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# Methods, Techniques and Researchers. Methodological Reflections on the Study of Disability

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## **Abstract**

The article aims to offer some reflections and considerations arising from a case study regarding people with physical and sensory disabilities. Starting with a brief overview on the importance of the qualitative method in the study of disability, and on the use of some qualitative research techniques applied to this context, The article intends to highlight how, in some cases, qualitative interviews can provide better results than other techniques. Nevertheless, some difficulties can emerge also using qualitative interviews, in particular with deaf people. Moreover, since the research team included a disabled researcher, the article describes some problems that the latter (but not only) faced during the research.

**Keywords:** Disability; qualitative method; qualitative interviews; disabled researcher.

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# Métodos, técnicas e investigadores. Reflexiones metodológicas en materia de estudios sobre discapacidad

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## Resumen

El presente artículo plantea algunas reflexiones y consideraciones derivadas a partir de un caso de estudio llevado a cabo entre personas que sufren discapacidades físicas y sensoriales. Se parte con una breve panorámica sobre de la importancia del método cualitativo en el estudio de la discapacidad y de la aplicación de algunas técnicas de investigación en este ámbito. El artículo se propone evidenciar cómo, en algunos casos, las entrevistas cualitativas pueden ofrecer resultados mejores respecto a otras técnicas. Pueden también surgir, sin embargo algunas dificultades con las entrevistas, en particular cuando se trata de personas sordas. Por último, dado que en el grupo de investigación uno de sus miembros está afectado por una discapacidad, el artículo describe algunos problemas que dicha persona (y no solo ella) ha tenido que afrontar en el curso de la investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Discapacidad; método cualitativo; entrevistas cualitativas; investigador con situación de discapacidad.

## Introduction: methods and disability

As highlighted by Oliver (1992), for a long time research on disability was based on the medical model approach (e.g. Boorse, 1975, 1977; Rioux, 2001), which focussed mainly on physical, sensory, and/or cognitive impairments. Disabilities were considered as “reflecting the consequences of impairment in terms of functional performance and activity by the individual; disabilities thus represent disturbances at the level of the person” (WHO, 1980:14). As a consequence, the focus was on the impairment, seen not only as the only factor determining the disability, but also as the element responsible for a lacking or reduced social inclusion of disabled persons (Bickenbach et al., 1999; Barnes and Mercer, 2005).

Such model tackles the issue in terms of individual health, from an exclusively medical point of view (as implied in the name), a field of study that is traditionally based on the

positivist paradigm and employs quantitative research techniques (Hartley and Muhit, 2003). Still today this type of research is regarded (sometimes excessively) as the most valid one to generalize the results achieved and make them universal, determining the correlation between two observable phenomena (Marradi, 2010; *author*, 2015); it is also considered as the most reliable since the objectivity of the results should be guaranteed by the non-involvement of the scientist's value judgments (Black, 1994; Hartley and Muhit, 2003).

In the 1970s the medical model began to be criticized by disabled people's movements together with numerous researchers from social and health sciences (see e.g. Hiranandani, 2005). In 1976, the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) produced a statement establishing the principles that would lead to the development of a new theoretical framework to discuss and study disability, moving away from the medical model (Barnes and Mercer, 1997). After that, British academic and activist for disability rights Mike Oliver (1983, 1986) reformulated UPIAS' principles opening the way to the social model of disability (Barnes and Mercer, 1997, 2005).

According to this model, people with disabilities are limited in their activities due to socially constructed barriers and not (as the medical model argued) to their impairments; their unsuccessful social inclusion would therefore derive from the failure of the society to meet the needs of disabled people adequately (UPIAS, 1976; Barnes, 1991; Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). As a consequence, it is necessary to promote and implement actions that can change the social, economic and political structures which prevent this category of people from achieving emancipation (UPIAS, 1976; Barnes, 2000; Smith-Chandler and Swart, 2014). In order to do that, it is essential to start a process of inclusion and participation of disabled people in all fields of social life, also including that of research, regarded as a crucial area to trigger change and to promote the empowerment of those who take part in it (Oliver, 1992; Zarb, 1992; WHO, 2011; Fenge et al., 2016). The importance of research is emphasized in the hope it does not limit itself to merely contribute to academic knowledge, so that it stimulates the promotion of actions dedicated for designing, changing and/or improving disability policies, in favor of an inclusive society which values the experiences and points of view of the investigated subjects (Kitchin, 2000; Mmatli, 2009). Inclusion and participation practices must give voice to vulnerable subjects or groups and, hence, prefer qualitative methods quantitative ones during the research phase. Broadly exploited in the medical model, not only did the use of quantitative methods disregard the social aspects of disability, but it also did not take into consideration disabled people's opinions and direct experiences. Instead, through the use of qualitative methods, each individual represents the singular re-appropriation of the social universe surrounding him/her and, therefore, it becomes possible to know the social starting from the irreducible specificity of an individual praxis (Ferrarotti, 1981; *author* et al., 2016). From this perspective, each person can be considered a mirror of his/her times and environment, a witness and a member of a collective being, the holder of all the elements necessary to read the investigated phenomenon (Bichi, 2000; *author* et al., 2016). Qualitative methods are therefore regarded as being particularly effective in investigating a vulnerable social reality like that of disability (Muecke, 1997; Hartley

and Muhit, 2003), by recognising that some of the situations implied in it are inevitably beyond the reach of quantitative methods (Black, 1994). However, it needs to be pointed out that a propensity for qualitative methods does not imply that quantitative methods cannot be used in research on disability: nevertheless, here the focus is on the intrinsic limits of quantitative research, highlighting that they can be faced or overcome thanks to the contribution of qualitative research (Black, 1994; Hartley and Muhit, 2003).

Recently UNO argued that the disability issue “poses a number of challenges for data collection and measurement. The lack of a uniform definition and understanding of disability among countries and the application of non-comparable methodologies in the measurement and collection of data are not consistent or comparable among countries” (UNO, 2015:3-4). The heterogeneity of impairments and the different related conditions and situations make their measurement and/or all-embracing classification impossible, determining a further impossibility to generate unambiguous statistical inferences (Hartley and Muhit, 2003). In fact, the use (and/or the addition) of qualitative methods would allow to understand the various characteristics of a specific field of disability, investigating the extremes' data within the target population and the unexpected or unexplained findings that emerged during the quantitative research (Black, 1994; Hartley and Muhit, 2003), which usually ignores them in order to be “succinct, systematic, standardised” (Mmatli, 2009:15). These characteristics of quantitative research - in addition to the fact that studies' techniques and contents are decided in advance by researchers - make the participants passive bystanders and prevent them from expressing their opinions and considerations freely. In this way, disadvantaged groups are not given voice, which is a fundamental step to reach the inclusiveness wished by the social model (Barnes, 1992; Oliver, 1992; Kitchin, 2000). On the contrary, through qualitative methods it is possible to bring to light the stories and experiences of those who live through hard times every day (Pugach, 2001), providing precious information that can be used to introduce positive changes in disabled people's lives. Qualitative methods can give disabled subjects an active role in the research (Oliver, 1992) and the opportunity to express their needs as well. In Mmatli's (2009) view, people with disabilities should take part in research because they, more than anyone else, can understand their needs and aspirations; in this sense, they are best placed to indicate what services could have beneficial or negative effects on their lives.

More strongly, Oliver (1992) claimed that the positivist paradigm excludes the disabled person from the research, isolating him/her from every aspect of it. According to some authors, like Oliver (1992) and Zarb (1992), using qualitative methods and making people with disabilities participate in research would not yet be enough for their emancipation. Drawing from Feminist theories (Roberts, 1981; Finch, 1984; Maguire, 1987; Morris, 1996; Kitchin, 2000), power relations within the research process need to be destabilised, questioning traditional methodologies which put researchers in a position of superiority in comparison to disadvantaged groups (Kitchin, 2000). As a matter of fact, Oliver (1992) and Zarb (1992) argue that qualitative research has taken the first steps towards a participatory and inclusive approach to people with disabilities, but this is only the beginning to reach their real emancipation. Actually, though not denying the importance of participatory research to achieve important results in research on disability, the necessity to go beyond

mere collaboration between researchers and disabled people needs to be emphasised. To promote the empowerment of people with disabilities, it is necessary that they do not simply remain interviewees or consultants, but that they take on a central role in all stages of the research process. In order to be emancipatory and therefore trigger political actions, research must be directed and managed by disabled people (Oliver, 1992).

## **An overview on the use of some qualitative techniques in the study of disability**

As outlined in the previous section, social research has been dealing with disability only since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, by doing it, has been faced with some issues related to research techniques. According to Toboso-Martin and Rogero-García (2012), the difficulties one meets while investigating disability do not lie only in the limits that the different types of impairments imply: further problems can arise from investigative techniques as well, since they were born to analyse the reality of people without disabilities.

Without any pretence of completeness, hereafter I will present how qualitative research has employed a range of different techniques to study disability, and I will highlight some of their strengths and weaknesses.

Observation is one of the techniques of the qualitative method. It can be defined as a tool that enables the researcher to observe and notice a specific social group's actions as well as verbal and non-verbal interactions, facilitating an 'insider' comprehension of the investigated phenomenon (Cellini, 2008). This technique is useful especially where there are significant differences between the researcher's and the investigated subjects' points of view: in this way the researcher tries to understand the subjects' inner life through his/her own eyes (Geertz, 1983). "Obviously, there are some limits in this identification process" but the researcher tries to do his/her best to resemble those whom he/she studies "in an attempt to look at the world from their perspective", deciding "to turn his/her body into a research tool" (Barnao, 2004:9).

In research studies on disability, observation has been used, for instance, to increase the quantity and reliability of the information gathered by means of other research techniques (Mik-Meyer, 2016). This has happened especially in studies on children with disabilities: here observation allowed the comprehension of elements that would not have emerged using exclusively interviews, like the interpretation of non-verbal communication acts or the detection of particular physical and social barriers (Harding et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2014). Moreover, observation can be also used when the researcher chooses to carry out the study in spatially defined places (Goffman, 1961; Barnes, 1992; Cellini, 2008).

Although observation enables researchers to penetrate into situations and contexts that differ from those in which they normally live, and to create relationships of intimacy and trust with the investigated subjects (Barnes, 1992), it also has some critical issues. In particular, the researcher's presence can alter the natural situation of the studied phenomenon, for instance, by inhibiting the behaviour of the other person. In other cases, the researcher identifies too much with the observed group, and is unable to keep the

objective detachment required by scientific research. Last, different observers can perceive and analyse the same situation and interpret it in different ways (e.g. Cellini, 2008).

The focus group, too, is considered as an important technique because it allows to create interaction among more participants. During group sessions specific topics referring to a phenomenon of interest are called into question, often stimulated by researchers (Carter and Handerson, 2005). In research on disability, the focus group has been used not only to enable researchers to understand the disabled's point of view, but also to promote the exchange and sharing of knowledge among the participants: for instance, the discussion can focus on how to find and evaluate information about a specific type of disability (Synnott et al., 2014), on the difficulties concerning healthcare and suggestions to improve it (O'Day, 2004), on comparing the experience of people with different types of disabilities in job search, and giving useful advice to those who encountered difficulties in getting employed (Jans et al., 2012). The focus group can therefore be a valid tool for the researcher to analyse a topic or to stimulate participants' interventions, and this can foster the empowerment of people with disabilities (Jans et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, the focus group has also some limits in the research on disability: first, logistical problems can prevent people with different types of impairment from participating (O'Day, 2004; Toboso-Martin and Rogero-García, 2012). In addition, as Carter and Handerson (2005) argue, being in the presence of other people can get some participants not to talk about delicate topics, like those related to disability.

When dealing with disability, qualitative interviews are highly used: the researcher poses open questions in order to encourage interviewees to talk, and then listens to people describing how they perceive the world in which they live and work (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

In the semi-structured interview, in particular, the interviewer is allowed to have a certain degree of flexibility and freedom in posing questions. This interview technique has been employed in many studies on disability (e.g. Murray et al., 2007; Loeppenthin et al., 2014; Blaylock et al., 2015) as "it allows enough flexibility for the interviewer and interviewee to clarify meaning and explore fully the issues raised during the interviewing process" (Barnes, 1992:120). However, the term 'enough' implies that semi-structured interviews are not completely flexible since they are based on an interview guide that delimits the topic areas to investigate. The interview guide can limit the participants in their answers (Senra et al., 2011) because the researcher has to respect a rather ordered and previously established set of questions (Bichi, 2007).

Differently from the semi-structured interview, not only do other types of qualitative interviews limit the possibility that established questions influence the research, but they also allow the respondent to have a higher freedom of expression. In literature we do not find a univocal denomination for this kind of interviews, maybe because the way we call them derives also from the epistemological reflection on the definition of a 'qualitative interview', that is why we have a wide range of terms (*author*, 2011). Just to mention a few, Carter and Handerson (2005) refer to them as 'in-depth interviews' and Hindhede

(2012) writes about 'face-to-face interviews', while Grytten and Måseide (2006) use the term 'unstructured interviews'. Despite the different terms, all authors agree on defining these kind of interviews as non-directive or non-structured; that is, an interview without a fixed scheme that the interviewer and the interviewee must follow. So, they are free to shape the course of the interview (*author*, 2011). In the field of disability, many studies use this type of interviews because it allows to give voice to the participants who, by describing their past, enable researchers to understand their perspective, their point of view and the situations pertaining to disability (Foster, 2007; Smith-Chandler and Swart, 2014; Barns et al., 2015; Al-Makhamreh, 2016). Moreover, as the experience of disability has scarcely generalizable meanings, interviews can be a valid tool to understand the attributions each subject assigns to his/her own impairment (Foster 2007; Senra et al., 2011; Olafson et al., 2011). Giving voice to disabled people is what the social model requires and the interviews can therefore be employed in order to promote the empowerment of those people (Foster, 2007; Smith-Chandler and Swart, 2014; Stephens et al., 2014; Barns et al., 2015).

As a matter of fact, Smith-Chandler and Swart (2014) emphasize the importance of letting research participants decide how to tell their story and what topics to examine in-depth.

Nevertheless, some limits can be found also when using interviews: for instance, in their study aimed at comprehending the coping strategies adopted by visually impaired people, Blaylock et al. (2015) claim that having involved visually impaired researchers in the research could have influenced their interview conduction. As a matter of fact, in comparison with the other researchers, those with disabilities could have conducted their interviews differently, maybe examining certain topics more in depth than others on the basis of their personal experience. Further problems can arise in studies carried out with disabled children: as Harding et al. (2009) and Stephens et al. (2014) argue, children can meet difficulties in presenting their experiences verbally. Moreover, as children are easily suggestible, the interviewer could manipulate the interview with his/her questions accidentally.

Besides the more 'traditional' techniques mentioned above, a further qualitative tool is autoethnography (Dumitrica, 2010; Keefer, 2010; Denshire, 2014). Maréchal (2010:43) defines it as:

“a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork and writing. The term has a double sense referring either to the reflexive consideration of a group to which one belongs as a native, member or participant (ethnography of one's own group) or to the reflexive accounting of the narrator's subjective experience and subjectivity (autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest)”

Within the disability area some authors use autoethnography in different ways in order to describe and comprehend the experience of impairment: for instance, Esposito (2014) poetically tells her personal reflexive considerations about her own physical disability. The use of poetry allows to express what would be difficult to convey through natural language

(such as the experience of pain), producing an evocative story which aims to stimulate an emotional response from the reader. So, this kind of autoethnography focuses only on the narrator's personal experience and the reflections on himself/herself presented through creative practices.

This approach differs from analytic autoethnography (Maréchal, 2010), in which the narrator, though reflecting on himself/herself, presents experiences and reflections as a member belonging to a specific group: in this case one tries to develop and offer a social group's comprehension - theoretical as well - through the realistic story of those who belong to it, in an attempt to make the process more scientific than in postmodern autoethnography (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Analytical autoethnography is a technique that allows a reflection on disability with regard to the social structures that need to be modified to favour the inclusions of disabled people (e.g. Lourens, 2016). It can also be useful to overcome the limits that traditional qualitative research imposes to those researchers who, due to their disability, find it difficult to have direct contacts with people participating in the study, especially when these too have some type of disability (Polczyk, 2012).

Lastly, despite a debate not devoid of objections within the academic world, also Performative Social Sciences (PSS) should be presented: they began to be applied to disability in recent times and are considered as 'innovations' in qualitative research (Furman et al., 2005; Fenge et al., 2016). The PSS are based on artistic performances (such as theatre, poetry, music, dance, photography, videos, website activities and much more) aimed at the realization of a scientific project (Madison and Hamera, 2006). Gergen and Gergen (2011) argue that the performative orientation has particularly attracted those researchers who are interested in social justice issues, as the performance has proven to be a very effective way to involve people in a perspective of political-cultural change. The artistic performance in front of an audience has the potential to stimulate reactions of emotional empathy which can facilitate the comprehension of disabled people's experience in a way that academic research does not succeed in conveying (Furman et al., 2005; Cameron, 2009; Hodges et al., 2014; Fenge et al., 2016).

Although in recent years the amount of research using performances has increased and several researchers praise the value of the results derived from PSS (e.g. Furman et al., 2005; Gergen and Gergen, 2011), the debate about these approaches is rather heated and the questions is whether they can be considered a real practice of scientific research. As a matter of fact, "unlike most qualitative practices, [the PSS] challenge the identity of the discipline. By blurring the boundary between science and art, fact and fiction, seriousness and play, they challenge 'normal science' activities and standards" (Gergen and Gergen, 2011:296).

## **Experiences and methodological reflections deriving from a qualitative research study**

Currently I am completing a research study on disability in the Italian province of Trentino. The main research goal is investigating and understanding the difficulties

that people with disabilities meet in the labour market, inclusion (or non-inclusion) modalities and possible forms of discrimination. However, here I will try to present some methodological considerations deriving from this research experience.

In the light of the considerations presented in the previous sections, I have decided to employ a qualitative method to carry out the research and, in particular, I have opted for two types of interview: to date, 89 people have been interviewed.

In order to examine all possible points of view on disability in the labour market, interviews were conducted with Human Resources Managers of both public organisations and private firms (n=11) in which disabled people were employed. Moreover, 30 colleagues without disabilities who work in the same organisations and firms were also interviewed (n=30). With the Human Resources Managers and the colleagues without disabilities the semi-structured interview technique was used (n=41), with the purpose of investigating precisely their opinions and experiences on working with disabled people.

Within those organisations and firms also the disabled employees were interviewed (31 people). In addition, 17 unemployed disabled people were interviewed (n=48). Of the disabled people interviewed, 21 had a physical or mobility disability, 16 were visually impaired and 11 were hearing impaired (n=48). I decided to focus on people with physical and sensory disabilities because other existing research studies (e.g. Baldwin and Johnson, 1994; Thornicroft, 2006; Verdonschot et. al., 2009) show that most disabled workers are people with a basic activity difficulty (seeing, hearing, communicating and walking) and I wanted to compare my findings with those emerging from other studies. Investigating people with other types of disability will probably be the aim of further research.

The interview technique used for disabled people was the *récit de vie* (Bertaux, 1998) which takes into account the biographical experience of the interviewee in a way similar to the life story (e.g. Atkinson, 1998). While in the life story the interviewer encourages the interviewee to tell his/her whole biographical path, from birth up to the interview time, the *récit de vie* aims at a greater **focussing** on the area the researcher wants to study, that is the theme, the sociological topic previously established in the research design (Bichi, 2002). The *récit de vie* is often used in Sociology to investigate what Bertaux (1998:44) defines as “*domaines spécifiques*”, i.e. experiential dimensions often characterised by deviation from social normality and/or by non-linear life paths and/or by events which upset or break a planned and coherent chronology in its unfolding. I have therefore found the use of this interview technique appropriate, considering that disability (like other topics regarding health, but not just that) can be defined at the very least as a 'delicate' research area (author, 2009). The *récit de vie* can be included among the non-structured interviews, that is to say that they do not have a fixed interview guide that both the interviewer and the interviewee must respect, so they are free to create the interview path (Bichi, 2000); this technique also gives the possibility to collect and examine, within every interview, both general information on the contexts and elements that define the interviewees, their cultural backgrounds, their relations with 'significant others' and with those social worlds that define roles and positions (author, 2013).

The *récit de vie* (as any other type of qualitative interview, after all) requires therefore a great degree of attention and a very careful listening on the part of the researcher who, according to what the interviewee says, tries to extract and/or to deepen any specific subject that the narrator may only have mentioned carelessly and that is indeed crucial for the global economy of the study (*author*, 2011). In this way, it is possible to pay special attention also to the meanings and the signals that come directly from the interviewee's reality, without concentrating exclusively on the study of previously agreed subjects (*author*, 2016).

Nine researchers/interviewers have participated in the research design and the interviews' collection and analysis; one of them is visually impaired. In this way the study was conducted taking into account the disabled researcher's knowledge and experiences. I want to point out that this person played a crucial role for the study's general management, and suggested to the research team possible investigation areas to take into consideration and not to disregard, like accessibility, mobility, various regulations, different prejudices that disabled people have to face and much more. All this also contributed to focus better on the theoretical framework and on the development of the whole research design.

Some (modest) difficulties emerged when the disabled researcher conducted interviews with disabled interviewees, and it is worth mentioning them. For instance, interviewing visually impaired people, some of them often repeated: "I think there is no need to talk about this, because you already know it, since you too are visually impaired". A sort of identification of the interviewees with the researcher had taken place because of the same type of disability. The interviewees therefore would like to omit some aspects that they considered shared with the researcher, thinking it is not necessary to express them. Thanks to the researcher's experience in the field it was possible to investigate some topics that, otherwise, would have been omitted or treated superficially by these interviewees.

An embarrassing situation took place when the disabled researcher met a quadriplegic on a wheelchair: unable to see the person clearly, the researcher could not know that the interviewee could not move the arms and held out the hand to shake the interviewee's one. The interviewee and the researcher had to admit their disabilities and give explanation for their behaviour. As outlined above, this minor incident is not serious but both the interviewer and the interviewee felt embarrassed for a few minutes, although the impasse was overcome thanks to the researcher's experience who downplayed the situation making some jokes.

The disabled researcher faced a more difficult situation in interviewing a hearing impaired person who had never acquired spoken language and communicated with sign language through an interpreter. As we will see later, the interviews with these people proved to be the most complicated and required adaptation of the technique. Getting back to that specific case, the researcher could hear the interpreter's voice but was unable (literally) to see the interviewee's facial expressions and physical gestures: for this reason, the researchers was not fully satisfied with the interview, getting the impression that important elements got lost.

Last, being visually impaired but not totally blind, the researcher could move quite easily in the different places in which the interviews were conducted (interviewees' offices and homes). This would not have been likewise possible if this person had been on a wheelchair, instead of being visually impaired. As a matter of fact, not all interview locations - chosen on the basis of the interviewees' preferences - were wheelchair accessible. One must not forget that people with disabilities (and people in general) need to feel at ease during the interviews and it is therefore better if researchers adapt to the place chosen by the interviewee for the meeting.

The other interviews, conducted either by the disabled researcher or by other researchers of the team, went fine: however, this has been possible thanks to the fact these researchers/interviewers had been selected on the basis of their previous experience in carrying out qualitative interviews.

As mentioned above, in the interviews with hearing impaired people the interview approach needed to be modified. Among the 11 hearing impaired people interviewed, only one wore a hearing aid and could hear the interviewer's voice and communicate verbally without great difficulties. Another person, though not hearing anything, could lip-read easily and express verbally. The other nine interviewees, though being able to lip-read, could not communicate verbally in a clear way. Among these, five were interviewed by means of a sign language interpreter but the interviewers got the impression that the interviewees were not completely at ease in talking about themselves in front of a third person. In fact, it is known that interviews (in general and the qualitative ones in particular) should not be conducted in the presence of third parties in order to make the interviewees feel free to express themselves to their best (Bichi, 2002). Faced with this obstacle, I decided to introduce a technique adaptation to interview other hearing impaired people with communicative difficulties. The interviews with the next four hearing impaired people were divided into two phases: in the first phase, the researchers tried to carry out the interview on their own as far as possible. The researcher accurately articulated every verbal input through lip movements and the interviewees tried to answer verbally as good as they could. Since the communication system of deaf people is different from that of hearing people, the answers were short and concise. Further input produced by the researcher did not succeed in stimulating more detailed answers. Then the second phase began: after transcribing the whole interview conducted face-to-face, the researcher sent it by email to the interviewee, asking to examine more in depth certain points, topics or answers that appeared to be incomplete or not exhaustive for the research. Before this, the researchers verified that interviewees were comfortable using computers and the email. However, it needs to be pointed out that this second phase did not lead to the production of long answers and/or written explanations. This conciseness should not come as a surprise: for hearing impaired people it is difficult to achieve a full mastery of graphical signs, the phoneme-grapheme correspondence and to expand their knowledge of new words, with the subtle nuances of various meanings, to reach a highly expressive written communication (e.g. Fabbretti and Tomasuolo, 2011). As a consequence, it has been deduced that for future research including hearing impaired people (and opting for not involving any sign language interpreter) it would be suitable to employ a semi-structured

interview composed of more specific (and, if necessary, more numerous) questions that lead to short answers.

## Conclusions

As mentioned in the previous section, I decided that qualitative interviews were the most appropriate technique for my study given the particular topic of my research.

It would have been complicated (and maybe even impossible) to obtain permission to access corporate offices in order to base the research work on the observation technique: the research team might have disturbed the regular daily work. Also, the presence of the team (or of a single researcher) might push people to change their behaviour, making us observe a situation which is different from the reality (Cellini, 2008). Thanks to the interviews, instead, the research team was able to find out that, in some cases, people with disabilities were discriminated against or were victims of workplace harassment by colleagues and/or by Human Resources Managers: it is reasonable to think that such behaviours would not have been put in place in the presence of an observing researcher. Even if had I chosen the observation technique, I should have opted for interviews anyways in order to contact the unemployed disabled people: through the words of the interviewees, both with and without disabilities, the team was able to understand the reasons (or some of them) why disabled people were excluded from the labour market.

There are some reasons why I have not used focus groups: first of all, participating in a group meeting would have revealed the disability of some participants. We have learned a fundamental lesson from the disabled researcher of our team and from the literature on the subject: people with a disability which is not apparent usually wish to keep it hidden (Perrotta, 2009), and during the research work, we have identified a number of this latter. This reluctance in manifesting one's own disability was confirmed by more people: for example, people with a degenerative condition tend to keep it hidden as long as possible in order not to be stigmatized (Goffman, 1961), to avoid being labelled and thus experiencing negative consequences. By inviting them to participate in a group meeting, I might push them to break the silence, and this was not my intention. Also, as already mentioned, focus groups might have hindered the participation of some people: not everyone is comfortable discussing personal experiences in public, and this is true for both disabled and non-disabled people (Carter and Handerson, 2005; Acocella, 2008). Moreover, to organize focus groups we should have asked people to meet in a designated area and this might have implied further difficulties (O'Day et al., 2004; Toboso-Martin and Rogero-García, 2012). My University obviously has accessible rooms, but moving around can be complicated for people with disabilities, for various reasons, and I did not want to exclude people from my research study for this. And even though today it is possible to organize focus groups through the web (Synnot et al., 2014), I was not sure that all the participants had access to an ADSL or similar connection. In this case, too, I did not want to exclude anybody. With interviews, the team was able to overcome all these obstacles and talk to people face to face, meeting them in the place they chose.

Finally, given the specific subject of the research study and the different types of people I wanted to include (people with physical, sensory, visual and hearing impairments, non-disabled colleagues, Human Resources Managers), I came to the conclusion that autoethnography and innovative communication strategies would not have been appropriate. I think I could not convince all the participants to write their autoethnography or to engage in some creative work to express their opinions or describe their experiences. Also, I did not know how to integrate these activities in a comparative analysis of the different positions, experiences, and opinions on the specific research subject. This, however, might be the object for future research. Moreover, thanks to the interviews it was possible to establish, confirming literature on the subject, that people with disabilities are sometimes distrustful towards research work (Kitchin, 2000): they feel that research, once concluded, will not bring any concrete and positive effects, that it might soon be forgotten and that it can only be useful for the researchers and their scientific production. It would be difficult to convince people having this opinion to commit to perform the activities required by the innovative strategies, also because they require a lot of time and the full disposition to display their private feelings, emotions and experiences. With interviews, on the other hand, we were able to involve disabled people ensuring their right to privacy, anonymity, a reasonable amount of time (one and a half hours or two), and the freedom to discuss certain topics or not.

Therefore for all the above reasons interviews were the best technique for this study. However, some special arrangements and adaptations were necessary. As previously mentioned, to overcome mobility and accessibility issues, we have established that the interviewees chose the interview location, and the researchers moved to meet them.

Special attention was given to the general attitude and physical presence of the researcher in interviews with visually or hearing impaired people. As for visually impaired people, it must be considered that all non-verbal communication on the part of the researcher is useless: it is impossible to communicate approval through nods and smiles, because the interviewee cannot see them. It is therefore necessary to express our approval, our interest and our attention for the tale of the interviewee through verbal communication (or at least using our voice). However, it would be wrong to think that visually impaired people cannot perceive what is going on before them: they understand if the person talking to them is looking ahead, right or left, they can perceive embarrassment, sincerity, and attention (Marcantoni, 2014). They are exceptional listeners, because hearing is their life, sometimes literally.

On the contrary, for hearing impaired people, non-verbal communication is key: in interviews with them the researchers always tried to keep eye contact, trying not to cover their face and, most of all, their mouth as it sometimes can inadvertently happen. They, in other words, tried to be constantly seen by the interviewees. The researchers expressed their interest and attention through their facial expressions and body language, and not verbally. If visually impaired people are hearing professionals, hearing impaired people have strong observation skills.

The disabled researcher did not obtain better or more in depth interviews compared with the rest of the team; as already pointed out, there were some minor problems due to the disabilities of both the researcher and the interviewees, overcome thanks to the researcher's experience. Paradoxically, the disabled researcher was able to obtain better interviews (sometimes) when interviewing non-disabled colleagues and Human Resources Managers. Previous experience in research together with strong hearing skills because of visual impairment allowed this researcher to grasp the easiness or perplexity of non-disabled people when discussing delicate matters. The researcher could recognize their sincerity, embarrassment or prejudice from their voice, nuances, or in things said and left unsaid.

To confirm the studies of Barnes (1992), this research proves that the involvement of a disabled researcher is not 'essential' in a work on disability. Direct experience of disability does not automatically imply a feeling of affinity with other disabled people, or an interest for relevant research topics. What really matters is the researcher's attitude, their attention, their hearing and observation abilities, their interaction skills: they have to be 'good researchers'. They have to make the interviewees feel at ease, they have to respect their silences trying to interpret them rather than force them. If the narrator does not want to discuss a certain topic, they have to be able to perceive their discomfort (*author*, 2011). In research on disability the researchers can (and sometimes must) adopt different conducting styles during the interview: they have to pay attention to their way of dealing with others; they have to develop their ability to identify themselves with people; they must have a deep knowledge of the research context.

Social sciences scholars who use qualitative interviews (but also those who use other qualitative techniques as well) should therefore be aware of the fact that they are dealing primarily with human beings, with people. It is this very 'detail' that must be kept in mind.

It is therefore important to let disabled people participate in the research, not only as interviewees or subjects but also as consultants or co-producers; however, in my opinion it is not always possible or necessary that disabled people take control of the research as suggested by Zarb (1992). Actually, people in general, both disabled and non-disabled, have no experience in doing research: and despite the fact that qualitative research tries to bridge the gap between science and daily life (Marradi, 2007), we must remember that researchers are professionals with specific competences, as it is the case for other professions. Disabled people can surely say how a building can be more accessible, but it takes an engineer and construction workers to make this accessibility come true. So the disabled researcher of the team was of great help for the research we carried out for the direct knowledge of the subject but also, and most of all, for the strong research experience as a professional researcher.

Therefore, in agreement with the theories of Barnes (1992), researchers must however put their skills and knowledge at the service of their research subjects. In this way disabled people will be able to play a crucial role in all the phases of the research work and in the dissemination and use of results (Mmatli, 2009).

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