L’abilismo svelato

Uno studio partecipativo che intreccia prospettive personali e analisi collettiva[1]

Rosa Bellacicco[2] e Silvia Dell’Anna[3]

Sommario

Negli ultimi decenni si è registrato un crescente interesse, nella letteratura internazionale, nei confronti del concetto di *abilismo*. Questo fenomeno di discriminazione ha un impatto significativo sulla vita delle persone con disabilità; tuttavia, la sua pervasività all’interno della popolazione generale non è stata indagata a sufficienza. Questo articolo presenta una ricerca partecipativa co-condotta con esperti con disabilità in Italia. Le riflessioni critiche sull’argomento sono state guidate dalle prospettive personali delle persone con disabilità, radicate nelle loro esperienze quotidiane, e organizzate in un quadro concettuale basato sulla *Convenzione ONU sui Diritti delle Persone con Disabilità* (CRPD). L’articolo discute nel dettaglio le fasi di questa indagine partecipativa, nonché le specificità e le sfide della ricerca su, con e per le persone con disabilità. Come prodotto finale, il gruppo di ricerca ha co-costruito uno strumento per indagare la diffusione degli atteggiamenti abilisti nella popolazione generale e promuovere consapevolezza. Questo approccio risponde all’urgente necessità di coinvolgere attivamente le persone con disabilità nella ricerca partecipativa su temi rilevanti per la loro esistenza.

Parole chiave

Ricerca partecipativa, Approccio qualitativo, Abilismo, Sviluppo di strumenti, Disabilità.

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[1] L’articolo è il risultato della collaborazione tra le due autrici. Sebbene il testo si fondi su un impianto condiviso, si segnala che le seguenti sezioni sono attribuibili a Rosa Bellacicco: *Introduzione; La ricerca su, con e per le persone con disabilità; Il processo di ricerca partecipativa sull’abilismo: le fasi preparatorie; La seconda parte del lavoro: la costruzione dell’Ableist Attitudes Scale – AAS*. Silvia Dell’Anna, invece, è autrice delle sezioni *Atteggiamenti abilisti; Le ragioni della ricerca; La prima parte del lavoro: una nuova definizione condivisa di abilismo; Riflessione finale sul processo di ricerca partecipativa*. La sezione *Discussione* è condivisa.

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— L’integrazione scolastica e sociale
Vol. 25, n. 1, febbraio 2026
doi: 10.14605/ISS2512605 — ISSN: 2724-2242 — pp. 63-78
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Ableism unveiled

A participatory study bridging individual insights with collective critique[4]

Rosa Bellacicco[5] and Silvia Dell'Anna[6]

Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in international literature towards *ableism*. These phenomena of discrimination have a significant impact on the life of people with disabilities; however, their pervasiveness in the general population has not been investigated sufficiently. This article outlines a participatory research co-conducted with experts with disabilities in Italy. Critical reflections on the topic were guided by people with disabilities' insider perspectives on their everyday experiences and organized in a conceptual framework based on the UNCRPD. The paper discusses in detail the phases of this participatory inquiry, and the specificities and challenges of research about, with, and for persons with disabilities. As a final product, the research team co-constructed an instrument to investigate the prevalence of ableist attitudes in the general population and raising awareness. This research approach responds to the urgent need of actively involving people with disability in participatory inquiry on issues relevant to their existence.

Keywords

Participatory research, Qualitative approach, Ableism, Instrument development, Disability.

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[4] The article is the result of collaboration between the two authors. Although the text is based on a shared framework, it should be noted that the following sections are attributable to Rosa Bellacicco: *Introduction; Research about, with, and for people with disabilities; The participatory research process on ableism: the preparatory phases; The second part of the work: developing the Ableist Attitudes Scale – AAS*. Silvia Dell'Anna, instead, authored the sections *Ableist attitudes; Research rationale; The first part of the work: a new shared definition of ableism; The final reflection on the participatory research process*. The *Discussion* is shared.

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— L'integrazione scolastica e sociale
Vol. 25, Issue 1, February 2026
doi: 10.14605/ISS2512605 — ISSN: 2724-2242 — pp. 63-78
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Introduction

This paper presents a participatory research project on ableism, conducted with the direct involvement of people with disabilities as co-researchers. The study was carried out in Italy, where — despite a growing interest in Disability Studies (Medeghini et al., 2013) — scholarly work that uses ableism as both a theoretical and empirical concept remains limited (Fedeli, 2022). The paper outlines the stages of the participatory process that led to the development of the Ableist Attitude Scale (AAS), designed to detect discriminatory attitudes within the general population.

Research about, with, and for people with disabilities

Scientific research actively involving individuals with disabilities began to emerge in the late 20th century, influenced by the Independent Living movement (Gilbert, 2004; Stack & McDonald, 2014). The participatory approach, specifically, developed within Disability Studies and is grounded in the social model of disability. Oliver (1992) — a pioneer of participatory research — argued that much disability research conducted over the previous century had been experienced by participants as neglectful of their perspectives, irrelevant to their needs, and unable to improve their future trajectories. Traditional research methods, rooted in a rigid distinction between researcher and researched and in the belief that academics alone possess legitimate expertise, have therefore often reproduced ableist structures and oppressive theoretical paradigms (Lester & Nusbaum, 2018).

In this article, «participatory research» refers to studies initiated by others but involving people with disabilities (Zarb, 1992). Despite variations in definitions, these approaches share core principles: the active engagement of individuals with disabilities in research and the centrality of their lived experiences and expertise (Henn, Weinstein & Ford, 2009). Participatory research is therefore expected to foster (1) equitable, trusting, and mutually beneficial collaboration between researchers and participants; (2) recognition and valuing of disabled people's experiences; (3) their involvement in all aspects of a project; and (4) the production of knowledge oriented toward positive social change (Aldridge, 2015; Chappell, 2001; Peuravaara, 2015).

Such involvement is closely linked to the concept of empowerment (Stack & McDonald, 2014). Nonetheless, participatory approaches also entail significant methodological and ethical challenges (Flynn, 2019; Peuravaara, 2015), particularly because power asymmetries between academic researchers and participants with diverse educational and professional backgrounds may hinder the genuine amplification of disabled people's voices (Stone & Priestley, 1996). Addressing participants' varied needs can also be difficult (Aldridge, 2015; Parsons et al., 2001), requiring the adaptation of materials to ensure accessibility (Pentini, 2001). Some scholars have questioned whether these approaches can meaningfully involve individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Chappell, 2001; Gilbert, 2004). Indeed, reviews of participatory research with adults with intellectual or sensory disabilities indicate that only a minority of projects achieve genuinely shared power across all research phases, with limited engagement in tasks such as data analysis (Stack & McDonald, 2014; Rix et al., 2020).

Ableist attitudes

The attitudes of teachers and professionals in educational contexts play a decisive role in influencing the (learning) experience of disabled people. The literature indicates the presence of bias in the definition of learning objectives, in everyday micro-behaviours and even in assessment methods (e.g., Bastart, Rohmer & Popa-Roch, 2021; Turetsky et al., 2021), which would lead to underestimating the competences and potential of pupils with disabilities, to legitimising discriminatory behaviour of peers and colleagues, and to implementing differential practices that lead to segregation and marginalisation.

In this regard, Friedman's studies (2019, 2023) on explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) disability prejudice showed that non-disabled individuals reported low explicit but high implicit bias, whereas disability professionals exhibited high levels of both. Notably, many professionals were symbolic ableists, expressing empathy yet reinforcing individualistic views that frame disability as a personal problem rather than a systemic one. A recent study conducted in Italy on a sample of teachers further demonstrated a connection between various forms of discriminatory attitudes (Dell'Anna, Parisi & Pedron, 2024). The dimensions examined — ableism, together with sexism, racism and classism — were found to be significantly interrelated, supporting the hypothesis that certain individuals may be more vulnerable to the internalization of biases and stereotypes than others. The presence of such relationships between discriminatory attitudes would support intersectionality literature (Crenshaw, 1989), which argues that different forms of discrimination are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Research rationale

In this context, it is essential to have instruments, such as questionnaires or other scales, that, on the one hand, allow for the identification of professionals (both current and future) who exhibit ableist attitudes, in order to implement training and awareness-raising interventions, and, on the other hand, provide instruments for self-reflection and assessment that can be applied in educational settings as well as in schools.

Nevertheless, while scales for measuring racism and sexism have been the subject of more in-depth studies and there are numerous validated versions (e.g., Colbow et al., 2016), when looking specifically at scales measuring ableism-related attitudes, the results are scarce, especially regarding quantitative instruments that investigate their diffusion among the general population. When studies apply quantitative instruments, the incidence of ableism is more often acquired through the perspectives of those subjected to these discriminations rather than from the perpetrators (Li et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2023). To our knowledge, four specific measurement scales for ableism-related attitudes in the general population have been identified (Aydemir-Döke & Herbert, 2022; Conover, Israel & Nylund-Gibson, 2017; Friedman & Awsumb, 2019; Kattari, 2019). These scales were developed in the context of doctoral research or exploratory studies and examine the ideologies of micro-aggression or hostile/benevolent ableism (e.g. the already cited Friedman & Awsumb' scale, 2019), neglecting to explore the various ways ableism may manifests, including how the social context and different dimensions of daily life justify, influence, and perpetuate ableist beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, despite the calls for empirical research to amplify disabled voices (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014) as well as the *nothing about us, without us movement* calling for disabled people's involvement in understandings of their experiences, it is crucial to emphasize the scarcity of co-constructed tools that investigate ableist attitudes. In this regard, only Kattari's scale (2019) was developed through co-participation with activists with disabilities. In the Italian context, the growing interest in ableism (Medeghini et al., 2013; Bocci et al., 2023) is not yet accompanied by a substantial body of literature that employs ableism as a theoretical and empirical concept (Rinaldi, Belluzzo & Caldarera, 2022).

Against this background, we co-developed, with the direct involvement of disabled people as researchers, a scale (the *Ableist Attitude Scale* - AAS) designed to measure ableist attitudes in the general population, a validated instrument applicable in diverse settings, such as educational environments and extensive surveys. The comprehensive analysis encompasses methodological considerations, reliability assessments and the potential applications of the scale.

The participatory research process on ableism: the preparatory phases

The constitution of the group of experts with disabilities

Firstly, a list of 15 well-known Italian experienced activists on ableism were contacted by email. The target group entailed representatives of the main minorities existing within the broad category of disability: people with hearing, visual, physical, and intellectual disabilities as well as neurodivergent people (autism). Many enthusiastically agreed to become involved in the research process. Most of those who could not get engaged suggested possible substitutes with a similar profile, keeping the group balanced not only in relation to disability but also gender and age. Finally, a purposive group of 10 experts with disabilities was formed (Table 1). All people were informed, at the beginning of the study, regarding the aim of the study, the procedures and their rights, and they gave their consent.

Table 1

Participants' characteristics

	Male	Female	*Tot.*
< 50 years	3	2	*5*
50-60 years	2	1	*3*
> 60 years	1	1	*2*
Tot.	*6*	*4*	*10*

The academic-researchers' role and positioning

Considering that the academic-researchers' positionality may create ethical problems, in that are positioned as part «insider» and part «outsider» in relation to the participants (Peuravaara, 2015), and that the background, interests, and lives of researchers invariably influence the direction of research (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), it was crucial to clearly describe what experience and position were for the participants with disabilities. Four university researchers — the authors of this article, two sociologists, a psychologist and an educationalist, all (at that time) young women — conducted the study. Two of us share a close relationship with individuals with disabilities (one as a mother and another as a sister), while the other two are academic researchers with knowledge of the topic and teaching experience with pupils with disabilities.

Clearly informing participants at different times regarding the theoretical foundations and the cognitive goals of the study was also of great importance, to make them fully aware of every aspect of the research (Peuravaara, 2015; Verseghy, Atack & Maher, 2020). Regarding the risks of making certain categorizations and reproducing people with different impairments as homogenous groups (Peuravaara, 2015; Milner & Frawley, 2019; Rix et al., 2022; Porkertová et al., 2024), we tried to conduct our research from an intersectional perspective, paying attention to not solely the impairment but «multiple affiliations» of participants (Shakespeare, 2006) and characteristics, in terms of skills, gender, age, social class interests, attitudes, priorities and motivations to contribute to the dialogic spiral.

Preparation materials and meetings management

The research group met 7 times, between May and October 2021, online, as it was still close to the pandemic and the participants included also, as previously mentioned, people with physical disabilities and Italian activists living abroad (Spain).

In addition to figuring out the communication rules for the internal discussion among the group, there was also a diverse range of needs to be considered. These included testing the accessibility of software (e.g., platform used for online meetings – Webex) and documentation used (e.g., slides, papers), alongside with the support of an interpreter of the Italian Sign Language (ISL), involved at all stages of the research process. To enhance the engagement of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the language was kept as simple, clear, and concrete as possible; a more informal register and familiar examples were used to explain the difficult and abstract concepts as well as audio description and text transcriptions were offered at the same time.

The participatory nature of the study required sustained dialogic engagement, both during scheduled meetings and through ongoing exchanges (email, telephone, shared documents). An iterative feedback process enabled participants with disabilities to assume the role of co-researchers, rather than research subjects. Meetings were organised in a flexible format — short, frequent sessions with the possibility of joining or withdrawing as needed — and individual follow-ups were arranged when necessary. Two authors facilitated each session to ensure an inclusive climate. Participation levels fluctuated (3 to 8 of the 10 members), while interim reflections and communications provided additional opportunities to address emerging issues and negotiate areas of disagreement.

The first part of the work: a new shared definition of ableism

In the first two meetings, the research team shared a number of definitions of ableism. Discussions revolved around the different themes covered by the definitions available in the literature, reflecting on the most recurring ones and those recognized only by certain authors. Furthermore, the most relevant themes were discussed based on three guiding questions:

1. What is ableism?
2. How does it manifest?
3. What are its consequences?

Through an initial work of analysis, selection, and brainstorming, the group agreed on a set of essential aspects to create a complete and exhaustive definition of the concept of ableism and, subsequently, a short version.

In the following two meetings the research team discussed experiences of discrimination they had personally faced or were aware of, due to their role and commitment as experts in the field. To organize the experiences into categories, a dedicated grid was created, containing the list of life areas mentioned by the UNCRPD (e.g., education, work, independent living, family, health, etc.) divided into the four dimensions: economic, political, bio-psychic, and socio-cultural (Table 2).

Table 2

Examples of discrimination organised into the conceptual framework

Dimensions	Life Areas	Examples
Political system	Bureaucracy	Access to services, support, and funding is frequently associated with a rigid and stigmatising category system.
	Political representation	There are very few political representatives with disabilities at local, regional, and national level.
Economic system	Work	Workplace prejudices restrict the career opportunities of people with disabilities, often confining them to stereotypical jobs (e.g., a visually impaired person could only work in a call centre or as a massage therapist).
	Consumption	Very few companies carefully consider the needs of people with disabilities (e.g., clothing, shoes) in manufacturing goods and account them as consumers, equal to the rest of the population.
Bio-psychic system	Sexuality	The sexuality of people with disabilities is often denied and sometimes even repressed, both at family and societal level.
	Reproduction	Low or negative expectations about the parenting abilities of people with disabilities often translate into verbal microaggressions and even harmful practices within social and healthcare services (e.g., encouraging abortion, not protecting reproductive organs during radiation).
Socio-cultural system	Education	Children with disabilities often experience bullying and social isolation in schools.
	Leisure time	Cultural products and opportunities (e.g., movies, tv series) are not accessible for many people with disabilities.

Moreover, referring to the Pyramid of hate (Anti-Defamation League, 2018), participants were actively involved in formulating examples of discrimination at different levels of severity within the same dimension (e.g., language, stereotypes, micro-aggressions, psychological, verbal, or physical violence).

Furthermore, an initial extended definition of ableism was drafted by the research group. Based on this long definition, a shorter definition was also prepared (Box 1), with the aim of raising awareness not only in the academic field but also at social and political level.

Box 1

The co-created short definition of «Ableism» (translated)

> Ableism is a form of discrimination that concerns disability, understood as the product of the interaction between a society centred on the concept of «normality» and certain characteristics of the person. It is a set of negative attitudes and/or discriminatory behaviours that result in the creation, perpetuation, or exacerbation of conditions of disadvantage related to disability.

The second part of the work: developing the *Ableist Attitudes Scale* (AAS)

The subsequent meetings were devoted to the development of the measurement scale called *Ableist Attitude Scale* (AAS).

Firstly, the group discussed the measurement tool to be constructed based on the few selected survey scales from the literature review phase. Despite being developed using different methods and applied to different populations, the presentation of the three scales selected during the empirical literature review proved useful in familiarizing all research participants with this type of instrument. Of the four scales identified in our literature review, only three were presented to the panel (Friedman & Awsumb, 2019; Conover, Israel & Nylund-Gibsonet, 2017; Kattari, 2019), since they were the only ones published in scientific journals. The remaining one (Aydemir-Döke & Herbert, 2022), instead, derived from a doctoral thesis and, since it was based on an unpublished work, it was excluded.

In light of the discussions that took place within the larger group, academic researchers elaborated a first, extensive, list of items: firstly, the insider perspectives were rephrased as anonymously as possible, not only to protect the privacy of those concerned but also to make them generalizable to several individual situations and experiences. Secondly, they were broken down into short sentences, each of which contained only one type of discrimination. Finally, the wording was approximated to a questionnaire item (see Table 3).

Table 3

From the shortened version of the Pyramid of hate with some examples to the scale items

Levels of discrimination serverity	Examples from the panel work	Anonymised and generalized fumulation(s)	Item(s)
Discrimination (e.g., at work, in education, etc.)	I was denied an opportunity for career progression because of my disability.	People with disabilities are denied employment positions or career advancement because the disability is considered an obstacle to productivity or a hindrance in the work environment (e.g., for colleagues).	Before placing a person with disability in a work group, it would be fair to ask the opinion of future colleagues. It is counterproductive to promote the career of a person with disability, as they are likely to be frequently absent and less productive.
Behaviours based on prejudice (e.g., micro-aggressions such as insulting, ridiculing, avoiding, etc.)	When I go to a restaurant with a friend, the waiter always turns to them to order my food.	People automatically tend to turn to a care-giver, a friend, or a family member, rather than directly addressing the person with disability, assuming that they are not able to answer.	To ensure one is understood, it is best to talk to the person accompanying the person with a disability rather than addressing them directly.

Building on an initial list of 64 items generated in previous sessions, the final meetings focused on refining the scale’s language, improving clarity, and reducing its length. Through discussion and negotiation, the group reached consensus on 19 core items constituting the final version of the «Ableist Attitude Scale» (AAS) (see Box 2).[7] The selection was guided by highlighting five key dimensions of ableism identified in the literature: (1) ambivalent representations of people with disabilities (items n° 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17); (2) infantilization, substitution, and de-sexualization (15, 16, 18 reversed); (3) non-recognition of disability (1, 2, 3, 4 reversed); (4) segregation and separation (6, 11, 12, 19); and (5) equity and accessibility (13, 14 reversed). The inclusion of items covering major life domains was also emphasized: education (11, 12), family (10), social and romantic relations (16, 17, 18), workplace (5, 6, 7), cultural opportunities and free time (13, 14), independent life (19), self-determination (15). The remaining items are more general and might be associated with many different areas (1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9).

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[7] Between October-November 2021, the AAS was administered to a representative national sample of adults in Italy and the data were analysed by the academic researchers. The administration was financed by the Free University of Bozen/Bolzano (Italy).

Box 2

AAS items

Below, you will find some statements made on the subject of disability. For each of them, please indicate how much you agree with each of them, taking into account that: 0 = completely disagree – 4 = completely agree.

1. More often than not, people with disabilities exaggerate their difficulties.
2. Making special arrangements for people with disabilities gives them an unfair advantage.
3. Disability benefits represent an excessive cost to the state.
4. Subsidies should only be based on the degree of disability, rather than on economic status.
5. In times of unemployment, people with disabilities should stay at home to protect the employment of genuinely productive people.
6. Before placing a person with disability in a work group, it would be fair to ask the opinion of future colleagues.
7. It is counterproductive to promote the career of a person with disability, as they are likely to be frequently absent and be less productive.
8. People with disabilities who make an effort to behave like others are to be admired.
9. People with disabilities are an example to all.
10. Having a child with a disability is the worst thing that can happen to a parent.
11. It is beneficial for children with sensory disabilities (deaf or blind) to have schools dedicated only to them to better meet their needs.
12. Having an autistic child in the classroom slows down the curriculum.
13. People in wheelchairs should not expect to be able to go anywhere they wish.
14. In films and television programs, subtitles and audio-descriptions should always be provided so as not to discriminate against blind and deaf people.
15. To ensure one is understood, it is best to talk to the person accompanying the individual with a disability rather than addressing them directly.
16. People with disabilities need affection more than a sex life.
17. It is better not to start a romantic relationship with a person with a disability as you would end up having to assist them.
18. I would not be upset if my child had a best friend with an intellectual disability.
19. I would prefer if people with intellectual disabilities did not live in my block of flats.

Moreover, certain items of the AAS highlighted specific dimensions of ableism. For example, item 8 illustrated ambivalent representations, reflecting pietistic attitudes that imply shame or deficiency in disability. Item 15 captured infantilization, encompassing behaviors that undermine adult status and self-determination. Items such as 3 and 4 addressed the non-recognition of disability, emphasizing assumptions of dependency and the perception of people with disabilities as economic burdens (Goodley, 2014; Medeghini et al., 2013).

The final reflection on the participatory research process

At the end of the research process, we involved participants in the reflection on the participatory research process. People with disabilities who co-led the research were first invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire — chosen because it was the only way to guarantee anonymity — followed by a final moment in which we exchanged impressions of the activities carried out by the group.

The online module, including 8 open-ended questions in total, consisted of three parts: part 1 collecting opinions' on the research process (what they liked and didn't like of the research experience; whether they felt that their opinion had been listened to; the accessibility of participatory activities, such as the language used and the materials shared); part 2 on the research outcomes (personal opinion on the scale jointly developed; whether they felt they were learning and teaching something throughout the research process); and part 3 on possible future developments, such as further in-depth studies on more specific topics.

The six participants who responded indicated that the participatory approach had enabled them to flourish, to share their point of view, and to give space to the subjectivity of people with disabilities. Furthermore, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, which imposed exclusively online meetings, they appreciated the possibility of speaking with people with different types of disabilities and backgrounds:

> The intention to had followed up on the principles of participatory research (Participant 1).
>
> The fact of having explored a topic that is still new for Italy but very important for combating discrimination against persons with disabilities, as well as the possibility of meeting new people (Participant 2).

Participants also highlighted their positive contribution to the research, particularly in developing high-quality tools and advancing understanding of ableism, and emphasized the importance of follow-up awareness and dialogue initiatives with public and private institutions:

> [The participation in research] opened up another world for me (Participant 3).

Discussion

This paper describes the participatory research process, involving people with disabilities, aimed at developing an instrument, the *Ableist Attitude Scale* (AAS), for investigating ableist attitudes in the general population. The steps that led to the creation of the instrument have been entrenched with the strengths and challenges inherent in the participatory process.

On the one hand, important components and indicators of the success of the participatory process included building trust among the research group, starting from openness about our role and positioning as able-bodied academic researchers. Our attempts were aimed to achieve a more inclusive process and to take into account the accessibility needs of the participants (in terms of the language to be used, the adaptation of all materials and the presence of an ISL). Factors that appeared to facilitate an equitable relationship between co-researchers with and without disabilities included the negotiation of timing and communication methods throughout the research process, achieved through both formal and informal discussions.

On the other hand, there were also some limitations. Beyond challenges posed by online meetings, the main issues concerned the partial involvement of individuals with disabilities in key research phases, including project design and data analysis, as well as constraints on knowledge production and accessibility. As noted by Peuravaara (2015), this reflects a «light» participatory approach, raising critical questions regarding genuine power-sharing and control over the research process. Additionally, the reduction of scale items necessitated the exclusion of certain aspects of participants' lived experiences.

Consideration should also be given to the benefits of the research outcomes for the participants, who reported feeling valued and recognized, perceiving that their experiences and perspectives contributed to knowledge production and could foster awareness (Annamma, 2018), while also noting increased opportunities to deepen their understanding of the research topic and enhance collaborative engagement. However, the fact that they did not indicate transformative results, both at personal level (e.g. increased empowerment, advocacy) or societal/political level (e.g. progress in the agenda of persons with disabilities) is worth analysis.

Regarding the structure of the instrument, the composition of the panel might have played a significant role in polarizing the discussion in relation to specific areas rather than others. In general, being a small highly selected group, it only partially represents the interindividual diversity among people with disabilities in terms of social class, level of education, age and type of impairment. In particular, intellectual disabilities were underrepresented within the group, compared to sensory, motor, and neurodivergences. This might have determined neglect or underestimation of issues related to this specific population.

In addition, some co-researchers with disabilities were committed to a specific area, such as sport or tourism, and might have directed more attention to some topics of interest for them. Nevertheless, the effort of the research group to ensure visibility to the main areas of life defined by UNCRPD (e.g., school, work, family, independent living), and on certain nuances of the concept of ableism identified in the literature (the five dimensions), should have mitigated these thematic biases.

Despite these limitations, this study represents a pioneering contribution to Italian research on participatory methods for investigating ableism, offering both epistemological and empirical advances and enabling people with disabilities to share their stories in line with the principle of «Nothing about us without us».

At a more general level, the aim is to bring the issue of ableism into the academic and socio-political discourse, giving to this category the same visibility reserved to the other categories of discrimination prominent in the national/ international panorama (sexism, classism and racism), raising awareness within the general population.

Although the study highlighted some possible common and specific manifestations of ableism, the voices of participants showed that people with different disabilities do not experience the same oppression and, even when they do, the severity of oppression, its manifestations and consequences are not the same. Therefore, it appears necessary to conduct further studies to identify and clarify the mechanisms associated with the different types of disability (e.g., blindness, deafness, motor, intellectual, etc.).

Overall, this experience represent one of the possible practices to challenge existing power dynamics and interrupt binary thinking about «the academy» and «the community» of marginalized groups (Parker et al., 2018), starting from people with disabilities’ life stories to reduce ableist beliefs and attitudes in the general population.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the individuals on the panel who served as co-researchers in the development of the AAS scale.

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