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Experiencing and Interpreting Disability (Studies) in the Post-Socialist Era

Hungarian scholars in international disability (studies) discourses

Introduction

Although the powerful slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us!" originates from Central-Eastern Europe (Charlton, 2000), most scholars in the area arrived significantly later in the international disability studies arena. Despite some exceptions (see Prof. Dr. György Könczei, n.d.), scholars first entered the international disability studies discourse around the beginning of the 2000s. Nowadays, numerous resources provide several reasons for the delay, for example, Petri & Hruskó (2024), Hoffmann & Flamich (2024), Mladenov & Petri (2019), and Hoffmann & Flamich (2015). This paper is not intended to be one of them. In this paper, rather than seeking further explanations, we highlight aspects and ideas that Hungarian scholars have contributed to the theories and practices of multifaceted disability studies.

This article features scholars who represented Hungary at the 13th ALTER conference, held at the University of Innsbruck from July 8 to 10, 2025. However, before getting acquainted with the scholars and their talks, we take a closer look at ALTER, its brief history, aims, and philosophy.

ALTER: What is it? Who are they?

ALTER, the European Society for Disability Research, is a scholarly network that promotes research on disability in the social sciences and humanities. It welcomes contributions from the scientific community across the globe" (ALTER Conference, 2025). The history of the community dates back to the human rights revolutions of the 1960s and '70s. The movements not only encouraged but also empowered people with disabilities to initiate and carry out activism in academia. Henri-Jacques Stiker, the acknowledged disability historian and co-founder of ALTER (European Journal of Disability Research), recalls how it all started:

"1. I do not start by defining Alter as a word, because the polysemy of this Latin term, deliberately chosen during free discussions in the period between 1987-1988 […]: it [the term] implied the connotation of other, otherness, alteration, handicap, infirmity, marginality, etcetera.

2. Were we a band of indecisive, unable to decide on a concept? Were we, in addition, a heterogeneous group of researchers who did not know what disciplines they belonged to? Indeed, next to Alter, we ended up putting 'International Association for the History of …'. The 'for' voluntarily left the door open to all those, whether sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, lawyers, or professionals, who thought they could not do without historical depth, without being historians. History was like a connective tissue, but it did not impose a discipline, as Michel Foucault had taught us to be way of" (Stiker, n.d.).

As the name ALTER implies, the devoted scientific community provokes critical thinking of disability, and instead of considering it a taboo engraved in most cultures, the international network seeks answers to extremely sensitive questions, such as

- Disability, an operator to question norms? ALTER Conference, 2021)
- Protection, autonomy, emancipation: a(n)(im)possible alliance? (ALTER Conference, 2023).

Consulting the ALTER website, we can see that the questions always focus on themes that are often considered sensitive or taboo topics even today. For example: normalcy (ALTER Conference, 2021) or "Inclusion, Participation, and Human Rights Disability Research (ALTER Conference, 2016)

Presentations by Hungarian researchers at previous ALTER conferences

As 'Nothing About Us Without Us' implies, the concept of disability is strongly connected to various factors of human nature, cultural contexts, knowledge, religion, philosophy, and human rights. Like it or not, we must admit that the human rights approach enjoys priority. In contrast, the others are often ignored or forgotten when disability-related issues, such as inclusion, come into the picture. Inclusion can be regarded as a one-word version of the slogan and therefore implies numerous questions. The fact was recognized by the organizers of the 2016 ALTER Conference, who chose the theme of inclusion and participation in the context of human rights. The theme resonated with two Hungarian scholars, Anikó Sándor and Péter Horváth, from the Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. Sándor and Horváth approached the theme from a rarely discussed, constantly relevant aspect: the adoption of children with disabilities in Hungary. The scholars introduced their mixed-method study where they aimed to reveal "the characteristics of the families that deliberately adopt children with disabilities [in order to] better recognize the needs of families, their pleasures and difficulties after the adoption [The outcomes of their study] can help to establish adequate supports in the everyday lives [of the families concerned]" (Sándor & Horváth, 2016, p. 95). The two scholars concluded that the "empirical evidence can also lead to a legislation reform, and more children with disabilities can live in families" (Sándor & Horváth, 2016, p. 95). This novel aspect could not only contribute to a better understanding of disabilities in legal, pedagogical, cultural, and social contexts, even in those cultures where disability is still a stigma, but also in countries where disability is considered a special way of perceiving the world.

Admittedly, since the disability human rights movements empowered disabled scholars, their activism has changed or transformed thinking and acting about disability all over the world. These changes can be both positive and negative; moreover, in most cases, they challenge societies of all kinds. The Janus-faced transformation explains why the 2025 ALTER conference reflected critically on these changes and challenges.

The 2025 ALTER Conference

Why "transformations"? What does the term "transformation" cover in theory, and what in practice in disability studies context? Since the "Nothing About Us Without Us" movement empowered various groups that felt segregated, the world has been exploring ways of transformation regarding the concepts and practices of inclusion and exclusion. That might be one of the reasons why the 2025 ALTER Conference focused on "Transformations" and invited scholars, activists, professionals, and people with lived experience to analyze the changing dynamics in disability rights and disability research. The "underpinning question [was] whether change in the various social, cultural, economic and political systems shaping the lives of persons with disabilities reduced inequalities or lead to more pessimistic conclusions about increasing exclusion and precarity including the research arena" (ALTER Conference, 2025). The relevant question again crossed over disciplines and addressed people interested in the fields of "policy and societal contexts of disability rights, activism and campaigning, culture, history and disability archives, disability knowledge and disability research, disability futures (ALTER Conference, 2025).

The keynote speakers explored transformations of disability from cultural, legal, and social perspectives. The cultural one aimed to highlight the various ways of perceiving the world and their significance to any individual, while the legal one aimed to guarantee the rights to perceive the world in different ways, live in it, and act within it. The social one aimed to address the benefits of various perspectives on the world while criticizing current practices. The triad of approaches aimed to form a holistic picture of disability and to empower those who feel lost in the transformation process.

Cordula Thym and Eva Egermann, professors at the University of Vienna, introduced C-TV, a film that uses satire to critique ableist and heteronormative dynamics in society. It depicts a fictional television station and its interviews with people with disabilities about their daily lives and their artistic and political work. The authors […] "portray a world in which participation, inclusion, agency and visibility are realized far more strongly than in our current world" (ALTER Conference, 2025).

The legal aspect of changes was highlighted in Justin J. W. Powell's keynote talk, Transformation(s)? Deinstitutionalization Dynamics in Disability Rights, Representations, and Research. Professor Powell from the University of Luxembourg examined the dynamics of change. He theorized "(de-)institutionalization dynamics in ideas, norms, and policies. Case studies of disability rights, representations of disability and accessibility [Professor Powell stated that] disability studies exemplify the complexities, paradoxes and potentials involved in (attempting to) transform societies to be more inclusive" (ALTER Conference, 2025).

The third keynote speaker, Katerina Kolarova from Charles University of Prague, focused on otherness and social attitudes towards "disability, mechanisms of exclusion, feminism and queer/LGBT identities" (ALTER Conference, 2025). The three keynote talks paint an overall picture of the changes and transformations that have happened so far in thinking about disabilities; however, they still failed to answer the questions of the Conference. The panels, however, offer some answers and alternatives to make societies as inclusive as possible.

To highlight the transdisciplinary nature of disability studies, the panels of the ALTER Conference 2025 in Innsbruck address a wide range of interrelated themes. Central attention is given to disability histories and memories, as well as the roles of policy and practice in education, employment, social services, and health care. Discussions explore identity, self-representation, and cultural narratives, while also engaging with pressing issues of accessibility, digital transformation, universal design, and inclusive pedagogies. Further focal points include the rights and lived experiences of persons with disabilities in contexts of migration, family, sexuality, and everyday life, as well as questions of empowerment, autonomy, and deinstitutionalization. Methodological and theoretical innovations are foregrounded, with attention to multi-perspective approaches, relational aspects of rights, and activist strategies for social change. Complementing the panels, workshops offer more focused explorations, including the history of disability rights movements in Austria, the representation of Nazi "euthanasia" in literature and film, participatory research and filmmaking, innovative uses of PhotoVoice, and ethical frameworks for co-constructing knowledge in Deaf and Disability Studies.

Taking a look at the list of topics, we can conclude that disability as a concept has constantly been transforming, and as lived experience changes every aspect of life from birth to death. Disability is universal and therefore moves far beyond the stereotypes most cultures have universally formed about it since disabled human beings first appeared on earth. Till disability-related stereotypes are with us, we cannot ignore them. Understanding and challenging them, however, can be a significant step towards inclusion.

Hungarian scholars at ALTER 2025

What can ALTER learn about Hungary's alternatives to transformation?

The 2025 ALTER Conference is expected to welcome several Hungarian scholars. That activism may be attributed to the fact that Innsbruck is closer to Hungary than Stockholm. However, supposedly, this is not the only reason. Another possibility is that the number of scholars interested in disability studies has been increasing since 2010, when Professor György Könczei, an acknowledged Fulbright scholar, established the Disability Studies Doctoral Workshop at the Institute for Disability and Social Participation, part of the Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education at ELTE.

Most of the Hungarian scholars presenting at the 2025 Conference are affiliated with the Workshop. The work of the scholarly community can be discovered in their approaches to disability (studies)-related issues. Their topics and talks unwielded, they approach disability (studies) from numerous aspects, and to a great extent, rely on "Nothing About Us Without Us".

Anikó Bernát, Gábor Petri, and Ágnes Turnpenny, through a survey, provocatively asked and answered the question whether "public attitudes support intellectual disability and autism rights and inclusion" (Bernát, Petri, and Turnpenny, 2025, n.p.).

The authors state that their purpose was to "explore social attitudes toward disabled people and their human rights." Within the scope of the study, Bernát, Petri, and Turnpenny analyze how social attitudes change toward specific groups of persons with disabilities.

The authors describe "promising" findings to some extent when they reveal that "the majority of respondents supported full inclusion of people with sensory or mobility limitations signalling a broad social consensus. [While] acceptance of autistic people and people with an intellectual disability was significantly lower for both adults and children." In general, attitudes towards children were less harmful than those towards adults. The authors point out that "respondents were less likely to approve certain rights of autistic people and people with an intellectual disability, including the right to vote, to marry, to raise children, to work in the open labour market and to go to school with others."

Negative attitudes can be rooted in past beliefs and depictions (Hoffmann & Flamich, 2015). Emese Berzsenyi & Laura Husvéth (2025) examined depictions of Down Syndrome and other disabilities in the Middle Ages. The researchers pose the question of whether angelic or sinful creatures are those with disabilities. Berzsenyi (2025) relates that "In the socialization of any community value selection serves as a powerful determinant of behaviour. In the Middle Ages the interplay between health, religiosity, economic factors and societal factors was far more intricate than it is today. Christian sensibilities reinterpreted the ancient Greek concept of kalokhagathia, linking visible beauty to virtue through religious devotion" (Berzsenyi & Husvéth, 2025; Berzsenyi, 2024).

Their research is based on disability history and content analysis to introduce how disability is represented in medieval iconography.

Emese Berzsenyi spoke about another interesting and relatively rarely discussed topic: Religious Interpretations of Disability. She introduced representations of disability in the Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The author pointed out that the term disability is much younger than the examined texts; therefore, her "study required careful contextualization in the alignment of relevant concepts." In her paper, she focuses on questions such as "How do the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an address disability and disabled individuals?" (Berzsenyi, 2025; Berzsenyi, 2020).

Staying with the historic aspect, an often-mystified theme, blindness came into focus.

Maria Flamich, the leader of the Legato Choir at the School for the Blind, moved beyond the metaphorical interpretations of blindness and stepped towards practical issues. She discussed the strong and everlasting connection between blindness and music. One of the reasons why the author chose the theme is to examine realities and mysteries behind the ancient stereotype according to which blind people are compensated with exceptional musical talent for the loss of their sight, and to what extent blind people's outstanding knowledge of and connection to sounds help them navigate successfully in the world. In her study, Flamich addresses the questions by examining the 200-year history of music education for people with visual impairments in Hungary. Due to blind people's special relationship with sounds and voices, Maria Flamich believes that music is one of the most inclusive ways for blind people to become responsible citizens.

In her presentation, "Sounds of Becoming: Two hundred years of teaching music to the blind in Hungary," Flamich relates past and present practices and proposes future perspectives. She aims to "initiate thinking over what role music education has been playing in becoming and belonging in blind people's lives" and to what extent music helps blind students to establish and accept their blind identity (Flamich, 2025, n. p.).

Her historical overview and the semi-structured interviews she conducted with blind choir members demonstrate the empowering role of playing music, even in cases where blind individuals lack exceptional musical talent. Her study suggests rethinking and reforming music education for students who are blind.

As the historic aspects illustrate, understanding disability requires knowledge about human differences. Historical, cultural, and political contexts, as well as the contexts of power, often shape the knowledge that determines the lives of people with disabilities.

Although the role of political power can be considered universal in shaping knowledge about disability, two Hungarian scholars examine its role in these transformations.

In his study Gábor Petri from the Central-European University introduced to the audience, he explores how disability rights movements advocate for human rights in changing and eroding democracies for Central and Eastern Europe" (Petri, 2025, n. p.). He refers to data collected in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Serbia. First, he describes disability movements in the four countries "with the data about their mobilisation resources and positions in policymaking. Second, a closer analysis examines the situation in Hungary, often regarded as a 'poster child' of illiberalism (Petri, 2025, n.p.). The author finds it of significant importance to underline that, according to the results of his study, 'the space of disability rights movements is shrinking in eroding democracies.' Opportunities to influence and monitor public policymaking have been diminishing where de-democratisation is stronger. Due to fear of representations, some disability movement actors employ self-censorship when talking publicly. […] De-democratisation affects disability movement organisations diversely, making it difficult for movement actors to form coalitions internally.

Or externally with other social or political movements. National disability movements can, and often become fractured" (Petri, 2025, n. p.) After reviewing human rights-related policies and practices regarding the advocacy of persons with disabilities in the recently democratizing countries of Central Europe, Hungary comes into focus from a rather unusual perspective.

Katalin Gyöngyösi's presentation highlights an often-neglected issue: the intersection of disability and homelessness in historical, cultural, and political contexts, spanning from the recent past to the present. To help understand the significance of knowledge shaped by the political context, the author finds it essential to provide background information. She points out that the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe has resulted in significant changes and challenges in disabled people's lives. "New institutions were put in place, legislation was brought in line with international standards, and EU support was used for development. Despite the progress achieved, fundamental challenges remain, including the lack of sufficient guarantees to exercise basic rights, a scarcity of inclusive educational and employment opportunities, low levels of accessibility, misalignment of user needs and social service supply, restricted legal decision-making capacity for many, and a lack of affordable housing (UN, 2020; Kozma, Petri and Bernát, 2020; Petri, Turnpenny and Bernát, 2023 cites Gyöngyösi, 2025, n. p.).

Out of the challenges listed above, the connection between disability and homelessness falls within the scope of Gyöngyösi's research. Observing the tendencies, policies the regime changes have brought, Gyöngyösi concludes that disabled persons have been overrepresented amongst homeless people since the regime collapsed. Gyöngyösi underlines an unexpected fact of her research:

"A rather surprising and finding is that a high number of homeless clients reported to have attended special education in childhood, and those with such education history are more likely to identify as Roma, and to have been raised in foster care" (Gyöngyösi, 2025, n. p.). Families and disabilities can be analysed from numerous aspects. In her study, Judit Gombás, for example, focuses on parenting with visual impairment. She examines social attitudes toward parents who are blind or visually impaired. Gombás highlights that although Article 23 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) states the right of individuals with disabilities to found a family and highlights the significance of providing them to all the necessary information so that they could make freely their own decision about parenting, blind and visually impaired parents all over the world experience "discrimination in pregnancy and child birth related health settings" (Frederick, 2015 cites Gombás, 2025, n. p.). The author even points out that most societies question their ability to give proper care for their children.

Gombás introduced the results of two different qualitative research projects. One study investigated the experiences of Hungarian Blind and visually impaired fathers in rearing their children, while the other focused on the viewpoints and practices of Hungarian mothers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the respondents' attitudes. In both research projects, the results reflected worries from the families of most respondents. Moreover, they reported that even medical staff questioned blind and visually impaired people's ability to be responsible and caring parents. Gombás (2025) pointed out that in one case, "a blind mother was suggested an abortion by her gynaecologist upon detection of the pregnancy."

The talks we have investigated so far, to a great extent, rely on inherited preconceptions. Most cultures, societies, and political regimes associate disability with extremities. Some still suggest that it is either the result of sinful behavior (see Berzsenyi & Husvéth, 2025) or the presence of angelic creatures with extra abilities (see Berzsenyi, 2025; Flamich, 2025). Due to the power human beings attribute to themselves, their reaction to extremes is to mystify the gifted ones and rule over, or disable, segregate, or marginalize the weak ones (see Petri, 2025). Those who are disabled or segregated tend to blame society's attitude for their disability.

Attitude is a key concept in disability-related transformations. Attitude, both individual and social, reflects the level of knowledge about the various abilities that people with disabilities possess.

Carmen Svastics, Sára Csillag, and Zsuzsanna Győri examined how digitalization influences the attitudes of disabled entrepreneurs towards both disabled and mainstream societies regarding opportunities for inclusion. The authors state "since they [disabled entrepreneurs] occupy a special place in the community of people with disabilities through their self-realization and the many benefits and resources (personal assistance, relational capital freedom) arising from their business, digitalization may mean not only difficulties but also greater flexibility and autonomy to them" (Pichault & McKeown, 2019 cites Svastics, Csillag & Győri, 2025).

The three scholars employed qualitative research to examine how digitalization has transformed businesses for individuals with disabilities. According to Svastics, Csillag, and Győri (2025), "the results revealed four distinct strategies […] [and concluded that] overall, entrepreneurs accept the digital imperative, see digital solutions as opportunities to bridge the so-called digital disability gap (Dobransky & Hargitai, 2016 cites Svastics, Csillag & Győri, 2025), at the same time believe that digital equality for people with disabilities […] has yet to be achieved" (Svastics, Csillag and Győri, 2025).

As all the talks suggest, the attitude towards people with disabilities is a key factor. It has been observed, examined, and depicted since the emergence of disability as a phenomenon on the planet. Admittedly, knowledge gained through dialogues may generate a positive attitude, without which inclusion is impossible. Generating special knowledge to affect attitude was the purpose of Maria Rita Hoffmann's talk: Concepts, Contents, Realities: What a course on inclusion teaches us about us.

The author aimed to provide an example of how disability-related narratives can contribute to inclusive teacher education, in general, and specifically to English as a foreign language (EFL) education.

Hofmann points out that inherited beliefs and prejudices, as they have been with us for thousands of years, influence our attitude towards disabled people. We need time to eliminate them. We need time to learn about our own abilities, disabilities, and prejudices. Cultural representations of disability prove a helpful mirror to be critical regarding prejudices, and to recognize skills and disabilities. The author goes even further and proposes cultural disability studies as an element of teacher education. Based on students' feedback, Hoffmann concludes that critical thinking about prejudices and special knowledge about disabilities promotes inclusion.

The course she described exemplifies the significant importance of lived-experience-based narratives in generating knowledge about disability and the experiences of persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

This paper describes what Hungarian scholars think of the theme of transformations. ALTER proposed to discuss at its 13th conference in Innsbruck this year. To understand the significance of the Hungarian contribution, Hoffmann, Flamich, Berzsenyi, and Gombás introduced ALTER: the international community of disability researchers. They provided a brief description of its history and highlighted the topics that the academic community addresses.

Over the years, the topics have addressed several sensitive issues, such as inclusion and participation. This year, the topic focused on transformations, and the question was whether change in the various social, cultural, economic, and political systems shaping the lives of persons with disabilities reduced inequalities or led to more pessimistic conclusions about increasing exclusion and precarity, including the research arena" (ALTER Conference, 2025).

In this paper, Hoffmann, Flamich, Berzsenyi, and Gombás situate both the topic and the question within the context of "Nothing About Us Without Us," due to its Eastern European origin. The once empowering has undergone a radical transformation since it was first recorded in 1993 (Charlton, 2000). These transformations were addressed, discussed, but never questioned at the Innsbruck conference.

Scholars from around the world presented a comprehensive picture of their disability culture. Hungary's past and present disability culture was also introduced from several viewpoints. The scholars talked about historical, political, legal, social, and cultural aspects. They even pointed out attempts disabled and non-disabled people make to understand better, interpret disability, and accept and respect the people who perceive or navigate the world differently. The holistic picture of the Hungarian disability culture is a direct, both theoretically and practically supported answer to the Conference's question. The delay that characterized Hungarian scholars' arrival at the international disability studies arena can no longer be discovered in their scholarly work. They bravely highlight points, such as the significance of attitude, to consider if the disabled community wants steps towards inclusion and belonging.We observed that the talks revealed the significance of attitude, which appears in each presentation of the conference, encompassing historical, political, legal, social, and, of course, cultural contexts. Thus, we Hungarians proposed ways to transform a negative attitude into a positive one.

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