

ACCESSIBILITY IN THE HUMAN LIBRARY ORGANIZATION



Roskilde University

Cecilia Marascalchi

Student number: 76647

Supervisor: Nina Torm

Spring semester 2024

Project-oriented internship

Executive Summary

The Human Library is a volunteer and non-for-profit Organization based in Copenhagen, whose purpose is to create spaces where vulnerable conversations can happen and prejudices can be dismantled. By adopting the concept of libraries, this Organization prompts a dialogue between the Readers, who are external participants, and Books, who are the people who volunteer to talk about their personal experience in regards to discrimination.

As an intern in the Human Library Organization, my job consisted in planning and delivering events, by collaborating with both companies and the volunteer community of Books, which allowed me to witness the internal diversity of the Organization.

There is limited research on the Organization, and most of it focuses on the impact of the Human Library experience on the Readers. Because of the access granted me by my position as an intern and researcher, I decided to focus on the Books' perspective instead, and investigate the inclusion of the Organization, in particular regarding the accessibility aspects of the events.

The theoretical framework, by guiding both the methodology and the analytical discussion, is of fundamental importance: while Critical Disability Theory focuses on the discourse around impairments and disabilities, Universal Design presents concrete guidelines that aim at making spaces inclusive. In fact, in order to uphold the chosen theories, the project focuses on access, which highlights the socially constructed barriers rather than individual impairments. In order to do so, the data analyzed in this project was gathered by distributing a survey centered on accessibility to Books, collecting their opinions on the experience. Therefore, much time was spent in ensuring that the data collection process was accessible and that it reflected the principles of the chosen theories.

The Analytical Discussion follows the structure of the survey, focusing on several areas of the Human Library events, namely communication, online events and in-person events. By using the framework provided by the chosen theories, the analysis highlights that the Human Library events can be considered Accessible, but that certain aspects can certainly be improved by implementing some recommendations. This project showcases how diverse organizations can be truly inclusive, ensuring that accessibility is granted for all.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Problem Area	3
2. Literature Review	5
2.1 Human Library	5
2.2 DEI and Disabilities in the workplace	7
3. Theoretical Framework	9
3.1 Critical Disability Theory	9
3.2 Universal Design	11
4. Methodological Framework	13
4.1 Ethical Considerations and Crip methodology	13
4.2 Survey Design, Sampling method and Accessibility of the Survey	14
4.3 Limitations and Positionality	16
5. Analytical discussion	18
5.1 Identity, intersectionality and communication	18
5.2 Online events	20
5.3 In-person events	21
5.4 Final remarks and future research	23
6. Conclusion	26
7. Bibliography	28

1. Introduction and Problem Area

The Human Library Organization (HLO) is a non for profit organization that aims at challenging prejudices and stereotypes, by creating spaces where open and vulnerable conversation can happen. By fostering open, honest and upfront conversations, the HLO hopes that participants can deconstruct their *pre*-judice, letting go of their preconceptions or learning something new, ultimately ‘unjudging’ the person they have in front of them (The Human Library Organization, n.d.).

The Human Library Organization (HLO) was first created in Denmark in 2000, by Ronni Abergel, under the slogan of “Stop the Violence” (Kwan, 2020), and started as a small local project, aimed at contrasting the violence that was growing in Copenhagen. In the last two decades, it expanded into the global network that has become today, with events in more than 80 countries and 500 plus volunteers. The events are held publicly or privately for corporations, non-profits, educational and medical institutions, and they typically consist of different rounds of 30 minutes conversations about different topics.

This organization adopts a unique approach to Diversity and Inclusion, by borrowing the terminology of libraries: in this instance, Books are the people who volunteer to talk about their personal lives and experiences with stigma, and the Readers are the participants who take part in the conversations. By transferring this analogy to people, it de facto creates a *Human* Library. During each conversation, Readers get to talk to a Book, which will first introduce their personal topic, and then be open to answer questions regarding their chosen *Title* of the day.

The success of the HLO is rooted in its Books community, which takes part in the Human Library events by talking about their personal life experience with stigma, discrimination or trauma. In order to organize the diversity internally, the HLO chose to identify fifteen different ‘Pillars’, which reflect different types of identities or discrimination that one could encounter in real life. Some of these include sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, neurodiversities, physical disability (p. 23, Appendix).

As an intern in the Human Library Corporate and Delivery Team, I have worked closely with companies and with the Books to plan and deliver events. During my time at the HLO, I have organized more than forty events online, and planned and delivered an event in Amsterdam

for fifty people. My role consisted in managing the relations with international clients, as well as organizing the events. When facilitating an event, whether it was in person or online, I was in constant contact with Books, which showed me the wide variety of things that need to be taken into account. It made me realize how ‘one size does *not* fit all’, and how important flexibility and communication are in order to better accommodate the needs of the Books. In particular, I worked with people who are neurodiverse, fat, physically disabled, suffer from PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) and trauma, which made me aware that what some people would consider accessible, might be an actual challenge for somebody else. Accessibility is something that should be crucial and central when dealing with a diverse community, leading me to the following Research Question:

To what extent are Human Library events accessible to Books and what can be done to improve such events?

Formulating this Research Question, I aim to analyze the accessibility of Human Library events, both online and in-person. In order to do this, I focus on the accessibility of every aspect of the events, collecting my data through a survey I asked the Books to fill in. I start from the communication needed to contact Books, and then move to the unfolding of both in-person and online events. I apply Critical Disability Theory and Universal Design to this research, and therefore adopt a critical intersectional feminist approach to the problem, highlighting individual characteristics and, consequently, the need of the Human Library Organization to accommodate individual needs of Books. Following Critical Disability Theory, I adopt the Social Model of Disability, whose main argument is that “people with impairments are disabled by society’s responses to impairment” (Boxall, 2019, p. 199), and not by nature. This model shifts the research focus on *access*, rather than individual needs, making the analysis of the environment crucial. As accessibility is the focus of the paper, much time has been spent ensuring that the way I collected data was accessible, which meant strongly bringing the chosen theoretical framework in the methodology. Accordingly, the survey followed Universal Design and feminist principles, and was then distributed to the Human Library Books, chosen through a convenience and purposive sampling. The Analytical Discussion of this project highlighted how the Human Library events can be considered accessible, and nonetheless showed several suggestions that could be implemented to improve the events’ accessibility.

2. Literature Review

This section highlights the existing literature on the Human Library Organization, and on Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace, which has helped to position my research in the current scholarship debates.

2.1 Human Library

There is limited scholarship on the Human Library: it generally centers on studying the various effects of the Human Library, both from an external participants' perspective, that of the Readers, and from an internal one, that of the Books. Some studies have focused on the changes in prejudices towards stigmatized group after the participation in Human Library events (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020; Groyecka et al., 2019), while others highlighted the value of implementing the Human Library as part of an educational curriculum (Giesler, 2022; Pope et al., 2023) or in a mental health setting (Kwan, 2020).

Groyecka et al. (2019) have centered their research on analyzing the effects on the Readers' prejudice after taking part in a Human Library event in Poland. Employing a survey as their methodological approach, they investigate the changes in the prejudice towards certain stigmatized groups in society, such as Muslim, Roma, and Transgender (Groyecka et al., 2019). Based on their research, they argued that the Human Library can serve as an effective tool for reducing social distance and ameliorating intergroup relations, but that further research is needed in order to establish the best implementation of its methods (Ibid.). Similarly, Bagci & Blazhenkova (2020) have studied the changes in prejudices towards stigmatized groups in Turkey. The article looked at different measures, such as empathy, knowledge and trust, finding that while a general positive sentiment is highlighted at the end of the experience, there are no significant changes in "outgroup trust, which is potentially a relatively more stable variable compared to the others variables" (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020, p. 418).

In a study led in 2023, Wong & Ling researched the functioning of the Human Library in Taiwan. In particular, they highlighted how the experience created by the organization can function as a platform where informal knowledge is transmitted and new connections are explored, both considered fundamental resources in what the authors define as a more distanced and online society (Wong & Lin, 2023).

Other scholars have focused on the role that the Human Library experiences can have when built into educational or recovery programmes (Giesler, 2022; Pope et al., 2023). In particular, Giesler (2022) has focused on implementing the use of the Human Library into social work education, and Pope et al. (2023) on the inputs that Human Library experiences can give to Occupational Therapy students. Both studies emphasize the effects on empathy and cultural competences (Giesler, 2022; Pope et al., 2023). Giesler (2022) focuses on social work, highlighting how the Human Library can serve as a valuable tool to improve empathy towards other groups, and to help draw attention to the coexistence of different and marginalized identities in varied groups. Similarly Pope et al. (2023) study the positive effects that the Human Library has in developing cultural awareness in Occupational Therapy students.

Also characterized by looking at implementing the Human Library in programmes, Kwan (2020) led a study on the effects of the Human Library in mental health recovery programmes, arguing that the “dialogic nature” (Kwan, 2020, p. 2) can serve as a tool to reduce stigma and prejudice around people recovering from mental illness. By focusing on the exchanges happening through the conversations between Readers and Books, Kwan (2020) identifies both benefits and disadvantages of being a Book. On the one hand, by telling their own stories, the Books partly fulfill their need of being understood and emotionally supported by others (Kwan, 2020). On the other hand, Books who are still vulnerable and recovering from mental illness, might be harmed by negative response from the Readers (Kwan, 2020). Other scholars have focused on the advantages of being a Book (Dobreski & Huang, 2016), highlighting the therapeutic benefits of reflecting on one’s life.

Rather than focusing on the impacts of the events, as many authors have done, I focus on the Books’ perspective. Making use of the access granted me by my role as an intern at the HLO, I investigate the Book’s perspective on the Organization’s events, in particular looking at the inclusion and accessibility perceived by the Books.

2.2 DEI and Disabilities in the workplace

For the second part of this Literature Review I provide insights on the current literature on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), exploring recent scholarship on workplace inclusion of people with disabilities.

Extensive literature has been published on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). In order to provide an effective overview of the scholarship, I refer to the review papers of Gang & Sangwan (2021) and Nguyen et al. (2024). Gang & Sangwan (2021) have led a study which employs a citation analysis method to draw a comprehensive overview of the literature published on 'inclusion' between 2010 and 2017. In particular, they highlighted that even though much has been written on 'inclusion', there still is a wide knowledge gap when it comes to integrating measures of a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Garg & Sangwan, 2021). Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2024) have concluded that more research is needed in order to properly determine what causes and affects the feeling of inclusion. Nguyen et al. (2024)'s exhaustive literature review analyzes the origin of DEI practices, stressing how 'inclusion' was added to the equation once it was clear that a diverse workforce only could not be considered enough when evaluating the inclusivity of a workplace (Nguyen et al., 2024). Scholars like Shore et al. (2018) proposed a model of inclusive workplace, where the feeling of inclusion is evaluated on the individual level. In this article, notable guidelines are offered, and they identify the importance of being respected as an individual, and being included in the group (Shore et al., 2018).

Generally, most scholars (Dagar, 2024; Dobusch, 2021; Moser, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2024; Reeves et al., 2023; Shore et al., 2018) have highlighted that DEI policies often build on social constructs that translate into incomplete research, as they exclude sections of the population or evaluate 'inclusion' only from a marginal perspective.

Dagar (2024) and Dobusch (2021) deconstruct the meaning of 'inclusion' by highlighting how it does not encompass "psychological diversity" (Dagar, 2024, p. 20), nor it considers the needs of autistic people by considering only one type of interaction style (Dobusch, 2021). Reeves et al. (2023) deconstruct the meaning of 'social inclusion' and 'belonging', focusing on people labeled with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and concluding that experiences of these people need to be centered in future research. Similarly, Moser

(2006), by adopting the Social Model of Disability¹, analyzes the relation between ‘disability’ as a social construct, and the use of technology, arguing that improperly addressing their relation will reproduce inequalities. Finally, adopting a feminist disability standpoint, Dobusch (2011) and Reeves et al. (2023) utilize relational theory to highlight the way relations are developed.

Given that *diversity* in the Books’ community of the HLO is the starting point and not the goal, this project focuses on the Books’ inclusion, and in particular on its accessibility aspects. This research aligns with Shore et. al (2018)’s approach, by addressing accessibility needs individually, and relates to the Dobusch (2011), Reeves et al. (2023) and Moser (2006) by adopting both a feminist standpoint and the Social Model of Disability. Moreover, it also highlights how accessibility, by being a part of the inclusion paradigm, influences the way people feel included in a space.

¹ The concept of the Social Model of Disability will be further explained in the Theoretical Framework section.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this section, I will explore the chosen theories of Critical Disability Theory and Universal Design, and highlight their core principles, which will be fundamental in the analysis, as well as in shaping the methodological framework.

3.1 Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Studies originated from Health Sciences in the 1980s, and as other critical studies, they were born as a way of bringing activism struggles into academic settings, with the intent of providing a theoretical framework to the fights of the Disability Movement (Kent et al., 2019). At the core of Critical Disability Theory is the ‘Social Model of Disability’, which sees disability as a contextual and political issue determined by socially constructed barriers (Ibid.). This idea opposed the ‘Medical Model of Disability’, which dominated Health Studies for most of the 20th century and saw disability as a lack of the human body that needed to be fixed or compensated (Ibid.). Contrarily, the Social Model defines “‘disability’ not as a physical defect inherent in bodies - just as gender is not simply a matter of genitals, nor race a matter of skin pigmentation - but rather as a way of interpreting human variation” (Garland-Thomson, 2019, p. 12). In fact, Critical Disability Theory explores the politics of the body, investigating the practices and societal norms that dictate which bodies are desirable and can be considered ‘normal’ (Ibid.). By identifying ‘disability’ as a social construct, the focus is moved to the barriers and the context around it. Which means that attention is brought to *access*, and to the way the environment *dis*-ables people, rather than targeting the impairments of individual people. Congruently, instead of disability, I chose ‘accessibility’ as the focus of this research project, as the concept allows to include - rather than exclude - multiple identities. Critical Disability Theory, by analyzing the concept of the ‘body’ *tout court*, does not limitate its sphere of action to ‘disabilities’, but rather focuses on deconstructing the idea of a normalcy, which can be applied to any field.

Critical Disability Theory adopts, amongst other things, intersectionality as an overarching concept useful to look at identities and categories (Kent et al., 2019). The term ‘intersectionality’ was first coined by Kimberly Crenshaw in order to explain how multiple identities overlap, creating unique categories that help identify how social dynamics work (Crenshaw, 1991). In particular, Crenshaw (1991) first adopted this term to better describe the

specific situation of black women who were discriminated against in the workplace because of their identity, which could not be explained as a simple sum of being ‘black’ and ‘women’: there was a need to identify how the categories of race and gender intersected, leading to a discrimination that was different to the one typically connected to racism or misogyny (Ibid.). The idea of Books having the possibility of participating in the conversation with different Titles, which reflects their multiple experiences in life, resonates with the idea of intersectionality. Therefore, intersectionality is both something that is already engraved in the way the organization works, and a crucial tool to highlight further dynamics in relation to Human Library events, such as socio-economic factors.

Since a good portion of the Books’ experience of the Human Library happens online, I believe it is important to look at how Critical Disability Theory understands technology, in order to draw useful insights that can help as a theoretical approach in the analysis, as well as to implement such recommendations in the methodology. Technology is seen by many scholars as an inevitable part of the future (Ellis, 2019; Goggin, 2019; Lewthwaite et al., 2019; Moser, 2006). Moser (2006), adopting the Social Model of Disability, highlights how technology can be a great tool for disabled people, but also suggests how it should not be normalized as a necessary aid, as that would fuel a compensatory logic which would play into the idea of disabled people needing extra aid. Rather, a paradigmatic shift of what we consider ‘normal’ is preferred (Moser, 2006). While deconstructing and analyzing what we consider normalcy is crucial, there still is the need to strive for accessible technology and accessible user experiences.

To this regard, Lewthwaite et al. (2019), in a chapter entitled ‘A web for all’ (published in *Manifestos for the future of Critical Disability Studies*, 2019), write their own manifesto on web accessibility and user experience. In particular, I chose to report here some of the fundamental passages that have guided part of the methodology and will also be crucial in the analysis. This Manifesto declares the need to “learn from people with disabilities about their needs and preferences” (Lewthwaite et al., 2019, p. 131), which is a crucial point in this project’s methodology. Moreover, the *Manifesto* highlights that “Digital resources can reduce social and economic exclusion - without deliberate attention, they will increase exclusion” (Lewthwaite et al., 2019, p. 130), and furthermore adds that accessibility should be a “shared responsibility” (Lewthwaite et al., 2019, p. 131). This means that accessibility is not to be intended as merely about impairments and user-friendly experience, but rather as a

comprehensive concept that includes different layers of one's experience, and acts as a guiding principle in the creation of common spaces. Accordingly, the methodological framework has incorporated these principles.

3.2 Universal Design

In this section of the theoretical framework, I briefly present the principles of Universal Design, which contribute to this research in two ways: firstly, as a theory, since it guides the analysis by providing useful insights on how the Human Library events should be planned; secondly, as a methodological tool that has accompanied the creation of the survey, which tried to be inclusive of everyone. I will extend on the steps I took to make the survey accessible in the section 4.2. In this research paper, I decided to adapt the concept of Universal Design, which is typically a theory utilized in Architecture and Design studies, to analyze Human Library events, therefore addressing things that are both digital and physical. Because of this, I translate some of the principles provided by Universal Design and adapt them to my research.

Universal Design first arose from the US-based Disability movements, echoing the changes happening in the United States legal framework that aimed at removing barriers and ameliorating access for disabled people (Steinfeild and Maisel, 2012). Since then, it was confronted with much criticism, which was reflected in the way its fundamental principles changed. Fundamentally, Universal Design is a theory which expresses the idea that things should be imagined and constructed with an intent to include everyone since their creation (Steinfeild and Maisel, 2012). This means that instead of gradually improving a product by enlarging its accessibility and functionality, a design should “strive for including everyone all the time” (Steinfeild and Maisel, 2012, p. 24).

Some of the principles, more design-related, include the importance of adjustability and the idea of designing for the extremes, which would mean including a larger quota of the population (Steinfeild and Maisel, 2012). Moreover, Universal Design guidelines express the importance of providing rich multisensory experiences, while also reducing the impact of sound and light stimulation (Steinfeild and Maisel, 2012). Other general and easily adaptable recommendations focus on adopting a human-centered approach, in which a comprehensive

idea of diversity is taken into consideration, and where direct subjects of a design are included into the creation process (Ibid.).

Although the concept has been generally used in the past decades, it has not been exempt from critique. Imrie & Luck (2014) provide a comprehensive review of academic criticism on the concept of Universal Design, highlighting how its claim to be inclusive and universal concur to the reinforcement of a normalizing paradigm of bodies. The authors still believe that this concept can provide useful insights, but it needs to be implemented with a critical perspective that incorporates the deconstruction of the idea of normalcy of bodies (Ibid).

In this project, Universal Design will be used to both shape my research method, as well as highlight the importance of the data collected and analyzed in the analysis.

4. Methodological Framework

In this section, I explain my methodological choices. I chose a survey method to gather as much data as possible. While interviews are certainly a valuable instrument, I believe that the survey method corresponded better to the project focus of the Research Question. As the RQ aims at assessing accessibility, given the time and the resource frame of this project, choosing interviews as my methodology would have meant only including a few opinions, rather than gathering multiple responses. In this methodological section, I will first focus on ethical considerations, explaining how the theoretical framework has shaped the chosen methods, and then expand on the survey design, the sampling method and the data collection procedure. Finally, I will discuss some of the survey's limitations and my positionality as a researcher and intern.

4.1 Ethical Considerations and Crip methodology

In this section, I discuss the implication of choosing a critical feminist approach as my theoretical framework.

I believe that adopting a feminist approach means being aware of the space we occupy and of the platform we use. In this research project, I decided to investigate the accessibility of the Human Library events. While the project and the survey don't focus solely on disabled and neurodiverse people, the chosen theories, although adopted to analyze a wider cohort of people, come from the field of Disability Studies and from the work of disabled, neurodiverse and feminist activists. Therefore, I believe it necessary to clarify my position as a researcher. Inspired by *Feminist Theory: from the Margins to the Center* of bell hooks (2015), I truly believe that the voice and the main perspective in any project should be the one that comes from 'the margins' in question, therefore of the people who are subjected to the research question. In this project, that voice belongs to the Books, to which the investigated accessibility refers to. As a privileged person, my goal is to use my platform to shed light on problems and thematics so that I work towards promoting equality. I am aware that, in this scenario, I am not a person from 'the margins', as I have not encountered accessibility problems while being a Book, and therefore do not wish to speak for other groups. My sole purpose, in this internship project, is to assess and analyze how accessible the spaces that the

Human Library creates are, in the hope of generating and contributing to positive change in the Human Library Organization.

Furthermore, as explained by Hickman and Serlin (2019) in ‘Towards a crip methodology for critical disability studies’ (published in *Interdisciplinary approaches to disability: looking towards the future*, 2019), a fundamental shift on the discourse around disabilities can be guided by adopting a methodology which is guided by disability scholars and activists. In order to properly adopt a “crip methodology” (Hickman and Serlin, 2019, p. 135) we need to ask who this knowledge is helping, and how this knowledge is gathered. The authors explain how “a crip methodology might also highlight an understanding of “access” - a buzzword across a number of domains including the administrative - not as something given by one group to another but as something shared from its inception and thus horizontally distributed across multiple bodies and technologies” (Hickman and Serlin, 2019, pp. 136-137). Knowledge and access are crucial in defining how crip methodology works, and are also fundamentally important in this project, which is why I believe this paragraph is necessary. Given these considerations, much time has been spent on rendering the survey accessible and, for this reason, the theoretical and methodological sections of this paper intersect each other.

4.2 Survey Design, Sampling method and Accessibility of the Survey

The survey aims at assessing the accessibility of different areas of the Human Library events. Since the data is collected only once, this survey can be defined as cross-sectional (Gideon, 2012). As explained by Gideon (2012), it is important that the survey follows a logical flow, and uses simple and direct language, which was even more fundamental in this project, as the survey aimed at being accessible and inclusive.

The survey was developed in accordance with the theoretical framework and the research question, and qualitative questions were asked. As the main research topic is accessibility, most questions addressed it, either directly or by providing context about the participants of the survey or other aspects of accessibility. I have directly investigated this variable in four questions (questions 2.3, 3.3, 4.2, 4.4, Appendix), providing a qualitative scale of five options (Very inaccessible, Inaccessible, Neither/nor Accessible, Accessible, Very accessible). Other items of the survey investigate indirect factors contributing to accessibility, by providing contextual factors (questions 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, Appendix), or open-ended

questions about possible suggestions or further comments (questions 1.3, 2.4, 2.5, 3.4, 3.5, 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 5.1, 5.2, Appendix). While the questions related to accessibility aim at answering the first part of the Research Question, open-ended items that ask for suggestions or further comments are directed to answering the second part of the Research Question, which focuses on possible improvements of the Human Library events.

Pilot-testing a survey is also a fundamental step in this method, as it provides a critical perspective on the survey, it highlights possible grammatical errors, and provides indication on the time needed to complete it (Gideon, 2012). Three employees of the Human Library and two Books, who are advocates and Disability consultants in their personal life, were included in the pilot-testing process. With the latter two, longer consultations were also done, and served to address the overall contextualization and language framework of the survey. The feedback highlighted that some options were missing in the section related to impairments (question 1.2, Appendix), and that an additional question related to assistive technology was needed (question 2.2, Appendix). Moreover, it provided an estimated amount of time needed to complete the survey. In this project, the respondents to the pilot-testing were not included in the study.

The population of the survey participants are the Books of the Human Library. The sampling of this survey can be defined as a mix between *convenience and purposive* type (Gideon, 2012). These samplings are both non-random sampling methods: in the convenience sampling, people who are easily recruitable and available participate in the survey; in the purposive one some degree of direct targeting of participants is involved (Ibid.). The completion of the survey was voluntary and anonymous. In this project, the data was collected online: I posted the survey on the Human Library Facebook group where some of the Books are active, and also sent it via email to other Books who don't use the platform. Respectively, these two actions can be identified with convenience and purposive sampling.

As my goal in this project is to analyze accessibility in the Human Library events, I wanted to make sure that the way I collected data was accessible. Since it is also directed to people with different impairments, such as neurodiversity, physical disabilities, visual impairments etc., I wanted to make sure that it was accessible for them to fill in the form. In order to do this, I conducted further research, which, as mentioned before, included consulting sessions with

colleagues who are more expert on the topic, that led to the final structure of the survey as seen in the Appendix.

In the first place, I offered the possibility of filling in the survey on the Google Survey platform, as well as on a word or pdf document, to better accommodate eventual individual needs of applying personal assistive technology. Furthermore, I offered support to confidentially help to fill out the form privately. In the second place, I've edited the survey so that the character size was at least 12, the font was easily readable and not overlapping. Moreover, it was suggested by experienced colleagues to avoid italics and underline, as they might be confusing to, for example, dyslexic or visually impaired people. Finally, I've avoided the use of numeric scales when asking quantitative questions, as the use of numbers could be confusing and not clear enough. Therefore, I structured the questions that investigated Accessibility by offering five possible options equivalent to a scale.

4.3 Limitations and Positionality

The biggest limitation of this method is surely the sampling method. As I chose a non-random sampling technique, the data gathered from this study cannot be considered statistically relevant and therefore not generalizable. One of the reasons for the sampling choice is the volunteer nature of the Books. It is important to acknowledge that these people engage voluntarily with the Human Library events, and in order to respect their consented time commitment to the organization, I approached the survey administration with caution, giving the opportunity to fill it out but without directly targeting people. Another reason for my choice is ingrained in its intersectionality nature, which would cause problems when creating representative sampling of the Human Library Books. Many Books participate in the Organization with multiple and intersecting topics, and sometimes their accessibility needs are not directly related to their adopted *Title* in the Library. As mentioned before, accessibility is about inclusion rather than exclusion, and accessibility needs are highly individual. Therefore, given the voluntary commitment of the Books, which meant lower response rate, and the goal of wanting to contribute to the Human Library overall Accessibility, adopting a convenience and purposive sampling, meant giving the survey a higher chance of response rate.

Another limitation of this project can be identified in the fact that *accessibility* is a subjective concept. I chose to leave up to personal interpretation the meaning of accessibility, as I did

not want to restrict it to my subjective definition of it. Moreover, as the survey distributed to participants is already quite long, I preferred to give space to the language frameworks and in providing different options of completing the survey.

Finally, my dual role as researcher and employee in the Organization makes me an embedded subject in the research. While my positionality as an intern grants me access to firsthand knowledge on the HLO and on the Books, it also plays a role in the limitations. Together with my personal beliefs and expected outcomes, these factors influence the way I structure the research design and interpret the data. As expressed before, the chosen theories, which also reflect my personal beliefs, have played a big part in defining the methodology and the research design, and therefore highly condition this project.

5. Analytical discussion

This section brings together the data collected through the survey and the input provided by the theoretical framework and helps to answer the following Research Question: *‘To what extent can Human Library events be considered accessible to Books and what can be done to improve such events?’*. The survey was divided in five different sections: general information, communication regarding events, online events, in-person events and final remarks and comments. The data is composed of a total of twenty-six answers to the survey, gathered from 18.04.2024 to 09.05.2024, which will be analyzed from the lenses provided by the theoretical framework.

5.1 Identity, intersectionality and communication

In the first section, I’ve collected personal information about the Books. I’ve asked the respondents to select and further expand, if needed, on their impairment, in order to uphold an autodetermination principle. Following the input of Critical Disability Theory, it is important for one to be able to determine their own identity. In this section, guided by the Social Model of Disability, I chose to use the word ‘impairment’, but I am conscious that different frameworks and languages are being used. I decided to use this terminology to describe the Books’ condition, and to offer the possibility of explaining, if they felt comfortable, how they would describe their situation. Between the answers I received, fourteen out of twenty-six included multiple impairments in their answer. In fact, as highlighted by Figure 1, the total amount of impairments listed (56) is far bigger than the number of respondents of the survey (N=26). Using a critical feminist approach, we can highlight the intersectionality of this answer, which shows that the Books often have more than one impairment or condition that they can identify with.

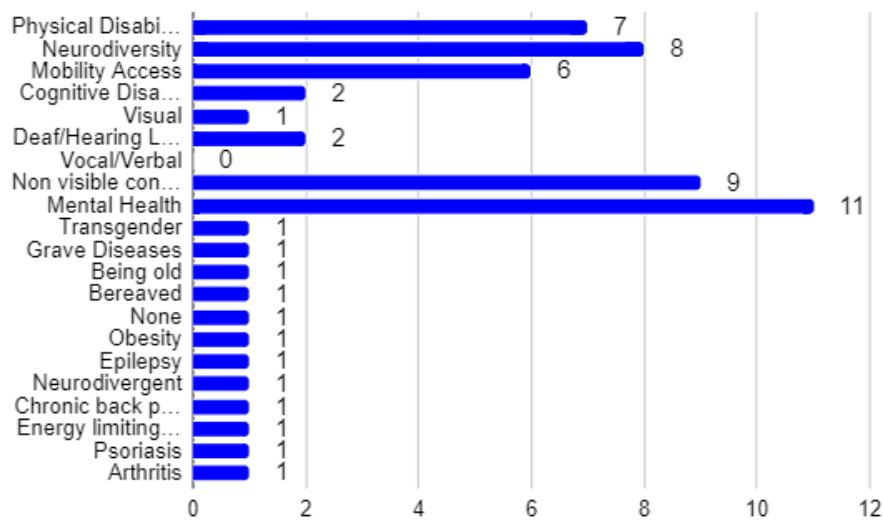


Figure 1: Indicates the answers to question 1.2 of the survey, elaborated personally from the raw data. Source: Appendix,

In the second section of the survey, I focused on communication with the Human Library Team. When organizing Human Library events, the communication takes place primarily online, through Facebooks, Email or Whatsapp. As expressed by the Lewthwaite et al. (2019) it is important to make user experiences accessible and to actively work towards an including paradigm. In the communication section, I investigated which channel of communication is preferred by people: while the Human Library can't directly change the way accessibility on platforms such as Facebook, Gmail or Whatsapp works, it is important to be aware about how the Books experience these platforms, and what could be improved in this process. For the same reason, I've also asked the Books if they made use of any assistive technology. The main variable of the survey was investigated by asking to rank the accessibility of the communication with the Human Library team on a qualitative scale from one to five. Furthermore, I asked the open question: "*What could be done differently in terms of communication?*" (p. 4, Appendix).

Following the input of the theoretical framework, the questions about the communication channel and assistive technology are crucial to understand the context in which 'accessibility' is operating. As mentioned before, the HLO cannot change the way these platforms work, but it is important to know if the channels offered are functional to the Books. Moreover, these

questions reflect a Universal Design principle, by offering different options that align with the individual needs of the Books.

From the data collected, we can say that most Books find the communication with the Organization accessible: 77% of the answers were positive (pp. 9-13, Appendix). While the communication channel itself does not appear to be the problem, many respondents have highlighted the inconsistency in the communication practices, which make it harder for the Books to know who the contact person is. Moreover, many have highlighted how it is hard to keep in mind an outline of the events: *“I struggle with keeping track of events and times on Facebook; A complete overview, like a calendar overview, would be helpful”* (p. 12, Appendix). Another one, on the same note, said that *“I have object permanence issues and so forget they exist [the events]”* (p. 12, Appendix). These comments highlight the importance of having a design that includes people and reflects individual needs. Moreover, it is important to deconstruct what we consider ‘normal’, and be aware that people may have diverse needs, such as having an easy access to a calendar of the events.

5.2 Online events

In the third section, I focus on the online events organized by the Human Library, which were a substantial part of my assigned tasks during the internship. Similarly to the way the Human Library approaches communication channels, this part of the survey does not aim at investigating the overall accessibility of the platform where the Organization holds events (Zoom), but rather explore the ways that the Human Library team could improve the Books’ experience, by tackling the way it approaches the platform. Ensuring that the needs of the Books are properly met aligns with the idea of Universal Design and Critical Disability Theory.

The first two questions of this section are socio-economic questions. Here, I ask Books whether they have a personal room and device from where they can join. Guided by the theoretical framework of Critical Disability Theory, investigating socio-economic conditions is crucial to this analysis. In fact, as expressed by Lewthwaite et al. (2019), “access to digital resources is an individual and societal imperative and a fundamental human right” (Lewthwaite et al., 2019, p. 130), and insufficient attention to access to digital resources creates further exclusion if not properly addressed. Moreover, following the inputs of Intersectionality theory, identities are never monolith, but rather they are constituted of

multiple layers - some of which are economical and social. Therefore, it is important to address if people can access the Human Library events, if they own devices or have private rooms at their disposal. From the data gathered, it appears that every respondent owns a device, and that they are able to connect from a private space, whether that space is private or shared. Although these questions provide useful information, it is also important to highlight that given the non-random sample of the survey, the data collected might reflect a 'self-selection bias'. This means that people who don't own a device, are probably not able to participate in the online Human Library events at all, excluding them from the start.

The third, fourth and fifth questions of this section ask to rate the accessibility of online events, and offer the possibility of both explaining an answer, as well as direct inputs of "*What could be done differently on our online events?*" (p. 5, Appendix). The data gathered showed a positive response, with 84,6% of positive answers. Similarly to communication, the events themselves don't appear to be inaccessible, but some suggestions highlighted the need to pay more attention to other side aspects, which could smooth the process. When the Books participate in an online event, some preparatory time is needed in order to provide Books information about the event and to check their headspace before the actual event with the public starts. Some of the respondents agreed on the prolonged length of the preparatory process, where idle times could be reduced. Moreover, other respondents highlighted that the online preparatory shared space can sometimes be sensorily overwhelming because of the many participants. By adopting a Universal Design perspective, as well as an intersectional feminist one, it is important to listen to individual needs and not dismiss them. In this case, a solution could be offering different options for the preparatory time needed before an event. While some Books may need a quiet space, others might prefer sharing a moment together before the event. Being able to offer different options means offering an inclusive and Universal Design that can fit individual needs.

5.3 In-person events

In the fourth section of the survey I focus on in-person events. When planning in-person events, the Human Library team generally asks Books if they have any 'special needs' in the hope of making the event as easy as possible for them. In particular, the team offers to book or refund the transportation or accommodation, as well as assistance during the journey to the event venue. Moreover, the Human Library team tries to ensure that the site of the event is

accessible and can accommodate the Books' needs. This usually refers to the general accessibility of the venue, making sure, for example, that it is wheelchair friendly and that disabled parking is available. In this section of the survey I divided the questions in transportation and venue. Because of the adoption of the Social Model of Disability, where the overarching argument is that it is the environment that disables people, rather than the impairment, I always formulated the questions in a way that would center the focus of the question on the barriers and on external factors, rather than concentrating on the Books' potential impairment(s). Since not everyone had the opportunity to participate in in-person events, I gave the option of not filling in this part of the survey. This section gathered a total of twenty-two answers (N=22).

Regarding transportation, I asked the following question: *“How accessible was transportation made for you?”* (p. 5, Appendix). Similarly to other sections, the aim is not to assess how accessible transportation is in itself, but to investigate what the Human Library team can do better and how it can improve, so that their process is inclusive. Although three quarters of the Books found that transportation was made either ‘Accessible’ or ‘Very Accessible’ for them, many comments were gathered regarding this question. One of the respondents said that it would be useful to have a *“downloadable expenses form on the HL website, [...] usual expectations and reasonable accommodations you can expect as a book [...], early provisions of maps [...]*” (p. 13, Appendix).

While some respondents highlighted that assistance was provided in regards to the organization of transportation, others have stressed that planning transport as a disabled or neurodiverse person can require additional energy. To this regard, one of the respondents commented that [they] *“Had to organise my own accessible taxi, travel assistance on trains etc. - this takes time, energy, and funds which not all disabled books will have”* (p. 18, Appendix). Another Book mentioned that *“transport is not one size fits all”* (p. 18, Appendix), and we could generalize this point to every other aspect of accessibility and inclusion. These comments highlight the importance of different aspects. As Critical Disability Theory stands, it is fundamental to learn from people with disabilities about their needs, and respect their voice on the matter. Furthermore, the adjustability in the Universal Design becomes central: universality cannot strive to be a model that fits everyone at all times, but it needs to be incorporated as a practice that shapes processes, allowing nuances

and human variation. Because of these reasons, the Human Library needs to be flexible and attentive to different needs.

The central variable of accessibility was finally investigated by asking how accessible the Books found the venues of the events to be. This is the section that showed the lowest accessibility: around 30% of the respondents (N=22) indicated that the venues were either “Neither/nor accessible”, “Inaccessible” or “Very inaccessible” (p. 19, Appendix). As many Books highlighted, the spaces that host the events are where the most barriers present. The answers in this section highlighted the importance of taking into account many different factors, such as the availability of lifts or alternatives to stairs, the presence of special chairs that provide adjustability and extra support, and the general wheelchair accessibility of a site. These points reflect the ‘adjustability’ guidelines of the Universal Design theory.

Several Books also highlighted that the venues were sometimes too noisy, and that lighting was also a problem. In fact, as emphasized by Universal Design theory, it is important to mitigate the effect of noise and light, as it can be overwhelming for many neurodiverse and disabled people.

Finally, multiple respondents highlighted the importance of having a separate room where they can have private time during the session. The Human Library Team always tries to ensure that a safe space, called the ‘green room’ is available to the Books during in-person events. Sometimes, due to unavailability of spaces this room was shared with other people, or functioned as a snack room. As the answers showed, having a private space is crucial to the wellbeing of the Books, and therefore needs to be granted at all times.

5.4 Final remarks and future research

In the final section, I gave space for general comments and feedback. This section recalls two general needs. Firstly, it follows the theoretical choices of this research project, as it reiterates the fundamental importance of asking the direct subjects of this survey about their preferences. Adopting a feminist approach means listening to the ‘margins’ voices’, and using this platform as a means to enhance their opinions. Secondly, it also allows the Books to further expand on their answers, giving the possibility to reiterate important concepts, comment on language or on the survey in general.

Some Books expressed concern regarding the relevance of this survey, and how their suggestions would be implemented. In particular, a Book said: “*I worry sometimes that my*

observations land in empty space or can't be considered because it's only me asking for an adjustment" (p. 21, Appendix). Critical Disability Theory, similarly to other feminist approaches, values the importance of one's voice, and believes that every inclusion need is valid on its own. In fact, as the authors of the theory have mentioned, accessibility needs to be taken into consideration as a shared responsibility of any organization. This comment also spotlights the importance of knowledge. When employing a 'crip methodology', part of the attention is given to knowledge, and to the way it is addressed and transmitted. This means that, in order for accessibility to become a common shared practice, the Organization needs to find ways to store this knowledge permanently and to implement it in their daily work.

Finally, I asked the Books "*What question would you have liked me to ask during this survey? [...]*" (p. 7, Appendix). By asking this question, I aimed at discovering where the survey might have been lacking, and shed light on other possible concerns connected to Accessibility which I didn't investigate, or highlight possible paths of future research.

Several Books have brought about the question of support of the Human Library experience, highlighting how they would have liked to be asked questions such as: "*Do you always feel safe in readings?*" (p. 22, Appendix). These observations underline the importance of emotional and psychological support that accompanies the Human Library experience. While some practices, such as briefing and debriefing with the Books, are active in the Organization, future research could investigate the perceived safety of Books throughout their experience at the Human Library.

Another Book mentioned how some accessibility factors were under-investigated in the survey, mentioning "*socio-economic status [...], access to cars, ability to drive, [...], ease of covering expenses upfront*" (p. 22, Appendix). This comment brings valuable feedback and highlights some layers of intersectionality that have only been partially covered during this survey. Further Research could focus more on these factors, and address how socio-economic context influences the participation in the Human Library.

In conclusion, this final section highlighted once more the importance of listening to the Books' voices and implementing their answers. By following the lens provided by the theoretical framework of Critical Disability Theory and Universal Design, this analysis has highlighted different valuable areas for improvements for the Human Library events. Differently from other scholarship written on the HLO, this research focuses on the Books'

perspective, making use of the access granted by my positionality. Moreover, it aligns with current research on feminist approaches to Diversity and Inclusion, highlighting both the importance of intersectional research, as well as the implementation of accessibility as a common shared practice.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this research project investigated the accessibility of the Human Library events, which can be considered a crucial aspect of inclusivity. The theoretical framework of Critical Disability Theory and Universal Design guided the analysis, highlighting the importance of listening and accommodating individual needs of the Books. Centering the research on the Books' perspective was done by gathering data through a survey, which allowed them to identify different opinions and needs.

In order to answer the following RQ: *“To what extent can Human Library events be considered accessible to Books and what can be done to improve such events?”*, the gathered data was examined through the lenses of the chosen theoretical framework.

This study showed that the events of the Human Library can be considered accessible, but there is room for improvement. The variable of ‘accessibility’ was assessed over four different aspects (communication, online events, transportation and event venues) and the answers showed an overall percentage of 76,7% of positive answers. In particular, the data revealed online events and event venues to respectively be the most and the least accessible areas. Throughout the survey, the questions were formulated to draw attention to how the HLO can enhance the accessibility of the experience, rather than assess the user experience of the platforms. Nonetheless, some answers showed that certain aspects depend on the platform that the HLO makes use of, and therefore cannot be changed easily by the Organization.

To improve this aspect, the second part of the RQ aimed at identifying possible suggestions that could improve the overall Book's experience. This section highlighted valuable feedback that the HLO can improve in its daily practice. As the results showed, the HLO could improve its accessibility by providing Books with an overview of events, where different time zones are listed and contact people are clearly noted. Moreover, the research showed that some time adjustability should be provided in terms of online events, where idle times can be sometimes overwhelming for Books. When looking at in-person events, the diversity in accessibility needs becomes evident, and flexibility is fundamental, as many different situations and requests present. In particular, the results showed that the HLO should be available to pay transport expenses up-front, rather than only reimburse them later. It was also highlighted that an accessibility checklist could function as a way of implementing general

recommendations and of storing knowledge. This would align with the principles of Universal Design, as it would fulfill the need of planning for a wide cohort of people. Nonetheless, needs change and vary based on the situation, and the voice of the Books should always be valued and made central.

All in all, the analysis showed that the HLO is quite accessible, and does a great job in asking Books for their needs. By keeping the practice of open dialogue with its volunteers, the HLO allows for adjustment and ensures flexibility, recognizing that needs are in constant variation. Nonetheless, some accommodations can be implemented to ensure that knowledge is stored properly and therefore transmitted more easily. This practice also shifts the focus to the Human Library Team, rather than on Books. It should not, in fact, be on individuals with impairments to compensate for the deficiencies of society, but instead inclusion and accessibility should be treated as shared practices and common responsibilities. In conclusion, this project showed how diverse and volunteer based organizations such as the Human Library can ensure that their communities feel included, and that their accessibility needs are met.

7. Bibliography

- Bagci, S. C., & Blazhenkova, O. (2020). Unjudge Someone: Human Library as a Tool to Reduce Prejudice toward Stigmatized Group Members. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 42(6), 413–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2020.1792298>
- Boxall, K. (2019) Revisiting the foundations of (critical) disability studies: manifesto for an inclusive social model. In Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., & Robertson, R. (2018). *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* (Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053341>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dagar, C. (2024). Workplace well-being: making a case for “psychological” diversity and inclusion. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 38(2), 20–22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-03-2023-0083>
- Dobreski, B., & Huang, Y. (2016). The joy of being a book: Benefits of participation in the human library: The Joy of Being a Book: Benefits of Participation in the Human Library. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 53(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.2016.14505301139>
- Dobusch, L. (2021). The inclusivity of inclusion approaches: A relational perspective on inclusion and exclusion in organizations. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(1), 379–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12574>
- Ellis, K. (2019) A media manifestol. In Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., & Robertson, R. (2018). *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* (Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053341>

- Garg, S., & Sangwan, S. (2021). Literature Review on Diversity and Inclusion at Workplace, 2010–2017. *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective*, 25(1), 12–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0972262920959523>
- Garland Thomson (2019) Critical disability studies: a knowledge manifesto. In Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., & Robertson, R. (2018). *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* (Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053341>
- Gideon, L. (Ed.). (2012). *Handbook of Survey Methodology for the Social Sciences*. Springer New York. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-3876-2>
- Giesler, M. A. (2022). Humanizing Oppression: The Value of the Human Library Experience in Social Work Education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 58(2), 390–402.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1885541>
- Goggin, G. (2019) Technology and social futures. In Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., & Robertson, R. (2018). *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* (Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053341>
- Groyecka, A., Witkowska, M., Wróbel, M., Klamut, O., & Skrodzka, M. (2019). Challenge your stereotypes! Human Library and its impact on prejudice in Poland. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 29(4), 311–322.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2402>
- Hickman L. & Serlin D. (2018) Towards a crip methodology for critical disability studies in Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., Robertson, R., & Garland-Thomson, R. (2018). *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability : Looking Towards the Future: Volume 2* (K. Ellis, R. Garland-Thomson, M. Kent, & R. Robertson, Eds.; First edition.). Routledge.
- hooks, bell. (2015). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (New edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- Imrie, R., & Luck, R. (2014). Designing inclusive environments: Rehabilitating the body and the relevance of universal design. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 36(16), 1315–1319. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2014.936191>
- Kent et al. (2019) Introduction: why manifestos, why now?. In Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., & Robertson, R. (2018). *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* (Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053341>
- Kwan, C. K. (2020). A Qualitative Inquiry into the Human Library Approach: Facilitating Social Inclusion and Promoting Recovery. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(9), 3029. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17093029>
- Lewthwaite et al. (2019) A web for all: a manifesto for critical disability studies in accessibility and user experience design. In Ellis, K., Garland-Thomson, R., Kent, M., & Robertson, R. (2018). *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* (Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351053341>
- Moser, I. (2006). Disability and the promises of technology: Technology, subjectivity and embodiment within an order of the normal. *Information, Communication & Society*, 9(3), 373–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180600751348>
- Nguyen, L. A., Evan, R., Chaudhuri, S., Hagen, M., & Williams, D. (2024). Inclusion in the workplace: An integrative literature review. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 48(3/4), 334–356. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-10-2022-0104>
- Pope, K., Hewlin-Vita, H., & Chu, E. M. Y. (2023). The Human Library and the development of cultural awareness and sensitivity in occupational therapy students: A mixed methods study. *Frontiers in Medicine*, 10, 1215464. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2023.1215464>
- Reeves, P., McConnell, D., & Phelan, S. K. (2023). The (radical) role of belonging in shifting and expanding understandings of social inclusion for people labelled with intellectual

and developmental disabilities. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 45(2), 317–330.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13574>

Shore, L. M., Cleveland, J. N., & Sanchez, D. (2018). Inclusive workplaces: A review and model. *Human Resource Management Review*, 28(2), 176–189.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.07.003>

Steinfeld, E., & Maisel, J. (2012). *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kbdk/detail.action?docID=821663>

The Human Library Organization (n.d), retrieved from <https://humanlibrary.org/> on 23rd May, 2024

Wong, F. M., & Lin, C.-M. (2023). Operation, development, opportunities and challenges of a human library in Taiwan. *Library Management*, 44(3/4), 191–202.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/LM-11-2022-0115>