

Adaptation Phenomena of Visually Impaired Disabilities in Social Relations at the Social Rehabilitation Unit in Malang, Indonesia

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Abstract - This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, involving various techniques, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, to explore the adaptation phenomena of visually impaired individuals at the Technical Service Unit (UPT) for Social Rehabilitation for the Visually Impaired in Malang, Indonesia. The research findings indicate that their self-adjustment involves complexities arising from differences in abilities and individual conditions. The dynamics of social relations within the UPT also play a significant role in shaping their experiences and quality of life. The research findings highlight the need for holistic and inclusive efforts to understand and address emerging issues so that visually impaired individuals can develop their full potential in a supportive social context. Practical implications of this research include recommendations to enhance services and support for visually impaired individuals, while promoting social inclusion for them. These concrete steps are expected to contribute positively to the welfare and social potential development of visually impaired individuals in Indonesia and other countries.

Keywords: disability, visually impaired, phenomenology, social relations, adaptation

I. Introduction

A. Background

Adaptation in social environments is a crucial process for every individual, especially for those facing challenges such as visually impaired disabilities. Adaptation plays a key role in enabling them to engage fully in daily life and build healthy social relationships. Visual disabilities, as one form of sensory disability, present unique adaptation challenges to the surrounding environment.

In the context of relevant international conventions, it is important to note that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasizes the importance of protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, including sensory disabilities such as visual impairments. This convention urges countries to ensure accessibility, inclusion, and equality for persons with disabilities in various aspects of life[25].

In Indonesia, Law Number 8 of 2016 concerning persons with disabilities also recognizes the need for protection and support for individuals with various types of disabilities, including visual impairments. Depending on the severity, visually impaired individuals can be classified as totally blind or having low vision[6]. Understanding these differences is crucial for designing appropriate approaches to provide the necessary support and access. This research looked into those two type of visual impairment, i.e., totally blind and low vision at the UPT in Malang, Indonesia.

Research focused on the adaptation of visually impaired individuals at the Technical Service Unit (UPT) for Social Rehabilitation for the Visually Impaired in Malang, Indonesia, is an important step in gaining deeper understanding of their experiences in adaptation. This UPT plays a crucial role in aiding the adaptation and social integration process for visually impaired individuals.

The Social Rehabilitation Unit for the Visually Impaired in Malang is responsible for implementing certain duties of the Department, specifically in social rehabilitation for clients aged 15 to 50 with visual disabilities, as well as administration and public services. There are a total of 100-110 individuals with visually impaired condition. To fulfill these responsibilities, the unit's functions include program planning, candidate selection, social rehabilitation and services, fulfilling basic needs, providing consultation services, preparing technical support for ongoing guidance and service contracts, facilitating cooperation in services and rehabilitation, technical execution of client repatriation or referrals for those capable of orientation and mobility, daily living activities, braille literacy, and life skills, administrative tasks, public services, monitoring, evaluation, reporting, and other tasks assigned by the Department Head. All these function of the UPT has not been fully implemented, due to limited resources and the existence of stigma at the community to those disable group of people, including the visually impaired individuals [38].

With a deeper understanding of the challenges they face, existing needs, and effective strategies, we can better support them in building independence and social inclusion.

1. *Problem Formulation*

Based on the background described above, the research addresses the adaptation phenomena of visually impaired individuals in social relations within the environment of the UPT for Social Rehabilitation for the Visually Impaired in Malang, the factors influencing their adaptation process, and the implications of these findings for improving their quality of life and social inclusion. Annually, about 110 individuals undergo rehabilitation at the UPT, but only 20-25 successfully complete the program. Several factors contribute to this low completion rate, including internal family problems such as lack of commitment, limited resources at the UPT, lack of confidence among the visually impaired individuals, and persistent community stigma towards visually impaired persons. These issues highlight the critical need for targeted interventions to enhance support systems, reduce stigma, and foster a more inclusive environment, thereby improving the overall quality of life and social inclusion for visually impaired individuals at the UPT.

2. *Research Objectives*

The objectives of this research are:

1. To explore the adaptation phenomena of visually impaired individuals in social relations at the Social Rehabilitation Unit in Malang and other places.
2. To identify the factors influencing the adaptation process phenomena in that environment.
3. To evaluate the implications of the research findings for efforts to improve the quality of life and social inclusion for visually impaired individuals at the UPT.

3. *Research Benefits*

This research is expected to provide the following benefits:

1. Theoretical contribution to understanding the adaptation phenomena of visually impaired individuals in the context of social relations.
2. Practical contribution to formulating policies and intervention programs that are more effective in supporting the independence and social inclusion of visually impaired individuals.
3. Valuable information for institutions and organizations involved in the service and advocacy for visually impaired individuals, in Indonesia and other areas.

II. Theoretical Framework

1. *Social Stigma Theory*

The theory of social stigma, developed by sociologist Erving Goffman in his famous book titled "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity," is a conceptualization that depicts how individuals or certain groups can be negatively labeled by society due to attributes or characteristics considered different or abnormal. Social stigma can form based on various factors, including physical conditions, social circumstances, or personal identities such as disabilities. Goffman suggests that social stigma is not only formed by the attributes possessed by individuals but also by the social interactions that occur between individuals with those attributes and others in society as a whole[14].

In the context of this research, the theory of social stigma can be directed to understand how societal perceptions and attitudes toward visually impaired individuals at the Social Rehabilitation Unit for the Visually Impaired in Malang affect their adaptation process in social relations. The main propositions that can be utilized in this research are:

1. Visually impaired individuals are perceived as a vulnerable group [15] to social stigma. This proposition directs the research to understand how visually impaired individuals experience social stigma in their daily interactions within the environment of the Social Rehabilitation Unit for the Visually Impaired in Malang.
2. Social stigma affects the adaptation process of visually impaired individuals in social relations[23]. This proposition directs the research to explore how the social stigma experienced by visually impaired individuals influences their interactions with staff and fellow residents of the unit and how it affects the quality of their social relations.
3. Social support can reduce the impact of social stigma [21] on visually impaired individuals. This proposition directs the research to evaluate the extent to which social support received by visually impaired individuals at the Social Rehabilitation Unit for the Visually Impaired in Malang can help them overcome social stigma and enhance their adaptation process in the social environment.

In addition to Erving Goffman, several other figures have also advocated, critiqued, or developed the theory of social stigma introduced by Goffman. One of them is Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and historian. Foucault developed his own perspective on social stigma through the concept of "power/knowledge." According to Foucault, social stigma is not only formed through social interactions but is also influenced by power structures within society. Foucault highlights how knowledge and power collaborate to create social norms and construct individuals as "other" or "abnormal" based on certain attributes or characteristics. Thus, Foucault makes an important contribution to understanding the relationship between social stigma, knowledge, and power in society[17].

Apart from Foucault, many other figures have also developed understandings of social stigma from various perspectives. For example, sociologists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Douglas Massey, as well as psychologists such as Claude Steele and Carol Tavris [17]. Each of these figures brings their unique contributions to understanding the complexity and impact of social stigma in various contexts, both at the individual and structural levels within society. Thus, understanding of social stigma becomes increasingly rich and complex with the diverse contributions of these figures.

2. Challenges of Disability Adaptation

Based on etymology, the term "visually impaired" comes from the word "visually" meaning damaged, and "impaired" meaning sight, thus literally referring to someone who experiences damage to their vision. Visually impaired individuals can be divided into two main categories, namely totally blind and low vision. Total blindness is a condition in which a person is completely unable to perceive light stimuli from the outside, while low vision indicates that an individual is still able to perceive light stimuli from the outside, albeit with limitations. In the context of social theory, understanding this classification of visual impairment provides a foundation for understanding the complexity of individual adaptation experiences in social relations.

Visually impaired individuals face various challenges in adapting to their environment, involving physical, social, and psychological aspects. These factors have significant implications in social theories related to adaptation and social inclusion. For example, limited physical accessibility, such as the unavailability of good sidewalks, can be analyzed through the lens of human ecology theory, which highlights the complex relationship between individuals and their physical environment. The misunderstanding from those around them regarding the needs and experiences of visually impaired individuals can be explained through symbolic interactionism theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in shaping meanings and social constructions of disability.

Meanwhile, stigma and discrimination against disabilities from society reflect the concept of social stigma developed by Erving Goffman. Social stigma can affect the adaptation process and social integration of visually impaired individuals by hindering positive interactions and resulting in damaged or stigmatized identities. The level of education and societal awareness of the needs and rights of disabilities, as well as complex health condition disruptions, can be analyzed through the lenses of social inclusion theory and social involvement theory, which highlight the importance of individual's active participation in various aspects of social life and creating supportive environments for all individuals, including those with disabilities.

3. Previous Research on Disability Adaptation

There have been several previous studies both in Indonesia and other countries that have examined disability adaptation within families and social environments. For example, research by [37] in Indonesia explored the experiences of families in facing and managing a child's disability at home. This research highlights the role of the family as the primary agent in supporting the adaptation of children with disabilities in the home environment. Findings indicate that social support and family understanding of the needs of children with disabilities are crucial in facilitating their adaptation process.

In other countries, research by [35] discusses the adaptation of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in Australia. This research highlights the importance of inclusive school environments and support from teachers and peers in helping children with disabilities adapt to mainstream educational environments. The findings of this research show that supportive social environments in schools have a positive impact on the adaptation process of children with disabilities.

Additionally, research in developed countries such as the United States and Europe has also examined various aspects of disability adaptation within families and social environments. The results of these studies provide valuable insights into factors influencing disability adaptation, effective strategies in supporting the adaptation process, and policy implications in creating inclusive environments for individuals with disabilities. By referring to these previous studies, research on the adaptation of visually impaired disabilities in the environment of the Social Rehabilitation Unit for the Visually Impaired in Malang, Indonesia, can enrich the understanding of the dynamics of disability adaptation in different social contexts.

4. Phenomenological Study in Social Sciences

In the context of researching the adaptation of visually impaired individuals at the Malang Blind Social Rehabilitation Center, Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach offers valuable insights into the experiences and social interactions of visually impaired individuals. According to Supraja and Akbar [29], Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the construction of meaning beyond the mainstream flow of experiences. Thus, this approach can

assist researchers in understanding how visually impaired individuals navigate the complexities of adapting within the rehabilitation center. By comprehending their subjective experiences and meanings, researchers can identify the "typification" mechanisms used by visually impaired individuals to construct practical understandings and knowledge about their surroundings [29].

This process of typification also creates what Schutz refers to as a "stock of knowledge" that has practical utility in their adaptation process. With a structured collection of practical knowledge, visually impaired individuals can more easily confront and navigate various challenges in their daily lives, including interacting within the social environment of the Malang Blind Social Rehabilitation Center. Additionally, understanding the construction of meaning and practical knowledge enables visually impaired individuals to develop more effective adaptation strategies according to their needs and contexts. Thus, Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of adaptation among visually impaired individuals in social relations at the rehabilitation center [29].

There are several references from previous studies that have used the phenomenological method in similar research, both in Indonesia, Asia, and other countries. One example is the research conducted by [36] in Indonesia, which used a phenomenological approach to understand the adaptation experiences of physically disabled individuals in their daily activities. This research delved deeply into how physically disabled individuals experience and overcome challenges in adapting to their surroundings.

In Asia, a study by [34] in South Korea also used a phenomenological approach to explore the life experiences of intellectually disabled individuals. The study aimed to understand how intellectually disabled individuals form identities and overcome social stigma in their daily lives.

From other countries, research by [33] in the United States is another example of using the phenomenological method to understand the adaptation experiences of individuals with disabilities. This research highlights the important role of individuals' subjective experiences in forming a deep understanding of the challenges and adaptation strategies.

The advantage of the phenomenological method in studying disability adaptation lies in its ability to explore the subjective experiences of individuals in depth and within context. This method allows researchers to understand the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences and how these meanings shape their adaptation to their environment.

However, there are some limitations to consider in using the phenomenological method. One of them is the inherent subjectivity in the data analysis process. Because it focuses on individuals' subjective experiences, researchers' interpretations may be influenced by their own perspectives and personal experiences. Additionally, the phenomenological method tends to require more time and resources because it involves in-depth data collection and complex analysis. Moreover, using this method may not be suitable for research aimed at generalizing findings or for cases where individuals' experiences cannot be accessed directly, such as in the case of visually impaired individuals who rely on their sense of sight.

III. Methodology

The research method employed in this study is qualitative research with a descriptive type. According to Sugiyono [28], qualitative research is a method used to scientifically examine the conditions of objects, where the researcher serves as the key instrument in collecting and analyzing data. The qualitative approach allows researchers to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, as it emphasizes meaning and context rather than attempting to make broad generalizations. In qualitative method, data collection techniques are inductive, meaning researchers collect data directly from the research subjects and analyze it to discover emerging patterns or themes.

The location of this research is at the Technical Implementation Unit of Social Rehabilitation for the Visually Impaired in Malang, which is part of the East Java Provincial Social Service. The selection of the research location is based on suitability with the research objectives, which is to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of adaptation of visually impaired individuals in social relations within the environment of the Technical Implementation Unit. By conducting research at this location, researchers can directly interact with participants and gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives.

The data collection process in this research involves various techniques, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation is conducted to directly observe the interactions and activities of visually impaired individuals in the environment of the Technical Implementation Unit. In-depth interviews are conducted to gain deeper understanding of their experiences, perceptions, and adaptation strategies. Document analysis is also conducted to obtain additional information related to policies, programs, or records related to visually impaired individuals at the Technical Implementation Unit.

Furthermore, data analysis in this research is done thematically, where collected data is analyzed to identify patterns or themes that emerge. This analysis process involves data coding, categorization, and the development of main themes that reflect the adaptation experiences of visually impaired individuals in social relations at the Social Rehabilitation Unit for the Visually Impaired in Malang. By using qualitative research method with a descriptive approach, it is expected that this research can provide deep and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under study and make a meaningful contribution to the development of policies and more effective intervention practices for visually impaired individuals.

IV. DISCUSSION

1. Adaptation (Self-Adjustment)

Adaptation is a process involving mental and behavioral responses of individuals to achieve harmony and alignment between themselves and their environment [4]. In the context of visually impaired individuals (both for those who are totally blind and those with low vision), adaptation becomes a crucial key in facing various challenges encountered in daily life. This process enables individuals to navigate their surroundings, maintain independence, and build meaningful relationships. Self-adjustment is an integral part of the adaptation process, where individuals modify themselves according to the environmental conditions, ensuring they can function effectively despite their impairments. Fromm and Gilmore (as cited in [12]) underline four main aspects of healthy self-adjustment for individuals with disabilities. One of these aspects is the ability to actively participate in social communities, which involves engaging with others, forming connections, and contributing to communal activities. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of demonstrating tolerance, which entails accepting differences and managing frustrations, and possessing adequate emotional and intellectual maturity, which includes maintaining emotional stability and using cognitive skills to solve problems and make decisions effectively.

From the excerpts of news provided by the Malang Blind Social Rehabilitation Center (UPT RSBN Malang), testimonials from several beneficiaries of visually impaired sensory disabilities depict their adaptation abilities in facing the social environment¹. Suliadi, one of the beneficiaries, mentioned that with the existence of Braille libraries, they can easily expand their knowledge. He can read and learn new knowledge and increase his information horizon. This demonstrates how they can adapt to their learning environment through the use of technology that suits their needs. Additionally, testimonials from other beneficiaries, M. Rozy and Xena Firyatullah Hayurra, show strong social adaptation abilities of visually impaired individuals. Through participation in activities such as World Braille Day commemorations and financial management workshops, they not only develop new skills [8] but also demonstrate willingness and capability to actively participate [13] in their socio-cultural and economic lives.

"From now on, I already have a savings account, and the income from massage workshops can be saved for my own business capital later" (Xena Firyatullah Hayurra, 2024)

"With this service, my friends and I can easily expand our knowledge!"

The testimonials from visually impaired sensory disability beneficiaries provide a strong illustration of their social adaptation abilities. They not only manage to overcome challenges encountered in daily life but also actively participate in various activities that enable them to grow and reach their full potential. This affirms that with proper support from the surrounding environment and willingness to adapt, visually impaired individuals can create meaningful and productive lives in society.

When associated with Goffman's theory, the concept of stigma sees an attribute leading to social discrimination and negative judgments against individuals or specific groups. For individuals with disabilities, social stigma can be a significant barrier in their adaptation process with the social environment. Goffman emphasizes that individuals with stigmatized attributes (found in cases of individuals with disabilities) often face pressure to hide or manage these attributes to be accepted in society. The adaptation process for individuals with disabilities can be an effort to overcome this stigma by acquiring social skills and coping strategies that enable them to interact with the social environment more effectively. For example, in the aforementioned testimonials, visually impaired individuals take concrete steps to develop new skills such as learning Braille or managing finances, which are adaptation efforts to enhance their independence and social integration. While Goffman does not specifically discuss the adaptation process of individuals with disabilities in his work, the concept of stigma and his interactional theory provide a strong foundation for understanding how social stigma can affect the experiences and adaptation processes of individuals with disabilities in daily life.

Using Alfred Schutz's phenomenological thinking [3], the testimonials from visually impaired disability beneficiaries at UPT RSBN Malang demonstrate how they experience the social adaptation process in their daily lives. In Schutz's view [29], individuals like Suliadi, M. Rozy, and Xena Firyatullah Hayurra give meaning to their experiences in facing environmental challenges and how they adapt to achieve balance between themselves and their social environment. The beneficiaries express how technologies like Braille libraries help them gain knowledge, and how participation in various activities such as financial management workshops helps them develop skills and create new opportunities. Schutz would emphasize the importance of understanding how individual-subjects (such as Xena Firyatullah Hayurra and Suliadi) interpret and give meaning to their experiences [16] of adaptation in the social environment. This phenomenon, and the ability for the visually impaired persons to adapt in gaining more information will define on how they adjust their social-cultural life.

¹ Utilize Public Facilities, East Java Provincial Government - UPT RSBN Malang Visits Braille Corner at Malang City Library. Published on February 2, 2024 <https://dinsos.jatimprov.go.id/web/public/berita/13194/show>
Commemorating Braille Day, PM Distra East Java Provincial Government - UPT RSBN Malang Dinsos East Java Actively Participates in BTB Class. Published on January 8, 2024. <https://dinsos.jatimprov.go.id/web/public/berita/12626/show>

2. *Adjustment of Visually Impaired Individuals*

Simanjuntak [24] states that visually impaired individuals interact with the outside world using symbols that have been given meaning. Symbols agreed upon with other visually impaired individuals, such as Braille letters, reglets, styluses, long canes, talking books, and screen readers. Each visually impaired individual first responds to all the symbols that have been given meaning resulting from interaction, then visually impaired individuals can assess themselves based on their inner world and self-assessment through relationships and social activities. In this regard, social interaction depends on how the environment interacts with them.

A visually impaired child, when asked about the freedom given in the UPT, responded: "My parents and the staff at the UPT give me the freedom to choose my life goals and my social interactions. Sometimes my parents provide facilities for me to socialize with peers, and the most important thing from my parents is that they often motivate me. So, there is no reason for me to give up...". From this answer, it is apparent that as a person with a disability, what is most needed is facilities, both personally owned and publicly provided by the government or related institutions, to perform an action. Motivation from close people can also foster strength and spirit in a person with a disability [18].

In the context of this statement, it is evident that this disabled individual experiences positive support from their environment. However, stigma may still exist in society towards people with disabilities [11], although not directly mentioned in the statement. Goffman mentions that individuals with disabilities are often regarded as "the discredited" (who have stigmatized attributes) or "the discreditable" (who may conceal their stigmatized attributes) [9]. In this case, parents and UPT staff provide support to overcome this stigma by granting freedom and motivation [19] to the disabled individual.

When asked about their response to new people, the answer is: "When adjusting to new people, there is usually confusion because I don't know them well or vice versa. Sometimes when confused, I wonder what this person is like? But once I get to know them, it's just fun, laughing, teasing, even some confide in me. Then, I am someone who pretends to know someone well, so usually when there are new people, I just chat with them, just go with the flow...". From this, it can be concluded that intellectual, social, emotional maturity, and personal responsibility need to be possessed by people with disabilities, so they can easily adapt [18].

This second statement can be analyzed using Goffman's stigma concept. Although there may be initial uncertainty when meeting new people, the individual then demonstrates the ability to interact socially and overcome any stigma that may exist. Goffman shows that individuals with disabilities can use social strategies to overcome stigma [11], such as choosing to disclose or conceal their disabilities [7], and striving to build positive relationships with others [20].

Using Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach [3], a visually impaired child expresses their positive experience of the support provided by parents and staff at the UPT, including the freedom to choose their life goals and the motivation given. Schutz always emphasizes the importance of understanding how disabled individuals give meaning to their experiences in receiving positive support and motivation from their surrounding environment. Furthermore, the statement also highlights how disabled individuals cope with confusion and adjustment to new people in their environment. Schutz also emphasizes how these individual-subjects construct their social relationships, face uncertainty, and adapt in ways they find suitable in interacting with new people [16]. This shows how intellectual, social, emotional, and personal responsibility of disabled individuals play a crucial role in their social adaptation process.

3. *Attitudes of Society Towards Visually Impaired Disabilities*

The government, as policymakers, need to pay more attention to formulating policies to protect the rights of visually impaired individuals, building facilities, providing job opportunities, and fostering public perception that visually impaired individuals, like any other humans, deserve fair treatment. Moreover, discriminatory actions towards visually impaired individuals should be avoided as they result in injustice and suffering. Therefore, it is advisable to understand how we should behave towards visually impaired individuals, including [18]:

- a. Building awareness that visually impaired individuals are ordinary humans like normal individuals, but due to certain circumstances (genetic or accident-related), their situation is less fortunate than normal humans.
- b. Cultivating patience and tolerance in interacting with visually impaired individuals.
- c. Building enthusiasm and giving praise to visually impaired individuals. This is to motivate visually impaired individuals to continue doing their best in positive activities.
- d. Treating visually impaired individuals fairly can foster self-confidence.
- e. Maintaining a positive attitude and providing guidance and direction to visually impaired individuals to engage in positive activities.

In other countries, the handling of visually impaired individuals is done systematically and professionally by government-supported institutions. In the United States, the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) and the National Federation of the Blind

(NFB) are the two main organizations focusing on the handling and advocacy of blind individuals ([32] and [2]). AFB provides educational resources, job training, advocacy, and information for blind individuals, while NFB focuses on empowerment and advocacy [22]. In Europe, the European Blind Union (EBU) and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) in the UK are important actors in improving the quality of life and rights of blind individuals [10]. In Asia, the Japan Federation of the Blind (JFB) in Japan [30] and the Indonesian Association of Visually Impaired People (PERTUNI) in Indonesia [5] are active in providing education, job training, social support, and advocacy. Through these programs, visually impaired individuals are expected to gain better accessibility, education, and social support and advocacy for their rights.

V. Conclusions

The conclusion drawn from the summary is that adaptation and self-adjustment are crucial aspects of the lives of visually impaired individuals. In facing daily challenges, the ability to adapt is key to achieving harmony with the surrounding environment. Through active participation in social communities, tolerance, and the development of emotional and intellectual skills, visually impaired individuals can overcome social stigma and gain the necessary support from their environment. Testimonials from beneficiaries of programs for visually impaired individuals also demonstrate their strong social adaptation skills, enabling them to participate in various activities and achieve their full potential. Furthermore, the importance of the government's role in protecting the rights of visually impaired individuals, building facilities, and raising awareness in society about the need for fair treatment is emphasized. Programs for handling visually impaired individuals in other countries, such as the United States, Europe, and Asia, show efforts that have been made to provide support and advocacy for visually impaired individuals, with the hope that they can have better accessibility, better education, and adequate social support and advocacy for a meaningful and productive life in society.

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