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Ableism in the media in Catalonia: the perception of disabled adults

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Abstract

Ableism is the ideology related to discrimination against people with disabilities and is based on socially constructed collective representations. These representations are internalised through stories that are created and amplified by the media. This paper seeks to characterise the perception that people with disabilities have of the way they are represented in the media. To do so, a qualitative methodology and the technique of focus groups were used.

The results indicate that the participants attribute the cause of discrimination and stereotypes faced by the group to media representations. In addition, the lack of representation is perceived as an obstacle to the normalisation of disability, while their presence in the media is seen as essential to reducing prejudice. Finally, it is pointed out that the life stories shown online contribute to building an active minority, indispensable to advocate for the elimination of physical and social barriers.

Keywords

Ableism, media, disability, social representations, prejudice, perception.

Resum

El capacitisme és la ideologia que promou la discriminació de les persones amb discapacitat i se sustenta en unes representacions col·lectives construïdes socialment. Aquestes representacions són interioritzades mitjançant relats creats i amplificats pels mitjans de comunicació. Aquest treball busca caracteritzar la percepció que tenen les persones amb discapacitat sobre les seves representacions en els mitjans de comunicació. Per a això, es va utilitzar una metodologia qualitativa i la tècnica dels grups de discussió.

Els resultats indiquen que les participants atribueixen a les representacions mediàtiques la discriminació i els estereotips cap al col·lectiu. A més, la manca de representació és percebuda com un obstacle per a la normalització de la discapacitat i la presència mediàtica és primordial per reduir els prejudicis. Finalment, s'apunta que les històries de vida a les xarxes contribueixen a construir una minoria activa, indispensable per reclamar l'eliminació les barreres físiques i socials.

Paraules clau

Capacitisme, mitjans de comunicació, discapacitat, representacions socials, prejudicis, percepció.

Introduction

Despite advances in the recognition of people with disabilities, their day-to-day lives are still marked by stereotypes and discrimination (Nario-Redmond, 2019). These discriminatory attitudes have their origin in ableist ideology, which "is a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people due to real or presumed disabilities" (Campbell, 2009, p. 4) [*Own translation*]. The struggle to achieve emancipatory social change for people with disabilities requires correcting these negative attitudes, allowing their participation in society and promoting compensatory actions and mechanisms when the situation of vulnerability requires it (Nario-Redmond, 2019).

Ideologies are transmitted through discourse, which is acquired, predominantly, from the two most influential ideological institutions: school and the media (Van Dijk, 2003). Ideologies are the source and result of the group's practices to perpetuate itself and its power, and are meaningless without the *other*, a group they want to dominate. Thus, ableism, as an

ideological structure that supports the discrimination of people with disabilities, is based on social representations that have been constructed and amplified by the media (Nario-Redmond, 2019).

This article reports on the research by Sabà (2023), which presents a more detailed development, as well as the questionnaire and focus group transcripts. It should be noted that in this paper, unlike in that research, the term *disabled person* is used, instead of *person with functional diversity*. This decision is based on the objective of adapting the language to the recommendations of international organisations (WHO & WB, 2011) and of the associations most representative of the disability community (Cebrián, 2012).

Models of interpretation of disability

In the World Report on Disability prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank (WB), disability is defined as a contested concept because it is complex, multidimensional and dynamic (WHO & WB, 2011). For her part, Nario-Redmond (2019) adds that disability depends on the source, the environment and the historical period. In this regard, Shakespeare (2014) points out that many conditions that are not considered a disability in the global north are indeed a disability in the countries of the global south. Furthermore, a diagnosis does not necessarily predict a given person's functional ability in different contexts (Nario-Redmond, 2019). For this reason, in order to understand disability, one must resort to its interpretation models.

In the report by the WHO and the WB (2011), it is explained that in recent decades the medical and individualistic interpretation of disability has given way to a social perspective that contemplates the role of physical and social barriers. The first interpretation is what is termed the *medical model*, as opposed to the *social model*. However, Smith (2008) warns us that although these models are important in order to understand and define the characteristics of the interpretations, today, they are archetypes of the discourses on disability and allow various interpretations between the two extremes.

Below we will define both models.

Modernity led to the adoption of the medical model of interpretation of disability (Vehmas *et al.*, 2008). This model considers disability as "the inevitable product of the individual's biological impairments, diseases or characteristics" (p. 2) [*Own translation*]. For this reason, the disability rights movement maintains that the medical model is based on an essentialist interpretation of disability (Smith, 2008). This model focuses its efforts on diagnosing the physical causes that cause the disability, with the aim of preventing it, curing it or minimising its effects (Nario-Redmond, 2019). In addition, disability is seen as a personal tragedy and, for this reason, it is also termed the *individual model*. This individualistic approach leads to a paternalism that undermines the autonomy and agency of people with disabilities, turning them into passive beneficiaries of assistance and charity (Vehmas *et al.*, 2008). Thus, people with disabilities are considered patients who must follow the instructions of healthcare professionals (Nario-Redmond, 2019).

In the 1960s, a critique began of the medical model, stating that it was a biased interpretation that tends to favour oppression and that does not take environmental elements into consideration (Vehmas *et al.*, 2008). In recent decades, a new interpretative framework has crystallised which is known as the *social model*. In this interpretive framework, disability is a wholly social phenomenon and the distinction is made between *impairment*, which is an attribute of the person, and *disability*, which is imposed externally by physical and social barriers (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

The social model has provided people with disabilities with a clear goal: the removal of barriers, which has allowed this minority to achieve rights through collective struggle (Shakespeare, 2014). Because of this, a strict interpretation of the social model has been popularised that refuses to recognise the role of specific functional impairments and limitations. However, most academics in disability studies today believe that disability is constructed by a combination of factors such as impairments and social barriers. Disability is "the result of the interaction between individual and contextual factors, including limitation, personality, individual attitudes, environment, policies and culture" (p. 77) [*Own translation*].

Ableism

The concept of *ableism* is an analytical parallel to masculinism and racism, and arises within the disability rights movement (Nario-Redmond, 2019). This ideology can be defined as prejudice and discrimination towards people with disabilities, regardless of whether their impairments are physical or mental, visible or invisible.

Van Dijk (2003) describes ideologies as basic belief systems shared by a group. They are located in social memory, together with knowledge and social attitudes. These beliefs are not universally accepted and often lead to differences of opinion and conflict within sociocultural groups. "Ideologies underlie the social beliefs of a group, (so) the identity and identification of group members must follow a more or less fixed pattern of basic categories, together with flexible rules of application" (p. 27) [*Own translation*]. Likewise, ideologies form social representations of the shared beliefs of a group, functioning as a frame of reference that defines the coherence of these beliefs.

Ableism is the ideology that constructs an ideal of the *self* and the body as perfect and indispensable to be considered fully human, using to this end a set of beliefs, processes and practices (Shakespeare, 2014). This ideal is what is known as being *abled-bodied*, while disabled people are the otherness that allows it to be sustained. "The body with a disability acts as a metaphorical crutch for the support of ableist culture: it becomes a body that arouses cultural fascination but, at the same time, also rejection" (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 51).

Remote origins of ableism

The idea that discrimination against people with disabilities is a transversal phenomenon present in all cultures and eras is shared by many people (Nario-Redmond, 2019). Below, we will explore the two main contributions that have been made from disability studies to answer this question.

On the one hand, there is an unfounded fear of contagion, which has an evolutionary origin (Nario-Redmond, 2019). According to this theory, avoiding contact with people who have symptoms or signs of illness would be an adaptive mechanism beneficial for the survival of the individual. These mechanisms were considered to have evolved excessively and, when faced with the difficulty of identifying diseases, would overreact when they detected non-normative traits.

On the other hand, the terror management theory suggests that people tend to avoid contact with people with disabilities because they represent a palpable reminder of the fragility of body and mind, as well as the vulnerability of being human (Nario-Redmond, 2019). People with disabilities are excluded because they "serve as unwelcome reminders that life is unpredictable" (p. 12) [*Own translation*]. This perception can ultimately contribute to turning people with disabilities into targets of violence.

Attribution theory and stereotypes

Human beings relate to the environment through the senses. By comparing and highlighting similarities and differences, living things can interact more effectively with the environment around them (Doise, 1994). People use a mechanism similar to that of emphasising similarities and contrasts in order to interact with society. When we relate to people, perception will produce a judgment, in what is called the *process of attribution*.

The social environment defines the categories of people with whom one can interact (Goffman, 2006). In this way, the initial appearance of a stranger helps predict which category they belong to and what their social identity is. Social categorisation is a mechanism that allows us to form an idea of other people quickly and without needing too much effort (Doise, 1994). This process is also the origin of social stereotypes. Stereotyping occurs when one group emphasises the differences with another group, while at the same time emphasising the similarities within the same group. Attributing a neutral character to the stereotype is linked to avoiding effort through simplification (Amossy, 2010). However, the stereotypes about disability are, to a large extent, those that originate the negative prejudice towards this group, since they generate and perpetuate differentiated judgments and treatments which, in turn, can lead to stigmatisation (Doise, 1994).

We need to distinguish between stereotyping and prejudice (Amossy, 2010). The former refers to the belief, opinion and representation of a group and the people who compose it, that is, to the classificatory and emotional dimension. On the other hand, prejudice is an attitude that tends to negatively evaluate the members of a group. According to social psychology, prejudice manifests itself at three levels: emotional, which is based on affections and attitudes; behavioural, which is based on actions and practices, and cognitive level, which originates in stereotypes and beliefs.

Disabled people are useful as an otherness that allows non-disabled people to define themselves as competent (Nario-Redmond, 2019; Shakespeare, 2014). Those who do not belong to the group can be seen as useful and strong by stereotyping disabled people as dependent and weak. Ableist stereotypes can influence personal expectations, as well as social expectations that often confirm stereotypes, restricting opportunities for people with disabilities (Nario-Redmond, 2019; Watermeyer & Görgens, 2013). These expectations manifest themselves subtly, conditioning the expectations of educators, and are a cause of dropping out of studies and the lower levels of higher education among the group (Nario-Redmond, 2019).

Prejudices towards people with disabilities are already transmitted from childhood, through the products of the cultural industries aimed at this segment of the population (Nario-Redmond, 2019). Thus, people with disabilities are represented as tragic victims, like Quasimodo and Nemo; evil characters, like Captain Hook and the grumpy hunter Elmer Fudd; or incompetents, like Mr. Magoo and Dopey (Nario-Redmond, 2019). These representations perpetuate the stereotypes that associate the group with helplessness and dependence, but never with characteristics such as motherhood or skills.

Media representations

Farr (1994) defines the current era as that of social representations, given the influence of the media on individual conversations and the dissemination of information, opinions and ideas on a national and international scale. Social representations are forms of common sense knowledge that arise from social interaction and allow people to understand and interpret everyday reality (Jodelet, 1994). Social representations are, to a large extent, created, transmitted and transformed by the media, and often exist solely because they have been disseminated through these media (Farr, 1994).

Representations of disability in the media often coincide with our own social representations and anticipate our reaction to specific situations (Nario-Redmond, 2019). The way the media portrays disability not only builds on our social stereotypes, but also reinforces them.

People with disabilities have been marginalised from mass culture, both in their representation in the media and in access to employment opportunities and participation in production (Ellis & Merchant, 2020). "They have been excluded from the production of mass culture, both in terms of their representation in the media and opportunities for employment and production" (p. 155) [*Own translation*]. However, authors such as Foster and Pettinicchio (2023) note that there has recently been a growing interest in mainstream media and brands to include the

representation of people with disabilities. However, they warn about the risks of a representation that lacks information and adequate planning in advertising and audiovisual products.

When people with disabilities are represented in the media, "the negative stereotypes related to the community of people with disabilities are reproduced" (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2023, p. 276) [*Own translation*]. Whittington-Walsh *et al* (2019) state:

> *Images of disability have historically been constructed from an ableist or non-disabled point of view, where disability is represented as something abnormal and disabled people are therefore perceived as less than human. (p. 158)* [Own translation].

Among the most common stereotypes we can highlight "the image of the criminal, the evil and violent, the pitiful and dependent, the childish and asexual character, the extraordinarily talented individuals, the comic, the moral metaphors and the idea of *better dead* than disabled" (Whittington-Walsh *et al.*, 2019, p. 158) [*Own translation*]. However, the two most common representations are as subjects of pity or inspiration for overcoming adversity (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2023), which we will detail below.

On the one hand, in line with the perception of disability as a tragedy, the medical model promotes a vision of disability that focuses on suffering and pity (Nario-Redmond, 2019). As Hayes and Black (2003, p. 1) point out, "disability is situated within a discourse of pity". Nario-Redmond (2019) relates this representation to certain characteristics associated with people with disabilities such as victimisation, helplessness, asexuality, incompetence, passivity, weakness and lack of attractiveness. In addition, the author highlights that news about disability focuses mainly on medical and social welfare aspects, presenting these people as a burden to their families and to the State.

Hayes and Black (2003) relate the representation of suffering with confinement. They argue that in Hollywood films the representation of disability falls into four phases: confinement, the hope of rehabilitation, the denial of this possibility of rehabilitation and, finally, reconciliation and acceptance of confinement. They claim that these elements articulate a paternalistic power that limits and confines the people in the group.

On the other hand, one of the hegemonic representations is what in English is called *supercrip*, which is short for *supercripple* (Grue, 2015). This is based on the achievement of overcoming adversity and can manifest itself in three forms: firstly, people with disabilities who rack up achievements within everyday experience; secondly, people with disabilities who are distinguished by exceptional achievements; and finally fictional characters, in whom functional limitations serve only to motivate their fantastic achievements (p. 209).

Although in representations of the *supercrip* or in overcoming adversity disability is presented as a positive attribute, because it establishes a causal relationship between achievement and limitation, this implies that people with disabilities need to achieve something exceptional to deserve recognition (Grue, 2015). These stories serve the media to reinforce dominant ideologies, such as meritocracy and positive thinking (Nario-Redmond, 2019). The representation of people with disabilities is often instrumentalised to serve interests and goals that do not coincide with those of the group, such as instilling the worldview of Western capitalism or promoting the culture of effort in society (Cebrián, 2012; Nario-Redmond, 2019). Thus, the concept of *inspiration porn* has become popular (Grue, 2016). This type of representation of disability is problematic because it asserts that all people can progress with effort (Nario-Redmond, 2019). Otherwise, she warns us that this belief can lead to questioning the need for accessibility measures or the impediments to improve socio-economically.

The abundance in the media of overcoming challenges carried out by people with disabilities reflects the cultural pressure to achieve the ideal of body and functionality (Watermeyer & Görgens, 2013). The self-awareness of ableist prejudices causes people with disabilities to strive to overcome stigma and, at the same time, reinforces internalised oppression, because it forces them to define themselves "in opposition to a negative cultural assignment" (p. 269) [*Own translation*].

Objectives

This research study aims to determine the perception that people with disabilities have of their media representation. To answer this, people in the group will be asked what image they think the media projects about them.

In addition, this study will make it possible to explore whether people with disabilities recognise the existence of an ableist ideology and, if so, what role the media play in its creation and reproduction. Finally, the aim is to understand how they value the influence of the media on the origin, diffusion and maintenance of ableism.

The hypothesis is that people with disabilities are aware both of the invisibility of the group in the media and of the existence of hegemonic media representations that stereotype the people of the group: that of suffering and that of overcoming adversity. Another hypothesis is that people with disabilities attribute to the media a responsibility in the production and reproduction of social representations that promote their discrimination. Finally, the main assumption is that disabled people identify ableist ideology as the cause of discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping, even though they are not familiar with the term.

Through the focus groups involving people with disabilities, our study tries to characterise the social representations of the group transmitted by the media, in order to determine if they spread ableist ideology.

Our approach has many similarities with the work of Vázquez-Barrio *et al.* (2021). First, both studies start from the premise that there is not enough research on the perception of the representation of disability in the media by the minority. Both

our study and that of Vázquez-Barrio *et al.* (2021) use the focus group technique.

However, there are also significant differences between the two works. Unlike ours, the study by Vázquez-Barrio *et al.* (2021) includes non-disabled people in the focus groups. In addition, that study focuses on the analysis of journalistic coverage in traditional media. Instead, our research study addresses participants' perceptions of a wide variety of content, including traditional media, online streaming platforms (video on demand and OTT services), transmedia media supports, social media and products of the cultural industries.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used through focus groups to access the social representations and forms of ableist discrimination that are spread and reproduced by the media.

Procedure

The technique of focus groups was determined to bring out the ableist discourse based on the perception of the group affected by this discourse.

The selection of the participants was conducted through purposive sampling. They were recruited using the snowball method through an invitation distributed by instant messaging applications. Four different focus groups were created to cover all the features identified as relevant.

The following criteria for the participation of candidates were established: generational homogeneity, with ages between 20 and 45; an officially recognised degree of disability of at least 33% (including the moderator); heterogeneity of gender and place of residence, external visibility of disability and socialisation as a disabled person. An attempt was made to cover the diversity of the sample while at the same time ensuring the internal homogeneity of the groups. For this reason, two groups were formed: one made up exclusively of people socialised as disabled, and another made up of those who have acquired this condition throughout their lives. Finally, group sessions were held inside and outside the metropolitan context to attend to territorial diversity. This information can be found in table 1.

The person moderating the focus groups had a semi-structured script that you can consult in the appendix of Sabà's (2023) research that started with a very open question: "How do you see the media's portrayal of disability?" (p. 113). The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave their consent for the session to be recorded and transcribed for academic purposes.

The discourse analysis was carried out at the logical-semantic level to prioritise manifest content and immediately accessible meaning following a more procedural than intuitive or intersubjective approach, as pointed out by Gil-Flores *et al.* (1994). Following the authors' instructions, the analysis of the information began with the data reduction process, segmenting and performing an open and inductive coding. Subsequently, these data were organised through memoranda and diagrams to facilitate the drawing of conclusions. The Atlas.ti v.23 program was used for the different phases of analysis.

Limitations of the research study

The research study had a propaedeutic vocation and was conceived as a first approach to the study of the perception of social representations of disability disseminated by the media. One of the main objectives was to establish a solid foundation and identify key questions that could guide future research.

Table 1. Technical details of the focus groups

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Participants	4	6	5	5
Gender	3 M / 1 W	1 M / 5 W	1 M / 4 W	2 M / 3 W
Place of residence	Girona Province	Barcelona Metropolitan Area	Vallès Occidental	Barcelonès
Type of disability**	Physical: 3 Organic: 1	Physical: 3 Organic: 1 Intellectual: 2	Physical: 5	Physical: 2 Mental health: 1 Intellectual: 1 Sensory: 1
Socialised or acquired	Heterogeneity	Heterogeneity	Acquired homogeneity	Socialised homogeneity
Location of the session	Figueres	Barcelona	Sant Cugat del Vallès	Barcelona
Duration	90 minutes	120 minutes	90 minutes	75 minutes
Date	6 April 2023	14 April 2023	16 April 2023	5 May 2023

** When a person had more than one type of functional diversity, only the one for which they were invited to participate was considered.

Source: Own work.

This work started as part of a Master's Thesis, which imposed restrictions on the time and resources that were available. As a result, it presents a series of limitations on the composition of the groups. The need for the participants to meet, at the same time, the internal homogeneity criteria of the study (being people between 20 and 45 years old with a recognised disability), the heterogeneity criteria at a general level (type of disability) and between the different focus groups (place of residence, external visibility of disability, socialisation as a disabled person), as well as the gender diversity of both the groups and the research as a whole, represented a significant challenge. It should be borne in mind that many disabled people have reduced mobility, lack of autonomy or health problems. Some groups suffered last-minute cancellations for these reasons.

That is why the study has three important limitations: firstly, the number of participants, which is only twenty people, and the composition of the focus groups, which ranges from four to six people, which is considered a small number. Furthermore, there is a lack of gender parity, as only a third of the participants are men. Finally, a disproportion is observed in the representation of the different types of disability in the sample.

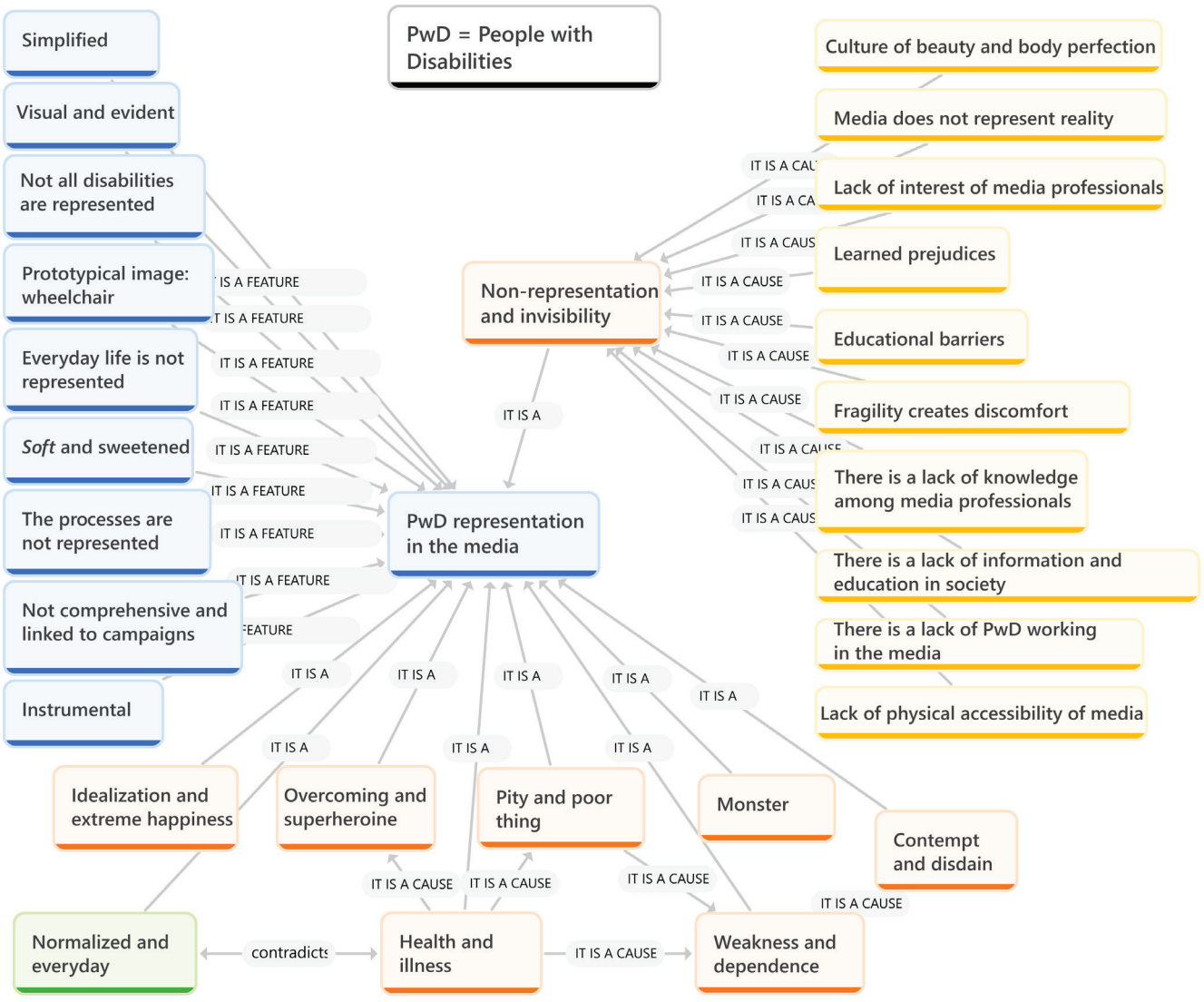
Results and discussion

Media representation of disability

Around the media representation of people with disabilities, codes have been generated by reducing data from the analysis and, subsequently, they have been grouped into categories. Afterwards, Diagram 1 was drawn up as part of one of the last steps in the data processing.

This diagram focuses on the media representation of disability and all the other codes grouped into categories converge towards it. In the centre, a little higher, the non-representation of disability appears. On the right, the causes attributed to

Diagram 1. Representations of disability. Forms of representation and characteristics



Source: Own work.

the invisibility of the collective are shown. At the bottom of the diagram, the concrete forms of media representation of disability can be found. Finally, the characteristics of media representations have been grouped to the left of the figure.

Diagram 1 serves us to structure the exposition of this section. Firstly, the non-representation and the reasons that could explain it are considered. Next, the media representation of people with disabilities is addressed when this occurs. Then, the two hegemonic forms of group representation are discussed: pity and overcoming adversity.

Non-representation and invisibility

The lack of representation of the collective is a central theme in all the focus groups, and the participants express themselves very clearly. Person 8 states: "That it does not appear, that it is not seen; this is already a form of discrimination" (group 2). The perception that the presence of people with disabilities is quantitatively scarce in the media is shared by all groups. For example, in group 1 the *screen share* is mentioned, which refers to the time proportion of their presence within the programming. It is stated that this *share* is much lower than what would correspond to the group based on its percentage of the population, which they quantify as being between 8 and 10%. In fact, they are arguing about the right of representation of disabled people as an oppressed minority. As we will see in the next paragraph, they attach great importance to this right to improve the situation of the minority.

In all the sessions they agree that there is a causal relationship between the presence of people with disabilities in the media and what they define as *normalisation* (sometimes they use the term *familiarisation*) by society. As in this example taken from group 1:

> Person 3: *Lately, also, the issue of sexual diversity, the screen share percentage, I don't know it, but, well, if I looked at it if I'm convinced, I think it's much higher...*
> Person 2: *Much much higher.*
> Person 3: *...what is being projected than what really exists in society, which is there, but...*
> Person 2: *And we have normalised it, of course.*
> Person 3: *Yes, yes, by... by putting it, putting it, putting it above what would be a real mirror in society.*

In summary, they agree that presence in the media implies visibility and what is seen regularly becomes normalised. This *normalisation* connects with the process of *integration of the novelty* of the social representations of social psychology (Jodelet, 1994).

In the previous conversation it is also mentioned that the lack of representation does not exclusively affect this group. In addition, two groups compare the media presence of "racialized" people and of the LGBTQI+ community. These interventions underline the progress in recognition achieved by these minorities, which they attribute to greater media exposure. This comparison and the subsequent assumptions are indicative of the capacity of social transformation that the participants grant to the media. Likewise, these interventions highlight that the participants attach great importance to the existence of an organised and combative minority.

The participants attribute this invisibility to multiple causes. However, closer examination reveals that these issues are interconnected and can largely be understood in terms of ableist discrimination and the exclusion of anything that deviates from the social norm. In this way, the most general reason given is that the media do not represent society, but only show a part of it.

Next, the causes of non-representation in the media are analysed and related to each other. In all groups, a connection is established between the low presence of people with disabilities and the culture of the perfect body. The cult of bodily perfection and the culture of ideal beauty are closely linked to the medicalisation of society and interact with other mechanisms of exclusion and privilege (David & Derthick, 2013; Shakespeare, 2014). In group 3 they argue that the media sell a skewed reality, which is closely linked to commercialisation.

Another block of reasons is related to the social, rather than innate, nature of prejudice. In all the groups, the issue of society's lack of information and education about disability appears as promoters of misunderstanding and lack of empathy. The participants denounce the negligence of the media in relation to what they consider their role to be: anticipate the various circumstances and challenges of life to prepare the audience. In addition, misunderstanding and lack of representation feed off each other: invisibility causes misunderstanding, which, in turn, generates an avoidance response that further increases the misunderstanding.

Similarly, it is emphasised that media professionals, as members of society, are not immune to the same prejudices as their fellow citizens. Groups 2, 3 and 4 are highly critical of journalists. They attribute a lack of interest and indifference to them, since they have an ethical duty to show the diversity of society. This excerpt begins with the question of how to convey to journalists their professional responsibility, but it is concluded that they are not interested in reflecting reality: "If you want to transmit news and, seriously, the aim, one supposes, is to represent the reality of society, you can learn more. What happens is that they don't make any effort because they want to be interesting to the mass audience" (group 2). Group 1 emphasises that this fact is particularly serious in the case of public media outlets.

In the focus group sessions, the lack of interest of media professionals is linked to the absence of disabled people in these environments. As observed in the theoretical framework, Ellis and Merchant (2020) confirm the hypothesis that in the media and, in general, in the cultural industries, the presence of disabled workers is very low. The participants of the groups attach great importance to this presence: "If you have a worker with diversity on your staff, by definition you are already raising your own awareness in different areas; in accessibility, in the way of dealing, in the news that affects us..." (group 3). Nario-

Redmond (2019) agrees that the presence of disabled workers in the media could help reduce prejudice among other workers through intergroup contact. In addition, the participants emphasise the importance of establishing preconditions to favour the presence of people with disabilities in all media production processes. The physical accessibility of the media is the most obvious one, which they remind us does not yet exist.

Another issue that causes anger among participants is the obstacles that prevent people with disabilities from accessing education and training. Groups 1 and 3 state that, for people with severe functional diversity, having a personal assistant is an essential requirement to be able to pursue a career, which, in many cases, is still not guaranteed. In addition, groups 2 and 3 complain that the Institut del Teatre, like other acting schools, demand access requirements that are impossible for a person with a disability to meet, and that these act as a barrier to education. This aspect correlates with the complaint by Kate O'Reilly (Komporály, 2007), who points out that the prejudicial admission requirements of these schools prevent disabled performers from receiving regulated artistic training. According to Watermeyer and Görgens (2013), stereotypes limit the expectations of people with disabilities, as well as limiting the trust in their potential held by society, training centres and educators and, thus, it becomes a self-fulfilling prediction.

It should also be noted that, as groups 2 and 3 have commented, the topic of disability is often avoided in order not to make the audience uncomfortable. In this regard, Nario-Redmond (2019) points out that the contemplation of disability is uncomfortable because it reminds us of our vulnerability and fragility. Group 3 warns that disability will one day end up affecting all of us and notes that people do not want to be aware of this reality. The WHO and World Bank report (2011) agrees with the following statement: "Most people will have, at some point in their lives, a temporary or permanent disability, and those who reach old age will experience more and more difficulties in their daily functioning" (p. 3) [*Own translation*]. In the same line, group 2 remarks: "Disabled people are the mirrors in which people do not want to see themselves reflected. When we are very visible, people feel very uncomfortable" (group 2).

Characteristics of the representation

In this section, the perceived characteristics of this representation when it occurs are examined.

The idea that the media representation of disability is simplified has been repeated a lot in all the sessions. At the same time, other closely related characteristics have been highlighted, such as the lack of representation of the everyday life of people with disabilities. Some participants talk about a non-normalised image to point out that representations of disability are rarely included in mainstream representations. For example, in several sessions it is commented that a character with a disability in a film or series is never just another character in the cast; their condition becomes their most prominent trait and, often, the only trait that defines them.

Group 2 has considered that the representation is soft. Group 1 also expresses this idea with different words and a more general scope. The particularity of the approach of group 2 is that it associates it with the desire not to disturb the audience, which we have already discussed previously.

Group 3 provides another simplifying feature of the representation: neither the process nor the middle ground are represented. "There are two representations of the disabled in the press: the one who drools, which we've all been through. Many are shown drooling. And the superhero who runs 20,000 marathons in 20 days. And the middle ground is not explained, is never included" (group 3). Between these dichotomous and extreme representations "there is no middle ground... they do not explain the process or the middle ground that exists" (group 3). When they say 'process' they refer to rehabilitation and by 'middle ground' they refer to the degree to which a disability is affected.

Another attribute of representation, highlighted by all groups, is its tendency to exclude various disabilities, especially those that are not outwardly obvious. These diversities often include little-known affectations and symptoms. Likewise, the participants agree that the usual representation tends to be visual and spectacular. Group 3 mentions that the aim is often to represent an artificial and imposed type of diversity. The participants explain that surreal casting decisions are made: people with very visually obvious and identifiable disabilities are sought and, at the same time, it is necessary for the bodies of these people not to deviate from the canons of the ideal of the perfect body that excludes them. The practices described here agree with what Foster and Pettinicchio (2023) point out, which indicate a growing interest in including diversity. However, since this inclusion has not been done in an informed way or with objectives and planning that have included the participation of people with disabilities, it ends up presenting more risks than opportunities.

In addition, all the groups have highlighted the existence of prototypical images that make the others invisible. One example of this is the manual self-propelled wheelchair, which has become the emblem that identifies the entire group. Person 6 in group 2 says:

> *For me there are different levels of disability. When you say* disabled*, the image is of a person with a manual wheelchair who can more or less move around. And if you say* intellectual disability*, people are already thinking of Down syndrome. They already have some fixed images and the rest does not exist.*

This simplification works against those people with disabilities who do not use wheelchairs. It is reported that the bulk of adjustments and people's empathy are aimed at the wheelchairs. The most adversely affected by this are the people with a disability that is not externally perceptible. Some people with non-externally obvious disabilities in groups 1 and 2 express that they do not identify with the disabled community and sometimes experience the impostor syndrome.

Likewise, person 17 says "there is a strong tendency to conduct highly specific campaigns and not in an integral way for the person with a disability, whether in advertising, or in making programmes or series" (group 4). The usual representation is for a campaign or day focused on a single illness or functional limitation, and rarely is the entire community discussed. In a similar way, Nario-Redmond (2019) points out that the denial of the existence of both the minority of people with disabilities and of ableism implies a particularistic view and a partial and fragmented treatment of disability, as some participants of group 4 complain. In other words, the tendency to focus attention on a specific group within the world of disability can sometimes indicate the denial of the condition of an oppressed minority.

Finally, the participants show that representations of disability are often characterised by their instrumental nature. This finding agrees with the results obtained by Cebrián (2012): "The image of disability in the media is an instrumental image at the service of other interests and objectives" (p. 113) [*Own translation*]. This instrumentalization occurs mainly in the two hegemonic forms of representation of disability: that of suffering and that of overcoming adversity. In the sessions, it is said that, in many cases, disability is used sensationally to increase the drama of a situation, exploiting the stereotype of pity. At other times, the person with a disability is portrayed as a superhero who has achieved a great milestone. Thus, the most common representations have an instrumental function, since they are used for a purpose that has nothing to do with the group, instead becoming a means. Although the character represented is a person with a disability, the message conveyed is intended for those people who do not belong to this minority. In the following sections, we will address these hegemonic representations in more detail.

The representation of pity

All the focus groups agree that, on the rare occasions when it occurs, the representation of disability is intended to provoke grief with a message of pity. They also share that behind this representation is "the idea of associating disability with illness" (group 1), which is at the core of the medical paradigm of disability. In one of the groups, the participants conclude that empathy towards sick people fosters compassion and pity, and that these attitudes, in turn, fuel discrimination and stereotyping. We must bear in mind that, when dealing with specific images and representations, it is not easy to differentiate between stereotypes, forms of discrimination and representations.

The participants associate the stereotype of pity with infantilisation, which can manifest itself in the lack of respect for the autonomy and agency of people with disabilities. In addition, they also relate the representation of the "poor thing" to a stereotype of weakness, lack of power and incompetence. Through viewing this supposed weakness, people without disabilities can perceive themselves as capable, useful and strong (Nario-Redmond, 2019). According to this idea, people with disabilities are often perceived as the *useful other*, who are attributed group stereotypes that go against the traits of the abled-body ideal (Shakespeare, 2014).

During the sessions, the representation of drama because of an accident was discussed. Three of the groups have criticised a type of fiction which one participant summarises with the following plot: "They are people who have an accident, and the film revolves around this person as the protagonist, and that's it" (group 4). In this group, it is reported that this disability is often presented as such a misfortune that it makes death preferable. This representation implies dehumanisation, as expressed by another person in the group: "If you want to kill yourself, you have the right to decide. But in this film, from the very beginning, they already associate the two ideas. Accident plus disability equals death" (group 4). Despite its harshness, it is common to associate disability with death, and many people with disabilities have to endure being told that it would be better to die than to live with this condition (Nario-Redmond, 2019). In his work, Shakespeare (2014) reflects extensively on the dehumanisation that leads people to consider as normal certain eugenic practices, such as sterilisation or embryo selection, which they would not tolerate for any other discriminated group.

The representation of overcoming adversity

Many of the participants agreed to point out that representing the person with a disability as a hero who has achieved great feats is probably the most common way in which people with disabilities appear in the media. In addition, they point out that this representation displeases them, because it is a source of prejudice and danger. The participants identify two of the three forms of representation of the *supercrip* defined by Grue (2015). On the one hand, they talk about the representation of the ordinary person with a disability performing everyday actions such as passing secondary education or buying bread. On the other hand, reference is made to the representation of a disabled person achieving extraordinary feats such as climbing a mountain or running a marathon. However, unlike Grue (2015), they do not identify superheroes, such as those from Marvel and DC Comics, as possible representations of disability.

They argue that these types of representations are dangerous, because they can lead to the normalisation of the exceptional. That is to say, that society ends up perceiving extraordinary situations and outcomes as if they were usual and expected. In particular, in group 1 they give the example of Àlex Roca, a disabled marathon runner. They argue that this figure generates expectations among people without disabilities: if an athlete with a specific functional impairment or limitation is able to achieve this feat, all people with similar disabilities should be able to do the same. We will now contrast this interpretation with our theoretical framework. Since this is the most common representation, the processes of objectification and anchoring turn it into a social representation and, through repetition, these expectations become demands (Jodelet, 1994). Grue (2015) states that functional limitation is perceived as

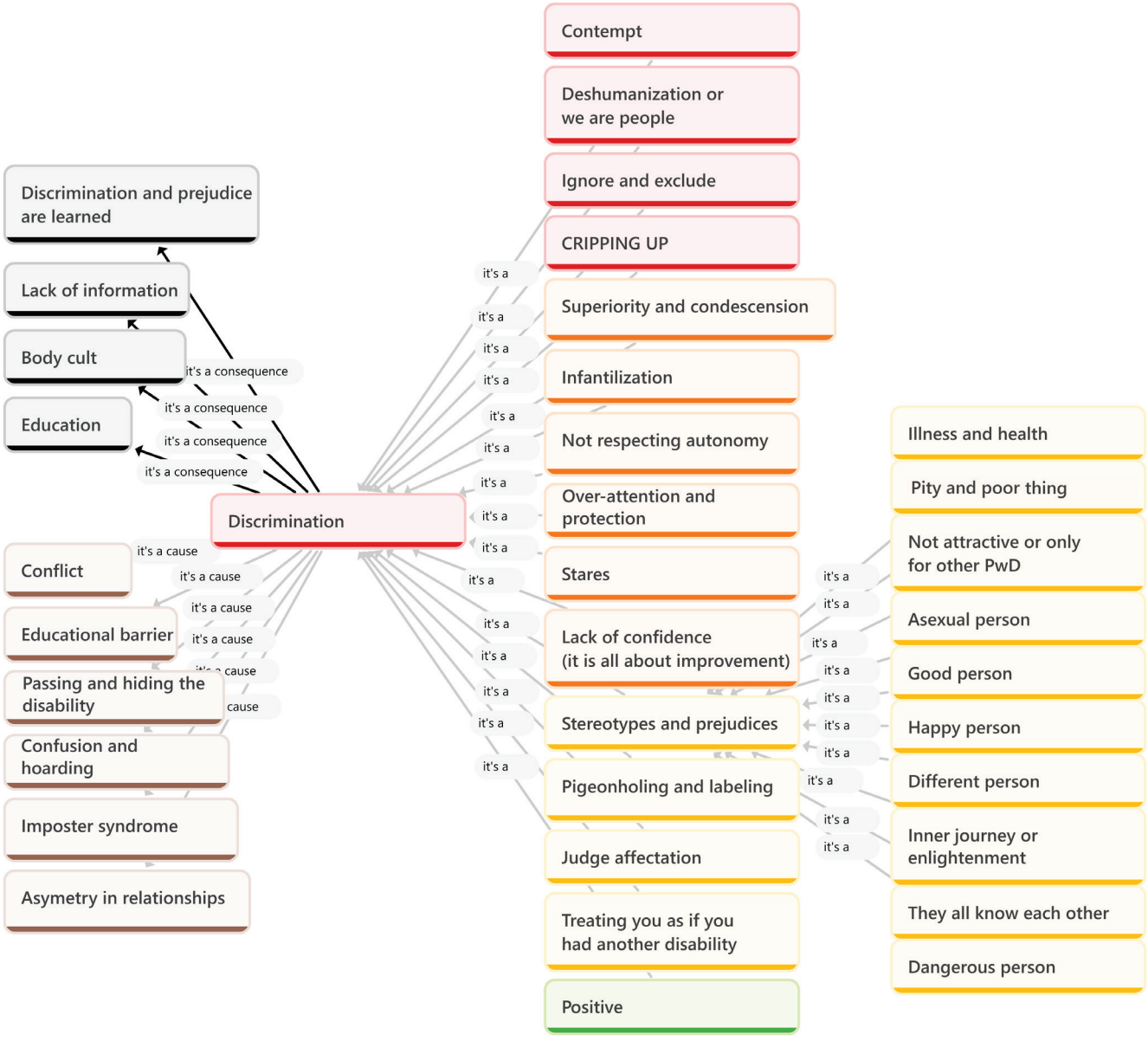
something solvable: "Through the combined forces of willpower and technological intervention, disabilities are presented as obstacles that can, and must, be overcome" (p. 209) [*Own translation*].

On the other hand, the focus groups have also highlighted three forms of discrimination associated with the representation of this athlete. First, the person is classified with very little information, based on diagnostic categories or appearances; secondly, the impairment is predicted without considering other factors such as age or socio-economic conditions, or without having consulted the person concerned, and, finally, the subject is required to fulfil the expectations of others.

In addition, these representations are accompanied by narratives of personal development. A statement that is not necessarily true is often taken for granted: if you try hard, you can be healed. However, the participants complain that the opposite proposition ends up being assumed: if you are not healed, it's because you didn't try hard enough. Group 2 states that these assumptions forget the resources, supports and opportunities of each person and entail the danger of relativising the need for accessibility measures.

Group 1 reveals the instrumentality of this type of representation. They claim that the media are not interested in conveying the diversity of society in the form of its representations. This representation of the superheroine has the function of inspiring and indoctrinating people without disabilities. It is equivalent

Diagram 2. Forms of discrimination, stereotypes, causes and consequences



Source: Own work.

to what Grue (2016) defines as *inspiration porn*. Through these representations, hegemonic ideologies such as the culture of effort, individualism and meritocracy are reinforced (Nario-Redmond, 2019). The participants agree that this representation is the reverse of that of the "poor thing" and the lack of confidence. When a feat is achieved by a person who belongs to a group that society has classified as incapable, the inspirational effect of this improbable action is multiplied.

The responsibility of the media

When addressing the question of the extent to which the participants blame the media for spreading and maintaining prejudices and stereotypes, the unanimity and forcefulness with which they express themselves is surprising.

When the participants are asked about the responsibility of the media, they unanimously and forcefully express that the media should take full responsibility for the production and reproduction of the discrimination and stereotypes that they have described throughout the previous discussion. For example, in group 3, one person stated: "You just asked, what responsibility do they have? Well, I would place the entire responsibility on them, because there are no representative characters" (group 3).

In the previous paragraph we have referred to the overt or conscious attributions of responsibility. However, the manifestation of latent form can be even more significant, that is, the unconscious indictment of responsibility on the media. When talking about media representations of disability, participants tend to evoke personal experiences of discrimination that have no direct relation to the media. This fact highlights the difficulty of talking about forms of media representation without reflecting one's own experience. This can be interpreted as an unconscious assumption that the represented and lived realities are closely related.

In this way, forms of discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes suffered by people with disabilities have appeared in the discussion groups and have been collected in Diagram 2.

Conclusions

The project has provided an answer to the four research questions formulated.

Firstly, the participants perceive that discrimination and stereotypes about the minority of which they are part have been caused by certain social representations.

Secondly, the existence of two hegemonic forms of representation of disability is recognised: the representation of pity or "the poor thing" and the representation of overcoming adversity or "the superhero".

Thirdly, the invisibility of people with disabilities in the media is criticised and defined as a form of discrimination. The participants attach a lot of importance to presence in the media because they relate this with normalisation.

Fourthly, all focus groups clearly express that the media should bear full responsibility for the dissemination and maintenance of ableism.

Finally, in order to overcome the discrimination suffered by people with disabilities, the participants maintain that it is necessary to increase their presence in the media and change current ableist media representations.

Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the same stereotypes and prejudices that we want to mitigate are responsible for the lack of representation and the invisibility and the ableist representations. In this way, we face a vicious circle. To leave behind this impasse we need to resort to collective action with a determined and constant attitude that combines:

- on the one hand, self-representation on social media such as, for example, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. These channels are essential to continue building an active minority;
- on the other, the Administration must be required to remove the barriers that hinder or prevent disabled people from participating in the media. It is necessary to guarantee the physical accessibility of the media, the availability of personal assistants at universities and that acting schools such as the Institut del Teatre have non-ableist access requirements. At the same time, we need to work hand in hand with professionals in the media so that they become aware of ableism and, thus, can be able to overcome media representations of disability focused on pity and overcoming obstacles, and can thus guarantee a non-stereotypical presence. One way would be participating, for example, in the Mesa per a la Diversitat en l'Audiovisual (Audiovisual Diversity Board).

In summary, this research study aims to use the prejudice-reducing potential of mediated contact to change current ableist social representations.

Finally, avenues for future research in this field will be pointed out.

Public media outlets have been mentioned on several occasions for their inadequate representation of people with disabilities, both in terms of the extent of this presence and also the way in which they are represented. These media outlets are subject to stricter public service obligations and it would be important to investigate what their regulatory responsibilities are and compare them to current programming.

One of the conclusions of the research study is that the self-representation of the group in social networks is essential to create an active minority, which enables people with disabilities to organise themselves to change the conditions that allow discrimination in order to eradicate it. For this reason, it is essential to know how this self-representation occurs and what opportunities and threats it entails.

Endnote

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