

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AS A PLATFORM FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION: EXPERIENCES OF THE SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT: *The article examines the importance disabled people award to NGOs in their experiences of social connectedness. Applying qualitative research methods (interviews and content analysis) revealed significant aspects of the existential desire to belong to a group. Four research categories emerged: connectedness through identity, connectedness with another person, connectedness through the need to give help, and connectedness through the need to receive help. The results of the research showed that disabled people join NGOs when they feel rejected by society. This involves a step in the search for one's own identity in order to realise oneself as a person. The research revealed that people with disabilities may look for people with the same fate, giving meaning to their lives and being. The category of connectedness with another person revealed that communication is an integral part of social connectedness. This leads to overcoming loneliness, not being closed at home, and having human relations with each other within an NGO. Based on the results of the qualitative research, it became clear that in terms of connectedness through the need for help, it was considered important to help others and for NGOs to be interested in those who need help. From the data that were obtained during the research, it can be seen that moral support and psychological help are important components of connectedness for seriously ill individuals.*

KEYWORDS: *NGO, disability, social connectedness, qualitative research*

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INTRODUCTION

The social inclusion of people with disabilities is a major challenge for social policymakers and practitioners as well as for local communities. Although there is still a lot of talk about people with disabilities, their social exclusion, and problems, it is noticeable that people with disabilities are not always present in all spaces (e.g. non-participation in the social life of the city, sometimes in the education system, in the labour market, etc.), and that social exclusion persists. Watson (2004) mentions that people with disabilities are an oppressed social group whose members are excluded by their impairments, making them a separate social group. This oppression may cause them a lot of grievances, injuries, and challenging experiences. Consequently, for a long time, the participation of people with disabilities was extremely limited in social life, and the main vision of them was constructed only based on the latter's "impairments." As a result, people with disabilities tend to experience feelings of loneliness and a lack of self-confidence and are at risk of poverty and social exclusion in society. Neves et al. (2018) specify the difficulties that result from being socially isolated as loneliness and depression, with social, physical, and cognitive limitations leading to early mortality.

The importance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a platform for social inclusion for people with disabilities is becoming apparent. NGOs aim to represent the interests of persons with disabilities and to help them overcome stigmatisation and experience connection with others. According to the data of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, at the end of 2021, there were approximately 221,000 persons with disabilities living in our country. In order to represent a significant number of people with disabilities, the importance of NGOs as a platform for social inclusion is clear. One of the most important documents related to persons with disabilities is the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (27 May 2010, No. XI-854)*, which aims to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights for all persons with disabilities. Accordingly, this Convention includes Article 19, which emphasises the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the community.

This study, therefore, enriches previous insights into the role of NGOs and persons with disabilities as members of NGOs and highlights what meaning they give to the experience of social connectedness in NGOs. Social connectedness is defined as the level of inclusion of individuals in the social environment and the completeness of the associative networks formed therein. Belonging to social groups, such as NGOs, is associated with greater social connectedness. Connectedness takes many forms: connectedness to oneself and others, including family members, friends, colleagues or social groups. Activities that

offer opportunities for social interaction and conversation with others or for sharing experiences are highly valued (Franke et al. 2020; Hoye et al. 2015). However, Morgan et al. (2019) mention that poverty and inequality clearly hinder the sense of social connectedness. Social connectedness is conceptualised as multilevel, related to interpersonal relationships, NGOs, and wider society (ibid.). It is evident that the experience of social connectedness through NGOs becomes a strategy and gives meaning to NGOs. It can be assumed that for a person with a disability, activities and participation in the former are vital. This means that NGOs are a platform that plays a prominent role in connecting persons with disabilities with others due to the existential desire to belong to a group of people.

Given the relevance of this study, the defined research problem is that despite the large body of literature on NGOs, we still know relatively little about them, the activities they undertake, their role as strategic actors (Fogarty 2011), and the importance that persons with disabilities award NGOs in their social connection experiences. Social connectedness has been studied by researchers in various dimensions. Choi et al. (2020) found that access to community events, work resources, and connections was key to older adults' perceptions of community friendliness and highlighted the importance of promoting socialising through community events to strengthen older adults' sense of connectedness. Dury et al. (2019) studied how social connectedness affects the (potential) volunteering process in later life. The authors analysed formal and informal connectedness. Creaven et al. (2018) investigated the association between volunteering and health status (depression) and the importance of social contacts or group membership. Stavrova and Luhmann (2016) explored the meaning of people's lives through social connectedness. The findings revealed that people find meaning in life when they belong to voluntary organisations.

The novelty of the study is based on the fact that NGOs play an important role in today's society. NGOs help people and fight for social inclusion (Dan 2020). Certainly, one should not limit studies to NGOs for people with disabilities, but nor should one ignore the role of such NGOs in the context of the experience of social connectedness of people with disabilities and what the existential desire to belong to an NGO means to them, highlighting how this happens through NGOs. This research on the experience of social connectedness is being conducted for the first time in Lithuania. So far, there has been virtually no research on NGOs as a platform for social inclusion: in relation to the experience of the social connectedness of people with disabilities, no scientific studies could be found. This only proves that the experience of social connectedness of persons with disabilities in NGOs is a topical and researchable issue. This leads to the formulation of the research question: What is the importance that persons

with disabilities award to NGOs in terms of strengthening social connectedness (and thus social networking)? Answers to this research question may reveal the specificities of social connectedness, contributing to the identification of a new role for NGOs in representing the interests of people with disabilities.

Research methods: theoretical analysis; qualitative research, with empirical data collected through open-ended interviews; qualitative research data processed through content analysis.

THE MEANING OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AS AN EXISTENTIAL DESIRE TO BELONG TO AN NGO

When studying social connectedness, it is important to clarify the meaning of this concept. Wilkinson et al. (2019) describe social connectedness as belonging, highlighting the basic human need to feel accepted and part of something bigger while simultaneously feeling included (ibid.). In contrast, Cooney et al. (2014) treat social connectedness as more than social interaction, involving meaningful contact with social relationships, especially with friends, engaging in meaningful activities, and ensuring the quality of communication. This reduces the risk of social isolation and loneliness. A third group of researchers emphasises that social connectedness is defined as an aspect of the self and a sense of closeness, which is considered an important component of a person's well-being, a sense of belonging based on the experience of interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, social connectedness is a long-term set of experiences and a relationship with community and society (Lee–Robbins 2000). These definitions indicate that social connectedness is perceived as human relationships with those with whom one is in contact and who belong in certain environments.

In this study, social connectedness is defined as the participation of persons with disabilities in NGOs in terms of the importance that the latter place on the social connectedness experiences facilitated by the NGO. Experiencing social connectedness is important for individuals with disabilities, as it affirms their sense of belonging to a group. Therefore, NGOs play a significant role in receiving and giving help. Dupuy and Prakash (2020) highlight that NGOs are commonly referred to as active organisations and non-profit organisations. It should be noted that the role of NGOs has become very important as they are increasingly responding to social problems and natural disasters by providing humanitarian assistance. NGOs are seen as the main catalyst that can inspire, facilitate or contribute to the delivery of aid (Lewis 2010). NGOs are also addressing the problems faced by people with disabilities. Belonging to an NGO highlights connectedness through the need to give assistance. Yelpaze et al. (2021) found that high levels of social connectedness

were associated with lower levels of psychological vulnerability and higher well-being. It is suggested that the value of NGOs is listening to or morally supporting the lives of other persons with disabilities. Thus, NGOs become a platform for social inclusion by providing assistance where persons with disabilities may regain their self-confidence and feel supported.

It is worth mentioning the problems faced by people with disabilities. Disabled people face a range of problems, according to Dhir (2004), including poverty and lack of education as limiting barriers. Disabled people are often confined to home, face discrimination within the family and community, and are seen in society as less productive or unable to lead “normal” lives. People with disabilities are stigmatised for deviating from the norm. According to Hare-Duke et al. (2021), stigma is a barrier to the experience of social connectedness, a failure to experience communion with others and a feeling of being judged and ostracised. Disabled people with visible impairments are very often discredited; some impairments are difficult to hide and are therefore viewed by society through the prism of stigma, while societal attitudes highlight that people with disabilities are not ‘normal’ (Lejzerowicz 2017). This may lead to disabled people becoming depressed, according to Gilmore and Cuskelly (2014) and Cornwell et al. (2008), severely reducing their connection to society; people with disabilities are also more vulnerable to loneliness. Meanwhile, Cornwell and Waite (2009) describe social isolation as occurring in two dimensions: social withdrawal, characterised by a lack of contact with others, and situational factors, such as having a small social network, infrequent communication and non-participation in social activities and groups.

It is, therefore, very important to note that identity is important for disabled people’s participation in NGOs. As members of a social group, disabled people construct their identity through ongoing social interaction. One of the outcomes of this interaction is that they construct shared stories about the group and what it means to be a member (Ruelle–Peverelli 2016). This leads, according to Moran (2015: 12), to the view that identity is a fundamental and universal feature of the human condition and of what people know and perceive about themselves, whether this involves individual personal qualities or belonging to or identifying with a particular social group (*ibid.* p.12). By identifying with a group, the individual also gains a sense of well-being, develops and reinforces strong bonds between members and develops a “we” mentality, thus further reinforcing a collective identity (Harris et al. 2014). Jenkins (2008: 18) points out that connectedness through identity is a result of meeting new people. Therefore, based on the above-mentioned scholars, it can be argued that by cooperating, members of an NGO not only make sense of their own being but also become part of a group, strengthening their connectedness with other members of the NGO.

Social connectedness in NGOs is determined by the important factor of how one person connects with another. Connecting with another person is argued by O'Rourke et al. (2018) to facilitate the maintenance of meaningful, close, and constructive relationships with other individuals, groups, or society. The aforementioned authors emphasise that the social connectedness involved in caring for others, such as affection or attachment, is present when belonging to a community. A study by Morgan et al. (2019) highlighted three categories that underpinned the experience of social connectedness: a wish to leave the home (those experiencing loneliness have the desire to go out and socialise outside the home, such as joining community organisations, church, ethnically-specific community groups, and to access services), to connect with others (disability sometimes leads to negative interactions and affects self-confidence), and to avoid feeling like a burden (not wishing to burden others, individuals try to portray themselves as successful and happy to show that they are interesting people worthy of company. They do not want to bother family members, so they try to make friends). The authors' analysis shows that people conceptualise social connectedness as a multilevel concept, reflecting kinship relationships at the interpersonal level (family, friends), at the neighbourhood and community meso level, and the cultural and societal levels (Morgan et al. 2019).

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Data collection method

The idea behind any qualitative research is to purposefully select participants who best help the researcher understand the problem and research question. The researcher is like the main instrument: researchers engaged in qualitative research collect data by interviewing participants. They may use a protocol or an instrument to collect data, but the researchers are the ones who actually collect the information. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers (Creswell 2013).

The article discusses the results of a qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews with persons with disabilities in an NGO. The survey's main question to the NGO members was the following. Tell us about your personal experience dealing with NGOs. What does that relationship mean to you? Twenty-one interviews were conducted with disabled people who were members of NGOs. The selection of subjects was based on the main criteria: that the research participants had belonged to an NGO for at least two years and had a disability.

Participants of research

The research started by searching for research participants using personal contacts and social networks, writing electronic mail messages, and inviting them to participate in the research. Calls were also made to the heads of NGO headquarters. After the researcher had introduced herself and informed the latter about the research being conducted and the purpose of the research, the contacts of the NGO members were requested. The research participants responded to the researcher's request to participate, and an interview time convenient for them was arranged. The interviews then began. The research participants participated voluntarily. The researcher did not seek to construct a power relationship but allowed the research participants to say what they wanted to say. When the researcher presented the purpose of the research to the NGO members, the latter's reaction varied; one research participant emphasised, "Oh, very, very! You should emphasise that the society [i.e., the organisation/NGO] is very necessary." The researcher observed a shift from a culture of silence to sharing experiences about social connectedness in NGOs.

The youngest research participant was 30 years old at the time of research; the oldest was 75. The average age of the research participants was 55 years. Most of the research participants (six persons) had completed higher education; two of the research participants had not; five persons had completed further education; the smallest number of research participants had finished vocational education (two persons), secondary education (one person), incomplete secondary education (one person) and professional education (two persons). Three persons did not indicate their education. Although some of the research participants were of working age, only five were employed. The average duration of NGO membership was 13 years.

Data analysis strategy

Data were analysed using conventional content analysis. The relevance of the qualitative research analysis method is that it requires argumentation. A special advantage of content analysis procedures is that they have a solid basis in the communicative process; that is, the research material is always understood in relation to the specific communication context. This process is characterised by the breakdown of material, carried out gradually from one passage to another, i.e. subcategorising and grouping into categories. The system of categories is the main tool of analysis. This contributes to the procedure's intersubjectivity, helping others reproduce or repeat the analysis. In this regard, qualitative content analysis pays special attention to the construction of categories and

their justification (Mayring 2014). Continuing the latter author's thoughts, it should be noted that working with the category system makes an important contribution to the assessment of the reliability of the conclusions.

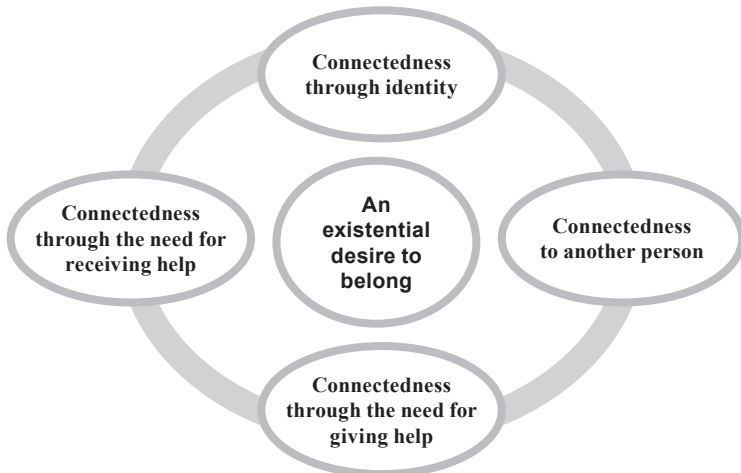
Ethical considerations and informed consent

The research was carried out in compliance with ethical requirements and principles of integrity. The researchers adhered to ethical behaviour and guaranteed the research participants that privacy, confidentiality and anonymity would be respected throughout the research. Adhering to ethical behaviour helps both researchers and research participants agree and assists in gathering more information (Kang–Hwang 2021).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This article analyses the themes of the empirical research, reflecting disabled people's experience of social connectedness through the existential desire to belong to an NGO.

Figure 1. *The meaning of NGOs for people with disabilities. A model of the existential desire for social inclusion*



Source: Author's compilation.

“I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t belong to the Association of Disabled People.”

Groups of people, communities, and organisations are necessary for disabled people to connect with others. Therefore, NGOs occupy a special place in an existential sense as a platform for social inclusion. It should be emphasised that those affected by disabilities have an existential need to belong, which often emerges when individuals are faced with profound experiences. When a person’s health is affected, they may experience isolation, situations of disability, social exclusion and problems associated with the latter. Joining an NGO involves taking a step in the search for their own identity, where persons with disabilities realise themselves as individuals, not as statistical units of organisations. This means NGOs open up the possibility of experiencing social connectedness (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Connectedness through identity*

| Category | Subcategory |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Connectedness through identity | Feeling of being a misfit in other spaces |
| | Desire to belong to an NGO |
| | Making sense of being in NGOs |
| | People of similar status (position, fate) |
| | Seeing other people with disabilities |

Source: Author’s compilation.

The research revealed that the subjective experiences of people, especially of those who experience rejection due to the prevailing criterion of discrimination in society, i.e. disability, do not always fit into other environments. This means that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience social exclusion and rejection by society. It should be mentioned that a person with a disability may acquire the status of an outcast, which means severed ties with society, so the possibility of belonging to an environment that recognises the human dignity of persons with disabilities is attractive. One of the research participants said the following:

Still, [because of] the disability, you don’t fit in everywhere, or people don’t want you everywhere. Instead, I am grateful that I am here and have some kind of relationship. (Interview 16)

When a person can no longer work, can no longer communicate with everyone, [they] would like to do a lot of things, but [they] can't anymore because there [are different kinds] of disability everywhere: whether legs, or hands, or paralysis, or epilepsy, well, in a word, a lot, a lot... (Interview 17)

As the research participant claims, not fitting in in other spaces is associated with a lack of connectedness with people, beliefs about persons with disabilities, and the reluctance of other persons to be in contact with a person with disabilities. This reveals that the latter's social relationships may be disturbed and limited. On the other hand, the study highlighted that NGOs were an alternative for building relationships. NGOs may become the space where connections are established. It is worth noting that the active participation of persons with disabilities in society is extremely difficult due to their various physical disorders. In analysing the research data, it was noted that, as stated by the research participants, being a member of an NGO means having many opportunities, but the essence is existence itself. We claim that the meaning of 'being' is associated with being together with other members. This is clearly important because it leads to togetherness and a sense of being part of an organisation. It can be assumed that in such an organisation, the person with disabilities' 'being' is better perceived and more sensitively looked at, and everything that is experienced is experienced more strongly.

Research participants said the following:

... 'being' in society itself. Well, in a word, it means a lot. (Interview 13)

... [it concerns] where to be, in the sense of being. (Interview 14)

The fact that there [is] such a [place] that [is] pleasant for everyone. (Interview 19)

Making sense of being is perhaps the most important force motivating disabled people to actively participate in NGOs, but it is also closely related to the existential meaning of belonging to a group. It is worth mentioning, according to the insights of the research participants, that an NGO is one of the possibilities for this and may be the only place for people with disabilities to maintain their social connectedness. This means that the person whose needs are to be met just sees a place to hang out, to feel that they are welcome and at the same time, a sense of belonging in a non-governmental organisation.

The statements of the research participants reveal that it is important for NGOs to bring together persons with a similar fate. For disabled people, this is especially important because it involves a feeling that unites them. It means giving them the feeling that they are not alone, can be brave and feel free. On the other hand, it highlights the fact that the daily life of people affected by disabilities is similar, and there is no need to feel bad about human weakness or to make excuses or blame each other. It should be mentioned that the NGO spaces do not encourage unnecessary pity, and disabled people may feel free when they join them. One of our NGO respondents shared their experience this way:

Well, I don't know, people [who are here have] the same life as me. Well, that, well, life is similar, how to say when you come [to the NGO], you can feel free. (Interview 11)

By facilitating being with people who share a similar fate, with the aim of creating a closer bond, NGOs permit new experiences and a new vision of individuals with different disabilities. In this context, a research participant stated:

Because when you see people with disabilities who are walking around with wheelchairs, crutches, with those extra things. When you see different children and people of different ages with disabilities. (Interview 1)

Based on this idea, it appears that such NGOs encourage people with disabilities to get to know others with disabilities and to accept them.

Based on the data obtained during the research, disabled people's identity may be connected to that of others and strengthened through non-governmental organisations. While a person with a disability does not fit into other spaces, members of NGOs populated by people with the same fate are more cooperative. It is worth adding that persons with disabilities do not always have an experience of what a social environment is or what a community is. This only strengthens the existential desire to belong to a group. According to Vanier (2006), it is important for a person to acquire an identity in life and to belong to a group which reinforces values and security. Without a sense of self, a human being only exists. Within such NGOs, defensive walls exist behind which persons with disabilities can find and consolidate their identity (ibid. p. 38).

As can be seen from the data that make up the categories, one of the matters most valued by the research participants that gives the NGO significance (through the existential desire to belong to a group) is connectedness *with* another person. Research participants identified communication as part of the inseparable sense

of connectedness with NGOs and people perhaps the most comprehensively. Communication is seen as an integral part of social connectedness with another person (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Connectedness with another person*

| Category | Subcategory |
|---|--|
| Connectedness with another person | Communication, connection with a person |
| | The meaning of overcoming loneliness |
| | The importance of sharing life experiences with each other |
| | The meaning of human connection and kindness |
| | Not being closed in at home |
| | Gathering and concentration |
| | Relationship with people |
| | The desire to be among people in the community |
| | NGOs as a family |
| | NGO as the whole of life |

Source: Author's compilation.

The statements of the research participants revealed that loneliness is present in the daily lives of disabled people. For people with disabilities, loneliness is one of the forms of social isolation which leads to negative experiences arising from the limits placed on social relations and the disability itself, or simply living alone, which also affects one's psychological state and isolation. The participants stated that a person with disabilities is a lonely person, but NGOs give meaning and help overcome loneliness:

Since I am alone...I have no family, and it means a lot to me. Company means a lot to me. (Interview 4)

And I feel like, well, I'm kind of alone, and I'm [also] disabled anyway. (Interview 16)

The results of the study agree with the statement of researchers (Chung et al. 2020) that when social networks are broken, individuals experience existential loneliness and feel isolated, "imprisoned," and useless (ibid.). It can be observed

that the members see the non-governmental organisation as a means of overcoming loneliness. This has a strong effect on feeling safe and understanding in an environment. Research participants see the content of connectedness with another person as sharing experiences with others, as each member brings their own life story to the NGO. This means that the individual sees up close what challenges other NGO members have to face and try to overcome in their lives. It can be assumed that members encourage each other to be more open, and life experiences become an instrument of empowerment for other NGO members. The information obtained during the interview shows that individuals are not only looking for deep connections with others but also nurturing the potential of goodness in a person and sustaining a sense of agency among themselves. A research participant said:

Humanity is number one in society. Only humanity, because if there wasn't that humanity in society [the organization/NGO], then what would it be, well, nothing? And there is a lot of kindness in people, well, really a lot, how to say, one must live a human life in society. (Interview 21)

Research participants reveal that it is important not to be closed in at home but to gather in non-governmental organisations. This means that gatherings lead to more relationships with other people. The research highlighted that relationships with other people are important for persons with disabilities because it is human nature to create new relationships with others. It should be mentioned that the fewer human relationships one has, the more one wants to establish a relationship with others. This only proves that the environment of close relatives is not enough for persons with disabilities; making new acquaintances with others in NGOs is also important. As one research participant put it, he wanted relationships with other people, not just family members:

In society, maybe meeting people in general means more to me because I want that relationship. You don't [shouldn't] communicate with your parents all the time, that's it, that's it. (Interview 20)

Based on the participants' opinions, it is possible to see the importance of communication. Relationships are important because the relationships of people affected by disabilities are often limited, and communication occurs only inside the family circle between close people. This means that a relationship with other people in the community is not created, so a person with a disability lacks a community. It is worth noting that this leads to the desire to be in a group of people, and persons with a disability may feel they lack the resource of humanity, even from their family and close people.

An interesting observation of research participants is that for the members, the NGO itself, as an organisation, is their whole life. This means that the NGO is a space where the daily life events of disabled people take place, so it is awarded special importance. A research participant, sharing her experience, noted:

Well, the society [the NGO] means a lot. As long as I could, before there was a pandemic, our society was our whole life. The society occupies the most important place in my life. (Interview 21)

It may be assumed that a member of an NGO spends a lot of time in the organisation and associates some part of their life only with the NGO. This only proves that there are few opportunities to participate in other spaces. NGOs open spaces where disabled people can confidently share their daily worries, successes or failures, and experiences, grow as people and especially feel a sense of togetherness. Based on the data obtained during the research, we agree with Vanier (2006) that communion opens the heart because one becomes sensitive to the other and feels closeness. Community involves a sense of trust when one can share with another and accept from them their innermost secrets (ibid. p. 43). Hence, communion involves a connection with another person and something that strengthens the connection, an experience of discovery that reveals oneself.

Another category identified in the research is related to connectedness through the need to help. This is a significant category that refers to disability support. In this regard, the qualitative research dataset highlighted the presence of strong support (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Connectedness through the need to help*

| Category | Subcategory |
|--|---|
| Connectedness through the need to help | The desire to help, give, and make life easier for other members of the NGO |
| | To give yourself to others |
| | The meaning of NGOs is aid-oriented |
| | A call from the head of the NGO to members |

Source: Author's compilation.

The study results show that NGOs are significant in providing assistance to people with disabilities, which is revealed through the need to give help; this reflects a desire to help others. This was revealed in one interview:

Somehow, you want to help them in some way and think about how you can help. Because the wish is that it would be somewhat, well, more convenient, easier for them somehow. When I [met] Ona [the head of the NGO], I also said that I don't need anything; I want to give something, whatever I can so that people can have more fun, maybe. (Interview 1)

The results show that the research participants give themselves to others. Dedication to others is not only about helping other members and feeling satisfied with one's work but also about developing sensitivity to others. It should be added that the members are responsible, which also affects the high-level provision of assistance. Research participants share their experiences:

Since I have tasted this bread, which had to be given to other people, as they say, I am satisfied today. (Interview 17)

This quote refers to when there is a desire to help make it easier for someone else. This proves the contribution that the members themselves make. Joining an NGO for this purpose reveals that one is not thinking about oneself and does not demand anything but believes that helping other members of the organisation would be of use – helping some members forget their problems. It is noticeable that the following research participant often turned to the head of the NGO for help, hoping for a quick response; on the other hand, it highlights that she trusts the NGO as an organisation because it is an essential aid provider. The research participant aptly stated:

And in fact, I very often turn to, for example, the chairman of our association and say, help me, man. And really, as much as they can, as much as is in their power, they really help. So that's it. (Interview 6)

From this perspective of NGO aid, the manifestation of humanity is important and essential. The data reveal that the strength of the NGO's connectedness with its members is linked to establishing contact by phone. It is worth mentioning that the NGO is interested and calls members up to see how they feel. This concern for members is perceived.

Another category identified during the research is related to the manifestation of receiving help (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Connectedness through the need to receive help*

| Category | Subcategory |
|--|---|
| Connectedness through the need to receive help | Moral support for seriously ill members |
| | Psychological help |
| | To be heard |
| | The meaning of understanding |
| | Advice received |
| | Emergency assistance |

Source: Author's compilation.

In the statements of the research participants, this connection was revealed through the need to receive help from NGOs. More prominent cases involving the difficult lives of the study participants related to their psychological experiences were also revealed. It was noted that an important aspect of NGO membership was the moral support for members with serious illnesses. One research participant aptly described it this way:

And then, when I got cancer [...] I got a lot of support from them, a lot. And somehow, well, I can't tell you how happy I was to have something to lean on. (Interview 19)

According to the results of the study, NGOs' active moral support greatly influences members with serious diseases because the latter feel supported, which alleviates the burden of the disease and helps the disabled members overcome it. The study results show that connectedness through accepting help is a form of psychological help. Psychological support is an important source of support that has a positive impact on disabled people in overcoming psychological problems. During the interview, research participants mentioned that disabled people were listened to and heard in NGOs. It may be considered that being listened to means being accepted and feeling part of the NGO. This means that disabled members have the opportunity to speak up and confidently reveal their problems. The research results agree with Vanier's (2020) thoughts that the meetings that take place give everyone the opportunity to speak and be heard and for a group of people to share their experiences; this opportunity connects disabled people in NGOs.

Well, [we are] satisfied because it is important for a member that he or she can come and talk at any time, express their problems and talk about all kinds of things, well... (Interview 17)

Based on the research results, hearing empowering words is of significant help to NGO members. Hence, it is revealing that NGO members feel understood. The following statements reflect the stories of the research participants:

Well, how to say, it means a lot, really means a lot. By the same understanding of organization, I mean the organization itself, the organisation understands me... (Interview 13)

It's just a pleasure to go there every day, go in, and you will always be understood, always comforted. (Interview 21)

The results we obtained show that the NGO is not only an understanding organisation but also an inspiring one, which leads to its members' more frequent participation. The advice they receive is also worth mentioning. The research highlighted that the need for help was especially important in the event of an accident. This means that members usually turn to NGOs in times of disaster, especially when they have nowhere else to turn.

Well, we had an accident. Our son died. We didn't have anywhere to turn to, so we turned to the Disabled People's Association. (Interview 9)

CONCLUSIONS

Using a qualitative research approach, disabled people's experiences of social connectedness in NGOs reveal how identity is strengthened through connectedness. The research highlighted that one of the main experiences of people with disabilities in terms of this connectedness and identity was not fitting into other spaces and rejection by society. Membership meant taking a step in the search for their own identity; persons with disabilities could realise themselves as individuals in this way. The research participants revealed that by doing this, they did not feel isolated, and participation was one of the ways of affirming that they existed.

Based on the qualitative study's results, it can be assumed that disabled people's experience in NGOs highlights the relevance of connection with other people.

Thus, communication emerged as the most important component of social connectedness. The research participants, emphasising their connection with other people, noted that NGOs were the main way to overcome loneliness. The research revealed that, through connection with another person, life experiences could be shared, thus creating a relationship of humanity within the NGOs.

The research results revealed a sense of connectedness through the need for help. The data showed that the desire to help and facilitate the lives of other NGO members led to understanding the problems of people with disabilities. It also revealed that the sense of connectedness through the need to give help involved a desire to give oneself to others.

An important aspect of the connectedness through the need to receive help involved moral support directed at members with serious illnesses because fulfilling their need for psychological help was an integral function of the NGOs.

DISCUSSION

Various studies show that after the restoration of Lithuania's independence, NGOs were created, and persons with disabilities themselves sought participation in society. People with disabilities wanted to seek more help, especially in the form of greater social inclusion. Not much was known about disabled people. People with disabilities were isolated and separated from 'normal' society and seen as non-standard people or people without perspectives. This limited participation of disabled people contributed to their strong feelings of loneliness. Other studies also confirm this. Burholt et al. (2017) note that this results from dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of social resources. Disability may increase a person's loneliness and decrease their well-being. This may be influenced by social norms and stereotypes or by temporary social comparison with a "previous" sense of self. The effect of loneliness mentioned by the authors leads to isolation at home, and persons with disabilities may have limited contact with others. Research by Cornwell and Waite (2009) confirms that social disconnectedness involves a lack of contact with other people, highlighted by factors such as a small social network, infrequent communication, and limited participation in social activities and groups. A lack of social resources such as friendship and support has the same effect. Socially excluded individuals have small social networks and rarely participate in social activities. Therefore, the departure of disabled people and their relatives from previous norms (such as being isolated in institutions or at home) was a significant step forward and involved a transition to more democratic forms of governance. This is also

confirmed by Holland's (2008) research on NGOs. The research revealed that the transition to democratic forms of government and civil society was an active breakthrough for disabled people in society. People with disabilities created and joined NGOs to emphasize that people should not be isolated (Holland 2008). It can be assumed that NGOs were the key to the breakthrough whereby people began to connect and maintain a sense of community with each other. Empirical studies show that NGOs are the foundation of civil society.

The present study focuses on revealing how disabled people see NGOs and what importance they award them. This study was distinguished by the use of qualitative research, which allows for a deeper understanding of the experience of social connectedness of disabled people in NGOs through the existential desire to belong to a group of people. In addition, data collection in Lithuania provides significant information about the wider context. The main conclusion of this study is that NGOs as a platform for social inclusion are the key to the experience of social connectedness of disabled people in everyday life. Taking into account the available data, it can be concluded that the participation of disabled people in the activities of NGOs enables them to become more active, and they see the important role of NGOs as receiving and giving help. It is worth noting that the question of how the interests of people with disabilities are represented shows that human rights are protected. Research must, therefore, be continuously developed to learn more about the experiences of people with disabilities. This may reveal factors such as the influence of NGOs on the representatives who shape social policy.

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