

Paraplegic women's emancipation along their vocational pathways: the potential contributions of Freirean, structural and post-structural feminist pedagogies

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Abstract

We have recently completed doctoral research on the reconstruction of paraplegic men's and women's vocational trajectories in French-speaking Switzerland. Based on three female informants' life narratives, we analyse issues of gendered vocational guidance, pathways and identities in paraplegic people's life courses. We shape some emancipating experience models and discourses about action, which empower the female informants on their vocational pathways. Our objective is here to point to the potential support that an emancipatory, feminist pedagogical approach could offer paraplegic women in the further development of personal models, and discourses of self in the conduct of their educational and vocational life.

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



Research background: the socio-politic components of paraplegic people's vocational rehabilitation in Switzerland, and the relevance of feminist pedagogies in that context

In this paper, we analyse the vocational life narratives of three among the five paraplegic female informants who participated to our qualitative research on the reconstruction of paraplegic people's educational and vocational pathways. We adopted a double disability- and gender-related perspective. We tried to understand our male and female informants' communal experience of gendered and disablist power relations in their educational and vocational environments. After Goodley (2014), we define disablism as structural relations of power, which activate stereotyped attributions of incapacities to people with disabilities, resulting in their exclusion from social contexts and mainstream activities. The adjective 'disabling' is used to signify non-systematically incapacitating situations, when people with disabilities are punctually deprived from means of action. More specifically, we focused on our female informants' relatively difficult construction of their educational or vocational pathways, in social contexts of:

Gendered representations devaluing women's competences and performances, originating in the sexual division of labour as a mechanism segregating women's work both horizontally – i.e., in a narrow range of job categories, mostly administrative support, social work and education – and vertically, limiting women's career advancement (Maruani, 2017);

Depreciative representations of disabled workers, stereotypically perceived as less efficient or productive than able-bodied workers, and who are offered restricted vocational choices (Pont, 2018).

Some of our informants (men and women) engaged in the construction of a vocational project as early as their rehabilitation in a medical centre, thereby complying to the injunction to return to paid work issued by the Swiss Disability Insurance (DI). The DI is the sector of the Swiss welfare state responsible for the distribution of various types of benefits to disabled people (The portal of the Swiss government, 2019). It conducts a policy under the rule of 'rehabilitation taking precedence over pension' (Information Centre OASI/DI, 2018). The DI nonetheless reproduces unquestioned assignments of disabled people to what it evaluates as 'possible' vocational roles (Pont, 2018). The vocational rehabilitation of paraplegic people contradictorily proves ableist and disablist concomitantly, and also gendered. Indeed, both paraplegic women's and men's working trajectories are projected in administrative support, a traditionally feminine career, thereby implementing a 'neutrally feminine' model of vocational guidance (Pont, 2018), which potentially conflicts with their own gendered (self-)representations of professional roles. A 'neutrally feminine' model of vocational guidance overgeneralizes feminine characteristics to both women's and men's self-projections, action, and experience in their educational and vocational trajectories (Pont, 2018).

Our research had as a main goal to show whether – or not – paraplegic women and men resort to their experiential knowledge to emancipate themselves from socio-structural and biographical limitations while attempting to reconstruct their educational or vocational trajectories. We found that our informants are engaged in communal, gendered and capacitating strategies grounded in their experience. These successful strategies were elaborated in shared, empowering experience models.

We pursue two main objectives in this paper. Firstly, we show the structural and biographical limitations that our female informants encounter while constructing their educational and vocational pathways. Secondly, we propose that an analysis of our women informants' gendered experience of relative (dis)empowerment be done in the light of the praxes of Freirean, structural, and post-structural feminist pedagogies. The

goals of this proposal are: on one hand, to provide other disabled women with a wider range of conceptual and experiential tools to interpret the limitations encountered along their careers; and, on the other hand, to possibly strengthen their models of self to reduce the impact of disability and gender on the pursuit of their educational and vocational trajectories.

Accordingly, we first situate our findings and proposal within the frameworks of feminist and Freirean pedagogies, and of the feminist critique of the effects of disability and gender in women's experience of learning and training. Secondly, we provide information about the collection of our informants' life narratives. Then, our method of analysis was deemed to facilitate the elaboration of the biographical portraits and the experience models of our informants. We present these portraits, which show the influence of both the DI's policy, and of the circumstances of their personal biographies on their trajectories. The portraits serve to shape our informants' experience models, and their idiosyncratic discourse about their educational and vocational life. In the conclusion, we highlight the structural and biographical limitations, and the capacitating aspects of our informants' educational and vocational courses. We suggest that their experience models and discourses can be enlightened by the praxes of feminist pedagogies, and thereby become empowering models addressed to other disabled women.

Theoretical framework

Pointing to their potential relevance in the vocational rehabilitation of women with disabilities, we first present structural and post-structural feminist pedagogies, and Freirean pedagogy. We then rely on the feminist critique of disability and gender, and of the non-consideration of disabled women's experiences.

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

Feminist pedagogy is noticeably about promoting women's empowerment in contexts of gendered power relations in education, vocational guidance, and work. Structural pedagogy seeks to change the patriarchal structures that underlie the intertwined systems of gender, class, race, heteronormativity (Crenshaw, 1991; Manicom, 1992) – and, we argue, disability – which inferiorise women in education and in work. In post-structural feminist pedagogy, women's voices are seen as conveying the dominant cultural narratives, which subject their agency to hegemonic discourses about the world and themselves (Barrett, 2005; Tisdell, 1998). Episodically adopting conforming, or subversive discourses, women negotiate their position within the hierarchies of power relations, possibly in work (Najarian Souza, 2010; Kray & Kennedy, 2017). Endorsing 'risky identities' (Barrett, 2005, p. 87) entails the possible loss of power granted by one's subjection to gendered and disablist standards of social adequacy (Kafer, 2013). As for Freire's (1996) pedagogy of liberation, it poses as prior the learners', trainees' or workers' objectification, and then subjective criticism of their experience through self-narration and dialogue. The latter practices are means of conscientisation of social relations such as disability and gender; they possibly support the integration of their own experience into an empowering conduct of their lives. In this process, voicing particularly helps women modulate their social identity and gain knowledge and power in varied contexts (Hayes, 2002).

The feminist critique of disability and gender

The feminist critique of disability and ableism insists on the significance of disabled women's experience in the development of their self-awareness and self-definitions (Hall, 2011). The latter statement is in line with the principles of both the structural and the post-structural strands of feminist pedagogy. Both strands advocate for the recognition of gendered and disablist obstacles to participation. This form of conscientisation may be undertaken by the means of: the voicing and valuing of disabled women's self-knowledge and approaches to the world (Sumskiene et al., 2016); the resolution of tension resulting from women's contradictory positioning in a variety of cultural discourses (hegemonic discourses, or discourses promoting difference) (Arenas Conejo, 2011; Shildrick, 2009); and their emancipation from gendered and disablist power relations through the development of empowering models of self (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

We derive some empowering models of self from our female informants' communal vocational experiences. We then attempt to render them adoptable by other women with disabilities in the light of Freirean, structural, and post-structural feminist pedagogies.

Conditions of data collection, methodology of life narratives, and method of analysis

In our qualitative research project, the informants were recruited in French-speaking Switzerland through a contractual collaboration with a rehabilitation centre established in that part of the country. Before data collection, our project was submitted to two institutional committees, which validated the ethical conditions under which our research was to be conducted. We carried out one educational and/or vocational life narrative of about 90 minutes with each informant. We thus gathered their own subjectivation of their educational and professional trajectories.

Narrative rationality organises the meanings of one's life by configuring statements in a temporal plot structure (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 35). Life events are integrated into each subject's narrative in order to create a coherent whole. Their life story aggregates their rational explanations, feelings and reactions about their experience, thereby shaping their self-representations and role identities (Van Dijk, 2010, p. 69-70). In self-narration, subjects structure similar, repeated meanings of experience and build them into systems – so-called 'models of experience' (Van Dijk, 2010), which are resources for further action courses (Pont, 2018).

The introductory question to each life narrative was: 'Could you please tell me about your vocational life?' Further complementary questions were asked about each informant's initial vocational choice; the circumstances of the vocational counselling which they received during rehabilitation; any decisive and/or motivated reorganisations of their vocational pathway; any types of resources, whether material, psychological, or social which capacitated them in decision-making processes along 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 career.

The analysis aimed to show the parts of life narratives which revealed our informants' empowerment. 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. One of the models facilitates the analysis of both the causal and temporal relations between a subject's life events, their individual decisions, and the outcomes of their action along their biographical pathway. Another model shows

the impact of socio-structural scissions on the degree of intentionality wielded by individuals in the conduct of their life path.

A 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 contexts and situations in which they trained or worked.

The analysis of our informants' vocational/educational life narratives in the light of the biographical models and of gendered (self-)attributions enabled us to grasp the logics of action which supported their emancipation from what they relatively consciously perceived as their dominated position in working or educational contexts. We demonstrated that their empowering strategies are gendered. Below, we shape some communal, experience models based on the (self-)attributions of gender and disability which underpin the narratives of our three female informants.

Results: modelling some of the shared (dis)ablist and gendered vocational experiences of paraplegic female informants

In this part, we briefly present the vocational pathway of each of our female informants, and give an analysis of the gendered and disabling, or ableist aspects playing out both in the treatment of their rehabilitation by the Disability Insurance (DI), and in their careers. Then we shape some models drawing on their communal experience of gender and disability in their trajectories.

Our informants' educational and vocational portraits: the DI's interventions, and the personal components of their trajectories

Our informants are Tam, Patricia, and Theresa, whose various identities and life choices are influenced by the effects of the 'conditional' policy of the DI, and the biographical circumstances of their life histories – whether they activate gendered, ableist or disabling treatments and behaviours.

Now aged 43, Tam is a social assistant. She fled her native country at war and emigrated with her mother and sister to a small town in French-speaking Switzerland around 1980. She integrated quite easily. After a few years, she was adopted by her mother's Swiss husband, an electrician. Her mother worked as a restaurant manager and cook. In her life narrative, Tam never hints at any derogatory, disempowering remarks on her ethnical origins.

She had just obtained her commercial diploma before the onset of paraplegia when aged 19. While in rehabilitation, Tam received disabling injunctions from the DI. The Insurance enjoined her to start work after her stay in hospital. Indeed, the DI considered that she had already successfully completed initial training – which is usually the only type of training supported by the DI. Nevertheless, Tam intended to acquire a qualification in social work, which meant that she first had to pass a more prestigious high school degree. She passed it without support from the DI. However, the DI partly paid for her education and training as a social assistant, although it was not expected to support Tam's further vocational training. In fact, in an ableist fashion, 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 engages in a long-term vocational project. In Tam's case, the DI applied more of a 'moral

norm' than an unconditional policy towards paid work (Probst et al., 2016). After experiencing discrimination in hiring, Tam now works part-time as a social assistant for a foundation supporting the autonomy and social participation of people with disabilities. She consciously enjoys the vantage point of a disabled worker sharing some parts of experiential knowledge with her clients. She feels comfortable with her self-attributions in a traditionally feminine occupation, which grants her authority and legitimacy at her workplace. She benefits from a pension, based on the DI's assessment of her working capacity.

Patricia, aged 50, was a student at high school at the onset of impairment when she was 16. She grew up in a family of French origin in a village in French-speaking Switzerland, her father being a craftsman, and her mother a housewife. Despite spending more than one school semester in a rehabilitation centre, she completed the most prestigious high school degree within the regular timeframe of the curriculum. She then obtained a qualification in architectural design, followed by a diploma in architectural engineering delivered by one of the Universities of Applied Sciences and Art of French-speaking Switzerland. She is now an engineer in architecture who has never practised in the field of her certification, but who has been placed by the state's unemployment insurance in various positions in social work. Patricia's educational trajectory highlights deep and alienating ableist self-attributions, which nonetheless proved empowering along her pathway, considering that she obtained a prestigious diploma. She now benefits – as a part-time worker – from the same type of pension as Tam.

Theresa is about 55. She works as a salesperson and accountant in the family business. She is married and has two grown-up children. She stems from a large farming family living in a rural area of French-speaking Switzerland. At the onset of impairment around the age of 16, she had just begun an apprenticeship as a pharmacy assistant, a profession that both she and the DI assessed as impracticable by a paraplegic person. In the mid-1970's, the DI intended to institutionalize her during her apprenticeship, possibly as a salesperson, in a sheltered social day structure dedicated to the professional training of young people with disabilities. Despite the DI's incentive, and with the support of the rehabilitation centre's social assistant, Theresa rejected what she evaluated as a disabling, stigmatizing option. She wanted to resume her studies as a means of emancipation from the DI's injunction. After completing a commercial degree, she began a curriculum to become an occupational therapist. However, feeling not mature enough and disempowered, she dropped out. She mentions support (such as information about the curriculum, or assistance before starting school) neither from her family or friends, nor from the DI. She received no vocational counselling or financial support for initial training. Both socio-structural, and family treatments appear to be ableist. As a certified salesperson, she then had to cope with disruptions in her professional pathway, due to discrimination in hiring and family life. She exercised a few jobs which required no qualifications from her according to her employers, although these employments correspond to segmented work sectors requiring certification. She was employed as a social animator, or as a knitter in a clothes shop. Along the years spent on family care, she became the part-time salesperson and accountant of her husband's company, occupying a traditionally feminine function at the border between the family business and her private sphere (Cappuyns, 2007). Theresa does not make any mention of the DI's participation in her schooling costs, or of a pension granted to her as a part-time disabled worker.

The last two informants see neither the conditional interventions (or lack of intervention) by the DI, nor the relational or identity-related ingredients of their own trajectories, as determinants of their vocational pathways. In our informants' life

narratives, representations of an ableist, individualising and self-controlled conduct of their life course dominate. From their twenties on, they readily took full responsibility for progression on their educational and vocational pathways. They may have been unaware of their right to demand the DI's support, or to disclose their limitations during their vocational guidance, so as to obtain support. Their self-expectations of normalcy, combined with a feeling of disempowerment caused an unexpressed, variable tension between self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), contradictory self-attributions of incapacities, and a relative deprivation of social resources. These self-attributions either resulted in their academic achievements (for Tam especially), or disrupted the construction of their identities and the pursuit of self-determined careers (in the case of Theresa particularly). Gendered (self-)definitions 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, grand-daughter, etc. They also possibly projected untold classist expectations on our informants' careers. Note that their families remained uninformed of the quality of support that they could muster for our informants, who never report any conscious, developed discourse of accompaniment provided by carers. Our informants were expected to occupy typically female jobs, which they all did, or still do. 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 representations of the ineluctability of their vocational choices.

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

Our informants demonstrate 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 either disablist, or ableist scansions of the welfare institutions and of their social environments prevail. Our informants pursue a quest of 'normalcy' to gain control over their own educational or vocational progression. They resort to discourses and actions promoted from the point of view of the able-bodied, which proves empowering for some of them, but also liable to prevent them from building idiosyncratic, self-valourised models of self.

Relying on this assessment, we shape two gendered and (dis)ableist experience models based on our informants' vocational experience: first, the model of unsupported self-determination; second, the model of educational/vocational compensation, which overarches the sub-models of differential competence, and of the double epistemic advantage (Pont, 2018).

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 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 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)' (Pont, 2018, p. 367). 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. (...) I still had that big thing to take in’* (Pont, 2018, p. 368). Instead, Patricia completed an apprenticeship before becoming a certified engineer in the same stream. Patricia reports that her parents, although supportive, did not value a prestigious educational and vocational life courses, possibly as a result of the traditional gendered segregation of women in the labour market and their working-class background. Patricia enacts the gendered role of the ‘good student’ (*‘I was a hard worker’*, she says) who pursues a renarcissization process while seeking social recognition of her individual qualities. However, lacking support, she confronts the sexual division of labour combined with the classist self-definitions which seem to remain unquestioned in her social environment. She moreover encounters and integrates disablist representational and structural obstacles preventing her from making socio-professional progress.

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’* (Pont, 2018, p. 247). 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... well, it just discouraged me a bit’* (Pont, 2018, p. 247). The process of knowledge construction seemed impossible, probably due to an unspoken lack of self-esteem and a feeling of illegitimacy and incompetence. The (self-imposed) injunctions of normalisation, contradicting Theresa’s disabling self-attributions, combined with unsupported self-direction and possibly implicit, gendered lower expectations of school performance addressed to (disabled) girls (BFEH, 2013), to doom her vocational project.

Reflecting the turmoil of identity reconstruction in contexts saturated with representations of appropriate roles assignable to disabled women, Patricia’s and Theresa’s conduct of their vocational trajectories reflect their internalisation of imbricated gender- and disability-related oppression. Their 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’* (Pont, 2018, p. 365). Theresa is now a salesperson in the family business, 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. She does it obliquely: *‘Well, then I did this school in architecture, and it was again just normal in my environment’* (Pont, 2018, p. 366). She realises that her family were not made sensitive to their ableist expectations addressed to Patricia. She was herself engaged in a normalising process demanding physical and intellectual efforts. As a result of ableism and over-responsibility for the conduct of their trajectories, our informants attempted to make vocational choices with no consideration of the effects that structural obstacles – especially gendered and disablist –, and personal biographical circumstances (including lack of support) would have on their career paths. In fact, they did not envisage the very possibility of support.

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 and motivation were opposed to a latent, limiting lack of recognition, they scaffolded compensating, normalizing strategies to regulate their performance, and to counter any disabling attribution in education and in work. They thus built an experience model of compensation. 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 two 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.

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'* (Pont, 2018, p. 313). Similarly to able-bodied women, Tam and Patricia have a strong belief that school performance is a guarantee of vocational achievement and/or social recognition. Tam's aspirations 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'* (Pont, 2018, p. 313).

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 trajectory, probably attempting to empower devalued self-representations. Patricia had to prove her competence as a learner, even though this 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'* (Pont, 2018, p. 365). Patricia's challenge seems to be making sense of polarised self-representations: on one hand, the ableist, academically successful individual asserting her competence in learning situations, and on the other hand, the disabled young woman enduring an absence of expectations of performance, whether in work or in other social spaces. These lower expectations are usually addressed to both women and disabled people, and collide with the reconstruction of a normalised personal identity.

On the contrary, 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'* (Pont, 2018, pp. 316-317). Tam satisfies the standard of the normalised, undistruptive disabled colleague. Her competence is indeed at risk of being degraded by attributions of physical and psychological weakness ('complaining'), which are usually attributed to disabled people, and also 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, according to a masculine model of self-promotion through socialisations outside the private sphere (Connell, 2005). 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”” (Pont, 2018, p. 317). 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 legitimacy. She has to manage high expectations of commitment to work – this being a traditionally valorised, masculine attribution in work.

Patricia and Tam both display the sub-model of differential competence, which supports their ableist and virilising demeanours, and hereby preserves their vocational identity from disabling representations. However, this sub-model covers devaluing, disabling self-representations: while differential competence exhausts Patricia’s self-projections in a career in architectural engineering, Tam must continuously regulate her professional environment’s perceptions of her competence and performance.

The sub-model of the double epistemic advantage

Traditionally located in the position of inefficient workers, disabled people may find a position of power if engaged as professionals in social work with other disabled people. This is Tam’s case; she says she has an ‘epistemic advantage’ (Wendell, 1996): ‘*They want to keep me because I bring something more to the institution*’ (Pont, 2018, p. 317). 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, and the experience of the DI’s treatment. Moreover, as a woman, she is in the allegedly ‘privileged’ position of the care-provider and educator. Tam reveals her positionality when she relates parts of her interviews with her clients. She has an empowering position 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*’ (Pont, 2018, p. 316). 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 situation as a disabled person*’ (Pont, 2018, p. 315). Tam’s position is located at the intersection of gender and disability; in her work context, her position in these imbricated social systems prove to be privileged. However, while granting her an epistemic advantage, the institution that employs Tam also barter her embodied knowledge for the upgrading of her vocational identity.

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 performance. To gain power, our informants produce a differential effort to be recognised as competent learners and workers. In Tam’s case, the competences acquired in formal vocational education are disparaged, potentially in favour of the promotion of internalised, naturalised capacities: her experiential knowledge of the effects of impairment and disability. Although the model of differential competence roots in disablism, it is enacted in a compensatory, ableist fashion. As for the model of the double epistemic advantage, it activates intricate gender- and disability-related representations, isolating Tam in a relatively privileged, context-dependent position of power at the workplace. Her singular situation may result in a form of disablist segregation, on account of an embodied knowledge which grants her a supposed epistemic advantage in her professional action, and which may isolate her from collaborations in her working

environment. Tam's situation allegedly gives her more authority than that provided by the professional qualifications that reunite her with her able-bodied colleagues. The model of the double epistemic advantage has another disabling dimension: it confines Tam in an assigned and hierarchically dominated, fixed role on account of her naturalised qualities.

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

The empowering qualities of the experience models in our informants' pathways

The models that we derive from our informants' experience reveal the structural and biographical, gender- and disability-related limitations as well as the facilitators in the reconstruction of their educational and vocational pathways.

Significant structural limitations are imposed on our informants' trajectories by the DI's alternately ableist or disablist policy. Disabled people's treatments are subsumed to an evaluation of their individual, ableist 'merit' to be supported, as Tam's guidance demonstrates. In Tam's and Theresa's cases, for example, the application of the DI's policy is in line with the 'neutrally feminine' guidance (or attempts at such guidance) of paraplegic people towards administrative occupations. Having completed a prestigious curriculum in an ableist demeanour, Patricia seems to gain self-determination in her educational choices, independently from a decision by the DI. However, the state's unemployment insurance assigns jobs in social work to her, which fall under the sexual division of labour. Concomitantly, these assignments are distributed under disability-related guidance towards jobs in which she has no qualification, as is the case with Theresa grappling with discrimination in hiring, and engaging in any 'suitable' employment. Just like Tam, Patricia and Theresa are also attributed a double epistemic advantage in social work – although the two latter informants engage on imposed trajectories. Even in periods of emancipation from the DI's incentives, all three informants engage in, or are assigned usually feminine jobs – social work for Tam and Patricia, office work for Theresa –, which shows the stronger prevalence of the sexual division of labour over disablist guidance. Structural and representational limitations combine with biographical limitations in our informants' trajectories. Both Theresa and Patricia entered their educational and vocational courses with isolating 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 while she compensates possible disabling representations by demonstrations of competence, and self-justifications of her legitimacy in work. Patricia also reports having resorted to ableist, successful strategies in her education. The three informants transform the situations in which they are at risk of losing power into relatively empowering ones (for instance, Theresa's emancipation from the DI, and 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 embarked on compensatory educational programmes, so as to purportedly struggle against discrimination or exclusion. Tam and Patricia silence their achievements and submit their action to a gendered and ableist hidden agenda imposed on women and on disabled people along with a correlate: the requirement of extra-performance. They self-imposed challenges to

receive recognition, in accordance with a traditionally masculine approach of skill and action. Our informants subject their action and voice to purportedly more legitimate, virilising models.

Making the empowerment experience models transferable in the light of Freirean pedagogy, and structural and post-structural feminist pedagogies

We suggest that the experience models become educational, conscientizing instruments in the vocational rehabilitation of paraplegic people (and especially women). These tools can be elucidated with the praxes of Freirean pedagogy, and of structural and post-structural feminist pedagogies applied in the rehabilitative context. A reading of the models through the lens of these pedagogies can re-signify the obstacles and facilitators of our informants' educational and vocational courses, and highlight the bolstering and legitimising potentialities of their feminine (self-)definitions in the conduct of their pathways – and possibly other disabled women's.

The praxis of Freirean pedagogy can enable paraplegic women to objectify the limitations and facilitators they encountered, and to dialogically criticise the structural, representational and biographical determinants of their educational and vocational trajectories. Ultimately, they can grow aware of, and powerfully re-instrument their experience models of compensation and double epistemic advantage with personal traits, behaviours, beliefs and values grown in their socialisations.

Structural feminist pedagogy can turn paraplegic women's compensatory models of self into valued, idiosyncratic but shareable experience. In the practice of self-narration, 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 conscientised instructors or peers can facilitate their 'self-actualisation' (hooks, 1994, p. 15) – that is, their emancipation from internalised systems of oppression –, and their re-appropriation of critical sense and voice to realistically assess their performance and legitimacy. They can thus construct their self-determination as disabled and capable women.

A post-structuralist approach to (self-)knowledge can encourage paraplegic women to embody non-conformist discourses, instead of gendered and disablist ones about some naturalised epistemic advantage. The latter discourses actually result 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 or other women with disabilities can, on the contrary, gain power by enacting dominant or virilising discourses but also, in some chosen contexts, by embodying subversive discourses as qualified professionals and as female agents showing their personal understanding of their mission nuanced with 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 and other disabled women's educational and vocational pathways.

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