Unheard discourses of normality:

Organizations and Hearing-impaired

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Purpose

This paper aims to discuss how dealing with invisible disabilities represents an individual and structural challenge within organizations. Considering the example "hardness of hearing" (as a more than widespread impairment of the senses), processual and relational limitations and potentials will be analyzed on three (different) levels: (1) hearing impairments and the understanding of content, (2) hearing impairments and social contact and (3) hearing impairments and the attribution process to the mind.

Methodology

As part of two research projects from 2009 to 2011, we have conducted more than 45 semi-structured interviews with hearing-impaired, their colleagues and supervisors and experts. In addition to individual needs and wants, the needs and wants of the organization as an employer should be analyzed. The leading questions of the studies were the needs and tasks in practice for the hearing-impaired individuals and work assistance as a central inclusion instrument. The main research interest focused on the agreements and cooperation during the assistance and also the demand of the progressing. The documentation of work approaches and significant results and experiences were evaluated. Questionnaires were sent to the persons included to augment the study. The current state of research and socio-demographic data on the subject were also analyzed.

Theoretical framework

With German-language territories increasingly giving greater attention to disability studies (e.g. Waldschmidt and Schneider, 2007), which are already established as an interdisciplinary field of research in the Anglophone world (e.g. Albrecht et al., 2001), critical discussion of the multiple facets of disability and disadvantage is slowly expanding and deepening. Stimulated by disability studies, disability and disadvantage are increasingly being identified and considered as structures of social and cultural exclusion and mechanisms of repression (Bösl et al., 2010). Some instructive perspectives on this are currently available in literature on social constructionism (e.g. Bendel, 1999), research on gender and intersectionality (Bruner, 2005; Raab, 2007), sociology of the body (Gugutzer, 2004; Gugutzer and Schneider, 2007) and political sociology (Maschke, 2007). Despite differing central focuses, the consensus of the current debate is that disability is correlated with complex practices of thinking, perception, assessment and action that necessitate normality categories on the one hand and simultaneously reproduce them on the other hand (Bruner, 2005; Waldschmidt and Schneider, 2007). After all, stigmatization, discrimination, precarity and isolation are manifested for disabled persons in numerous objective structures in social space, for instance work processes tailored to the average non-disabled person. The integration of persons classified as disabled into processes of communication and work always serves (additionally) to integrate and to adapt to a "non-disabled" order.

Preliminary findings

Communication and hearing are enabling factors in the workplace: for the organization of work processes as well as for the professional role behavior or the use of skills as an organizational resource. In addition to the tangible message, emotional and social intentions are often only cognizable through intonation, pitch of voice, volume and speech rate.

But the hard of hearing workforce cannot interpret these messages. Many hard of hearing employees reject sign language as a visual form of language and prefer using lip reading, because they are socialized by and identify themselves with the "normal" spoken language. Information gaps and misunderstandings are ubiquitous and unavoidable in the organizational setting: hearing-impaired employees, their colleagues and superiors give an account of stigma and taboo in conjunction with the invisible deficit, insufficient compensation strategies and a disabled feeling with growing distrust in everyday work. Deception and information control by dubbing, denial or withdrawal on the individual level demand for a organizational inclusion strategy to provide the organization with structural instruments and reflection discourses so it can act as an enabling force. The results show that occupational communication and participation for hearing-impaired employees is limited in a variety of situations, despite technical aid equipment. Overall, the two research projects demonstrate clearly that there is a structural deficiency concerning the participation of hearing-impaired individuals in occupational communication; a deficiency that can be eliminated with work assistance.

But the discourses of individuals and organizations in need and use of the instrument of work assistance are more than heterogeneous, depending on role and perspective of understanding, social contact and attribution to the mind. Thereby we will focus on the organizational practices and structures.

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