‘Sorted it all out by myself’: Laurie's emancipation from gendered and disabling representations about paraplegic people at work

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Abstract
A life narrative organises the meaning of a whole experience into a synoptic form, while dialectically integrating the meaning of its parts (Polkinghorne, 1988). A narrator can achieve a grasp of their identity (Thomas, 1999) – especially, their vocational identity. The voicing (Brooks, 2002) of one’s occupational trajectory may bring to self-awareness the biographical turning points when power was gained over (self-) attributions of lesser competence and worth – whether these attributions be about class, race, gender, or disability. Paraplegic people go through a rehabilitative process which is reputed to convey the ‘medical model of disability’. This is a limitative and gender-neutral - if not, therefore, sexist - model of individual tragedy (Goodley, 2012). Our main hypotheses are that the reconstruction of a vocational trajectory by paraplegic people is suffused with the restrictive representations of the medical model about disabled people at work, and that these limitations especially affect paraplegic women as they are entangled in discriminatory attributions about disability and gender. Relying on the […]

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Our main hypotheses are that the reconstruction of a vocational trajectory by paraplegic people is suffused with the restrictive representations of the medical model about disabled people at work, and that these limitations especially affect paraplegic women as they are entangled in discriminatory attributions about disability and gender.

Relying on the methodology of life narratives, we have collected Laurie’s vocational life story as a paraplegic teacher.

Laurie’s narrative unexpectedly shows that her appropriation of the medical model underpins her self-determination at the workplace. Her self-direction is also correlated to an identification with a male vicarious figure - hence Laurie’s masculine self-attributions of competence and authority, which shape her strategies of empowerment in her vocational activity.

These results might be taken into account in rehabilitative policies, so as to meet the needs of paraplegic women committed to a return towards formal work.

Key-words: paraplegia, vocational trajectory, gendered and disabling representations, life narrative, empowerment.

Bibliographical references


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Main interests in research: educational means (project work) in the reconstruction of a vocational trajectory by paraplegic women and men, life narratives as a methodology, Critical Discourse Studies to implement the analysis of life narratives.

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