.) and the situation of disabled people can be understood only as a result of a complex set of socio-demographic determinants.

Most of the unemployed people in our sample lost their jobs because of company bankruptcy and through lay off or could not find any employment after school. The majority of the unemployed who were interviewed were in most aspects satisfied with their previous jobs.

The only aspect in which they seem to have been unsatisfied is the previous salary. Disabled differ in their satisfaction only that they were less satisfied with their bosses than the other unemployed. In most respects the majority of the unemployed were satisfied with the previous job and people in the sample became unemployed against their own will.

*Table No. 3*  
*Satisfied with the previous jobs*

	Disabled	Not disabled
salary/wage	27.3	27.1
position	62.0	65.3
work he/she did	64.1	68.0
work schedule	64.8	62.0
atmosphere	65.5	66.4
colleagues	73.8	74.7
bosses	49.0	56.3

While only less than 3% of the *normal* unemployed did not want to get employment in the future the ratio of those exiting the labour market was almost 6% among the disabled unemployed! This fact raises a very important question.

Disabled people are often accused of not making enough efforts to find employment but they rather prefer living on welfare (what they are entitled for even if they do not have or have never had an employment). It is true that many of the disabled people really prefer to stay in welfare or living on the family help instead of searching for some job, but the explanation for that is not that they would be more idle than the *normal* population but simply that—at least in Hungary—they are not socialised for living and working in the *normal* society.

In the Hungarian educational system there are separate schools for the disabled and only the slightly mentally disabled have some chance for some integration into the *normal* society during their studies. More importantly, disabled kids in many cases are also separated from the everyday life of their families because the schools for the disabled are centralised and most of the children stay in boarding schools where they seldom meet anybody else except their teachers and the pupils of the same disability category.

This separation is in fact isolation with negative impact on the quality of life of the disabled in general and also as far as their employment possibilities and employment strategies are concerned. Paradoxically often it is the disabled person himself preferring non-employment and losing with it all the positive impacts the employment could mean for their quality of life. They simply feel more familiar with the segregated and isolated life of the disabled community where they are socialised to belong to than to enter the more or less unknown territories of normal social life. They feel better living on welfare than to risk failure and humiliation at a workplace.

The segmented school system results not only in intended exit of the disabled from labour market but causes negative prejudices against the disabled from the normal society in everyday life and also at the workplaces. The fact that normal people know only very little about the disabled causes fears that the disabled can be dangerous for himself or for the work-mates at the workplace. The result is twofold. Some employers do not employ anybody who is disabled, some others—on the other hand—who have always had disabled people among the labour force hesitate to fire anybody who has a handicap. So, it is difficult for the disabled to find an employment but those who are employed are less likely get fired than those who have no handicap. The employed disabled is many times kept in the job simply because the employee is not only satisfied with their work performance but the employees are also fully aware of the fact that the

unemployed disabled person has only a very little chance to find an other job and get re-employed.

### Coping with unemployment

When we investigate how unemployed people try to adjust themselves to the changed situation of their lives we must take into consideration the fact that for a long time during the post-war period people in the ex-communist countries had not had experience about being unemployed. It means, on the one hand, that they miss the routine of adjusting themselves to unemployment, they do not know what social assistance they are eligible for, how to search for a job, how to spend their time without a regular formal occupation that used to serve as a framework of their time spending, how to replace the formal workplace as a source of social contacts and information with some alternative forum of social life. On the other hand, unemployed people also have great difficulties to build up a new identity, not to lose self-esteem, especially when relatives, neighbours and also the wider public attitude is un-supportive and at least suspicious about them.

It could be thought that it is less true in the case of the disabled. Similarly to women, they could also have an alternative status in which they could accommodate themselves when they lose their jobs. The status of disabled living on welfare offers them an escape from the humiliating social label of being unemployed. In spite of all this, unemployed disabled people suffer from being without job. They, in fact, suffer more from unemployment than the normal unemployed because employment gives them a bigger relative satisfaction than for the non-disabled.

*Table No 4:  
The percentage of those agreeing with the statements below (%)<sup>iii</sup>*

	UNEMPLOYED		ACTIVE	
	H	NH	H	NH
I meet a broad range of people in my everyday life	40.4	39.4	64.4	62.2
Things I have to do keep me busy most of the day	52.4	57.4	95.5	85.1
Much of the day I have to do things at regular times	57.8	63.2	92.4	86.0
I make a positive contribution to society at large	23.3	28.4	75.8	72.0
Society, in general respects people like me	24.8	25.3	47.0	46.7

H: disabled N: not disabled

Unemployed people, in general, seem to have a less organised and systematic, more greyish and meaningless life in their eyes than it is for those who are employed.

One of the possible advantages of being unemployed is that people can decide relatively freely how to spend their time. We found that many of the unemployed used a

great proportion of the time for doing different types of work outside the formal employment sphere of the economy. What is amazing is that those who reported some kind of disability do as much work during unemployment as those who are not disabled.

The main field of economic activity is the household but occasionally people perform work in the market economy too. 56% of the disabled and 59% of the normal unemployed does relatively more housework during the period of unemployment than they used to do before losing their jobs. It also indicates that people try to substitute the work performed as employed with the work done in the non-formalised sectors of the economy.

The non-formalised and non-institutionalised (second economy) work relates people to a 'second society' which lays slightly on the margins of social life. The long-term unemployed, no matter that disabled or not, have to adjust themselves to the rules of the second society. The more the disabled are likely to get unemployed the more they are pushed towards outside the main stream of social life, strengthening this way the tendencies coming from the disability itself.

### **Involvement and coping**

A theoretically fundamental issue when analysing the social and psychological consequences of unemployment is that we have to be cautious when defining the object of investigation. Our point is that the more employed somebody is the more he/she is effected by unemployment. Employment and unemployment are expressions for the form of work that exists only in market economy circumstances when work is performed in the form of paid employment. Employment and unemployment are the two mirror statuses of workers as paid labourers.

The famous and often quoted phrasing of Marie Jahoda says that "in some respects every unemployed is like every other unemployed (i.e. without a job); in some respects every unemployed is like some other unemployed (e. g. with similar previous jobs); and in some respects every unemployed is like no other unemployed (i.e. unique individual)." (Jahoda 1982, 48). But even if it is statistically true it makes sense from a social-psychological point of view only if we put it the other way round: the more similar two unemployed were in their employment characteristics the more similar they will be when unemployed.

The deep, many sided and exclusive involvement in employment causes a very difficult and almost always unsuccessful coping with unemployment when somebody turns unemployed. It is simply because the more one loses the more difficult it is to cope with the loss. It is less important what kind of economic or social situation you get in as a consequence of unemployment but the real determinant of coping is how big the *relative change* is when one gets into unemployment.

That is why

- long term employment

- which is the only source of income and social status makes one a perfect labourer in the market economy and a perfect victim of unemployment which puts all the routines and the whole social status of the ideal employee at risk. The life long heavy metal industry worker represents a personality which is deeply rooted in the world of employment and which is the result of the long-term socialisation that has taken place during those decades of employment.

The school leaver, the house wife or the self employed might get to be in need of employment and might have serious economic, psychological, and social problems because of not being able to get employment. But their problems are not the problems of loosing and missing all the benefits, the psychological, social and economic “vitamins” (as Warr call it) of meaningful employment.

The same is true for the disabled: those who turned to be unemployed *disabled* from disabled *employee* suffered the most because of the shift from the status of employee to the status of disabled.

- Those who have been in employment for a long time before loosing the job suffered most from the lack of the previous experience attached to the employment.
- Those who were the more satisfied with the previous employment tend to feel that they lost something by getting unemployed
- Those who did not have any alternative meaningful activity or an alternative source of experience which could serve as a substitute of the previous employment suffered the most its loss

The only serious difference we found when we compared how healthy and disabled people could cope with unemployment was that socially and psychologically employment meant even more for the disabled then to the healthy (though the healthy were more in need of employment financially). It was because for the disabled employment served as a proof of being equally capable and socially valuable as the non-disabled. It served as a proof of something that non-disabled never felt like proving.

During unemployment disability becomes a source of handicap in an explicit way, even more obviously than during job-search.

The same is true for all the employees for whom employment is more that only the source of income. The bigger importance they attribute to employment and the less they are able to substitute it from something similarly meaningful the more they suffer from the lack of it.

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<sup>ii</sup> In this paper the words “healthy” or “normal” always mean: not-disabled and it is used in a purely descriptive way. The way in which people who are unable to fulfil the mainstream social requirements because of mental or physical characteristics are labelled has differed very much in the course of time. Traditionally, they used to be called 'debils', 'imbeciles' and 'idiots' etc. depending on the medical, pedagogical and psychological seriousness of their condition. Nowadays these terms are not only considered to be out of date but many people think that they are negative/pejorative terms for defining the mental health and characteristics of a group of people. As a sociologist I am not concerned with the meaning of these terms or the objective characteristics of people labelled with them. I am concerned with the quality of life of those who are labelled in any way.

<sup>iii</sup> The questions used in this table are from the study of Heywood F.—Miles, I.: The experience of Unemployment and the Sexual Division of Labour. (in: Fryer, D.—Ullah, P. (eds.), 1987).