Abstract

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Reference

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Abstract

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Keywords: Paraplegic women Vocational pathways Gendered and disabling representations Experience models Freirean and feminist pedagogies

Résumé

Nous avons récemment terminé une recherche doctorale sur la reconstruction des trajectoires professionnelles d’hommes et de femmes paraplégiques en Suisse romande. En nous basant sur les récits de vie de trois de nos informatrices, nous analysons ici les dimensions genrées de l’orientation, du parcours et de l’identité professionnels des personnes paraplégiques. A partir de ces récits, nous formons et structurons des modèles d’expérience et des discours sur l’action empouvoirants, auxquels nos informatrices recourent au fil de leur parcours professionnel. Un des buts principaux des pédagogies féministes étant l’émancipation des femmes de limitations structurelles et personnelles, notre objectif est de montrer le potentiel soutien qu’une approche pédagogique féministe pourrait apporter au développement des modèles de soi et des discours sur soi des femmes paraplégiques, dans la conduite de leur vie éducative et professionnelle.
1. Research background: women’s situation in formal work, the vocational rehabilitation of paraplegic people in Switzerland, and the relevance of feminist pedagogies in this context

Feminist pedagogy is noticeably about promoting women’s self-reflection, determined goals, and empowerment in, or emancipation from, contexts of gendered power relations in education, vocational guidance, and work. Much of the analysis carried out on working conditions ignores the sexual division of labour. Women are segregated within fewer job categories than men, and are mainly employed in administrative support, social work and education (Maruani, 2017). They occupy lower positions in employment hierarchies, earn less than men in the same occupations, and often work part-time on account of their commitments in the domestic sphere (Maruani, 2017). The ‘deficiency model’ (English et al., 2006, p. 12) internalised by women limits their career mobility and advancement (English et al., 2006) – which is also paraplegic women’s and men’s case (Roulstone & Williams, 2014).

In this paper, we analyse the vocational life narratives of three paraplegic female informants. We try to understand our informants’ communal experience of gendered and disabling power relationships in their educational and vocational environments. Our informants have experienced a relatively difficult construction of their educational and/or vocational pathways. We argue that this difficult process stems firstly from gendered representations about women in educational systems and in work, and secondly from depreciative representations of disabled workers. Our informants had to deal with the injunction to return to paid work (a ‘welfare-to-work policy’ [Revillard, 2016]) by the Swiss Disability Insurance (DI), the sector of the Swiss
welfare state responsible for the distribution of various types of benefits to disabled people, with a view to their full social integration (Le portail du Gouvernement suisse, 2019). Given its concomitant aims of drastic cuts in pensions and efficiency in the conduct of its welfare-to-work policy, the DI has put forward new ableist definitions of normalcy (Piecek et al., 2017; Tabin et al., 2019), while – contradictorily – reproducing traditional, unquestioned assignments of disabled people to prescribed, ‘possible’ vocational roles and situations (author ref. 1). In this respect, the vocational rehabilitation of paraplegic people is in fact not only disabling, but also gendered. It is disabling because it offers paraplegic people restricted vocational options on account of the functional restrictions imposed by impairment, and it is gendered because it proceeds from a ‘neutrally feminine’ model of guidance towards administrative work (author, ref. 1-2). Indeed, office jobs are viewed as appropriate for disabled people in general. Partly on the ground of this disabling and gendered rehabilitative policy, our female informants’ vocational projects were thwarted, or could not be fully expressed, constructed and attained during their rehabilitation or in their further vocational trajectories.

Anchored in the field of the education of adults, our research had it as a main goal to show whether – or not – paraplegic women and men resort to strategies grounded in their experiential knowledge to emancipate themselves from socio-structural limitations while attempting to reconstruct their educational or vocational trajectories. We found that our informants are engaged in communal, gendered actions which they consciously or semi-consciously assess as efficient, and which we elaborated in models of empowerment, or in subversive discourses (author, ref. 3). In this paper, in relation to our findings, we pursue two main objectives. Firstly, we show the structural and biographical limitations that our female informants, possibly like many other paraplegic women, encounter in constructing their educational and vocational pathways. Secondly, we suggest that an analysis of our informants’ experience of relative empowerment, or disempowerment, in the light of the praxes of Freirean, structural, and post-
structural feminist pedagogies can help further empower their models of self and action in education and work.

Accordingly, we first cross-reference principles of Freirean, structural and post-structural feminist pedagogies; we then relate them to the medical and social models of disability (Oliver, 2009; Hall, 2011; Goodley, 2016), and to the characteristics of the latter, which echo the praxes of feminist pedagogies. Secondly, we justify the relevance of the methodology of life narratives in our research, and provide information about our informants’ life narratives and our method of analysis. Thirdly, we present biographical portraits of our three informants, and the influence of both the DI’s incentive policy on their trajectories and the circumstances of their personal biographies. These portraits serve as the biographical basis of the definition of our informants’ models of, and their idiosyncratic discourse about, their educational and vocational experience. Finally, in the conclusion, we highlight the structural and biographical limitations and the capacititating aspects of our informants’ educational and vocational courses, suggesting that these models of experience and their discourses can be enlightened by the praxes of feminist pedagogies, and thereby become empowering models of self addressed to paraplegic women engaged in work or education.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Freirean and feminist pedagogies, and feminist theories

The understanding of our informants’ experience of gendered and disabling attributions is underpinned by the principles of Freirean, structural, and post-structural feminist pedagogies.

2.1.1 The principles of structural, Freirean, and post-structural feminist pedagogies

The structural strand of feminist pedagogy identifies patriarchy and capitalism as intertwined systems producing a gender- and class-based hierarchy between men’s and women’s
knowledge and situations in education and in work. Women’s identities are, moreover, constructed within the intersecting systems of race, heteronormativity, and disability (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016). In parallel with the structural strand of feminist education, the movement based on Freire’s (1996) pedagogy of liberation views learners’ conscientisation of their oppression as prior to the acquisition of formal knowledge. However ‘dehumanizing’ (Freire, 1996, p. 60) their experience, the oppressed can objectify their situation in society and history, and can then subjectively criticise it with a view to the transformation of their oppressive realities. The learning process modelled by Freire (1996) enables learners to gain more power and control over their own life by voicing their oppression and integrating it into their experience. Voicing helps women modulate their social and personal identities and gain experiential and emancipatory knowledge and power in varied social contexts (Hayes, 2002). Nevertheless, women’s voice may also be the communicative support of widespread internalised sexist discourses about women’s demeanours (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009).

According to post-structural feminist pedagogy, women’s voices are vehicles for the existing dominant cultural narratives that subject them to hegemonic discourses about the world and themselves, and which format their agency (Butler, 1990) and life opportunities (Davies, 2000; Barrett, 2005; Benschop et al., 2013). In their learning, women – whether disabled or not – episodically adopt conforming (Najarian Souza, 2010) or subversive discourses, in which they negotiate their position within the hierarchies of power relations (Davies, 2000), possibly in work (Kray & Kennedy, 2017). Women may make visible the language practices which have confined them to powerless, inferior positions, even if at risk of being made the ‘illegitimate Other’ (Barrett, 2005, p. 84). Women may experience the negotiation of their opportunities for self-expression, and of their educational or vocational choices, as a living tension between a conformation to, or disruption of gendered, classed, etc. dominant and hierarchizing discourses. ‘Risky identities’ (Barrett, 2005, p. 87), borne by subversive discourses of self, nevertheless
entail the possible loss of power granted by a conformation to the gendered, and – we argue – disabling standards of social adequacy.

2.2 Disability, gender, education and work

As much as gender, class and race, disability is an interlocking category in social power relations (English et al., 2006). More particularly, ableism imposes a normalising process (Tabin et al., 2019) through an ever-malleable, hidden educational or vocational curriculum that disabled people cannot complete in their performances in education or work. Although the internalisation of ableism may prove to be enabling for certain disabled women (author, ref. 4), the feminist critique in the field of disability insists on the significance of disabled women’s embodied experience in the development of their self-awareness and self-definitions (Crow, 1996; Thomas, 1999; Hall, 2011). The latter statement is in line with both the structural and the post-structural strands of feminist pedagogy. Both strands advocate for the conscientisation (Freire, 1996) of material and representational obstacles to participation due to gender and disability (Garland-Thomson, 2002; OSCE/ODIHR, 2019), noticeably: the individual and collective criticism of disempowerment; the valuing of women’s, and disabled women’s, embodied approaches to the world and self-knowledge; the identity-related tension resulting from women’s contradictory positioning in a variety of cultural discourses (hegemonic discourses, and discourses promoting difference) (Barrett, 2005; Shildrick, 2009; Arenas Conejo, 2011); and their emancipation from gendered and disabling power relationships through the composition of personal models of self.

We derive some possible models of self and a certain embodied discourse from these women’s communal vocational experiences, and analyse the latter in the light of categories of Freirean, structural, and post-structural feminist pedagogies: experiential knowledge; conscientisation and subjective criticism of structural, gendered (and disabling) limitations due to women’s (and especially disabled women’s) positions at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression;
the tense position that women experience as bearers and enactors of contradictory (dominant versus subversive), identity-related discourses; and voicing, as a medium favouring (rather than not) self-determination, self-development, and emancipation.

3. Methodology of life narratives: enhancing biographical meanings and experience models

Narrative rationality organises the meanings of one’s life by configuring statements in a temporal plot structure; it allows a subject to ‘understand synoptically the meaning of a whole, seeing it as a dialectic integration of its parts’ (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 35). Parts of the subject’s life events are integrated into their story to create a coherent, understandable whole, a ‘convergent’ (Ricoeur, 1990) narrative, despite the unexpectedness and disruptiveness of certain life events. Narratives become parts of the process of individuation through individual, original narratives of experience.

Subjects gather similar, repeated meanings of experience and build them into systems, which can function as models for a subject’s action – so-called ‘models of experience’ (Van Dijk, 2010). Subjects self-narrate their everyday life experience in the light of interpretations which shape their self-representations and role identities (Van Dijk, 2010, pp. 69-70). The meanings of these self-narrations aggregate the informant’s rational explanations, feelings and reactions about their experience. These meanings form ‘experience models’ which are resources for further, similar action courses (Van Dijk, 2010). Here we shape some experience models based on the (self-)attributions of gender and disability which underpin our three female informants’ vocational trajectories.
4. Conditions for the collection of data and method of analysis, using biographical models

The informants in our qualitative research project were recruited in French-speaking Switzerland through our contractual collaboration with a rehabilitation centre established in that part of the country. Our collection of data was preceded by submitting our research project to two institutional committees, which specified the appropriate ethical conditions under which it should be conducted.

The centre supported our project mainly by providing us with lists of their former patients, whom we were authorized to contact. We selected adult paraplegic women and men who had returned to education or vocational training or taken up a new occupation after the onset of paraplegia. Once the recruitment from the rehabilitation centre ended, we turned to community outreach for disabled people in French-speaking Switzerland to complete the recruitment process.

We carried out one educational and/or vocational life narrative of about 90 minutes with each informant. Our introductory question was: ‘Could you please tell me about your vocational life?’ Further complementary questions were asked about our informants’ initial vocational choices; the circumstances of the vocational counselling which they received at school and during rehabilitation; any decisive and/or motivated reorganisations of their vocational pathway to date; any types of resources, whether material, psychological, or social which capacitated them in decision-making processes in their educational and vocational trajectories; the expectations of gender-conforming vocational choices emitted by their social environment, and the impact of these opinions on their educational and/or vocational career.

The analysis aimed to show the parts of life narratives which revealed our informants’ empowering behaviours while reconstructing their educational or vocational pathways. In order to pinpoint these emancipatory courses of action, we analysed each of the narratives on the
basis of a grid drawing on ‘biographical models’ (De Coninck & Godard, 1990). These models
typify three core constituents of the dynamics of biographical pathways. The first of these is
the model of individuals’ ‘aggregated identities’ (the various identities that subjects construct
along their life courses), some of which they semi-consciously enact depending on life events
and social contexts. The second model encompasses the causal and temporal relations between
life events, an individual’s decisions, their action, and the outcomes of their action along their
biographical pathway. Finally, the third model shows the impact of socio-structural scansions
on the degree of intentionality which an individual wields in the conduct of his or her
biographical pathway.

Another significant dimension of our analytical grid concerned the gendered biases that had
marked our informants’ educational and/or vocational pathways. In particular, we asked our
informants about their own gendered self-definitions, and about their appraisal of the possibly
gendered social contexts and situations in which they trained or worked.

The analysis of our informants’ vocational/educational life narratives in the light of the three
biographical models and of their gendered (self-)attributions enabled us to grasp the logics of
action which supported their efforts – which we demonstrated as gendered – to emancipate
themselves from what they relatively consciously perceived as their dominated position in
working or educational contexts.

5. Results: modelling some of the shared vocational experiences of our paraplegic female
informants

In this part, we briefly present the vocational pathway of each of our women informants. An
analysis of the gendered and disabling aspects playing out in their vocational pathways will be
given while we shape some communal models of their experience.
5.1 Our informants’ educational and vocational portraits: the Disability Insurance’s interventions, and the personal components of their vocational trajectories

Our informants are called Tam, Patricia, and Theresa. In the educational and vocational portraits that we draw from their narratives, we argue that the construction of their various identities and life choices is influenced both by the effects of the ‘conditional’ policy of the Disability Insurance (DI) and the biographical circumstances of their life histories.

Tam, aged 43, who as a student obtained her commercial diploma at the onset of paraplegia, is a social assistant. She suffers from a chronic illness. While in rehabilitation, Tam received injunctions from the DI to start work after her stay at the hospital, as she had already successfully completed a commercial degree. Tam refused: she intended acquiring a qualification in social work, which meant that she first had to pass another, more prestigious high school degree. She passed it without support from the DI, while the DI partly paid for her education and training as a social assistant. In general, the DI only supports initial training. Therefore, the DI was not expected to support Tam’s vocational education and training. In fact, the DI supported the latter curriculum on condition that Tam ‘proved’ – not so much by her individual qualities as by her economic resources – that she was worth supporting and that she engage in a long-term educational and vocational project. In Tam’s case, the DI applied more of a ‘moral norm’ than an unconditional policy of activation towards paid work (Probst et al., 2016). During her education and training, Tam demonstrated strong and stable social and vocational identities, drawing on the medical model of disability and individual, motivational resources to pursue her trajectory, while keeping silent about her embodied experience of functional limitations, and parts of her personal history. Tam currently has a part-time job; she has a pension, based on the DI’s assessment of her capacity to work.
Patricia, aged 50, was a student at high school at the onset of impairment; she is a qualified designer and engineer in architecture who has never practised in the field of her certification, but who has had a number of job placements through the state’s unemployment insurance. She does not report on any intervention of the DI throughout her schooling, while she could have benefited from the support granted by the DI for initial training. She too repudiated the physical limitations imposed on her. Patricia’s educational trajectory highlights her deep, but also alienating and painful, ableist self-attributions, which proved empowering – she obtained her diploma in architecture –, yet also somewhat disempowering because of her conformation to ableism. She now benefits – as a part-time worker – from the same type of pension as Tam.

Theresa, aged about 55, is a salesperson in the family business. She had just begun an apprenticeship as a pharmacy assistant at the onset of her impairment, a profession that both she and the DI considered to be impracticable as a paraplegic. She wanted to resume her studies in social work and become an occupational therapist, but became discouraged and dropped out. She mentions no particular support (such as information about the curriculum and assistance) from her family or friends, either before starting the curriculum or after leaving it. She does not mention any support from the DI (in terms of counselling, or financial support for initial training). Nor does she report any financial resources provided later by the DI, during her apprenticeship as a salesperson. Either she did not ask for and did not receive any support, or she was given some support but did not mention it.

We argue that the last two informants see neither the interventions (or lack of intervention) by the DI, nor the relational or identity-related ingredients of their own existential trajectories, as determinants of their vocational pathways. In our informants’ life narratives, representations of an individualising and self-controlled conduct of their life course dominate. Our informants, when they were aged about 20, may have readily taken full responsibility for progression on their educational and vocational pathway, because they may have been uninformed,
inexperienced or unaware of their right to demand the DI’s support or to disclose their personal limitations during their vocational guidance so as to obtain support of various kinds. Both their self-representations, and expectations of normalcy either facilitated their academic achievements and the stabilising of their vocational trajectories, or disrupted the construction of their identities and the pursuit of self-determined careers. Gendered (self-)attributions also played a part in their educational and vocational choices. While our informants and/or their social environments valued long educational training, they did not envisage the possibility of a prestigious vocational trajectory for themselves and/or for their paraplegic daughter, granddaughter, etc. Moreover, our informants were expected to occupy typically female jobs, which they all did, or still do.

On the basis of our informants’ discourse (or conscious or semi-conscious silence), we suggest that the conditional or infrequent interventions by the DI, the degree of support offered by their social environments, and gendered, (dis)ableist (self-)definitions contributed to the formation of their representations of the ineluctability of their vocational choices.

5.2 Some vocational experience models drawing on our informants’ (self-)attributions of gender and (dis)ability

Our informants demonstrate self-valorising and self-legitimising strategies at the workplace or in training. Some of them are ableist, and certainly all of them are gendered and support attempts at personal empowerment in contexts where the scansions of the mostly ableist welfare institutions and social environments inflect our informants’ educational or vocational trajectories. Moreover, these scansions are underpinned by the medical model of disability, and echo in the hidden curriculum which unequally assesses the performance of disabled people engaged in paid work. Thus, our informants pursue a quest of ‘normalcy’, in order to gain control over their own educational or vocational progression. In so doing, they resort to
discourses and actions promoted from the point of view of the able-bodied, which proves empowering for some of our informants, but also alienating and liable to prevent them from building idiosyncratic, self-valorised models of self (author ref. 1; Tabin et al., 2019).

Common representations about women and disabled people’s professional roles combine in either structural or social-relational obstacles to some of our informants’ long-term integration into paid work. Relying on this assessment, we shape two gendered and/or ableist experience models based on our informants’ vocational experience: first, the model of unsupported self-determination; second, the model of educational or vocational compensation overarching the sub-models of differential competence, and of the double epistemic advantage (author, ref. 1).

5.2.1 The model of unsupported self-determination

This model refers to the uneven support brought by their social environments to our informants’ educational or vocational projects. We argue that cognitive and affective support is necessary for the wielding of vocational self-direction and self-determination. Note that our informants’ families remain uninformed of the quality of support that they could muster for our informants, who never report regarding any conscious, developed discourse of accompaniment. We constructed this model on the basis of Patricia’s and Theresa’s narratives.

Theresa’s and Patricia’s parents address expectations of educational achievement to their paraplegic daughters. Patricia recalls: ‘It was always something like: “Do the things that you choose, we’ll help. Do what you feel like doing as long as you pass your high school exams!”’ (...) But no pressure, luckily enough (towards a specific vocational education)’. Patricia’s parents had strong expectations of her normalisation through education, as compensation from ‘able-bodiedness’ to ‘able-mindedness’. However, Patricia renounces the prestigious education in architecture at one of the federal polytechnic schools: ‘I was afraid and not ready to leave home. (...) At 21, I didn’t have my driving licence (...). I still had that big thing to take in’.
Instead, Patricia completed an apprenticeship as a designer in architecture before becoming a certified engineer in the same stream at a University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Patricia reports that her parents, although supportive, did not value prestigious educational and vocational life courses, possibly as a result of the traditional gendered segregation of women in the labour market and the working-class background of her parents. Patricia enacts the gendered role of the ‘good, conforming student’ (‘I was a hard worker’, she says) who then encounters representational and structural obstacles preventing her from making socio-professional progress.

After obtaining her commercial diploma, Theresa was enthusiastic about her vocational future: ‘At the beginning my intention was to pass my high school degree and then enter a school for occupational therapists. I had lots of ambition and projects’. She attended an information session about the occupational therapy stream offered in the nearby institute for social studies. But she soon became discouraged because of the other students’ personal trajectories, and because of self-attributions of inexperience: ‘I was 18 at that time, (...) when I saw all the people there who were over 30, who were nurses, educators, I don’t know what... well, it just discouraged me a bit’. The process of knowledge construction seemed impossible, probably due to an unspoken lack of self-esteem and a feeling of illegitimacy and incompetence. The injunctions of normalisation combined with gendered representations to doom Theresa’s vocational project.

Struggling in the turmoil of overall identity reconstruction, our informants did not find the cognitive or affective support to undertake any stable trajectory. Patricia’s and Theresa’s vocational trajectories reproduce the usual characteristics of women’s careers: discontinuity, instability, and inferiorising, gendered job-categorisation. Patricia has occupied various jobs as a social carer, but has never formally worked as an engineer in architecture: ‘I feel... like I’m quite good at that but at the same time I never really felt like working as an architect. (...) I’m
interested… but a bit like an observer’. Theresa is now a salesperson in the family business, at the border of her private sphere, a position that numerous working women enter because of their commitment to their family (Cappuyns, 2007).

Our informants do not speak about the lack of support, apart from Patricia, who does so obliquely: ‘Well, then I did this school in architecture, and it was again just normal in my environment’. As a result of normalisation and ableism, our informants attempted to make vocational choices with no consideration of the effects that structural obstacles – especially gendered limitations and disabling situations –, and personal biographical circumstances would have on the conduct of their trajectories. Moreover, they did not envisage the possibility of support.

5.2.2 The two-fold model of educational and vocational compensation: the sub-model of differential competence, and the sub-model of the double epistemic advantage

Since our informants’ singularity, personal qualities and motivation remained unrecognised, they scaffolded compensating behaviours in their education or at work. We divide the model of educational and vocational compensation into two sub-models. First, the sub-model of differential competence refers to the additional effort that some of our informants, Tam and Patricia, make to have their competence recognised as learners and as workers. Second, the sub-model of the double epistemic advantage encompasses categorising representations about female disabled workers on account of their being both women and disabled. Their competences and knowledge are naturalised in rigid job assignment – specifically, social work. The latter sub-model draws on Tam’s narrative.

5.2.2.1 The sub-model of differential competence. Our informants undertook longer studies which guided them towards non-physical jobs. Tam says: ‘A good diploma means more vocational choices.’ Similarly to able-bodied women, Tam has a strong belief that school
performance is a guarantee of vocational achievement and social recognition (The Eurydice Network, 2009). Tam’s aspirations may also originate in a semi-conscious notion that disabled people emancipate themselves from dependence by raising their educational qualifications, so as to gain a position in a valued job category: ‘For me, it was essential to be financially autonomous and not dependent in any way, and to achieve this, I had to study at a higher level that was better than a mere commercial diploma.’

Throughout her educational trajectory, Patricia self-imposed the model of the extra-competent learner: she completed an apprenticeship, and then a degree as an engineer in architecture. She secured progressive successes in her educational trajectory, probably attempting to empower other devalued representations of her self. However, the various curricula she completed can be seen as tests of her vocational identity; Patricia had to prove her competence as a learner, even though this probing did not lead to the start of a vocational trajectory: ‘I did these studies to prove to myself that I was able to do them, and they were quite difficult to me, but I’m glad I did them because I’m interested in this’. Patricia’s challenge seems to be making sense of polarised self-representations: on one hand, the ableist, academically successful individual, and on the other, the disabled young woman enduring – relatively unconsciously – gendered and disabling expectations of lower competence.

Tam suggests that on account of her individual qualities, she has managed to ‘conquer’ her vocational position: ‘I’ve seen institutions that never employed any disabled workers. (...) I was lucky enough. But I think I have a little something to do with it (...). My colleagues (...) say I never complain’. Tam satisfies the standard of the normalised, undisruptive disabled colleague. Her competence is indeed at risk of being degraded by attributions of physical and psychological weakness (‘complaining’), which are usually seen as feminine. Tam denies the significance of her embodied experience of impairment and disability, and thus tends to virilise her vocational and social identities and action at work. She reports her employer’s appraisal of
her activity: ‘He told me: “Despite your illnesses, you’re the one who tries the hardest... you’re committed to your job, you’re a model”’. Extra-competence must compensate for her illnesses in a singular ‘economy of retrievals’: her employer secures her position on condition that she enacts the figure of the ableist role model. Tam is expected to conform to a continuing process of normalisation, which is subject to interpersonal negotiations around her vocational identity and legitimacy. She has to manage high expectations of commitment to work; she must even impersonate an idealised vocational identity – all of these being traditionally valorised masculine attributions in work.

Despite both its normalising and alienating effects, the medical model is a support to Tam’s emancipation. We argue that vocational stability and paraplegic women’s well-being at the workplace can originate in virilising ableism and the medical model (author ref. 4; author, ref. 5). However, Tam must continuously regulate her environment’s perceptions of her vocational identity, competence and performance.

5.2.2.2 The sub-model of the double epistemic advantage. Traditionally located in the unprivileged position of inefficient workers, disabled people may find a position of power if engaged as professionals in relationships with other disabled people. This is Tam’s case; she says she has an ‘epistemic advantage’ (Wendell, 1996; Harding, 2004): ‘They want to keep me because I bring something more to the institution’. Being concomitantly an expert in and a beneficiary of social welfare, Tam embodies the model of the double epistemic advantage legitimating her position of power at the workplace. Although she scarcely refers to it, she has an embodied experience of impairment and disability; as a woman, she is in the allegedly ‘privileged’ position of the care-provider and educator. In fact, the institution that employs Tam barters her knowledge for the upgrading of her vocational identity.
Tam reveals her different positionality when she relates parts of her interviews with her clients. In this context, she has a position of power as a caregiver and as a role model: ‘Sometimes (…) they are surprised when I introduce myself as a social assistant (…). I have the feeling that regarding my situation, some of them complain less often (…). I have the sense there is some respect from them when they consider what I have, they see I can still work, I can still help’. Tam’s vocational identity must be preserved from the traditional representations of the disabled worker: ‘Sometimes you need to keep a distance... and the person mustn’t mix up our role with our disabling situation’.

The model of differential competence is enacted by Tam and Patricia, who respond to latent attributions of lesser efficiency with self-attributions of additional knowledge and efficiency. At her workplace, Tam conforms to the unreachable expectations of the double standard of competence and legitimacy addressed to disabled people, which segregates them from able-bodied workers. To gain power, our informants must produce a differential effort to be recognised as competent learners and workers; the competences acquired in formal vocational education are disparaged, potentially in favour of a promotion of naturalised capacities (Tam’s intimate experience of impairment and discrimination, etc.). This may result in a form of disablist vocational segregation, in this case on account of a supposed epistemic advantage giving disabled women more authority than that provided by their professional qualifications.

6. Conclusion: suggesting the empowering potentialities of Freirean, structural, and post-structural analyses of our informants’ experience models

The models that we derive from our informants’ experience reveal the structural and biographical limitations as well as the facilitators in the reconstruction of their educational and vocational pathways. We suggest that these models can be elucidated with the praxes of
Freirean, structural and post-structural feminist pedagogies, and that they can thus empower paraplegic women’s conduct of their educational and vocational pathways.

Significant structural limitations are imposed on our informants’ trajectories by the DI’s injunctive policy, which determines disabled people’s individual ‘merit’ to be supported in the conduct of their educational or vocational life courses. The application of the DI’s policy is made all the more rigid as it is enacted in line with the normative, ‘neutrally feminine’ guidance of paraplegic people towards administrative occupations (author, ref. 2; author, ref. 1) and with the sexual division of labour. Structural and representational limitations result in our informants’ gendered and ableist educational and vocational choices and action, unstable vocational identities, demonstrations of competence, and self-justifications of their legitimacy in education or at work.

Structural and representational limitations combine with biographical limitations in our informants’ trajectories. Both Theresa and Patricia speak of the ‘autonomy’ that their family allowed them to have, on condition that they achieved culminant educational and vocational objectives (obtaining a degree, starting a vocational career). Our informants receive some ‘theoretical support’, which is in fact unaccompanied autonomy (author, ref. 6). None of our informants reports any circumstantial, practical support being offered to them at times of biographical bifurcations. Our informants entered their educational and vocational courses with individualising self-representations of deficiency requiring ableist compensation. Even if self-compromising, these self-definitions can nonetheless prove empowering. Significantly, Tam draws on them to assert her authority at her workplace, even though the discourse of the double epistemic advantage is gendered and disablist. Patricia, taking on the feminine model of personal deficiency, abandoned her career as an architect. Our informants still develop personal strategies that although contrived combine their compliance with the medical model of disability and their experience of disablist (or ableist) social treatment. Finally, they transform
the situations in which they are at risk of losing power into relatively empowering ones (for instance, Theresa’s securing of her position in the family business).

Our informants embody the sub-model of differential competence with a self-deprecating approach to (self-)knowledge. Tam and Patricia strived to have their personal capacities recognised by embarking on long, compensatory educational programmes, so as to purportedly struggle against discrimination or exclusion. They silence their achievements and submit their action to an intersectional, gendered and ableist hidden agenda imposed respectively on women and on disabled people along with their correlates: the requirements of extra-performance, conformity and compliance with normalised pathways. This hidden agenda is accountable for our informants’ self-extricating approach to knowledge: they test their competence and legitimacy in self-imposed challenges, in accordance with a traditionally masculine approach of skill and action. Our informants subject their idiosyncratic voice to purportedly more legitimate, virilising models.

In reaching a position of relative power, Tam is attributed (and attributes to herself) a double epistemic advantage, thus embodying two dominant discourses. On the one hand, Tam is attributed a ‘truer’ and more legitimate knowledge of impairment and disability than her colleagues. On the other hand, as a woman engaged in a traditionally feminine job, she is expected to adopt naturally caring behaviour; her double epistemic advantage is based on essentialised attributions addressed both to disabled people and to women. Tam’s qualifications and agency are invisibilized. To have her vocational competence and identity recognised, she adopts a third, virilising discourse about men’s greater performance and authority at work. Tam can demonstrate her efficiency, but is also at risk of being disregarded for disrupting her role as the knowledgeable, but as expected, relatively passive disabled woman at work. Tam nonetheless articulates a fourth, more personal discourse: she reports the development of a model of self, of an adaptable and usually feminine ability to learn from situations at work.
(Dejours, 2009), integrating the understanding of her own entire biographical experience and of her appropriation of her mission. Tam gives voice to four relatively contradictory discourses. The two first – the social and cultural narratives about women and disabled people at work – are intersectional, dominant, and internalised; the third – her masculine self-definitions – is also dominant and a tactic of relative empowerment. Tam’s fourth discourse overarches the qualified professional’s display of a personal system of action, experience, values and beliefs.

Our informants’ experience models and discourse about their action dispossess them of their feminine attributions. A reading of these models and discourse through the lens of Freirean, structural or post-structural feminist pedagogies can re-signify the obstacles and facilitators of our informants’ educational and vocational courses, and highlight the transformative, bolstering and legitimising potentialities of their feminine attributions in the conduct of their – and possibly many paraplegic women’s – pathways. The praxis of Freirean pedagogy can enable paraplegic women to objectify and dialogically and dialectically criticise the determinants of their educational and vocational trajectories, whether they be structural or biographical, so as to ultimately grow aware of, enrich, and re-instrument their experience models and discourse about their self.

Structural feminist pedagogy can turn paraplegic women’s compensatory models of self into valued, idiosyncratic experience. In the practice of life narratives, paraplegic women can bring to light unquestioned stereotyped attitudes, their semi-conscious models of self, and their limiting or empowering gendered behaviours in education or work. Cooperation with peers can facilitate their ‘self-actualisation’ (hooks, 1994, p. 15) – that is, their emancipation from internalised systems of oppression and injunctions to extra-competence –, and their re-appropriation of self-reflection, critical sense and voice in order to realistically assess their performance and legitimacy and to construct their self-determination.
A post-structuralist approach to (self-)knowledge can encourage paraplegic women to embody non-conformist discourses, instead of gendered and disabling ones about some naturalised ‘epistemic advantage’ (Wendell, 1996; Harding, 2004), which actually results in job-categorisation and idealized and alienating attributions of ‘truer’ knowledge addressed to disabled people in work. Disabled people do not gain any more (self-)knowledge or autonomy while wielding this alleged advantage. Paraplegic women can, on the contrary, gain power by enacting dominant or virilising discourses but also, in some chosen contexts, by embodying subversive discourses about their identities as qualified professionals and as female agents showing their personal understanding of their mission nuanced with aspects of their own biographical experience.

We argue that conscientisation and voicing are at the root of paraplegic women’s empowerment in the conduct of their educational and vocational trajectories. Empowerment is a crucial, identity-related ‘work in progress’ (Hayes, 2002, p. 99) – that is, a developmental process towards self-expression and recognition, countering the effects of sexism, disability and ableism – even if it may be contradicted by some resistant, structural or biographical obstacles. We suggest that our informants’ shared experience models, or discourses about their self – informed variously by Freirean, structural or post-structural feminist pedagogies – can become potentially empowering learning instruments for all actors, of both genders, involved in the reconstruction of paraplegic women’s educational and vocational pathways.

REFERENCES


