

Young inmates with *invisible* disabilities in the Hungarian correctional system. Preliminary results of a pilot research

I giovani detenuti con disabilità *invisibili* nel sistema penitenziario ungherese. I risultati preliminari di una ricerca pilota

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Abstract

In our study, we unveil the pioneering results of a pilot study of prisoners in Hungary, a significant step towards addressing the challenge of constructive life management. Our aim was to estimate the number of people in Hungarian correctional institutions and prisons affected by invisible disabilities, especially in reading, comprehension, and social skills, using the standardised Hungarian reading scale of I. Meixner, the Vannai reading comprehension survey, and the AQ questionnaire. We discovered that written language impairment was the most prevalent among the subjects studied, with no 100% results in the area of text comprehension even for the graduate completer. This motivates us to delve deeper into the investigation of working memory. Considering the pilot study's results, we are excited to announce our plan for a comprehensive national study in 2024-2025, which will significantly contribute to our understanding of this issue.

Keywords: constructive life skills; invisible disability; reading skills; reading comprehension; social competences.

Sintesi

Nel nostro studio, riportiamo i risultati di uno studio pilota sui detenuti in Ungheria, un passo importante per affrontare la sfida della gestione costruttiva della loro vita. L'obiettivo è stato quello di studiare il numero di persone detenute in Ungheria, che sono affette da disabilità invisibili, in particolare nella lettura, nella comprensione e nelle abilità sociali. Lo studio ha utilizzato la scala di lettura ungherese standardizzata di I. Meixner, l'indagine sulla comprensione della lettura di Vannai e il questionario AQ. Lo studio ha evidenziato che il disturbo del linguaggio scritto era maggiore, nella comprensione del testo nessuno. Nessuno, neanche i laureati, ha raggiunto il 100%. Alla luce dei risultati dello studio pilota, lo studio nazionale sarà completato nel periodo completo 2024-2025, nella convinzione che esso possa contribuire alla comprensione del fenomeno.

Parole chiave: abilità di vita costruttive; disabilità invisibile; competenze di lettura; comprensione; competenze sociali.

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1. Introduction

Progressive and constructive life management, or *constructive life management*, is critical to citizens becoming valuable members of society. However, we are talking about a fragile system, and it is very often the case that people fail to steer their lives in the right direction, that they can run aground, that the process can stall, and that as a consequence, they can become criminals by committing crimes. From Kopp and Skrabski's (2008) research, we know that the mental health of Hungarians leaves something to be desired, and they identified insecurity as one of the leading causes, which does not make the situation any easier (Kopp & Skrabski, 2008). The situation is further complicated by the increasing prevalence of learning disabilities, which cause problems in the lives and studies of many children, what we call in our research *invisible* disabilities. This is reflected in the European Commission's 2021 strategy on the rights of people with disabilities, which sets out priorities for people with disabilities for 2021-2030 (European Commission, 2021).

The strategy takes into account that disability differences are often the result of an invisible, long-term, physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory disability interacting with environmental barriers and that the persons concerned are in a difficult socio-economic situation and are vulnerable, particularly in the case of juveniles and adults in prison for criminal offenses.

We are curious to know how many people in Hungarian correctional institutions and prisons are affected by invisible disabilities, especially reading skills, reading comprehension, and social skills, and we plan to carry out an extensive study to investigate this. In this study, we present the results of a pilot research project in a prison in Budapest, Hungary, which investigated prisoners' skills, abilities, and competencies.

2. Statement of the research problem

The concept of constructive life management is used as an alpha and omega of deviance-free, law-abiding behaviour in behavioural science. It is often mentioned in various lectures on police science despite the fact that it is almost impossible to define. Bábosik considers the development of constructive life management to be one of the most important educational goals of the school. By constructive life management, he means a way of life that is socially valuable, individually productive, and one of the most essential human values (Bábosik, 2003). In this spirit, Bábosik focuses on the transmission of values in schools, which includes intellectual, physical and social work, value-creating behaviour, charity, discipline, intellectual activity, aesthetic behaviour and activities, and healthy lifestyle activities, i.e. the whole system of values necessary for constructive leadership (Bábosik, 2003).

The most straightforward way to describe progressive-constructive life management in practice is through equations of motion, but we do not want to bore the reader with intermediate-level mathematics, so we'll use an example instead: imagine the life path as a flowing river. We are in a boat and moving with the current at the same speed in the direction of the river. But this river is very winding, and these windings are nothing other than the difficulties of life, the stress, the traumas and tragedies we have experienced. According to the laws of nature, when the boat of our life is floating with the current at the same speed, it becomes out of control. Sooner or later, we will drift ashore, hit a rock, and break up. In this example, the shore and the rocks represent deviance, imprisonment, and/or premature death. How can we avoid being swept away? This is where constructivism comes

in: if we paddle faster or slower than the river's speed, we can control our boat with an oar. But this requires a wide range of skills. We need to know ourselves, our immediate social environment, and our needs. In Hungary, we do not seem to be very good at steering the boat of our lives, even though we are considered a *great power* in kayak canoeing. We are among the world's *leaders* in alcoholism, suicide, and other addictions (Rihmer et al., 2022; Statista, 2024). Hungarians are depressed people, with many *griefeaters* and highs in legal drug use (Kopp & Skrabski, 2008). The prison population is around 18.000, a significant increase from 13-15.000 twenty to thirty years ago (World Prison Brief, 2024). Clearly, these tragic figures cannot, and should not, be explained by the self-imposed definition of a discipline. Although the definitions of Durkheim's and Merton's theories of anomie are broadly appropriate to the world of deviance (Merton, 1938), the Hungarian situation is quite specific when examined more closely and, therefore, requires a *holistic* approach.

On 28 September, Endre Németh, a population genetic mathematician, wrote in Válasz Online that the traditional East-West territorial division of suicide should be changed to North-South (Németh, 2023). In his article, he points out that Hungary and the Balkans are typical places where fear of insecurity is genetically encoded in people as a result of the horrors they have experienced in the past centuries.

Hungary is a gateway to Western Europe, and practically since the Tatar invasion, our lowland areas – where the Hungarian-speaking population was in the majority – have been continuously exposed to murder, deportation, and kidnapping for centuries. In some areas, 95% of the population was exterminated. Németh draws parallels between Hungarians and the consequences of centuries of persecution of Native Americans on the American plains, saying that the descendants of the few surviving indigenous populations suffer from similar rates of deviance – suicide, alcoholism, crime – as Hungarians (Németh, 2023). Insecurity, lack of material security and esteem, specifically the foundations of the pyramid of needs described by Maslow (1954), are rattling in these areas and contribute to the high levels of deviance. This description is mainly in line with the exploratory research conducted by Mária Kopp and Árpád Skrabski in 1988, 1995, 2002, and 2006, published in 2008 under the title *Hungarian State of Mind 2008* (Kopp & Skrabski, 2008). In Kopp and Skrabski's findings, the leading cause of Hungarians' extreme individualism and pessimism is insecurity (Kopp & Skrabski, 2008). Endre Németh suggests that this may have biological and genetic causes in addition to socio-cultural ones (Németh, 2023).

As far as socio-cultural causes are concerned, we believe that Németh's position is confirmed by one of the fathers of modern sociology: in his seminal work *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, Max Weber (1905) explains that the economic development of European states is driven by their moral condition, which has been determined over the centuries by their religious affiliation. In short, and to put it simply, where the Catholic faith – where the priests sell indulgences for money and absolve ones of any sins after confession – is the dominant religion, the economy performs less well. The deviance rate is higher than in Protestant countries, where the basic assumption is that God can judge our actions after we die and hard-working, virtuous people are dear to Him. So, to the existing theories of education, sociology, psychology, biology, socio-cultural life management, and deviance, we have added a *macro-economic* approach, reinforcing the view that there is no point in arguing about which of these theories is the only real explanation.

Na sag schon - what then? We cannot change our past, our genetics and external factors want to keep us in a state of uncertainty so that we are more in control. Our opinion and hypothesis is that the only solution is to develop a *multitude of educated people*, young

people. However, there is a *small* problem with this, too.

According to the Office for National Statistics, one in three primary school children has some learning disability (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2024a). This could be delayed speech development, specific language disorder, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), autism spectrum disorder, and so on. To summarise, we call these ‘invisible’ disabilities in our research. These children need much work to become *normal* adults. However, it is not hopeless, and because of the human brain’s plasticity, they can even use these handicaps to their advantage. Many famous artists and scientists have struggled with various learning disabilities, and many improvements have not only compensated but ‘overcompensated’ for their deficits.

Nevertheless, if we fail to deal with this situation, we have to accept that a child with ADHD will grow up to be an ADHD adult and, thus, a prisoner in prison. The feeling of insecurity needs to be reduced in people through pedagogical and psychological methods, through the development of social skills so that future generations do not pass on our mistakes and *disabilities*. However, young people must be educated and developed from pre-school age to do this.

20-30 years ago, the prison population was about 5.000 lower than today (Büntetés-végrehajtás Országos Parancsnoksága, 2023; Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2024b). Political scientists would argue that this is also possible because the application of Hungarian criminal law has become much stricter, with longer sentences. It is also possible that this is a contributing factor. However, we would note here that the average sentence length in prison was 5.6 years in the 1990s (Hungarian Prison Service, 2020), compared to 1.8 years in Western Europe (UK Parliament, 2015).

We believe that a significant proportion of prisoners currently in prison were imprisoned because they did not receive the proper care, education, and development as children. The social factors, if they play a role in the crime, can be traced back to their insecurity, their inability to cope with problems, and their inability to manage their *ship of life*.

In order to get an idea of the number of people in Hungarian correctional institutions and prisons affected by invisible disabilities, especially the lack of reading skills, reading comprehension and social competences, a representative survey will be carried out. This survey, once tested and validated, has the potential to significantly improve our understanding of the characteristics of the target group and to map the population we wanted to study.

3. Presentation of the research

In the framework of our pilot research, on 9 August 2024, we tested the reading skills, reading comprehension, and social competence of nine prisoners in an institute of the Hungarian penitentiary system in Budapest (Központi Kivizsgáló és Módszertani Intézet = Central Institute of Examination and Methodology). The prisoners were male; three had a college degree, three had a vocational certificate, and three had completed primary school. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The age of the prisoners ranged from 20 to 54 years, typically serving sentences for sexual, drug, and property offenses.

Our study did not aim to diagnose any categories of learning disabilities. We did not conduct an assessment covering all learning sub-skills, an intelligence test, or map the subject’s history. Therefore, we cannot make a diagnosis either, as we do not have

information covering all segments. However, our aim is to explore what percentage of the prison population may be affected by inadequate levels of reading, comprehension, and social interaction that affect daily life and well-being.

In addition, we must recognize the tremendous development of digitalisation when formulating the research results. People between 45 and 50 years old, the “boomers”, can largely manage smart devices and use them in their daily lives. Attitudes to smart devices among the over 50s are less straightforward. Many of them are unfamiliar with modern technology and are cautious in their approach to the possibilities it offers. Younger people, aged 30-40, see it as part of their everyday life, and those aged 20-30 cannot live without it. However, do they know what they read, what they like, what they say no to and what they say yes to? A good level of reading and reading comprehension is a prerequisite for taking advantage of opportunities within prison, exercising their rights and lodging complaints. This will be further enhanced by the advent of digitalisation within prisons, where applications/complaints will be handled online.

Today, the educational landscape in Hungary is shaped by three main types of learning problems. These include learning difficulties, learning disabilities, and learning disorders, each with its own unique characteristics and challenges.

1. Learning difficulty. This category encompasses individuals who learn at a slower, less appropriate, or less efficient pace (Balogh, 2006). They are often classified as BTMN (struggling with adaptation, learning, and behavior). However, with the advent of digitalisation, new avenues for support and intervention are emerging. Tutoring and differentiation, when combined with digital tools, can offer innovative solutions to help these individuals catch up and thrive.
2. Learning disability: Learning disability include written language disorder, ADHD, autism, other psychological development disorders, specific language disorders, and children with special educational needs (SNI) who are developed by a special needs teacher (Gyarmathy, 2009). The deficits are in some areas of learning, with children underachieving in reading, writing, or mathematics, while in others, they are able to make progress at grade level. Children with special educational needs can be identified as early as pre-school age. Organic, neuropsychological causes are generally assumed to be of early origin.
3. Learning disability: Learning disability, which covers all areas of learning, results in a significant delay in learning ability (Mesterházi, 2006). It may be caused by a central nervous system injury or a persistent social environment slowing development. Children with learning disabilities are given SNI status, and their development falls within the competence of special education.

Our research used Ildikó Meixner’s reading sheet and Vannai’s text comprehension survey (Hargitai, 2010), the standardised assessment instruments used in Hungary. Social skills were measured with the AQ (Baron-Cohen, 2024a; 2024b) questionnaire.

Our main findings are the following:

1. as initially conceived, we wanted to assess the entire Hungarian prison population using a stratified, weighted sample. In the pilot, it turned out that this idea was wrong and unnecessary. The older cohort of prisoners who were enrolled before the regime change (1990) – as a result of the Prussian Hungarian education system and the work of an outstandingly good, old teaching staff – learned to read and write even if they had an otherwise *invisible* disability, regardless of whether they understood what they read and remembered it;

2. some parts of the Hungarian translation of the questionnaire measuring social skills were unintelligible to the detainees. This necessitated a careful process of rewording to ensure accurate understanding and response;
3. we found that two out of nine young adults with learning disabilities have written language disorders;
4. surprising results were obtained in the test of reading comprehension. The result was not 100% without errors despite the fact that three of the respondents were graduates (economist, engineer, teacher). This underscores the need for further steps in the direction of investigating working memory, a crucial aspect of our research;
5. the AQ test did not indicate a person concerned;
6. test-taking time was estimated at 15-20 min/person before the pilot study. In reality, 30-35 minutes per person. Seven, an interesting finding was that the longer the detainee was behind bars, the slower he or she solved the tasks.

4. Conclusion

Based on the pilot research, we have decided not to study the entire Hungarian prison population but the younger age group. The planned study will focus on the 12-30 age group in correctional institutions and prisons. Within this, we will produce a stratified weighted sample. We will put more emphasis on measuring working memory, so we will need to modify our reading instrument.

As we progress, we have identified the need for adjustments to our research plan. This includes an increase in the test duration and questionnaire length. Consequently, we have decided to reduce our planned sample size from 100 to 50, ensuring the quality and thoroughness of our study.

However, completing the research and processing and publishing the results is only the journey's beginning. Once the lessons have been learned, our aim is to produce educational material that can be used by both education and police and criminal justice professionals in their work.

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