The Making of Disability

Vodanović, Tino

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2021

University of Rijeka

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of Cultural Studies

Academic year: 2020./2021.

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To all persons with disabilities out there struggling for change

I. Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to think my supervisor Professor Sarah Czerny PhD for her enormous help during the process of writing my thesis with advices, proofreading, literature and general availability every time I needed help in the process or was not sure if it is going in the right direction. I am also particularly thankful to Professor Sarah Czerny PhD for the encouragement that was of particular importance during the making of the thesis as well as for always believing that I am and will be able to achieve my goals generally and with the thesis. I am particularly thankful to my parents for their endless help and encouragement when it comes to coming to the stage where I am today and for never stopping believing in me and the achievement of my goals. I would also like to thank to all the interviewees that were involved in the research for their great contribution to the thesis by sharing their ideas, opinions and personal experiences. Furthermore, I would like to thank all of my professors, faculty members and colleagues/friends that I have met during my studies for always treating and perceiving me as an equal individual without emphasizing my disability as well as for always telling me their honest opinions. My thanks also go to all assistants that have helped me during my studies in order to make do studying process more time-efficient, in particular I would like to thank my friend Mislav for physically helping me write and proofread the thesis. Next, I would like to give my thanks my friends Sanja and Sanja who, among many other professors and colleagues, had a significant role in igniting the spark of disability rights activism at the beginning of my studies that has since grown into a flame. I would like to dedicate a special thanks to my friends Luka, Jurica, Matej and Vadim for being there when I needed them, their encouragement and understanding in everything that I do, our conversations that have highly influenced my way of thinking and most of all for teaching me that not all problems I have encountered are linked with disability or any kind of difference. I also cherish their will to learn about disability and the disability related topics as well as passing the previously mentioned spark on to them. Last but certainly not the least important, I would like to thank Newton Technologies Adria for letting me use their speech-to-text software which made the transcribing process significantly more time-efficient.

II. Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the terms disability, inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, ableism, disability/ableist microaggressions. It also studies the general perception of persons with disabilities, highlighting the perception of persons with disabilities in Croatia. Even though the focus is on the Croatian context, it includes the global context. The aim of the thesis is to explore how these terms affect the general perception of persons with disabilities, and to consider the level of awareness of Croatian population regarding them. The thesis itself is divided into two parts. The first, theoretical, part describes in detail the notions of disability, inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, ableism, disability/ableist microaggressions. The second part is based on research which, through the use of in-depth interviews, attempts to see to the extent to which we are, as a society, aware of the aforementioned notions when it comes to disability in general and the population of persons with disabilities. The main argument of the thesis is that the notion of disability should be viewed as a social construct that occurs as a result of complex mutual relations between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. These interviews support the thesis about the many different ways disability can be defined, and also show that microaggressions and ableism are largely present in Croatian society. This serves to create a vicious circle whereby the current perception of persons with disabilities is still not observed in a positive light.

Key words: *ableism, disability, disability/ableist microaggressions, inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, marginalized social groups, perception of persons with disabilities*

III. Sažetak

Rad se temelji na problematizaciji i istraživanju pojmova invaliditet, dihotomija inkluzija-ekskluzija, diskriminacija na temelju sposobnosti [*eng.* ableism], mikroagresija na temelju invaliditeta/sposobnosti. U radu se također proučava opća percepcija osoba s invaliditetom, s naglaskom na percepciju osoba s invaliditetom u Hrvatskoj. Iako je fokus na hrvatskom kontekstu, spominje se i pogled na globalni kontekst. Cilj rada je ispitati kako prethodno navedeni pojmovi utječu na opću percepciju osoba s invaliditetom te pokušati uvidjeti razinu svijesti hrvatskog stanovništva o gore navedenim pojmovima. Sam rad podijeljen je u dva dijela. Prvi, teorijski dio, detaljno opisuje pojmove invaliditeta, dihotomiju inkluzija-ekskluzija, diskriminacija na temelju sposobnosti, mikroagresija na temelju invaliditeta/sposobnosti, dok se drugi dio temelji na istraživanju koji ima za cilj, koristeći se metodom nestandardiziranog dubinskog intevjua, utvrditi u kojoj smo mjeri kao društvo svjesni spomenutih pojmova kada je u pitanju invaliditet općenito i populacija osoba s invaliditetom. Glavni argument rada je ponuditi mogućnost definiranja pojma invaliditeta kao društvenog konstrukta koji nastaje kao posljedica složenih međusobnih odnosa između osoba s invaliditetom i osoba bez invaliditeta. Rezultati istraživanja podržavaju početnu premisu o mogućnostima definiranja invaliditeta na opisani način, a također pokazuju da su mikroagresije i diskriminacija na temelju sposobnosti u velikoj mjeri prisutni u hrvatskom društvu, čineći začarani krug na kojem se temelji sadašnja percepcija. osoba s invaliditetom koja se, u većoj mjeri, još uvijek ne smatra pozitivnom.

Ključne riječi: *dihotomija inkluzija-ekskluzija, diskriminacija na temelju sposobnosti [eng. ableism], invaliditet, marginalizirane društvene skupine, mikroagresija na temelju invaliditeta/sposobnosti, percepcija osoba s invaliditetom*

Contents

1. Introduction

Since the start of the Disability Rights Movement in the 1960s more and more attention has been globally given to persons with disabilities, their rights, social position within society, obligations, needs, and requirements. While the social position and conditions for persons with disabilities varies from society to society and while it is unfortunately unrealistic to expect that all persons with disabilities will have the same living conditions due to many economic, cultural and social factors, it is important to note that each person, whether with disabilities or able-bodied, does her/his best when it comes to eliminating the "difference"[1] between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. Another point I want to make right at the beginning of this thesis is the fact that every person has the possibility to reduce or increase the previously mentioned "difference". This can happen through their individual as well as collective actions and behaviors which do not necessarily have to have (immediate) physically visible implications. There are one billion persons with disabilities worldwide which translates to fifteen per cent of the entire human population (https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability). When we consider the context of Croatia, and according to the report published in 2019 it amounts to 511281 person with disability/ies, or 12.4 per cent of the country's population (Izvješće o osobama s invaliditetom u Republici Hrvatskoj, 2019: 5) The reason why I am mentioning this fact is not because I would like to scare my readers with disability and the numbers related to it as it happens often in the Croatian context on multiple societal levels both implicitly and explicitly. On the contrary, the reason I am mentioning the numbers is because there are countless ways how disability/ies can manifest themselves and also because of the fact that disability/ies affect each individual in a unique way. In other words, an individual approach needs to be taken when considering how to eliminate the "difference". In eliminating the "difference", less focus should be on the most visible aspects, that is the architectural barriers even though I am aware that those aspects are most prominent and are most recognizable. Due to this, it is understandable that society

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[1] Generally speaking, while using the term "difference" may serve as the foundation for many discussions as well as in the context of persons with disabilities because of its many possible meanings and implications, the intention of the thesis will not be on focusing and problematizing the notion of "difference" itself. The reason for the word "difference" being put in quotation marks is due to the distinction that difference between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons is socially constructed.

focuses on them the most. Just to be clear before continuing, I do not wish to diminish the importance of the most visible aspects or barriers. Nevertheless, I would like to offer a different view on disability, on persons with disabilities and equation of their social position. I consider the need for the focus to be shifted from architectural barriers, as one of the most visible aspects as far as persons with disabilities are concerned, to the terminology, that in my opinion precede those most visible aspects such as: inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, ableism and disability microaggressions. For this reason, I will try to shed some light on the aspects that precede the architectural barriers, which could in my opinion be seen as the tip of the iceberg and thus the most visible. In contrast, I wish to try to map out the aspects that form the invisible (or less visible) part of the iceberg as well as to add my own remarks to the aspects that have already been mapped out by scholars across many disciplines concerning disability and society and the relation between these two notions. In other words, the discussion will not be based on the facts why certain buildings are not accessible for persons with disabilities, or why certain stairs are missing a handrail. Instead, it will be based on the facts and reasons that brought society to this state, which in my opinion offer the foundations for our general perceptions of disability as well as persons with disabilities.

In this thesis, I will focus on trying to problematize the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, ableism and disability microaggressions. The reason I do this is that these terms have an important role when the topic of persons with disabilities is concerned. Nevertheless, despite their important role they are not only rarely talked about, particularly in the Croatian context, but also as a society we are not fully aware of their existence. This is partially due to the way we function as a society and partially due to the way these phenomena work. The idea for this MA thesis came about at the moment when I, as a person with disability through my academic work, education and conversations with professors and colleagues/friends with disabilities or able-bodied persons, became aware of this and how this affected persons with disabilities as well as society in general. This is the reason why I want to discuss some of these implications. But also I want to explore the extent to which we are aware, as a society, of the existence of phenomena such as ableism and disability microaggressions and also the extent to which we as society are content with the way that we currently perceive persons with disabilities and their social position. In other words, do we consider the need for change.

The thesis consists of two parts: first, a theoretical part with an examination of scholarship on the concepts of disability, inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, ableism and microaggressions. The second part consists of interviews and their interpretation. Throughout, the thesis aims to show the point that the social perception of disability and persons with disabilities is created and occurs as a result of the social relation between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. As such, the concepts of disability and able-bodiedness should be seen to be a product of these social exchanges and relations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Disability

The perception of disability as a social phenomenon has changed throughout history and has varied from complete social exclusion to periods when persons with disabilities were given characteristics of a deity, more specifically the period when it was believed that their bodies had special healing properties, thus parts of their bodies were being removed to be used as ingredients of miraculous healing medicines (Zadković, 2019: 2-3). It is still possible to encounter the leftovers of such perceptions mostly in some rural areas where disability is still viewed as a disgrace or a divine punishment. The term disability is even today filled with controversies since the mere mention of its name sparks numerous discussions that are perhaps more prominent than ever before. One of the leading points of divergence within the disability community, and the scientific community, circles around the question of how to approach disability, as well as what is and what is not acceptable. These debates are further animated by the fact that we are living in a digital era that allows the fast flow of information, new discoveries and theoretical breakthroughs almost on a daily basis. While all of this could be seen as an advantage, on the other hand, we should be aware of the fact that all this access has the potentiality to be misused.

A general reason for the constant eruption of controversies surrounding the term lies in the point that the term itself is not easily definable, meaning there are many possible definitions depending on the disability model and the perspective in general from which the term is being looked at. Nevertheless, a definition that is often used is the one from the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. According to the Convention, disability is defined as:" (…) those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) Although this is just one possible definition, it is one that is widely accepted. One of the objectives of the aforementioned Convention was, and still is, an attempt to try and unify terminology associated with the population of persons with disabilities as a social phenomenon. Despite the efforts being made by the Convention, the question of terminology regarding persons with disabilities is an especially relevant one for a society that is faced with political correctness and cancel culture.

When it comes to understanding and perception of the phenomenon and the term "disability", a very fervent topic in the scientific community, as well as in the disability community, is the question of what comes first. Is it the person (person with disabilities) or the identity (disabled person)? According to Nowak-Michalska, person-first language saw its assurgency in the United States of America in the late twentieth century, as part of Disability Rights Movement. Through being used it began to emerge that disability is not the backbone of a person, but rather just one of many characteristics of an individual (Nowak-Michalska, 2020: 572). The person-first approach to defining the disability evolved into an identity-first approach. What makes the identity-first approach better, according to Nowak-Michalska, is that it combines all the identities into a collective assemblage and does not detach them, whereas the person-first disability approach makes that distinction with the use of prepositional phrase preceded by the word "with", signifying that disability is an aspect which can easily be detached from the person (Ibid). Even though I am in accordance with the use of the identity-first approach as it is more natural and politically correct, that stage can only be reached gradually. In the context of Croatia, where disability is often perceived negatively and person(s) with disabilities is/are looked mostly through the disability prism and not as individuals, I think there needs to be an implementation of the person-first approach in order to delineate that persons with disabilities are people first and that their disabilities are just one of the integral elements of their personality. Only once this stage is reached, can there be further progress and advancements into identity-first approach, where the main focus would be on educating society that disability is not a detachable aspect. This in theory would allow the possibility for further improvement how people in Croatia perceive disability and its population. The reason all these distinctions are being made is to highlight that disability is not something to be pitiful about or looked at altruistically, but rather a matter to improve on, specifically on equating the rights of persons with disabilities to those of able-bodied persons. Another key factor affecting the perception of persons with disabilities is media representation. What is more, the effect that the media representation will have on the group has to do with what kind of verbiage will be generally dominant. In my opinion, this would happen sooner or later because media is in the place of power where they can popularize a certain term, which is done in the most part by implicitly pressuring persons with disabilities to be inside a box where they do not belong and do not identify with. Moreover, the power of the media can help enforce and perpetuate a certain type of perception, which is in Croatian context, in my opinion, mostly negative.

Even though there is a lot of terminology when it comes to characterizing persons with disabilities, there is not a single umbrella term, in Croatian as well as English, that truly encompasses the essence of disability, with some of them either being too specific such as wheelchair user or having many discriminatory aspects such as disability, differently-abled, physically challenged, invalid (used commonly in Croatian language), persons with special needs and crip. Before moving on, I would like to focus on why the former and latter terms could be considered problematic. First of all, there is the term wheelchair user. In my opinion, this term is the most appropriate one because it does not contain discriminatory connotations. It points out a concrete aspect, that aspect being a person that uses wheelchair as an assisting aid. On the other hand, the problem with the term is that it points to a specific group within the population of persons with disabilities. The next term I would like to refer to is disability. While the term itself contains the word ‘ability’, the prefix dis- creates a discriminatory effect, taking place primarily on the subconscious level thus putting the person(s) with disabilities in an inferior position compared to able-bodied persons. It is for this reason that Dan Goodley talks about Dis/Ability to make a linguistic distinction between the mentioned prefix and the word “ability” because having a disability does not mean that a person lacks in certain abilities just because she/he expresses it in a way that is not necessarily common, subsequently not socially acceptable (Goodley, 2014). Another hugely important question regarding the ability/disability binary opposition is who defines what falls in which ability and what conditions need to be fulfilled before an action can be considered an ability. While I am fully aware this is no easy question to answer and the question itself is a topic for another thesis in its entirety, I think that one of the possible answers partly lies in the concept of ableism that I will discuss at a later moment. The next term is differently-abled. The term itself is heavily influenced by the concept of political correctness, because at first glance it does not point to a person’s “lack of abilities”, as does the first example with the prefix dis-. On the other hand, if we were to take a closer look, it is possible to observe that the term creates differences between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons by highlighting that the talking point is on difference, thus implicitly eliciting the Otherness of persons with disabilities. When it comes to the term physically challenged, it is well known that each individual has their boundaries in a general sense which subsequently create challenges, thus confirming that we are all "challenged" (whether that be spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally….) It is possible to conclude that the term physically challenged cannot solely encompass persons with disabilities. The following term I would like to draw some attention to is invalid. As previously stated, the term is used commonly in Croatian language, despite the fact that in Croatian there are multiple terms that are far better and more acceptable when it comes to referencing persons with disabilities. For example, the Croatian public advocate for persons with disabilities has proposed that the term "persons with disabilities" (osobe s invaliditetom) be used as the correct terminology for the adult persons with disabilities while the term "children with developmental difficulties" (djeca s poteškoćama u razvoju) be used for children with disabilities. (https://posi.hr/pojmovnik/) A major change was even included in the Croatian Constitution. The problem with the term invalid is in its meaning deriving from the Latin root *invalidus*, meaning feeble or weak. (https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=27704) By using the said term, there is an automatic effect on the perception of persons with disabilities at a subconscious level. I deem the term invalid to be very specific because it makes part of the base word that, in many languages, marks or rather marked in the past the derogatory point of view of nature of persons with disabilities, additionally effecting the perception of the previously mentioned social group. Another thing to consider lies in the fact that many countries whose languages contain the words with the base word "invalid" are much more open, as well as liberal, towards any marginalized social group[2]. Putting Croatia in that equation, it is possible to deduct that many countries have a much more supportive outlook on issues concerning persons with disabilities compared to Croatia, making them prone to find more adequate substitutive words for the term "invalid". The next term that I would like to focus my attention on is "persons with special needs". Even though its usage has decreased over time in the English language, nowadays mostly used when describing younger generation (children with special needs), in the Croatian context the usage of the term remains very prominent and it usually describes

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[2] Looking from the Croatian point of view, when talking about the openess towards marginalised social groups is concerned, the primary countries in mind are UK and USA.

the general population of persons with disabilities (osobe s posebnim potrebama). The problem arising with the term is the word special itself. By using it, one gives the impression that all persons with disabilities have different needs from the rest of the general population. Although there are individuals that have specific needs that come from their diagnoses, I personally think these are not the needs from which distinctions must be made and that these needs are not aspects that separate persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. What I believe is that all people have the same fundamental needs and while those needs are not necessarily done in the same manner, which does not equivocally signify that those doing in it differently are different themselves. On the other hand, every person, whether a person with disabilities or able-bodied person, has their own 'special needs' such as the specific interests and activities of one specific person. The reason for making this distinction and why it is possible to use the term 'special needs' (even though it is not entirely appropriate) lies in the fact that the specific needs of a person do not necessarily have to coincide with the needs and interests of other people. The last term I wish to bring to the forefront is "crip". While the term was used pejoratively throughout the history "to describe disability-identified people or those deemed by others to be impaired", it gained its new meaning during the Disability Rights Movement in the 1970s (https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/697). The "new" meaning, so to speak, received its renaissance as part of the Disability Rights Movement. The term provided such a broad area of meaning that it has created a different subfield within the Critical Disability Studies. The meaning is, as Sandahl (2003: 27 as in https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3705/3240) argues, simultaneously ever-changing and fluid. The term is not only used when referring to persons with physical disabilities, but also in the context of persons with mental or sensory impairments (Ibid). I would also argue and thus agree with scholars such as Carrie Sandahl and Robert McRuer who are sharing the opinion that the term "crip" with the meaning that it presents creates an intersection between many identity categories for example race, gender, sex, class, disability and so on… It is also worth pointing out that the term is often used ironically by members of the disability community when referring to the position of constant oppression, whether it is implicit or explicit. In other words, as Hutsheon and Wolbring put it, the term mentioned above also denotes actions dedicated to certain individuals or group(s) that may not be welcomed by them (https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/697).

When talking about where the disability population stands nowadays in Croatia, what has to be accentuated is the fact that in the last twenty years certain efforts have been made, although too little in my opinion, to secure better standards of living for persons with disabilities. As far as improving the standards of living, the primary focus is on the accessibility of physical space, more concretely on architectural barriers or rather their removal. Based on those instances, it can be deducted that precisely those architectural barriers represent the widest category of barriers confronted by persons with disabilities. Even though, superficially speaking, this might seem correct, if we observe the current situation in great detail it is possible to note just by itself it is not easy to rest here. One could use a term used by scholars working in other areas, such as Donna Haraway (2008 as in Haifa Giraud, 2019) and declare the situation as being "entangled". Architectural barriers are the most visible set of barriers, which explains why there is a certain tendency for them to be put to the forefront when persons with disabilities are concerned. But they are a symptom of a deeper problem. In order to efficiently work on their removal, there needs to be a shift in the focus from architectural barriers to what precedes them. What precedes are deeply embedded social attitudes about the aforementioned marginalized social group that in most cases are based on prejudices that unfortunately still exist and generally arise from ignorance. My main argument is that disability can be defined as a complex relation between person(s) with disabilities and able-bodied person(s) and subsequently it is possible to observe the way society in general perceives and defines disability and the interaction between person(s) with disabilities and able-bodied person(s), depending on which side the entire process is observed from.

Based on all the things considered and discussed, I will be using the person-first approach in my thesis, specifically with the term person with disabilities while being fully aware of all the implications the approach and the term bring with themselves.

2.2. Inclusion-Exclusion dichotomy

In the past two decades globally, as well as in the context of Croatian society, the term "persons with disabilities" has been used together with the term and in the context of "inclusion". In this chapter I wish to explore the term in more depth as well as the context in which it is being used regarding persons with disabilities. The general definition of inclusion according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary is: “the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability)” (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inclusion). Moreover, the fact that one of the entries in this dictionary links exclusion with students with disabilities can, in my opinion, serve as an indicator of the connection between the term and this marginalized social group. On the other hand, the opposite term “exclusion”, used when referring to negative attitudes, behavioral practices and representation of social groups that were or were more likely to be excluded from societies throughout history – though I think that not one social group is less important than other. In my thesis I am going to focus on persons with disabilities. While I strongly agree on the fact that the notion of exclusion is an inherently negative one, at least at the first glance I also wish to suggest that exclusion might be a useful tool, despite its negativity, when thinking about changing the way in which we perceive persons with disabilities. Before I start discussing the problems related with terms “inclusion” and “exclusion” I would like to shed some light on the ways the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy is perceived in Croatia.

In their article *Inclusion* from the year 2000. Cvetko et al. write that inclusion per se does not mean equal opportunities for all members of the society, instead it implies respect for the diversity of every individual (Cvetko et al. 2000: 3). Looking at the date of the text from which I borrowed the definition, it seems that it should not be as relevant as it is. In fact, the decline of its relevance could potentially showcase how much has our society moved forward in ways of the treatment and perception of persons with disabilities in all instances. What I would point out here is not the desire to confront the authors, because they try to bring forth the way the society treats persons with disabilities and disability in general, but on the contrary, how we as the society have not moved forward, allowing the definition to still have relevance in today’s context. Since twenty years have passed, we should be considering how to upgrade the old definition with new knowledge thus improving it over time until a completely new definition of inclusion arises, based on the knowledge and the upgrade of the previous definition. Unfortunately, we are still relying on the unchanged old definition of inclusion particularly with regards to not providing equal opportunities to persons with disabilities but trying to respect the diversity of every individual. This is visible in the way everyday communication between person(s) with disabilities and able-bodied person(s) usually happens. Such interactions can be an invasion of personal or social space in a way where an unknown person with disability is asked about their disability or by touching the assisting equipment without the person's permission. Moreover, the judgments about persons with disabilities are not based on the persons themselves, but rather on the manifestations of their bodies exhibiting certain disabilities. On the other hand, in these types of interactions, persons with disabilities sometimes do not know how to react because that may be the reaction they least expected. By doing so, a general understanding about persons with disabilities can be deducted (most of time not in a favorable way). Based on the socially imposed prejudices, by creating a perception about the persons with disabilities population, in my opinion, the difference between person(s) with disabilities and able-bodied person(s) gets widened, thus confirming the fact highlighted by Eva Haifa Giraud in her book *What comes after entanglement?* "…oppositional thought and practice being marginalized because of its lack of fit with relational modes of ethics. These forms of marginalization are concerning as they can inadvertently reinforce existing social inequalities that make it difficult for certain communities to articulate a critique of particular social norms. " (Haifa Giraud, 2019: 9) The author further explains her theory by stating that "…no matter how messy ethical decisions are, as long as they benefit humans […], then the problems caused for nonhumans are a necessary (if sad) sacrifice." (Ibid: 6)

The reason why I think that our society acts this way is because throughout history we have been treating the disability according to the medical model that suggests that the disability is a condition that needs to be cured so that a person is able to fully participate in the society (https://www.ombudsman.org.uk/sites/default/files/FDN-218144_Introduction_to_the_Social_and_Medical_Models_of_Disability.pdf). Consequently, we started to think intensively about the inclusion of persons with disabilities. In my opinion, when it comes to fulfilling the basic general social criteria that needs to be worked on while simultaneously meeting with the process of inclusion, there are couple of aspects that need to be analyzed in great detail. Such aspects are as follows: encouraging the development of positive general attitudes towards persons with disabilities on all societal levels, informing the public how to approach members of the mentioned marginalized social group, learning about their abilities and responsibilities and so on. We also do not pay much attention to the consequences of inclusion - both for persons with disabilities that are/have been “included” this way and the able-bodied persons that are/were a part of the process of inclusion without fulfilling the basic general conditions. Although this kind of inclusion is well intended, it can often ultimately lead to the enforcement of ableist practices in every possible aspect. If the thought process of inclusion is looked through the inability to meet the aforementioned social criteria, inclusion can also be observed and looked even as violent despite the proliferation of the best intentions (Hirtenfelder and Prouse, 2021). The results of the facts mentioned above are that the majority of activities in Croatia where persons with disabilities are included can unfortunately only theoretically be called inclusion. After all that has been said, I think that it is safe to conclude that the notion of inclusion is viewed as an inherently positive one, but I propose this needs to be thought through much more.

On the other side of the dichotomy lies the idea of exclusion. Its origin, due to its past popularity, is derived from the interpretation of the medical model of disability, according to which disability is perceived as a state that needs to be cured. Following that definition, it is no wonder that persons with disabilities were kept with their closest family members at homes or in the institutions until they were considered cured - which in many cases meant their whole life - and thus were excluded from society. The mentioned notion can in my opinion be seen as a source of fear of society in general on the unconscious level thus forming the bedrock for discriminatory ableist practices towards the population of persons with disabilities. Such discriminatory practices can be seen throughout society, which I mentioned in the text above when it came to consequences of inclusion without meeting the basic general social criteria. One of the ways that the discriminatory practices are achieved is through the fear that persons with disabilities might be excluded yet again from society, as they have been in the past. The well-intended behavior of able-bodied person(s) towards person(s) with disabilities can be seen as discriminatory by the latter group. A suggestion for the paradigm shift in understanding is to look at exclusion as not something inherently negative, as supported by Haifa Giraud, stating that “…it is neither something that can be avoided nor something that is intrinsically negative.” (Haifa Giraud, 2019: 4). Haifa Giraud points out further that exclusion itself needs to be explored from more than one perspective. Usually, the one it is being looked at is in a constitutive role, but Haifa points out that the productive role of exclusion also needs to be taken into account, since it opens the opportunity for new practices to emerge. (Haifa Giraud, 2019: 11) To put this in the context of perception of persons with disabilities in Croatia, to make room for the new ways of perception of persons with disabilities, a much-needed step needs to be taken where we try to rethink and reframe collective ways of thinking about exclusion. Without this step it will be quite difficult to pave the way for a new and thereby different perception, the perception that will again be modified and upgraded over time breaking ground for yet another new perception to emerge. Furthermore, in one of the first words of their famous book *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer talk about the concept of enlightenment as one that, among other things implies the liberation from fears (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 1). It is exactly this way that the notion and the concept of exclusion can in my opinion be used to liberate the society from the previously mentioned unconscious fear of persons with disabilities and them being excluded from the society. Also, when looking at this through the prism of the enlightenment due this liberational factor, the notion of exclusion can be used to raise awareness when it comes to the aforementioned fear and the education of its existence. It could potentially result in more efficient way(s) of reducing ableist discriminatory practices. Moreover, it is important to notice that processes of paradigm shift are complex one and that a certain amount of time, possibly even generations, are needed to pass before this paradigm begins to change. It is also worth emphasizing that some paradigms need less time to change than others, which depends on many reasons, for instance the complexity of the paradigm that needs to be changed and how deeply rooted the old paradigm is rooted in a society or its parts.

For better understanding of the process, I suggest that we consider Thomas S. Kuhn’s definition of a paradigm for a moment . According to Kuhn, a paradigm is a set of universally recognized scientific achievements that provides the scientific community with the solutions for certain problems during a certain period of time (Kuhn, 1970: 10). What is clearly visible from this definition is that a paradigm, like I have mentioned above in the context of perception of persons with disabilities is useful for solving the problems for a limited, specific time period that greatly depends on the social circumstances in that given period. On the other hand, it can be argued that a paradigm also provides specific members of the community with certain solutions. Not all members of the scientific community might agree with this solution although certain paradigms, or to put it the other way, the solutions of certain paradigms are acceptable to certain members of the scientific community that is shaped by the specific social circumstances in a specific time period. This is why I would like to suggest that it is very important that we try to take a look at the wider context when it comes to the medical model of disability, considering the social circumstances from which it has arisen.

If we turn back to the social perception of person(s) with disabilities, it is possible to conclude that a certain time period is needed to achieve change when it comes to current perception, a change that is required substantially on a social level. It is also deductible that society nowadays is comfortable with the way persons with disabilities are perceived. If it were the other way around, where change was called upon, the possibilities and the attempts of changing the paradigm would be more visible in my opinion. In other words, what Kuhn calls "pronounced professional insecurity" would be felt more intensively when it comes to social perception of persons with disabilities (Kuhn, 1970: 67-68). Although Kuhn suggests that the state of pronounced professional insecurity comes into play because there are no other scientific solutions for certain situations than ones that are used in a given moment, I would argue that in the context of perception of persons with disabilities there are different ways of perception as a society. The perception where persons with disabilities are looked through person-first approach still forms a minority, yet it is fair to acknowledge that this number of people is constantly growing. When talking about who has the primary role in deciding what is satisfactory or not in the context of mentioned marginalized social groups, for me personally, aside from social elites that have dominion over the overall society, the protagonist is the disability community (and I will substantiate this point with the testimonies of interviewees in the next section of this thesis). It is members of disability communities, based on the imperative of Otherness which they are exposed to from an early age because of not fitting into societal norms, who unconsciously marginalize themselves even further which in most cases leads to their entrapment in a vicious circle of the current social perception. Closing the vicious circle, all by itself, opens up new possibilities of discriminatory and ableist reactions, ones that I have discussed earlier that are also linked to the general perception of exclusion. Due to this vicious circle and the phenomena of persons with disabilities unconsciously excluding themselves, they may alienate themselves further from society by thinking that they are not able or good enough to fulfill society's expectations.

Thereby, they reinforce the vicious circle and in doing so reinforce the possibilities for discriminatory and ableist reactions and also the general perception of exclusion.

2.3 Ableism

Ableism represents yet another term that is almost completely absent in discussions in Croatian society, but is greatly mentioned and problematized in the Disability Studies. The term signifies discrimination on the basis of abilities. In other words, it derives from the assumption that able-bodied persons have a superior position in contrast to persons with disabilities, subsequently leading to "…an attitude that devalues or differentiates disability through the valuation of able-bodiedness equated to normalcy." (Ho as in Kumari Campbell, 2009: 5)

Describing the social phenomenon, Kumari Campbell points out that the main storyline interpolated with ableism constitutes itself a certain belief whereby impairment and disability (no matter the type) are primarily perceived as negative and that, should such an occasion arise, be improved, cured or completely eradicated (Kumari Campbell, 2009: 5). Based on all this, it is possible to connect ableism and the medical model of disability, especially if we take into consideration that both terms contain a key element which is the need for some type of "erasing" of the disability and deviation from the social norms that accompany the negative perception of disability. Just like disability, ableism is also hard to define with one, all-encompassing definition. It is also very difficult to define the limitations of disability, who is considered disabled or not, subsequently it is also hard to give a universal definition of ableism, as it varies and depends from person to person. The perception of ableism from one person to another depends on the fact of how a person responds to/perceives a person with disabilities. One of the proposed and plausible definitions could be that ableism is "…ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized … and largely invisible 'others'" (Chouinard, 1997: 380 as in Nario Redmond, 2020: 5). While ableism targets all kinds of disabilities, whether visible or invisible, I must outline that, when talking about disability, we should also be reminded of invisible disabilities. By not recognizing and accepting them, we fail to value people with these types of impairments as persons with disabilities because these impairments are not manifested physically (not visible upon first sight), thus in a way recreating ableist views yet again. Unfortunately, nowadays there is still less focus and more judgment towards persons with invisible disabilities due to the fact that has been established in the societal backbone that disabilities “must” manifest themselves physically. Another reason for the mistrust lies in the way that disabilities could be misused in negative ways. There were, and unfortunately still are, people that will fake certain disabilities (those visible and invisible) in order to get empathy or benefits at the expense of those who really need it.

Another crucial element concerning ableism concerns the point that persons with disabilities act discriminatorily towards each other and towards themselves. In this way, ableism is further solidified through society’s forced standards and expectations of beauty and the wanted, desired body. This perception causes persons with disabilities to start doubting themselves and seeking to acquire the forced standard, ultimately creating a bad image for them, primarily because of their disability, if that standard is not reached. What can be deduced from all of these reasons is supported by Goodley who stated that “Our obsessions with our own bodies and biology, fuelled by institutional, expert, scientific discourse and the fascinations of popular culture trains our thoughts on to our individual selves, our minds and our bodies to check how we match up to a normative model of humanity.” (Goodley, 2014: 4) If we connect this to the person-first approach to disability, where disability represents an integral part of a human being, it can easily be seen that ableism’s primary objective is to make disability detachable from a person. It is important to note here that ableism does not have to necessarily relate to individuals deviating from generally accepted social norms because of disabilities per se. That is, ableist practices do not have to relate implicitly or explicitly to person(s) with disabilities even though the two mentioned variables are in most cases related in one way or another. Rather, that deviation could relate to other aspects such as education or workplace creating notions that a person, due to the lack of assumed knowledge or skills, cannot execute what is considered to be a “better” job or social position. Comparing a person because their current social position is considered less worthy, by using a pejorative mainstream discourse about persons with disability there is a desire to further belittle said person. However, the effects of such discourses are much deeper and much more complex. Indeed, the use of the said discourse does not only achieve the effect of additionally devaluing the targeted person, because what comes subsequently is the devaluation of the entire population of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, there is the further strengthening of existing prejudiced attitudes concerning persons with disabilities as being incapable and generally less worthy. It is precisely the apparent benignity of ableism in combination with insufficient awareness about its existence and implications that allows for its constant spread and branching out, or in other words, appearing in areas not necessarily connected or having no connection to the question of disability.

When talking about the discrimination of persons with disabilities, the term ableism is often used to describe it. When looking at certain synonyms of the word, another term can be found, disablism. The term itself is described as discrimination or prejudice against disabled people (https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/). Even though this can be a definition all by itself, Dan Goodley expertly broadens the definition as "…the oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralise those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative." (Goodley, 2014: xi). One thing needed to be pointed out here is that, while ableism and disablism can be used interchangeably, there is a difference to them, or rather what they emphasize. While disablism emphasizes discrimination against disabled people, ableism emphasizes discrimination but in favor of non-disabled people (https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/).

2.3.1. Internalized ableism

Such considerations bring us to a specific type of ableism, internalized ableism. Internalized ableism is by itself closely related to the efforts of persons with disabilities to reach society's standards regarding acceptable behavior and the aforementioned standards of beauty and the wanted, desired body. Due to the fact that persons with disabilities are constantly receiving messages that they are different and are very often put in the position of Other from a very young age, they are also trying their best to get as close as they can to these standards and to possibly meet them from the moment they have realized that they do not "fit in". One possible consequence of both society imposing the acceptable and subsequently wanted standards, and persons with disabilities trying to achieve them is that an individual can perceive her/himself according to the imagined picture that everyone has about her/him rather than based on the real-life image, partially thanks to the imposed standards and the social perception of persons with disabilities. This is where the relational aspect of disability comes in.

Imagining oneself based on the desired self-image could potentially lead to having certain expectations that a person cannot fulfill. The false self-image and the impossibility to fulfill certain expectations may be two of many possible reasons why a person does not accept her/his disability or feels less worthy. Not accepting the disability could result in a person with disabilities acting in a discriminatory manner because of her/his own disability perception. All of these aspects guide us to the situation of double discrimination. This means that an individual cannot only be discriminated from outside that is, from the society, but from her or his own self too. This results in internalized ableism because a person internalizes imposed standards that do not include any kind of divergence (disability being one of many). A good example of internalization of the norms is given by Nario-Redmond: "Over time, some disabled people may even develop learned helplessness, internalizing stereotypes and tolerating invasions of privacy that render them vulnerable to abuse – even by medical and service professionals designated to support their independence." (Mikulincer, 2013 as in Nario-Redmond, 2020: 200) The internalization of the norms brings us to the expectation that one may not be able to completely reach or may not be able to reach at all. It is also important to point out the fact that only a very small percentage of the general population is able to attain the standards that society is imposing on various levels. Another fact worth mentioning when it comes to internalized ableism is because persons with disabilities are internalizing ableist practices (and still are hopefully to a lesser extent) from a very young age, as well as because the practices that persons are internalizing are not always necessarily explicit, internalization usually happens on an unconscious level. Thus, people are often not aware of their internalized ableist practices unless one does not pay particular attention to which situations, and under which circumstances the process of internalization takes place.

Societies in general have a significant role when it comes to the ways that we react to ableism and decide which mechanisms will be used to stop existing ableist practices and prevent future ones. If a society does not have control over these mechanisms, it can very easily act in a way that does not only support ableism in general but also in ways that are directly reinforcing internalized ableism. Internalized ableism can be reinforced for instance by a general perception that is based around the idea that persons with disabilities are inferior and focus on things they cannot do instead of focusing on the things they can or could do. When it comes to the means by which the attitudes and beliefs that enforce or reinforce internalized ableism are spread, in my opinion, the media has a significant role, for example, when it comes to the spreading of the general perception of the mentioned marginalized social group that was covered in section about disability.

When talking about how ableism came to exist it is possible to trace its roots in the theory of evolution. From its earliest days, members of humankind have developed a set of codes and trigger warnings based on the learned experience that were, and still are, passed from generation to generation and were/are used to indicate the potential danger. People that were different in the broadest sense were also put in the category of danger. Among the different people were persons with disabilities as well, deemed among other things as dangerous because of contagion fears. In other words, people that were considered closer to the norm or were considered the norm were afraid of being infected by someone or something unfamiliar that met their criteria of danger, with persons with disabilities being just one of the many. As Nario Redmond states: "According to evolutionary logic, it's better to err on the side of caution to avoid those who aren't contagious than to fail to avoid those who potentially are." (Nario-Redmond, 2020: 40) The contagion fears, although initially well intended (to save humanity from unknown diseases), were present in cases when it was possible to infect the rest of a certain community as well as when it was not possible to infect others. This is one of the reasons why it is still relatively common to witness that people react with fear, disgust and sometimes even panic when they encounter person(s) with disabilities; for example, not feeling comfortable sitting next to such a person. From my own observations of interactions as well as reactions of persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons when seeing a person(s) with disabilities, it is possible to conclude that the intensity of people's reactions depends on how much a person does, because of her/his disability, deviate from socially accepted norms. That is, if for example a person has signs of facial deformities or acts because of disability in a way that is considered inappropriate (such as stims or salivation). I think that it is important to emphasize here that these situations mostly occur when an able-bodied person(s) and a person(s) with disabilities have an encounter for the first time. The interesting fact is that these reactions are not limited and exclusive to able-bodied persons, but they also include persons with disabilities. That being said, I do not think that able-bodied persons are the only ones contributing to the perpetuation of ableist behavioral practices, my opinion is that persons with disabilities are contributing to the process as much as able-bodied persons especially through what Erving Goffman calls “social identity”. (Goffman, 1986: 11-12) Goffman explains how social identity works by giving an example of approaching an unknown person. He emphasizes that when we do this, we automatically give her or him certain determiners that will classify them into certain categories, those categories usually being on appearance, thus determining one’s social identity. Occuring parallel to this is the notion that society forms ways of categorizing identity and characteristics that are considered usual or rather “normal”. In this way, every category predisposes certain expectations that need to be fulfilled by the members who have been assigned to the specific category (Ibid.). Persons with disabilities themselves generally contribute to the way they are perceived with their behavior and their attitude towards their own disabilities and disabilities in general. By doing so, they affect the creation of categories to which they are assigned by the public upon first contact.

2.4. Microaggressions

The general perception of disabilities as well as the perception of persons with disabilities, internalized ableism and ableism in general have brought us to yet another phenomenon that I personally consider of a huge importance for my thesis and one that in my opinion needs to be taken into account in all research about social interactions that involves the population of persons with disabilities. The phenomena that I am referring to are microaggressions, precisely disability microaggressions or ableist microaggressions. The term microaggressions was coined by the American psychiatrist Dr. Chester Pearce in 1960s to describe and refer to the subtle race related putdowns that can, as we shall see later in this thesis concerning the context of persons with disabilities, heavily affect person’s health condition particularly when it comes to the mental health (Williams, 2019: 2). The term according to Torino et al. includes and is defined as: “…“derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons who are members of an oppressed group.”.” (Torino et al, 2019: 3) In the beginning of its usage the term was primarily used in the racial context but with the development and growth of the specific disciplines that are focused on the specific marginalized groups (Disability Studies being one of many) and at the same time trying to connect and find similarities in other disciplines by using interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches, the concept of microaggression began to be used widely in fields that are focused on marginalized social groups research such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class etc. (Goodley, 2011: 33) While the exact definition of microaggression exists, it is most commonly described as a phenomenon since it covers a particularly broad field that expands regularly, the same as when it comes to ableism due to the fact that a large number of people have been and unfortunately still are faced with microaggressive behavioral practices. In doing so, it is not possible to efficiently cover all types of microaggressions with a single definition. Also, because of the fact that microaggressions affect a large number of people something that might be viewed as microaggression(s) by one person may not be seen as such by others. Furthermore, it can be added that one's microaggressive behavioral practices may in certain situations affect or motivate others to replicate the same unnecessary behavior, prompting the urge that usually happens on an unconscious level. It is also of particular importance to mention the fact, something which I would like to encourage the reader to try to be aware of as much as possible, that any kind of microaggressions (disability or ableism microaggressions being no exception) do not happen all of a sudden. Instead, microaggressions and subsequently the whole plethora of related behavioral practices, including their spreading, are the result of local policies that explicitly and implicitly dictate the way in which a society is set. Yet sometimes the roots of these policies, which are important as one of the primary things that need to be found when it comes to their much needed change, are so deeply imbedded in a society so much so that the deconstruction of each societal level is needed. Another reason why it is definitely not easy to trace the foundation of microaggressions is because they can be located deeply in a society. In other words, because of their location and due to the fact that people have adopted them as part of the set of automatic reactions, they are very unlikely to be aware of their existence thus making it difficult to find them all. All things considered, it is safe to say that no one is immune to microaggressions no matter the level of informedness when microaggressive behavioral practices or the specificity/ies of a person(s) or a group(s) towards which microaggressions may be directed are concerned. The next thing that I would like to draw my attention to is the fact that there are several different types of microaggressions, three main ones to be precise. Based on the taxonomy proposed by Sue (Sue et al. as in Sue, 2010: 28) the phenomenon of microaggressions is comprised of microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. For a better understanding of microaggressions, I am now going to focus on each type of the aforementioned phenomenon. It is also important to mention that each type of microaggressions depends on the level of awareness as well as on the perpetrator’s intention(s) but what all three types are sharing is that they communicate either implicit or explicit messages that are offensive for the person(s) they are dedicated to (Ibid.).

2.4.1. Microassaults

Microassaults are defined as: “conscious, deliberate, and either subtle or explicit racial, gender, or sexual – orientation [or disability] biased attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors that are communicated to marginalized groups through environmental cues, verbalizations, or behaviors.” (Sue, 2010: 28) The purpose of microassaults is to attack the group identity of an individual, or being harmful, that is to hurt or discriminate someone intentionally without calling her/his name (Ibid). If we consider the population of persons with disabilities, examples could include a person(s) imitating physical characteristics of one or multiple disabilities while being in close proximity of one or multiple persons with disabilities. This can be especially uncomfortable or even painful, in my opinion, if a person(s) has particular the disability/ies that the perpetrator is referring to is/are present in that situation. Another example of disability microassault is when an able-bodied person talks how she/he likes to use public spaces dedicated to persons with disabilities (parking spaces, beaches, elevators, ramps…). As I have already pointed out, the meaning of the microassault becomes even more powerful if a person(s) is/are involved in a conversation. Even though I generally agree with the statements expressed and Sue’s definition, it is important to point out that microaggression depends on the circumstances whether something would be interpreted as microaggression, or rather on the relationship between the person that the microaggression is directed to and the perpetrator. This dependence is conceptualized by the fact that a person that does not belong to a certain marginalized group, according to Goffman, is accepted by the member of the marginalized group while that person simultaneously feels accepted by the other (Goffman, 1986: 40). Acceptance as a binding process between two individuals or groups comes when a person, in specific circumstances, creates a deeper understanding of the way of life and the occurring themes of the members of the marginalized groups. The mentioned process demands trust on both sides, resulting in a process that is often long in duration. It lasts a long time because it depends heavily on intimacy. Once a certain level of mutual trust is achieved, only then does the member of the marginalized social group feels comfortable and accepted, no matter the flaws she/he expresses. (Ibid.) Considering all this, it is safe to assume that a marginalized member, in this case a person with disabilities, should she/he find her/himself being in the vicinity of educated and accepting members of society, would feel and consider things said less as a microaggression just because of the aspect of acceptance than engaging in a conversation with a minimal level of acceptance and education, considering every word or comment directed towards her/him as a microaggression. The role of dependence is hugely important when it comes to raising awareness and educating people not only about microassaults but also about microaggressions and discrimination in general. The dependable person(s), because of their roles in the lives of the members of marginalized groups or in other words the previously mentioned mutual trust, are allowed to speak up on rights and challenges of a particular group or individual when there is the need for that. Dependable people are informed about the challenges in such a way that they know their specificities as well as specific contexts and circumstances, thus they are able to see a broader picture of the circumstances that a group or an individual is faced with, as opposed to the people that are not dependable. All things considered, advocacy can vary, dare I say highly, whether the advocate(s) are or are not dependable mainly on two levels. At the first level, if the advocate is not dependable, she/he can, even with the best intentions, act in a way that may not be acceptable to a marginalized group or an individual that one is advocating for. In other words, an advocate's behavior might bring a group or an individual to a position that they do not feel comfortable in. At the second level, the advocate might, again with the best intentions, act in a microaggressive manner towards a group or an individual she/he is advocating for and thus spreads existing stereotypes of the group or an individual. An advocate that is not dependent can also be in a position where she/he can pave the way for new, that is future stereotypes. It is, in my opinion, fair to say that certain conditions need to be fulfilled before the trust between member(s) of the marginalized groups is built and a person(s) is considered as dependable.

Similarly, regarding the fact that certain conditions need to be fulfilled before a person can be or is considered as dependable, there are also specific conditions that need to be fulfilled under specific circumstances for microassaults to occur and to exist. As Sue and Capodilupo (2008) suggest, three conditions need to be brought about. The first is that a certain degree of anonymity is assured so that perpetrators are able to express their attitudes more freely when it comes to topics that are not socially acceptable (Sue, 2010: 30). The second condition consists of the fact that, in order to be able to express microassaults, people need to be in an environment where they feel safe surrounded by the people that share their attitudes knowing that they will not be judged by their unacceptable behavior (Ibid.). The third but certainly no less important condition is that there are people who have the attitude that members of the marginalized group(s) are inferior, less worthy compared to people that are considered as "the norm" as well as other biased attitudes, as long as they do not face their triggers (such as alcohol, drugs…) (Ibid.) It is with the help of the triggers that these people express their biased attitudes. The reason why I personally think that the third condition may be the most unpleasant one is because it leads people to create a false image about someone and sharing personal information (possibly of intimate nature) that knowing person's attitudes in advance would not be shared. It is because of possible sharing of such information that a person can at least be surprised when she/he discovers how the person that she/he has shared the information with acts when faced with triggers.

2.4.2. Microinsults

The second type of microaggressions is microinsults. Microinsults usually consist of "(…) interpersonal or environmental communications that convey stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity and that demean a person's racial, gender, or sexual orientation, [disability] heritage, or identity." (Ibid: 31) It is also important to emphasize that microinsults are implicit snubs that mostly arise from the perpetrator's unconscious level (Ibid). Due to the fact that they are happening on an unconscious level they are mostly not recognized as demeaning or unacceptable in any way by the perpetrator or by the persons that are not members of the specific targeted group. It is not uncommon for person(s) with disabilities as a targeted group to also not recognize microinsults when they are expressed towards them as negative. Instead, they might recognize it as just another comment or observation, thus allowing them to pass as unnoticed and deemed by the targeted group as completely acceptable. Part of the reason why the microinsults pass as unnoticed lies in the fact that person(s) with disabilities come into contact with such comments from an early age and as such they are rarely outlined as something unacceptable or in need of raising awareness, either with general population or person(s) with disabilities. If we were to try and sum up everything that has been mentioned so far, the fact that microinsults became a part of human automatic reactions should be of no surprise. I have personally experienced this, and in conversation with other persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. I also came to understanding very recently, because of the ways society works and behaves, of certain behaviors that are considered microaggressive, more specifically, considered as microinsults. Some of the examples of microinsults I experienced from unknown people include: “I see you are struggling with speaking, you don’t have to strain yourself:” “I see you as completely normal person.” “Lucky you darling, you are always sitting!” “Is the motor running perfectly?” (referring to my power wheelchair) I have also experienced that unknown people stop me, and also other person(s) with disabilities, and want to procure information about disability/diagnosis and related issues, which also can be viewed as microinsult. Another category of microinsults that happens to me, and to my knowledge to others just as much, is when strangers engage themselves in touching or playing with the controller unit of the power wheelchair or other aides of the person(s) with disabilities. By doing it without invitation or consent by the person(s) with disabilities, it can be considered as an insult since they are intrusive to one’s personal space.

Sue and Capodilupo (2008) mention several categories of microinsults of which I would like to say a few words on. (Sue, 2010: 35-37) Due to their relevance for the thesis, I will only discuss those that are applicable to the population of persons with disabilities. A more detailed discussion will be brought forth in the research part of my thesis. The first category is Ascription of Intelligence. This is in the context where person(s) with disabilities interact with the general population, specifically unknown people, that the engagement of unknown people in a discussion with person(s) with disabilities happens on an indubitably inferior level, often conversing using language more appropriate for young children. There are even cases where person(s) with disabilities are completely ignored and the person accompanying them is asked to talk about her/him. What usually happens after the person(s) with disabilities engages in the conversation is the immediate surprise from the unknown people and an immediate switch from the juvenile discourse to age-appropriate discourse. Another element of surprise is brought on in the conversation when the person accompanying person(s) with disabilities responds to the questions by stating that any questions should be aimed towards person(s) with disabilities. Often the recognition that person(s) with disabilities are of equal rights, makes unknown people embarrassed to behave in such a way in a conversation. The second category is Second-Class Citizen. This category in the context of person(s) with disabilities makes its prominence in the absence of elementary important things for person(s) with disabilities because, in the eyes of the societal expectations, they do not necessarily need it. An example could be when wheelchair users are out buying shoes. The societal automatic response could be to question why does she/he need shoes in the first place since they are using a wheelchair. Another extension to that category is that person(s) with disabilities often encounter the implicitness of not belonging to a certain place or conversation on the basis of behaviors and attitudes of the surroundings. This could be explained through the example of how a person(s) with disabilities entering the shop and shopping assistants not trying to offer help. The next category is Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles. In the context of person(s) with disabilities, pathologizing communication styles is much more prominent. Two examples that I would like to include are: when a person(s) with disabilities has speech difficulties and a person that is in a conversation with her/him gives no importance to the subject discussed because it is not discussed in a socially acceptable manner. The other one is when a person(s) with disabilities has speech difficulties and the person that is in a conversation with her/him finishes their sentences, most of the time with best of intentions. The last category I would like to refer to is the Assumption of Abnormality. This is the most prominent one and can be illustrated the easiest out of all the categories mentioned so far. It almost always correlates with the example of the wheelchair. When someone sees a wheelchair user in public space, there is an automatic assumption that the person has mental impairments. One of the reasons why this assumption occurs is because the wheelchair as an aid is part of the recognizable international symbol for persons with disabilities. Even though we are talking in the context of the wheelchair being the most specific trigger, in my personal opinion, for assumptions of abnormalities, this category can also be applicable to the wide variety of visible disabilities.

2.4.3. Microinvalidations

The third type of microaggressions is microinvalidations. “Microinvalidations are characterized by communications or environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups, such as people of color, women, [persons with disabilities] and LGBTs." (Sue 2010: 37) The author also suggests that in many situations microinvalidations can be perceived as a type of microaggression that affects a person the most out of all three types of microaggressions because of the fact that they insidiously and directly deny the racial, gender, sexual orientation or disability related realities of groups that are socially marginalized by themselves and their members (Ibid.). By denying the reality of an individual not only do we deny her/his specific and unique gender, race, class, sexual orientation, disability… related experience but we are also denying a whole individual. I would like to emphasize one more time the fact that every person has hers/his own ways of perceiving her/his self, and identity, thus building her/his own experience of the world that can but does not have to correlate with experiences of other people. This can be corroborated by Stuart Hall's suggestion that identities are never distinctive which brings us to the fact that they are nowadays even more fragmented than they were in the past leading an individual nowadays to an idea that there is no singular identity, but rather constant fluctuation in the process of transformation faction (Hall 1996: 4). As a result of the fact the identities of an individual are not distinctive, it allows each person to have her/his own experiences. As with the two aforementioned types of microaggressions, it is not rare that persons with disabilities are faced with microinvalidations, which is the denial of their personal experiences from very young age. Parents, kindergarten employees and primary school teachers are often the first people that microinvalidate persons with disabilities usually when referring to the interaction with their able-bodied peer(s), though microinvalidation when referring to an interaction with another person with disabilities are also not rare. An example of such microinvalidation is when a kindergarten employee or a teacher tries to convince person(s) with disabilities that a certain situation did not occur in a way person with disabilities interprets it and subsequently implicitly or explicitly microinvalidates that person's experience. Although this example is not one that is exclusively related to the population of persons with disabilities, it is in my opinion an example because of the fact that its perpetrators are in a position of power. By being so, they often unconsciously instill into a person's peers to automatically microinvalidate her/his experiences as those that are not realistic. The reason why they are not perceived as realistic is because they are not being attributed to the nature of the individual, but to the disability of an individual. In this way people, and thus the whole society are taught that the personal experiences of persons with disabilities are usually not realistic and that it is acceptable to microinvalidate them. Another common example of microinvalidations towards persons with disabilities happens in a situation when people who are working with persons with disabilities (doctors, nurses, therapists…) tell person(s) with disabilities that an action(s) is not causing as much pain as they think or that certain action does not and cannot cause pain at all. What often follows in those situations are comments from the person(s) working with person(s) with disabilities, or even other person(s) with disabilities that are present that a person(s) expressing the pain should be braver or that she/he is too sensitive. These situations can be used as cornerstones for the microaggressive, or other kinds of unacceptable behaviors during the future interactions with that/these person(s).

As with microinsults Sue provides a categorization of the most frequent examples of microinvalidation and in the following chapter, I am going to give my attention to each category in the context of persons with disabilities (Sue 2010: 37-38). The first category is Alien in One's Own Land. The category signifies and emphasizes the fact that persons with disabilities are often perceived as exotic foreigners in their own societies. Since persons with disabilities are being perceived in this way, it is not uncommon that people are being surprised by the fact that persons with disabilities can do most of the things, if not all, that able-bodied persons can do, that is persons that are considered as "the norm". It all subsequently leads to the fact that people are being overwhelmed when they realize that person(s) with disabilities are able to interact on equal level as they do. People are often also amazed by the fact that person(s) with disabilities is/are attending regular primary and/or secondary education, being more surprised with university level of education, or being successful at sports. All things considered, people are glorifying persons with disabilities because of the fact that they are able to do things that are otherwise considered as ordinary. Due to this reason, persons with disabilities are perceived as, in my opinion, not only foreigners but also exotic foreigners in their own societies, people are allowing themselves not to respect the private space of persons with disabilities in many ways, some of which were mentioned in the previous section. The next category is Color, Gender and Sexual-Orientation [and Disability] Blindness. Even though this category primarily talks about race, gender, and sexual orientation, I personally think it can be very evidently applicable when it comes to person(s) with disabilities. The mentioned category puts person(s) with disabilities in the generalized context of being calm and good, lowering their level of self-esteem and credibility in the society. Another example is that people often say they do not see disabilities and the person(s) with disabilities is "normal" for them. Even though the statement made in the last sentence can be considered positive and it would be advisable that all people are considered equal, considering the societal norms and behaviors nowadays that have seemed to have become utopist due to the current social circumstances, not perceiving disabilities, as well as race and gender, could be very well considered as a point of discrimination. The next category is Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism [and Disability/Ableism]. In this aspect, people often on the basis of their temporary disabilities (broken arm or leg) feel like they can relate on how the person(s) with disabilities feel. They can also think that, based on that experience, they are able to procure and hand out advice as far as disability is concerned. There are relatively frequent situations where unknown persons approach person(s) with disabilities just to tell them they understand a person(s) with disabilities because they have a relative or a friend in a similar situation and they are or rather think they are able to discern and discuss about disability. The last category I will discuss is called the Myth of Meritocracy. This category has a close and personal relationship with person(s) with disabilities, having to encounter them on different societal levels. It is also important to point out that the myth of meritocracy can be said implicitly and explicitly. It is comprised in the attitudes of others that a certain individual is not trying hard enough and would be successful if a little effort is put into something. The person is often compared to other person(s) with disabilities or able-bodied person(s). When expressing those kinds of attitudes, the way the disability affects the person is generally not taken into account. Another thing not considered, in my opinion, is that experience from the disabilities may vary from one individual to another and thus it is not possible for the two people to have the same results.

Part of the reason why microaggressions in general are so widely present and yet almost no attention is given to it can be found in the fact that microaggressions can be subconscious. From my own experience in the Croatian context, it also lacks the obvious potential to inform the society about its existence, unless we mention relatively small but hopefully growing academic community as well as members of the marginalized social groups and people they are surrounded with that want to point out the problem. The fact about their aforementioned unconsciousness can especially be related to everyday interactions. It is because of that purpose that microaggressions often, at least when everyday interactions are concerned, pass unnoticed by the person(s) that is/are being microaggressive towards other person(s), let alone as a kind of aggression. Another thing worth mentioning is that because, as I have already mentioned, microaggressions in daily communication are often unconscious they usually come as well-intended, and as will be discussed later in the research section of the thesis, microaggressions can pass unnoticed both by the individual(s) that are being microaggressive and by the individual that a microaggression is directed to. On the other hand, the vast majority of persons with disabilities has been told and taught that they are "different" because of their disability. Thus, they are exposed to microaggressive behavioral practices often on a daily basis, where they can learn that such behavior is normal and that comments such as "oh lucky you, you are always carrying your own chair" are, or should be normal and completely acceptable. Equally, able-bodied persons are often taught by the educational institutions that it is normal and completely acceptable to act in a way that might be perceived as microaggressive by certain groups or individuals. In both cases too little attention is given (if any) to teach younger generations as well as the general population and to help them become aware of the existence of microaggressions at all and their consequences.

If we were to take a look on some of the impacts of disability/ableist microaggressions on the population of persons with disabilities and society in general, I would personally argue that microaggressions are the co-creators of the vicious circle mentioned before. If we recall the fact that a large number of persons with disabilities are faced with microaggressive behavioral practices that usually consists of covert or overt messages (that a person(s) is "different" and often subsequently not welcomed by the society she/he lives in from a very young age) such atmosphere can highly influence person's behavior and attitudes towards society and life in general. The reason I mention the vicious circle lies in the fact that persons with disabilities are very often perceived as "different" by the state (at least in the Croatian context) and thus are marginalized by it. If we add that to the fact that they are also marginalized by the microaggressive behavioral practices because of their disability/ies, it is not uncommon to see a significant number of members of the mentioned marginalized social group reconciling in a certain way with ascribed circumstances. The aforementioned reconciliation often means and can induce the feelings of low self-esteem as well as unworthiness of a person(s). All things combined, some persons with disabilities ultimately - because of the social circumstances they are faced with on a daily basis and due to their longevity be particularly exhausting for the person(s) facing them - do not see the point of thriving to achieve certain goals, or fighting for their own needs/rights, or for the needs/rights of the marginalized social group that they belong to because of constant discrimination they are faced with on multiple levels (Solorzano et al, 2000 as in Lett et al, 2020: 4). Even though sometimes a person(s) is aware that the mentioned vicious circle exists and that she/he is in it, despite knowing these facts and what needs to be done to break the circle (at least theoretically), a person does not have the strength to do that because of the constant discrimination that results, among other things, in the feeling of unworthiness. This is the point to where, in my opinion, the state and society should come up with strategies to fight discrimination and all the previously mentioned social phenomena (ableism, microaggressions…). Considering the fact that similar strategies in the Croatian context still did not live up to its expectations, society as a whole generally does not pay attention to the problems of marginalized social groups, persons with disabilities being one of those groups. Due to society’s general disregard towards person(s) with disabilities, society makes up the second part of the previously mentioned vicious circle. The second aspect worth mentioning as far as society and the vicious circle are concerned, where considering we do not pay attention to the needs of marginalized social groups and person(s) with disabilities and that in a certain way we see them in an exotic way, there is the disruption of their personal space (such as the practice of unwanted behavior). We as a society support the state in which person(s) with disabilities could be feeling unwanted and undesired. The last thing is, due to the mentioned mainstream conceptions, some microaggressions might seem totally normal to us and are subsequently harder to notice and point out. By doing so, and doing it unconsciously, we bring forth the agreement with those kinds of behaviors, limiting the way marginalized social groups feel and create a sense of their position in the society.

It is on the basis of this theoretical part of the thesis, where it is possible to see that the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy, ableism and microaggressions are interconnected and mutually complement one another. Together they create a certain climate/perception at the level of general society for person(s) with disabilities that affects the degree to which person(s) with disabilities are accepted as part of society. It is important to mention here that society as a whole has a big role considering the way they interpret/do not interpret the mentioned climate/perception. On the other hand, in my opinion, person(s) with disabilities have the most important role because they are the one who can, based on the way they position themselves towards their disabilities and towards society as a whole, directly affect the climate and perceptions since they are in the forefront of the stage. It can further be said that persons with disabilities are constantly being accepted or rejected at various levels by society that is, on one hand person(s) with disabilities are considered as Others while on the other hand their acceptance and assimilation is sought after. It is exactly in these movements which when combined with the effects of ableism, as well as disability microaggressions, form the understanding of notion of disability.

To try to better understand this and with a desire to try to examine the extent to which we as a society are paying attention to what is happening, even if we are at all aware, in the next part of the thesis I will present the research I have done in these areas.

3. Research

3.1. Information about the research

The research that I have conducted for the purpose of my thesis took the shape of four interviews with interviewees who differed from one another by age, gender, whether they were persons with disabilities or able-bodied, and their employment status. Also worth noting is the fact that those interviewees who identified themselves as students were not all going to the same university nor were they attending the same program or degree of education. Another area where the interviewees differed was their type of disability, how they identified as persons with disability/ies or in the way their disabilities were manifesting. The research was conducted using semi structured, in-depth interviews. Research participation was not obligatory, that is participants did not need to accept a call to participate in the research distributed via email and social networks. The people who participated did so with informed consent. The interviews were carried out between the 21st of October 2020 and 14th of December 2020. Considering the fact that the interviews were made during one of the peaks of the global COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia, and bearing all the necessary health precautions in mind, the interviews were not held in person but instead using online platforms, mainly Zoom or Skype (each interviewee was able to choose the platform she/he prefers the most). To make the processing of the collected data easier and more efficient, the interviews were recorded at their full length.

The motivation for carrying out these interviews was to try to examine levels of awareness regarding ableism, the presence of ableist behavioral practices and disability microaggressions in Croatian society. I also wanted to examine to what extent people know about these phenomena considering the fact that they are barely ever mentioned publicly. The last thing I focused on in the research was to explore how the interviewees, that is persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons, view the current social position of persons with disability/ies. Here, I wanted to explore whether they think that there is a need for change when the disability perception is concerned as well as the perception of persons with disabilities.

As I have already mentioned above, each participant gave their informed consent prior to the beginning of the interview and while some participants agreed that their full names and the initials could be used, some participants preferred that only their initials are used. Bearing this in mind, I am going to refer to each participant by using her/ his initials. Here are the initials of the participants followed by their disability status (if a participant identifies as a person with disabilities) and employment status in the alphabetic order: A.V. student, identifies as a person with disability (Ulcerative colitis); A.T. student, identifies as a person with disability (Cerebral palsy); E.U. PhD student, identifies as an able-bodied person and H.A.B. employed, identifies as a person with disability (Cerebral palsy).

3.2. Methodology

The reason why I chose to use in-depth, non-standardized interviews is because in my opinion they are the optimum qualitative research method that could provide the data I wanted to research and examine. The reason for this is, as I have mentioned before, topics related to disability and/or the way we perceive it fall in the category of deep intimacy and thus disability related topics are not ones that people are usually willing to freely talk about. If we add to this equation the fact that disability related topics are not enough represented in the public sphere, then the taboo formed around the notion of disability and the perception of persons with disabilities becomes even more evident and somewhat understandable in my opinion. Bearing all these things in mind, one thing I sought to do was to take a holistic perspective by paying attention to the gestures of interviewees and their body language when answering a certain question. The research questions were thus composed in the way, ranging from the more general ones at the beginning of the interview so that the researcher and the interviewee could get to know each other, and for the interviewee to feel as comfortable as possible to be able to provide a complete answer to the questions, to the more complex questions by the end of the interview. It is also of particular importance that an interviewee is relaxed and has confidence in the interviewer, thus allowing her/himself to be able to express her/his emotions, feelings, opinions and attitudes. Since I was utilizing non-standardized in-depth interviews as a research method I was trying to create the most informal atmosphere possible during the interviews, especially because of the fact that they were online rather than in person. As a result, all the research participants could feel comfortable but at the same time I was able to guide the conversation in the needed direction for the purpose of the research. The interviews themselves were based on twelve questions where I was trying to examine how the interviewees perceive the population of persons with disabilities, their level of awareness when it comes to ableism and disability microaggressions, how interviewees think they are created and what contributes to spreading of the aforementioned phenomena. I also wanted to examine what the interviewees think when it comes to the current social position of persons with disabilities in Croatian society and if there is anything that in their opinion needs to be changed regarding this, as well as the perception of persons with disabilities. The estimated duration of the interviews was one hour though it varied from interviewee to interviewee depending on how communicative they were and how much they were willing to talk about the topic of the research.

3.3. Questions

These are the research questions that were used in the interviews:

1. Do you consider yourself a person with disabilities? If so, please state your diagnosis.
2. Are you, or have you been in close contact with a person with disabilities? If so, what type of interaction was it and what are your experiences of that interaction or interactions with persons with disabilities in general?
3. What is your opinion on the way we treat persons with disabilities? Please elaborate on your answer.
4. In your opinion, in which situations, if they exist, are we treating persons with disabilities appropriately and why? Please elaborate on your answer.
5. In which situations, if they exist, do you consider that we as a society have room for growth when it comes to treatment of persons with disabilities and why? Please elaborate on your answer.
6. According to you, are we familiar enough with the possibilities of persons with disabilities generally speaking? Please elaborate on your answer.
7. Do you think that persons with disabilities are equal members of the society and in what aspects? Are persons with disabilities visible (enough) on the societal level? If

not, what do you think needs to be done in other for that visibility to be prominent? Please elaborate on your answer.

8. In your opinion, is it possible to discriminate persons with disabilities, based on their disabilities, in everyday communication? What is the role of disabilities associations and what is the role of a person with disabilities when it comes to struggle for equality? Please elaborate on your answer.
9. Have you experienced any problems during an interaction with able-bodied persons? If so, when and in what situations? Please elaborate on your answer.
10. Have you found yourself in a situation where you realized that a question or a comment that you said to a person with disabilities was incongruent? Please elaborate on your answer.
11. In your opinion, what is needed to be done in order for the rate of discrimination of persons with disabilities to diminish and their position in the society to improve? Please elaborate on your answer.
12. Do you want to add something that was not encompassed in the previous questions?

It is important to mention that for easier understanding and wayfinding through the research section, each question is written above the answer of every interviewee. Furthermore, the answers of the interviewees are used in their entirety because of the fact that I wish to encourage my readers to pay close attention to different nuances mentioned by the interviewees when understanding the attitudes towards the research related phenomena (such as disability, ableism, disability/ableist microaggressions and microaggressions in general) are concerned. It is exactly the mentioned nuances that play a hugely important role when attitudes and relations towards the research related phenomena of an individual(s) are created and concerned in general. These attitudes and relations are directly linked to one’s perception of the research related topics that subsequently effects the perception on the societal level. Another fact worth pointing out at this point is that I provide analysis after each answer in the context of the research as well as research related phenomena. While analyzing I am also offering my personal opinions regarding a specific answer or statement in order to try to grasp the point of similarities or divergence with the opinions of the interviewees. My opinions are written in italics.

3.4. Data interpretation

Interview 1.

The first interviewee, A.V. is a student at the Faculty of Maritime Studies and identifies as a person with disability as a consequence of Ulcerative colitis from which A.V. has recovered in adolescence. A.V.'s disability is not clearly visible that is, by looking at the interviewee it is not possible to conclude whether they are a person with disabilities or not. The most evident physical feature that differentiates A.V. from the rest of the population is the fact that the interviewee was not able to grow in height as much due to his disability. The interviewee seemed interested in the topic of the research as well as in the research participation and was able to freely talk about research related topics despite the fact that they are often not the easiest topics to talk about.

Answering the question related to the fact whether the interviewee was involved in interaction(s) with other person(s) with disabilities and their experience(s) of the mentioned interaction(s), A.V. spoke about extremely positive experiences regarding their interactions with other persons with disabilities, characterizing the population of persons with disabilities as "particularly combative and brave".

By stating that persons with disabilities are "combative and brave" we subconsciously tend to ascribe these characteristics to the general population of persons with disabilities. The mentioned generalization can by itself be viewed as a form of microaggression. Such an attitude can, because of the fact that it is based on characteristics that are ascribed to all members of a social group, serve as solid base for future microaggressions towards member(s) of that particular social group. A form of microaggressions that often arises from attitudes like the one mentioned above is the extensive praise of persons with disabilities because of usual, everyday achievements. All things considered can confirm that microaggressions are very often occurring on subconscious level and can be completely unintentional.

When answering a sub-question about whether there were any situation(s) when a person(s) with disabilities were introverted (not willing to talk) or frowning during the interaction(s), the interviewee said there were situations when the other person(s) with disabilities was/were introverted, emphasizing that these occasions are rare and that it depends on the type of person's disability. Generally speaking, A.V. would not relate the aforementioned facts to person's disability, but rather ascribes these facts to "a social problem". Explaining further what they consider when talking about the social problem, the interviewee mentioned that persons with disabilities are excluded from society which is subsequently reflected in the way they live their lives.

Answering a sub-question who is responsible for excluding persons with disabilities from the society, A.V. says that in their opinion the responsibility lies both in the hands of the population of persons with disabilities and the society in general. Furthermore, the interviewee emphasized that there are certain individuals as well as certain civil society organizations of persons with disabilities who are interested in the existence of the relationship between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. On the other hand, there are also certain conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for the mentioned relationship to exist. A.V. added that a person with disabilities will rarely be accepted by society simply because of the fact that she/he wants to be accepted by society that is, in order for an individual to be accepted she/he needs to make it clear that she/he wants to be accepted.

Concerning the question about what segments are we as the society acting in an appropriate way towards persons with disabilities, A.V. pointed out that they did not see a situation when the parking space dedicated to persons with disabilities is used by someone to whom it is not intended. The interviewee also mentioned the fact that people are willing to help persons with disabilities. In further conversation A.V. gave an example where they said that people are willing to help person(s) with disabilities on the street for instance, to get on the sidewalk. The interviewee concludes that they did not encounter "major problems" when it comes to how we as the society treat persons with disabilities. On the other hand, when thinking about where society has space for improvements in terms of how we act towards persons with disabilities, A.V. pointed out that improvement is needed as far as the legal support of persons with disabilities is concerned. A.V. also said that improvements are much needed when it comes to this support for the members of the aforementioned marginalized social group in the educational system, particularly referring to primary and secondary education. The interviewee thinks that education about the abilities of persons with disabilities for teachers and the employees of primary as well as secondary education institutions needs to be provided so that employees of educational institutions are able to act towards persons with disabilities by treating them equally as their able-bodied peers.

When answering the next question A.V. expresses the attitude that Croatian society is generally not informed enough about the abilities of persons with disabilities, and that, in their opinion, when it comes to Croatian society those that are in a "better condition" have automatically better predispositions while the rest of the population is trying to do its best considering their abilities, that among other things depend on their social position.

A.V. does not believe that persons with disabilities are treated as equal members of our society. When talking about the things that need to be done so that we, as a society can (be)come more informed about the abilities of persons with disabilities the interviewee's opinion is, as in the previous question, that it all begins from the educational system. In other words, that firstly people whose work is related to primary and secondary education need to be informed how to treat persons with disabilities equally and how to help them to become part of a community. By being informed about how to treat persons with disabilities equally, teachers could be able to share their knowledge with their able-bodied peers and students. All these things combined could ultimately create an inclusive atmosphere in classes, schools and subsequently in a society. At the end of the answer, the interviewee added that he is not informed about the other segments of equality when it comes to persons with disabilities.

A.V was then asked the sub-question about what ways it would be possible to encourage people to attend educational activities about the abilities of persons with disabilities, whereby they are not only attended by already interested persons or those related to person(s) with disabilities. A.V. said that it depends from an individual to an individual whether or not she/he will attend such education adding to that it is impossible to force people to attend the mentioned education. Despite all these facts the interviewee's opinion is that such forms of education would mostly be attended by persons with disabilities themselves or people that have family member(s) with disabilities. Answering the question is it possible to discriminate a person(s) with disabilities in everyday communication based on her/his disability/ies, the A.V stated that unfortunately, it is. In the ensuing conversation A.V. explained that this phenomenon comes to fruition during interactions between person(s) with disabilities and able-bodied person(s).

According to Goffman, this type of interaction is called "mixed contact", outlining it as an instance where "…a stigmatized and a non-stigmatized individual find themselves in the same social situation or rather, being in the direct contact whether through a conversation between them two or just being in the larger part of the conversation." (Goffman, 1997: 24) Returning to A.V's answer, they mentioned that during such an interaction and if a conflict arises, an able-bodied person(s) can misuse the disability of their interlocutor to further discriminate against her/him. The described instance, in my opinion, could be categorized as a microassault due to the fact that the person consciously uses the disability of the other person as a way to directly bring the person down. Microassaults are used to target directly towards an individual and not towards a specific group, thus the mentioned situation falls under the microassaults umbrella.

When answering the question of whether or not during such interactions they encountered misunderstandings that relate to the specificities of their disability, the interviewee answered positively, accentuating that it happens "all the time". The interlocutor briefly explains the background of attaining the diagnosis of their disability. Although officially diagnosed as a person with disability three years ago, they have been considered a person with disability for ten years. They stated that in the beginning it was really hard to explain to people that they have a disability because it is not visible, apart from the difference in height, since their disability rendered them unable to grow in height as much as their peers. Continuing, they talked about proving the existence of their invisible disability, saying "it is hard to explain to someone that you have some type of disease or disability and that they are invisible". One repercussion of this is that there are problems in understanding during the conversation and these problems occur first and foremost due to the fact they look "pretty much normal" and thus it is hard to convince others they are a person with disability.

All things mentioned confirm the fact that society trusts less and gives less attention to people with invisible disabilities because of the rooted assumption that disability must be visible which by itself further confirms society's tendency to put people into *categories. Categorizing brings with itself opportunities for the development of microaggressive behavioral practices.*

When answering the question whether they had been in a situation when a person with disabilities asked acknowledgement or approval of something that does not belong to them solely based on their disabilities, A.V. answered that they do not have much experience of interacting with person(s) with disabilities in order to answer the stated question.

Regarding the question of whether they have ever been in a situation where they received a negative comment about their disability, A.V. answered “It happens constantly but I have gotten used to it.”

This answer could serve as an example of the fact that persons with disabilities encounter such behavior from a very young age and in different situations, being told that such behavior is/should be normal for them to experience.

Speaking further, they mentioned that such comments come from people who they trust pointing out that these people do not offer such comments in a mean-spirited way. A.V. mentioned the example about how the comments concerning their height have been following them since their secondary education.

Even though the described situation could be considered a microinsult, I think that it is important to mention that in the grand scheme of things the comments come from people A.V. trusts the most. If we try to connect this to the theoretical part about informed individuals, we can recall that people from marginalized social groups would not consider comments from informed individuals as microaggressive. On the other hand, if the comments came from an uninformed individual, then the situation would be different and such comments would be considered microaggressive. Everything stated is further confirmed by the speaker adding that they joke on their own behalf.

To a sub-question about why people offer incongruous comments, A.V. said that it depends on who is the one directing the comments or rather, if the comments come from an individual with whom a person(s) with disabilities is in a conflicted situation. These types of comments appertaining to disabilities are then aimed directly to hurt the person(s) with disabilities.

I agree with the speaker, but at a societal level I think we could consider microaggressive behavior going both ways, which, in my opinion, should be differentiated between whether the comments directed towards disabilities are considered as microaggressive or whether the individual directing the comments is informed or not.

A.V. explained that mean-spirited comments are “unfortunately a normal thing”.

I consider this statement to be highly crushing, but simultaneously perfectly depicts social relations when it comes to not accepting people or social groups that deviate in any way from generally accepted social norms.

Answering the question about what needs to be done to diminish the rate of discrimination against persons with disabilities on a societal level, A.V. stated that the Croatian system is bad in every possible aspect and that we should look to the Scandinavian countries for example when the perception of persons with disabilities is concerned and that we could learn a lot from other countries. A.V. also stated that Croatian society is not, due to its mentality, ready to tackle the complexities when it comes to the perception of persons with disabilities.

Interview 2

The next interviewee, A.T. is a graduate student of political science and identifies as a person with disabilities (Cerebral palsy). A.T.’s disability manifests in the fact that they are a wheelchair user that is, they use a wheelchair for their daily activities. A.T. showed interest in the research topic and participation and were able to talk freely about the topic of the research as well as express their own opinions.

When asked whether they have been in interactions with other persons with disabilities A.T. responded “of course I was”. When it comes to interactions with other persons with disabilities, A.T.'s opinion is that these interactions are different in the sense that not all persons with disabilities are the same, emphasizing that the same can also be stated when able bodied persons are concerned. They conclude that it is not possible to achieve the same level of interaction with every person with disabilities.

There are many factors that, in my opinion, contribute or can contribute to the fact about what level of interaction(s) can be achieved with a person(s) with disability/ies, person's abilities, the way she/he was raised, the environment she/he lives in or has lived in the past and the fact to which extent has a person(s) accepted her/his own disability/ies being some of the crucial ones.

When it comes to the question of informedness about abilities of persons with disabilities at a societal level, the interlocutor claimed they are witnessing a "big improvement" when comparing it to how it was in the 1990s. In other words, people nowadays are aware of the facts that the person(s) with disabilities (might) need accessible transportation or have personal assistants. A.T. concludes that this is slowly becoming a part of the mainstream. On the other hand, when it comes to things that need to be done in order for society to be able to be more informed about the abilities of persons with disabilities, A.T. thinks that greater pressure needs to be made on decision makers so that persons with disabilities are able to have those rights that are legally granted to them. They primarily emphasized the need for more than one personal assistant if a person with disabilities is, as they say "highly functional", that is highly independent.

These situations, such as the one mentioned in this answer, where persons with disabilities are not able to achieve all the rights that are granted to them by the system, fall in the category of macroaggressions. The difference between microaggressions and macroaggressions lies in the fact that macroaggressions are appearing on the structural level whereas microaggressions are appearing on a societal level (Osanloo et al. 2016: 6). Furthermore, macroaggressions are "encompassing actions that are meant to exclude, either by action or omission. Examples include not complying with disability rights laws…" (Ibid.) It is for this reason that at the beginning of the chapter about microaggressions in the theoretical part of the thesis I emphasized multiple times that microaggressions occur in everyday interactions.

In our further conversation, A.T. continued to talk about their interactions with other persons with disabilities as well as able bodied persons saying that people act towards persons with disabilities in different ways. A.T. stated that some people approach a person with disabilities with the intention of helping but it often turns out that, even though they have the best of intentions, a person makes the situation worse or even injures a person with disabilities. The interviewee offered the example of when a taxi driver was helping them to get out of a vehicle and while trying to help, the driver did not hear when the interviewee told her/him that their leg got stuck. Due to the fact that often in these situations a person tries to help a person with disabilities without asking her/him what the appropriate way to help her/him is in a particular situation, it turns out completely opposite from the initial intention.

The interlocutor answered the question about whether they have experienced inappropriate comments in a positive manner adding to that the fact that in their opinion all persons with disabilities have experienced inappropriate comments. A.T. explained that it depends on the person with disabilities themselves as well as the way how she/he will perceive such comments. The interviewee further explained that they are not affected by such comments because they think that a person who unwittingly said such comments does not know them.

While I would agree with the interviewee that it does depend on the person with disabilities and how will she/he perceive inappropriate comments, I also think that society needs to be more aware, at least at a more general level, on what is and what is not appropriate when it comes to certain (marginalized) social groups. Even more important, in my opinion, is that we should be more aware of what microaggressions are and how they affect marginalized social groups and their members.

Concerning the question as to what ways we as a society are treating persons with disabilities in an appropriate way, according to the opinion of the interviewee, we treat persons with disabilities in an appropriate way when we are asking them if they need help. Here, they gave as an example the situation when a taxi driver asks them if they can buckle the seat belt on their own.

When I asked A.T. whether we respect persons with disabilities at the societal level when an unknown person approaches them or are we intruding on their privacy, A.T. gave the answer that it depends on the age of the person that approaches a person with disability/ies. They said they themselves normally do not have negative experiences in their interactions with unknown people explaining that people mainly asked them if they need help. A.T also talked about a situation that without a doubt falls in the category of microaggressions. This situation occurred when they were waiting for their transportation to arrive and they were playing a game on their phone whilst they were waiting. In the meantime, multiple people approached A.T. offering them money as if they were begging. In the beginning, the interviewee would tell people that were approaching them "no, no I am not begging, I'm waiting for my transportation to arrive", or they would show people their phone in order to let them know that they are playing a game and not begging. In the end, when an elderly woman approached them, the interlocutor told her faster than usual that they were not begging.

After they had retold this, they continued to talk about the fact that perceptions about persons with disabilities on the societal level are changing. They explained that they felt interactions such as the one described above are more characteristic that is, more frequent when with members of the older population "above forty". On the other hand, regarding younger people there is a much greater probability that they have not interacted with person(s) with disability/ies, for example during their education. If they have been in an interaction(s) a person(s) with disabilities personally, according to the interlocutor's opinion, then they either know someone who has been in an interaction(s) with a member(s) of the aforementioned marginalized social group or they know someone that has a family member with disability/ies.

Although I would generally agree with A.T. when it comes to the fact that the elderly population is more prone to unacceptable behavior towards persons with disabilities than younger generations, I think that unfortunately, at this point and with current social circumstances we still cannot take that fact for granted because as with persons with disabilities there are many factors that contribute to the fact how will (able-bodied) person(s) perceive person(s) with disabilities. The crucial ones, in my opinion, being the same ones that are mentioned in the context of factors that contribute to the *fact which level of interaction can be achieved with a person with disabilities, except for the one relating to disability acceptance (see page 48).*

Concerning the issue as to where we as a society have room for improvements when it comes how we act towards persons with disabilities, A.T. stated that we do have a lot of room for improvements. They added that first and foremost persons with disabilities themselves need to show society they are capable of doing the same activities as able-bodied persons can do. In the opinion of the interviewee, this is the only way for persons with disabilities to get to the point where they will be perceived as equal persons that is, members of the society that are not being perceived through their disability/ies or the assisting aids they are using.

A.T. did not see society as the main problem when it comes to the perception of persons with disabilities. Instead, in their opinion, the problem lies in the fact that persons with disabilities in Croatia are not active enough, where they emphasized that the visibility of persons with disabilities needs to be increased on all societal levels. The interlocutor explained that the role of the state in terms of how to encourage persons with disabilities to become more active and actively participating in society is to ensure their basic rights such as: "the right to have a personal assistant, accessible education, accessible public institutions because not ensuring these rights we remain at home, enclosed, being only virtual people that do not exist realistically in the real life.

I definitely agree with A.T. that persons with disabilities in Croatia need to become more active and more visible; the fact to which I would not agree is that the problem of the perception of persons with disabilities lies exclusively in the hands of the persons with disabilities themselves. It is, in my opinion, not fair to "accuse" only one side because I personally think that it is idealistic to expect change from one part of the society without meeting certain preconditions that precede the needed change. All things mentioned corroborate and bring me back to one of my initial arguments when writing this thesis which is, the fact that the notion of disability is a social construct, that is constructed by society as the result of complex relations between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons and vice versa. This construct is shaped according to the cultural and social values of certain societies as well as stereotypes that arise from them. Bearing this in mind, it can be concluded that when it comes to the notion *of disability, disability is a social phenomenon due to the different perceptions not only by each society but also on which angle and from which social position we are perceiving the notion and the social phenomena of disability.*

Regarding the question as to whether persons with disabilities achieve the greater visibility of the persons with disability as individuals or as groups and associations, A.T. responded that when a person with disabilities makes a public appearance, they are seen as “ambassadors of the disability communities” . Through personal example, they can affect the perception of those people that have not had the possibility to interact with persons with disabilities. They developed their answer by pointing out that when a person that has a different opinion about person(s) with disabilities meets or engages in a conversation with a highly-functioning individual with disabilities who is equally represented and is included in the societal activities, then this person automatically “raises awareness about us and the fact that we are equal with only difference being the wheelchair”.

This quote is interesting because the interlocutor mentions we are all equal but then mentions there is one difference. This can very well explain that internalized Otherness.

Speaking about people whose previous experiences with person(s) with disabilities were negative due to the fact that person(s) with disabilities were closed off or moody, A.T. mentioned that people with those kinds of experiences find themselves quite surprised when they engage in interaction with person(s) with disabilities that do not fit with their previous experiences. It is up to the person(s) with disabilities to explain to their interlocutor “that we are not all the same and that we cannot represent ourselves in the same way”. A.V also stated that certain people with disabilities are antisocial while some are hypersocial, the same as with able-bodied persons, “the only thing is that this is more accentuated with us because we need more help from the community and we have wheelchair, making us more distinctive than others that walk and just buzz by the others, so much so that you are barely even notice them”.

A.T. notices the existence of “double standards” with certain parts of the persons with disabilities’ community. Namely, there are certain individuals in the community that prefer to be considered inferior and helpless while when it comes to the rights of persons with disabilities and everything associated with it, they will demand to be considered as equal. When it comes to the question whether or not persons with disabilities are visible in our society, the interlocutor once again highlights that is the persons with disabilities themselves that need to work on amplifying the visibility aspect. They also mention that persons with disabilities need to point themselves out to being equal to those persons who belong to the social "norm" and to be able to participate in governmental and humanitarian causes. Developing this, they state that persons with disabilities in Croatia are still experiencing positive discrimination, a topic they do not like to talk about because the word discrimination for them has a negative connotation pointing out that positive discrimination is not positive in any given situation even though it is sometimes necessary. According to the opinion of the speaker, persons with disabilities are equal to the point they want to be equal adding that equality should not only be talked about, because only being talked about grants them equality to the point to which the system allows them to. A.T. considers that the equality of persons with disabilities should be a matter for public discussion and considering the fact that Croatia is a part of the EU, persons with disabilities have opportunities to interact and engage in different activities in different countries, thus becoming more visible. In the end, they conclude that is up to the person with disability/ies on how she/he will use that opportunity.

When answering the question of whether in their interactions they have encountered misunderstandings that relate to the specificities of their disability, A.T. responded positively offering the example of a high-school math teacher who gave him too many tasks to complete in too little time, which was pointed out to the teacher by the interlocutor themselves. Continuing, A.T. explained that in the second year the said teacher realized that they really needed to change their approach, giving the speaker four or five exercises in a school hour, instead of the previous ten or twelve. A similar thing also happened to the speaker when another teacher refused to give them a deserved lower grade because of the fear they might worsen the speaker's medical condition. The speaker's response was that receiving grades does not have anything to do with disability and that they accept the deserved grade. Looking back, they said they were shocked that in today's society such things still happen. The third situation that A.T. mentioned was when they were using the public transportation with their cousin. While they were in the public transport an elderly women approached them saying "oh you both are so nice, I would like to give you the money for a pizza". The interviewee thanked the woman and rejected her offer. After that, the speaker and their cousin went away.

In my opinion, two of the three previously mentioned situations are valid and good examples of microaggression in the educational system. The first situation can be considered as a microinvalidation because the teacher did not respect the speaker's need for a lower number of exercises and extended time to solve them considering the nature of the interlocutor's disability. The second situation can be considered as microinsult due to the teacher's presumption that all things could be connected and directly affect speaker's health, in this case a deserved lower grade. The third situation, falling under the category of everyday interactions, can also be considered as microinsult this time because of the fact that the woman approached the speaker and their cousin using a juvenile form of speech offering them money (for food) thus perpetuating the stereotype that persons with disabilities are inferior and of lower economic status.

According to A.T.'s opinion, the only way for the person(s) with disabilities' status to improve in society is to engage themselves and point out to their personal rights along with their possibilities. Otherwise, situations arise where an able-bodied person founds a civil society organization for persons with disabilities in order to secure her/himself and others (usually able-bodied persons) a workplace and the financial funds predisposed for persons with disabilities. For that reason, the interlocutor highlights the need that persons with disabilities should be in charge of civil society organizations for persons with disabilities and to represent themselves on their own.

In the further conversation, A.T. emphasized the need of putting the focus on the younger generation where the education on the societal level about abilities of persons with disabilities is concerned, and this should be done instead of the attention we are paying on the older population. In the speaker's opinion, the older population acts in a microaggressive way towards people with disabilities because of the fact they were, as the interlocutor claims, "born [and raised] in a different system". By "different system" the interviewee was referring to the former SFR Yugoslavia where persons with disabilities were mostly kept in institutions and thus, they were not publicly visible.

I personally think that we should not exclude people of any age group or population when the education about abilities of persons with disabilities is concerned, because in my opinion the older population can have a significant role in that process by transferring what they have learned to the younger generations. As a result, each generation will be able to transfer that knowledge to the younger generation. By transferring the knowledge in such a way, it will ideally be possible to encompass every (age) group in a society.

A.T. also pointed out the importance of mixed interactions in the process of socialization and familiarization of persons with disabilities with able-bodied persons and vice versa. The speaker explained their answer by retelling the fact that during one conference that they attended, some of the attendees approached them and were amazed by the interlocutor's verbal abilities despite their disability. They told A.T. things such as "oh man your arguments were equally strong as ours, and you almost beat us".

While I completely understand the position from which the interlocutor is coming, highlighting the situation as positive, I find it microaggressive as well as contributing to microaggressive behavioral practices on several levels. First of all, this example can be considered as a microinsult because of the fact that the attendees made, most likely subconsciously, assumptions about the speaker's abilities, (that the speaker is not able to participate equally in a conference) based on the physical, visible features of their disability. By making these subconscious assumptions the attendees automatically underestimated the interlocutor and subsequently reinforced the stereotype that persons with disabilities are inferior and less capable compared to the population that is considered as "the norm", that is able-bodied persons. Last but certainly not least important, this situation shows us again how it is often difficult for persons with disabilities to perceive behaviors and undoubtedly fall in the category of microaggressions as negative because of the fact that this society tells us over a long period of time that such behaviors are acceptable.

In the further conversation, A.T. spoke about the fact the people are approaching person(s) with disabilities in a patronizing and superior way when they realize that person(s) with disabilities are able to do things that are considered as regular when able bodied person(s) are concerned. In the interlocutor's opinion, instead of approaching persons with disabilities being amazed by the fact that they are able to do standard everyday things just like able-bodied persons, it would be much more useful if we would approach them with the intention to make concrete actions in order to improve quality of life of the persons with disabilities.

Interview 3.

The following interviewee, E.U. is a PhD student who identifies as an able-bodied person. The interviewee seemed particularly interested in the topic of the research as well as in the research participation and was able to freely talk about research related topics and express their views and opinions about the related topic.

Answering the question about whether they were involved in interaction(s) with other person(s) with disabilities, E.U. points out that on multiple occasions they have engaged with persons with disabilities, adding that they approached the interactions without preconceived judgments because prior to them, they did not know what to expect from such interactions. When retelling about their first concrete interaction that happened in the Association of Persons with Cerebral palsy, E.U. said they expected to have a much harder time establishing interaction along with engaging in other activities that took place that day. Elaborating on the situation, the interlocutor said it was easy to establish an interaction and that there were no difficulties in conversing with the individuals. Further elaborating, the speaker stated that all the interactions they had with persons with disabilities were based on "healthy relations" and that they had no negative experiences. All the problems that they encountered were problems concerning the "material conditions of the environment", where the environment that did not provide equal opportunities and equal possibilities when it comes to the use of the space. According to the speaker, this directly "affects the relationship" where they adapted at every possible moment to the needs and the possibilities of the persons with disabilities.

I personally agree with E.U. that the unequal use of space directly affects the interaction, in other words their quality and that every moment needs to be an opportunity to create equal, or rather as equal as possible, conditions for interactions. I also deem the speaker's approach a positive example when it comes to approaching person(s) with disabilities and such an open way of interacting allows for easier look on the broader picture when it comes to specific needs in a certain interaction.

When it comes to the question of how we as a society treat persons with disabilities, the interlocutor states that, if we are looking at the broader picture, we are doing "absolutely nothing". They added that those governmental bodies under whose authorities persons with disabilities fall, fail to do their job. On the other hand, the speaker reflected on life in neighboring Slovenia, highlighting the position of persons with disabilities as being far better than the one in Croatia. They also point out that Slovenian society puts much more focus on making the life of persons with disabilities easier and puts more effort in making them visible. With these changes, society there has become more sensitized to the population of persons with disabilities.

I personally agree with the interlocutor's opinion because the higher presence of persons with disabilities, especially those moving independently whether by using assisting aids or not, reduces the occurrence of microaggressive behavioral practices in society towards persons with disabilities. The reason for this lies in the fact that society has the opportunity to experience persons with disabilities in a public space and this is experienced by all age groups.

E.U. continued with a comparison of the social position of persons with disabilities in Croatia and Slovenia outlining that in Ljubljana they met more persons with disabilities that "use the city space independently" stemming from the fact that the city is far more accessible in every aspect. On the contrary, E.U. highlights the lack of basic infrastructure in Croatia for wheelchair users so that they can move around independently. Continuing, the speaker points out that we have much more room for improvement when it comes to the independence of persons with disabilities, being of the opinion that all things considered, apart from a limited number of associations, no concrete actions are taking place.

Answering a sub-question as to whether there is space for improvement when it comes to the unconscious discrimination of persons with disabilities, the speaker considers the fact that, on the question of unconscious discrimination, “the key is connecting the majority and a minority of persons with disabilities”. E.U. said that their friend who is in a wheelchair said to them that “I hate it when people look at me with the look of pity…I just want to be considered as normal, equal to you [able-bodied persons]. I do not need anything…if I need it, I will ask for it just like everyone else.” E.U. said that the friend’s statement cited above made them “sober” saying that although they did not approach persons with disabilities in an inappropriate way they are not sure if they would potentially act in such a way if they had not witnessed their friend’s statement. In the further conversation, E.U. shared their opinion that it is completely inappropriate to approach persons with disabilities with pity because it puts able-bodied persons in a position of power. As a solution to this, the speaker emphasized the need for dialogue to be encouraged in society between the disability community and able-bodied persons, as well as the need to work on the visibility of persons with disabilities. The interviewee saw the visibility of persons with disabilities as the key element when it comes to the sensitization of the society. Continuing to talk about the need for persons with disabilities to be visible, the speaker further emphasized that it is the duty of governmental institutions to ensure the visibility of persons with disabilities, that is, the disability community. E.U. also said that “persons with disabilities for sure do not feel comfortable when someone approaches them out of pity or makes pity of them or gives them a certain kind of empty empathy” solely based on the fact that such behavioral practices are taken for granted by some social codes, what the interlocutor deems useless. The interlocutor thought that it was appropriate that able-bodied persons help persons with disabilities in order to make certain activities easier for them in, as they state “a reasonable way”, adding to that the fact that helping should not be viewed as “collecting moral points” for the person(s) that is/are helping persons with disabilities.

I agree with the way E.U. thinks. It is this way of (open) thinking and approach that allows us to learn and accept the new things that we are able to learn every day more easily. It is in my opinion important to add here that it is appropriate to help a person(s) with disabilities only if she/he expresses the need for help or if, when a person willing to help asks a person(s) if she/he needs help and a person answers positively. It is also *of a crucial importance to communicate with a person(s) what is the most appropriate way to help her/him before helping.*

When it comes to the question about which ways we as society treat persons with disabilities in an acceptable way, E.U. stated that we are absolutely not perceiving persons with disabilities in an appropriate way, stating that the situation has changed “a little bit” concerning physical accessibility stating that persons with disabilities are at least able to access some public institutions on certain locations. The speaker mentioned the current building of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Rijeka adding that faculty building was not accessible at all when they enrolled in their university education. Other than some slight improvements, the speaker did not see any other area in which we as society treat persons with disabilities in an appropriate way emphasizing “except on an individual level”.

Answering the question about whether we are informed enough about the abilities of persons with disabilities at the societal level the interviewee says the persons with disabilities in Croatian society are in social position whereby people do not approach them unless there is a specific reason to do so. Furthermore, E.U. talked about over emphasizing the achievements of people with disabilities, where they referred to sensationalist media reports about achievements of the Paralympic athletes. The speaker said that this way of reporting is mostly aimed to criticize those able-bodied persons who do not follow the ideals imposed by the society, which the interlocutor observes as useless.

It is worth pointing out here that this way of reporting, because of the position of power that the media is in, very often reinforces ableist behavioral practices at the societal level and also reinforces internalized ableism when it comes to the population of persons with disabilities. In other words, this form of media coverage does not only criticize able-bodied persons by saying that they are not following the norms imposed by the society and that they should try harder, but it also does this to the population of persons with disabilities. It is this way of sensationalist reporting that works on the principle “if they can do it, so can you” that further outlines and accentuates the process of marginalization towards persons with disabilities. All things considered this ultimately leads to the reinforcement of internalized ableism when persons with *disabilities are concerned, as well as reinforcement and normalization of ableist behavior at the societal level. It also sends the message that it is acceptable to tell other people that they are not trying hard enough without knowing them or taking their specific circumstances into consideration. This leads to the reinforcement of microaggressive behavioral practices and the normalization of disability microaggressions. By giving the example of Paralympic athletes, the interviewee shares the opinion that the focal point of media representation should be to indicate the equality and the possibilities of persons with disabilities to participate in all social activities. The end result of such sensationalist media reporting about the members of the aforementioned marginalized social group is, dare I say, the indirect intimidation of able-bodied persons through the lens of disabilities leading to mutual disrespect from persons with disabilities towards able-bodied persons and vice versa.*

Continuing the conversation, the interlocutor offered a concrete example of the sensationalist media coverage of persons with disabilities. They explained they have an acquaintance who uses a wheelchair and is a singer. During their acquaintance's time on a TV show, a large portion of the attention was given to their disability. The speaker stated that if they were not a person who is a wheelchair user, or rather a person with disabilities, their acquaintance would not get that much attention, let alone be highly placed in that TV show. Further, E.U. said that the participant themselves did not feel pleasant about the way they were portrayed. The example prompted the speaker to further point out their opinion stating that persons with disabilities should stand out in the social segments where the norms and stereotypes are highly present in order to make themselves more visible and have to fight the preconceived stereotypes because in that way, they lead society and themselves towards a more effective understanding and deeper thinking that leads to equality in society. Similarly, the speaker also shared my views as they conclude that persons with disabilities will unlikely be seen in public unless they are distinguishable in a certain way from the rest of the group or the general population, adding that media coverage of the successes of persons with disabilities are often used to cover up social barriers population of persons with disabilities encounter on a daily basis.

Considering the inferior social position of persons with disabilities, they can evoke certain emotions that are often targeted during the media coverage of persons with *disabilities (emotions of pity, empathy, sadness…) It is deductible from this that disability brings a certain spectacle with itself, offering emotions to the viewers who in return experience a certain cathartic effect, purifying themselves from the implicitly imposed disability fear figuring out that they are "lucky" because they do not have disability/ies. All this can be corroborated by Debord. According to the author "The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification." (Debord, 2014: 2) If we observe the spectacle as a part of society it can be viewed as the central point of our consciousness as well as our vision that forms a social relationship and perception that is mediated by images (Ibid). Debord also suggests that the spectacle cannot be viewed as the mere visual excess, but instead a world view that society has materialized and has become an objective reality (Ibid).*

On the other hand, the speaker highlights the key role of the "silent job" of the institutions that consist of encouraging persons with disabilities to engage and participate in the construction of an infrastructure that would allow equal participation in all areas of social life, making them feel as equal members of society in the process. In this process, as the speaker exemplified, persons with disabilities should be in charge with the willingness and the support of the institutions. Elaborating on the already existing media picture of persons with disabilities in the society, the interlocutor considered it to be "difficult to change" considering the organization of our society or rather the social circumstances we are currently facing.

Answering a sub-question about who has the main role when it comes to sensitizing the institutions about abilities and rights of persons with disabilities, E.U. claimed that the synergy of able-bodied persons and persons with disabilities is crucial here. The speaker further pointed out the need for as many persons with disabilities to work in governmental institutions "starting from the ministry downwards" and also the need for the "direct collaboration" between governmental institutions and the civil society organizations of persons with disabilities as well as between the civil society organizations of persons with disabilities themselves. The speaker also emphasized the need for a "free spirited open discussion" between the instances mentioned above. The interlocutor further explained the fact that when it comes to the aforementioned facts there must be no "space for cost cutting". They also spoke about the need for building a relationship between different sectors on the societal level, in the context of persons with disabilities as a marginalized social group and their abilities mentioning the educational sector, the cultural sector and the financial sector. At the end of the answer E.U. emphasized that all of the above needs to be implemented in synergy that is, without coercion and conditioning.

Answering the question about whether persons with disabilities are visible on the societal level, the speaker stated that they are not visible at all except in the situations that are linked with their success. Further elaborating their opinion E.U. explains that person(s) with disabilities are either completely invisible or they are, “ultra-visible” but the huge visibility is extremely short lasting.

I would agree with the interlocutor about the fact that persons with disabilities are either not visible at all at the societal level or they are hugely visible for an extremely short period of time. If we consider the invisibility/visibility binary opposition that has just been mentioned where the population of persons with disabilities are most often represented in the media, as described in the text above, it brings us to the fact that person(s) with disabilities are often viewed as a form of inspiration porn. Inspiration porn is a particular take on disability views where person(s) with disability/ies are viewed as sources of inspiration for able-bodied person(s) which, in my opinion, together with the emotions evoked with disability representation, (mentioned in the text above) elicit the previously mentioned cathartic effect when a person(s) with disability/ies is represented in the media especially as successful (Haller and Peterson, 2016: 41) All these things definitely contribute to over emphasizing the achievements and success of persons with disabilities, and I personally think that it also contributes to the tendency to generalize persons with disabilities as fragile, goodhearted, cute, heroes…Overemphasizing the achievements that are considered as ordinary in the context of able-bodied persons brings us to what Shapiro calls “ “supercrip”.” (Shapiro, 1994: 59) With the supercrip approach, there is a desire to perceive the population of persons with disabilities as equal, which is attempted by simply emphasizing the fact that person(s) are able to do and participate in ordinary actions despite of their disability/ies. On the other hand, it is because of such overemphasizing that the gap between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons becomes even wider. In the end it is possible to characterize the described behavioral practices as particularly ableist, thus it is safe to say that it contributes pretty efficiently to the *spreading of ableist and microaggressive behavior towards the population of persons with disabilities.*

The interlocutor answered the question about whether it is possible to discriminate person(s) with disabilities in everyday communication based on their disabilities positively, adding that from their experience of interactions with acquaintances who are persons with disabilities these persons with disabilities have a pronounced sense of self-irony. Further elaborating on the self-irony of persons with disabilities they know, the interviewee said that the self-irony of these persons is “quite hard to break through” adding that persons with disabilities have a high tolerance when disability discrimination or disability related unacceptable behaviors are concerned.

While I would agree with the speaker that some persons with disabilities have higher tolerance when it comes to disability discrimination than others, I also think that what a person perceives as discriminatory or unacceptable can vary based on the fact who is the person with disabilities in interaction with, that is on the level of informedness of the interlocutor.

Furthermore, according to E.U.’s opinion none of the persons with disabilities they know prefer to be treated in a patronizing way and with pity, adding that such an approach becomes funny to them. The interviewee also said that particularly harsh words need to be used in order to offend the members of the aforementioned marginalized social group who the interlocutor knows. Further, the speaker claimed that when it comes to those disability related aspects that can offend persons with disabilities they know it could primarily be the social, as they state, “oblivion” when it comes to providing the basic infrastructure.

In my opinion the fact that the interlocutor mentioned that it is more likely for the persons with disabilities who the speaker knows to be offended by a lack of the basic infrastructure than the unacceptable behavior can also serve as the indicator. Microaggressions can be difficult to define as such, where it is difficult to view them as negative in the first place, due to the fact that persons with disabilities have been facing them for a long period of time. In other words, it is often easier to get used to the unacceptable verbal behavior despite the fact in certain circumstances it can be, in my *opinion, more painful than the behavior that has physical consequences such as lack of physical infrastructure. Nevertheless, I am fully aware of the fact that defining what falls in the category of microaggressive or unacceptable behavior also depends on the person's character.*

Answering the sub-question about who has the main role when it comes to explaining to people who randomly approach persons with disabilities that their comments are often inappropriate, E.U. claims that raising awareness should be done in synergy with both persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons, adding that it is unrealistic to expect that each person from both groups will get involved in the process because it all depends on "the activist ambition of the persons".

I agree with the interlocutor that the process should be done in synergy though when it comes to persons that are involved in the process, they should be highly informed about the topic in order to prevent opposite outcomes from the initially expected ones.

When it came to the question about whether the speaker themselves has made a comment to a person with disabilities which they afterwards deemed as inappropriate, E.U. said that they cannot remember a particular comment, emphasizing that it is possible that they were in such situation. In the further conversation E.U. repeated that it is possible that they were in the situation described above explaining that the interactions with me helped them realize how a person with disabilities communicates openly, as they state "without barriers". Moreover, E.U. mentioned the terminology that is used when referring to persons with disabilities, which they deem as problematic stating that they do not agree with the term "persons with disabilities" emphasizing that they feel uncomfortable every time they use it and further explaining that they, generally speaking, deem categorizing people as problematic.

When it comes to the question about what needs to be done to diminish the discrimination rate against persons with disabilities at the societal level, the interlocutor stated that it is "a complex undertaking that requires a broad coalition of actors" firstly emphasizing the need for synergy between all actors involved in the process. E.U. also mentioned that the encouragement for actions when it comes to diminishing discrimination rate against persons with disabilities needs to come from "above", referring to the governmental institutions under whose authority are persons with disabilities. The interviewee said that here we are talking about a long-lasting process adding that conversations conducted as a part of this research and this thesis in general are contributing to the aforementioned process, comparing the process to a mosaic. Furthermore, talking about their own experiences, the interlocutor emphasized that it was their interactions with persons with disabilities that helped them the most to get to know and understand the persons with disabilities. It is for this reason that E.U. emphasizes the need for including members of the aforementioned marginalized social group in society through various activities. They pointed out that it is important that we do not stop by including persons with disabilities exclusively through the cultural or educational sector, mentioning among other things that it is crucial that we include persons with disabilities when it comes to infrastructural planning. Further explaining their opinion, the interviewee claimed that persons with disabilities need to be included in different sectors ranging from the cultural sector to the financial one, even though the interlocutor is aware of the fact that for this kind of inclusion to occur, certain preliminaries need to be made, that is, could not happen right away.

Continuing the conversation, the speaker offered their opinion that this way of including persons with disabilities in society would eliminate the possibility for their segregation due to the fact that there are activities aimed exclusively at persons with disabilities. This, in the speaker's opinion, elicits segregation. The speaker pleads for the inclusion of persons with disabilities through activities aimed at all members of society. The interviewee claimed that organizing events that are aimed exclusively at persons with disabilities does not only exclude them, but it also contributes to their “infantilization”.

I agree with every aspect that the interlocutor has mentioned and it is, in my opinion, that infantilization is one of the most common causes of disability microaggressions. The usage of the juvenile discourse in interaction(s) with person(s) with disability/ies as well as generalizing members of the aforementioned marginalized social group as fragile and/or goodhearted are two of the most common results of this form of infantilization.

The interviewee also spoke of a situation that occurred while they were attending workshops at the civil society organization of persons with Cerebral palsy, which they offered as an example of the exclusion of persons with disabilities. After publishing a music album, the speaker said that upon arriving to the workshops, they were greeted as some sort of "savior" who will reveal a new kind of perspective to the participants of the workshops.

The described situation leads us to an interesting phenomenon, which is the exoticization of able-bodied persons by persons with disabilities. Such phenomenon occurs, based on my experience and the experiences of other persons with disabilities with whom I have had the privilege of talking to, as a result of usual closedness of the persons with disabilities in closed off groups made almost entirely of persons with disabilities. Often the activities offered by civil society organizations of persons with disabilities are exclusively for participants that are themselves persons with disabilities. These organizations focus on specific groups of disabilities which creates further separation of the disability community from the rest of the society . Considering the fact that a very small number of people in the groups engaging in these activities are able-bodied, they are considered as idols and as persons that every member of the group, generally even a person with disabilities, should look up to. This mentioned discourse and perception is clearly exemplified in the example above where an able-bodied person comes to a group consisting of persons with disabilities where they are considered as some kind of high power who will offer them beneficial advice.

The speaker mentioned another situation where, during an interaction with a member, they got a very distinct feeling they were being looked at by the member as a "savior". The interlocutor found the behavior totally unexpected and it took them time to adjust. Building on their answer, E.U. talked about the existence of implicit and instinctive, or rather automatic, categorization into certain groups. This happens, according to E.U., when a person is connected to other members of a particular group mostly due to their common characteristics. These further stem from the segregation of persons with disabilities based on the similarities of the characteristics of their disabilities, but also through activities of civil society organizations and persons with disabilities being closed off and finding comfort in spending time with those who have related disability characteristics.

I completely agree with everything E.U. said when it comes to exoticization of able-bodied persons by persons with disabilities and consider it important to talk and raise awareness about the social phenomenon that unconscious exoticization at the societal level does not only happen unilaterally (able-bodied persons exoticize persons with disabilities), but rather mutually (persons with disabilities exoticize able-bodied persons too). This statement is also corroborated by the speaker by their example of being in the workshop where that exoticization was happening on an unconscious level.

Interview 4.

The next interviewee, H.A.B, is a journalist for Croatia's public broadcasting company and identifies as a person with disabilities (Cerebral palsy). Their disability manifests in the fact that they are a wheelchair user. H.A.B showed particular interest in the research topic and participation and were able to talk freely about the topic of the research as well as express their own opinions.

Their answer to the question of whether they had any experience of interacting with other persons with disabilities and how were these interactions, the speaker said "there are a variety of cases" when talking about their experiences. They clarified that there are persons with disabilities with whom it is possible to interact freely exchanging different opinions, while on the other hand there are individuals who "live in their own world" not noticing anything that contradicts their area of interest. Those types of people, according to the speaker, live their lives convinced that only their style of living is the correct one.

When I asked them what they thought was the reason why persons with disabilities "live in their own world", the speaker firstly accentuated the importance of house etiquette, the very small circle of people that persons with disabilities interact with or the people who they could interact with. Secondly, persons with disabilities do not feel the need to interact outside of the circle of people they have been interacting with from the very beginning.

I completely agree with H.A.B.'s point and consider one of the reasons why persons with disabilities' are inert and unwilling to meet new people is because of their *difference, their Otherness compared to able-bodied persons from which, according to my opinion, also stems the segregation of persons with disabilities. All this is perpetuated through institutions and civil society organizations of persons with disabilities where the focal point lies in the point that persons with disabilities are surrounded by specific people from the very beginning of their lives in isolated groups and very often in isolated activities. The other way that persons with disabilities receive the message that they are Other is through educational system that accentuates and deepens this Otherness at every level, apart from the university level. As soon as segregation is brought up, all of this is a way of deepening social distance between entire parts of the communities but also empowering ableism and microaggressions towards persons with disabilities.*

When answering the question of how do we as a society treat persons with disabilities, the interlocutor stated that we neither treat them good nor bad. When it comes to the situation nowadays of treatment of persons with disabilities, H.A.B. spoke about the community of persons with disabilities, where H.A.B. highlighted this community’s lack of engagement whereby they are perceived in the way they present themselves. Moreover, the interviewee talks about the mutual relationship between society and persons with disabilities as the marginalized social group. The relationship, according to the speaker's opinion, consist of the need that persons with disabilities encourage society for a change when it comes to perception of persons with disabilities as well as social changes in general, by their own behavior. This together could result in a higher level of informedness and the involvement of the society in general when disability related questions are concerned. It would also contribute to the greater representation of such questions which would ultimately lead to the greater accessibility of disability related topics questions. The interlocutor said that it is not realistic to exclusively expect that society adapts to persons with disabilities when they are just playing the role of the passive observers. Instead, the interlocutor emphasized the necessity of inclusion of persons with disabilities and their involvement in societal activities in order to create mutual understanding and respect.

The fact that the speaker mentioned that there is a mutual relationship between persons with disabilities and the society, that is the able-bodied persons, can also contribute to an outlook that disability should be viewed as a social construct consisting of complex *relationships between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. As a result, it can be seen differently depending on which side and level of society are we observing it from.*

In terms of how to encourage persons with disabilities to socialize, H.A.B. claimed that the solution to this problem is relatively simple, it consists of a firm decision, which is the will of a person with disability/ies to step out of her/his comfort zone.

I would not agree with the speaker that the encouragement of persons with disabilities to socialize is a simple process considering the current social circumstances Croatian society is faced with, that is closeness to any kind of diversity, the current social position as well as the perception of persons with disabilities. Like H.A.B. I also think that encouragement is necessary though in my opinion, in order for such process to happen in ideal conditions a change of approach in the educational system as well as other governmental institutions is needed when persons with disabilities are concerned from the youngest age. If we consider, for example, the fact that a person who is constantly faced with overemphasis of her/his Otherness in the educational system, compared to her/his peers, could as a consequence have lower self-esteem and we add to this the person's dissatisfaction with her/his own disability/ies, as well as difficulties regarding their acceptance. In my opinion, the situation regarding the encouragement becomes even more complex. It is because of such circumstances that I personally think that the encouragement of persons with disabilities to socialize it not an easy process. Whilst it is very challenging, it is nonetheless a possible process that requires a lot of patience and an individual approach. In doing so, this would be an attempt to try and change perceptions of ourselves in our everyday surroundings as well as to try to influence the change of our everyday surroundings when it comes to the perception of the population of persons with disabilities in general.

In the further conversation, the interviewee pointed out that by stepping out of their comfort zones and by interacting with other people, persons with disabilities will have the opportunity/ies to see that other people who are not necessarily persons with disabilities are encountering the same difficulties as they do. On the other hand, by making new contacts, not only will people get to know the person with disabilities they are interacting with, but they will also potentially get the chance to acquire some information about the general population of persons with disabilities. By acquiring some information about the aforementioned population in general, people may potentially form attitudes which can, based on the impression(s) of interaction with a person(s) with disability/ies, include creating, keeping and/or enforcing as well as rejecting the prejudices.

I completely agree with H.A.B. about the fact, which I am able to confirm from my own experience, that encountering new people is of exceptional help and dare I say crucial when it comes to realizing that able-bodied persons are faced with the same difficulties as persons with disabilities, in other words that the majority of difficulties that people are faced with when growing up for instance are not necessarily results of their disabilities. I also agree with the fact that mixed interactions allow people to potentially create their attitudes about persons with disabilities based on their experience(s) of interaction(s) with person(s) with disability/ies on which they could base their attitude(s) of the general population of persons with disabilities. It is for this reason that I think it is necessary for persons with disabilities to present themselves in the best possible way in order for the socially imposed stigma on persons with disabilities to be removed as efficiently as possible.

With regards to the question of where we as the society treat persons with disabilities fairly, the speaker said that as a society we do not treat them appropriately at all. They also pointed out that the society belittles persons with disabilities, or rather that they do not consider the position of persons with disabilities in society. Further elaborating, they mention that society does not appreciate persons with disabilities because they are not accepted as equal.

I would personally add that the society highlights, and often over highlights the differences for which I partially blame persons with disabilities themselves due to their lack of interest.

Connecting further to the question, the speaker talks about how persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons are equal in a sense that in order for persons with disabilities to achieve that deserved equal status, they often need assisting aides. In order to improve their social perception, and also social position, the speaker calls for a mass gathering of people with different types of disabilities in order to bring forth a wide range of difficulties they face in different circumstances. According to the speaker, all these things should motivate the society to think about when it comes to the perception of the aforementioned marginalized social groups.

Regarding the question about who has the main role in pointing out the possibilities and needs of persons with disabilities, H.A.B. mentions that both persons with disabilities and able-bodied person are of great importance, stating that the process itself should be started by persons with disabilities because without their momentum, society would not react willingly due to the society being, as the speaker comments, "inert". As well, they underscore the necessity of exigency for public opinion to be available and represented in the public discourse mentioning the need that person(s) with disabilities themselves present their own problems.

All this leads us to another reason why able-bodied persons may be afraid of approaching persons with disabilities. This is the implicit exoticization of persons with disabilities at the societal level, with which, in my opinion, a perception is formed whereby persons with disabilities need to be approached in a particular way for which, in most cases, needs education.

Continuing, the speaker said that helping persons with disabilities does not need to base itself on gifting which is again largely based on pity.

It can be deducted from this statement that gifting stemming from pity can be considered as microaggression emerging from another microaggression.

Instead of this approach, the speaker points out that "the essence of persons with disabilities is to be educated and employed". Without these two requirements persons with disabilities cannot find a "high-quality job", which, according to the speaker, is a prerequisite for acceptance in the society.

I personally think that "high-quality job" is not the only prerequisite for any person, including persons with disabilities, to be accepted in the society. On the other hand, I *understand the interlocutor's point of view for the need to highlight the necessity for the employment of persons with disabilities.*

Next in the conversation, the speaker comments that persons with disabilities face a number of problems at almost every level, including education and employment, stating the fact that there are situations where the employer will not hire a person because of her/his disabilities. Persons with disabilities are put in that situation despite the applicable legal requirements where for every 20 able-bodied employees there needs to be a certain number of persons with disabilities employed (https://www.zakon.hr/z/493/Zakon-o-profesionalnoj-rehabilitaciji-i-zapo%C5%A1ljavanju-osoba-s-invaliditetom).

This example could also be classified as microaggression, more specifically as microassaults, because usually persons with disabilities are not hired due to preconceived notions.

At the end of the question, H.A.B. remarks that society itself is hypocritical.

Responding to the question about which areas society has for room for improvement when it comes to person with disabilities, the speaker said there is a lot space for improvement when it comes to the educational system and the mobile technologies that are in use nowadays. As an example of such technologies, the speaker gave the example of conversation through a video platform claiming there is no need to meet in person, but rather through a video call adding there are many possibilities that need to be available.

I completely agree that more technologies need to be incorporated in general, as well as in the educational system, but I also think we need to be aware that, depending on the type of technology, its use needs education in order for that technology to be used at all. Otherwise, there is the potential possibility for an additional marginalization of persons with disabilities in the process of education for the use of certain technologies. What we need to do is to choose carefully which technology to use in order to avoid the possibility of discrimination.

When it comes to the question of whether we are as a society informed enough about the abilities of persons with disabilities, H.A.B. claimed that we are not, further explaining their opinion by stating “persons with disabilities are not of interest at all to the society, we are only interesting through the paradigm of barriers, employment, welfare, when someone is in a problem and needs help”. In the further conversation, they offered the opinion that the key problem when it comes to persons with disabilities is the fact that it is not possible for them to find an adequate job with equally adequate income. Another area which the interlocutor saw as particularly problematic is the lack of the support system that would allow members of the aforementioned marginalized social group to live on their own. H.A.B. pointed out that, instead, persons with disabilities are living with their parents or with the person(s) that is/are helping them, thus they are implicitly and/or explicitly forced to depend on the will of the person(s) they are living with.

Like the speaker, I think that the fact that our society lacks a support system that would allow persons with disabilities to live independently is extremely devastating and is one of the matters for which a solution at the national level needs to be found urgently. I consider it to problematic on two levels. For one it can be viewed as a macroaggression precisely macroassault because of the fact, as I have already mentioned in the thesis, it is quite often possible to hear the word “inclusion” in the context of persons with disabilities especially coming from the level of governmental institutions. Nevertheless, when it comes to the conditions that need to be met for the complete inclusion, I will borrow the words from H.A.B. when they stated that we are not of society’s interest anymore. In other words, the population of persons with disabilities is put to the forefront whenever there is the need for inclusion to be discussed in order for those in the position of power to be able to create an illusion of inclusive society. Putting persons with disabilities to the forefront in order to create an illusion of an inclusive society can show us how the entanglement is used to force certain parts of a society that directly and/or indirectly depend on those in the position of power thus creating a violent inclusion (Hirtenfelder and Prouse, 2021). Having said this, I do not think that is correct to blame only the decision makers because, as we were able to hear from the opinions of the interviewees, with whom I also agree, persons with disabilities need to show more interest for their involvement in this society in order to be completely included and accepted. Nevertheless, all this can show us how forces of social *oppression are able to use binary oppositions (periphery/center) for self-promotion (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 144). On the other hand, if we take into consideration the fact that persons with disabilities are forced to live with their parents or person(s) that are helping them bring us to the fact that person(s) that need(s) help may potentially deserve the help, that is, may potentially need to do something that a person(s) helping an individual(s) wants and/or even forces the individual in order to get the needed help. All of this could, in my opinion be characterized at least, as microassault. The exposure to such behavioral practices may have many consequences for the person facing them, with the most benign ones being getting used to microaggressions and perceiving them as appropriate.*

Referring to the fact that there is no previously mentioned support system, the interlocutor referred to segregation, saying that in their opinion segregation is present partially because of the architectural barriers, with which according to the interviewee “we are fighting for more than forty years”. In further conversation, H.A.B. offered their opinion that the majority of institutions could be made accessible in a period of two years. If we were to look at the matter exclusively from a financial point of view, that is by looking only at the price of the interventions that need to be made when accessibility is concerned, the interlocutor mentions that disability by itself and thus the persons with disabilities cost twice as much as able-bodied persons.

I think that it is important to add here that investing in accessibility for persons with disabilities or any marginalized social group means investing in equality, that is, the making of an inclusive society. There is no place for cost cutting when accessibility in general is concerned.

Answering the question as to whether persons with disabilities are equal members of Croatian society, the speaker states that they are not, explaining that they will not be equal members of this society because the equality of persons with disabilities would require legal regulations of areas that by themselves are not regulated.

My personal opinion about the regulations of those segments that are not currently regulated is that they would challenge the social elite because certain members would be held accountable for not changing the regulations, and subsequently failing to *provide the rights to the persons with disabilities. This all points to the fact previously mentioned in the thesis that institutions often use marginalized social groups as means of self-promotion.*

Answering the question as to whether media representation contributes to equality or enforces the further marginalization of persons with disabilities, the speaker said that the media representation neither contributes to the equality nor enforces further marginalization mentioning that when it comes to the media "we cannot be exclusive". The speaker elaborated on it by saying that each kind of media looks at the content from their own perspective. Continuing to talk about how the media works, H.A.B. pointed out that the media chooses the stories that suit them the best at a given moment, further stating that "if they want a sob story, they will get a sob story". Further, the interlocutor highlighted that nowadays it is very important to carefully decode the information the media puts out in order to gain a better understanding into who says what and how. On the other hand, according to the speaker's opinion, the population of persons with disabilities does not follow, or rather it is not interested at all for, the media.

Even though I agree that every type of media looks at the story from their own perspective, or rather chooses stories that are the most suitable at a given moment, I think that the media representation of persons with disabilities can largely affect their social position depending on whether they are perceived through person-first or identity-first approach, that is whether they are perceived directly through their disability/ies. I think it is constantly important nowadays, particularly by paying special attention to detail, to decode the information the media puts out, whether the representation is being positive or negative. The fact that the speaker points out the indifference of persons with disabilities towards media representation can be interpreted in two different ways. One can be seen from the perspective of persons with disabilities who want to be seen as being inferior and leading inferior lives. This way of thinking suits them as they do not mind that the perspective of stories concerning their community is through the disability prism. Consequently, this creates an aspect of inspiration porn. The other can be seen from the perspective of those persons with disabilities who want to be considered as equal. They do not want the disability prism to be the focus through which their story is translated so it is only logical that their *interest in the media representation is heightened and therefore prone to higher activity in order for the already stereotyped way of representing to change.*

Regarding the question of was there ever a person with disabilities that asked from the speaker something that did not belong to them because of the disability, the interlocutor said this happens even with able-bodied persons and, according to the speaker, are not characteristic to the persons with disabilities but rather depend on the way communication occurs. H.A.B. is of the opinion that “not all types of communications can be considered normal, whether coming from persons with disabilities or from healthy persons”.

While I generally agree with the interlocutor’s statement, I personally do not agree with the usage of the term “healthy persons” for able-bodied persons because in this way it further cements the we-they distinction. It also creates the prerequisites for microaggressions and all this is just one of the many ways that persons with disabilities are discriminated against.

Considering the question as to whether it is possible for persons with disabilities to be discriminated against based on their disability/ies in everyday communication, the speaker said that discrimination happens every day, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, the speaker felt that, when talking about disabilities, it depends on persons with disabilities or rather the way they portray themselves, stating that if the aforementioned marginalized social group creates a relationship of understanding to determine what they need in any given moment, then the level of discrimination would be lower. If such a relationship would not happen, then the level of discrimination would be higher, according to the speaker. Following up on the statement, the interlocutor said that able-bodied persons observe persons with disabilities from their own perspective focusing primarily on solving their own problems. It is after solving their own problems that in the interlocutor’s opinion able-bodied persons start to think about helping others but only if they are able to help, if they are not able to help others they will not think about it. At the end of the answer H.A.B. said that all this depends on persons with disabilities, that is, on the way how they perceive and present themselves.

A point that I find interesting in this answer is that in its beginning the speaker made a we-they distinction, which I would argue happened at a subconscious level. They claimed that persons with disabilities need to know what they need in any situation in order for the discrimination rate to decline, where in my opinion they did not take in consideration the role of society which also needs to be willing and ready to accept persons with disabilities. The reason why I find the statement of the interviewee interesting is the speaker's thought process, especially considering their level of informedness and involvement when it comes to disability rights and disability related questions in general. This could be viewed as yet more evidence of how deep the marginalization of persons with disabilities is rooted in the subconscious level of Croatian society. I also would not agree with H.A.B. with the fact that able-bodied persons will not help others unless they have solved their own problems and unless they are in the position where they can help. On the other hand, while I agree that a high percentage of the population functions in the described way, I do not think that it is applicable to the entire population. One of the reasons for such thinking when persons with disabilities are concerned maybe the fact that, generally speaking, society is not informed enough about persons with disabilities. Despite this, I personally think that there are a number of people willing to help without looking at their own problems first and that are willing to learn what is the most appropriate way to help a person(s) in certain situation, whether they do or do not know how to help a person(s) in the first place.

When it comes to the question as to whether the speaker has made a comment to a person, with disabilities or able-bodied person, which they afterwards deemed as inappropriate, the interlocutor stated that such situations are happening all the time, adding that they are constantly thinking if they were able to say, write or do something in a different way. In the further conversation, H.A.B. stated that perfection does not exist.

Answering the sub-question as to whether such situations are mutual considering the fact that they are happening all the time, the speaker replied that, "of course they are". They expanded by stating that persons with disabilities make mistakes just like able-bodied persons where the only difference between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons is the fact that the latter are potentially using assisting aids and potentially need help.

I agree with the fact that persons with disabilities make mistakes just like able-bodied persons. On the other hand, everyone needs help in certain situations and not only persons with disabilities. I argue that by making difference between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons, we are unconsciously supporting the previously mentioned we-they distinction.

Regarding the question of what needs to be done to diminish the discrimination rate against persons with disabilities at the societal level, H.A.B. firstly emphasized the need to include the population of persons with disabilities in all spheres of the society, where they mentioned the public and the political sphere. The next step that needs to be taken is to highlight to decision makers what are the requirements and obligations of persons with disabilities. The interviewee further illustrated their statement by offering their thoughts as to why there is no wheelchair accessible taxis in the cities of Rijeka and Zagreb. In the speaker's opinion, persons with disabilities expect that a taxi is free for them based on their disability/ies. But they point out that nothing is free, the clothing is not free, the food is not free and so the taxi cannot be free. In the further conversation, H.A.B also said that we as a society need to “set the persons with disabilities free from their parents” in order for the discrimination rates to diminish. It is there that a person with disabilities is not able to develop in the presence of her/his parents.

I agree with this but in my opinion the main reason why persons with disabilities are mostly living with their parents is because, apart from financial security, of the needed assistance, which brings us back to the fact that there is no support system when it comes to the independent living of persons with disabilities. It is in my opinion worth pointing out again that by living with their parents, there is a possibility that persons with disabilities will be (frequently) faced with microaggressions as well as other behavioral practices that support and/or enforce the current social position of persons with disabilities. This in my opinion needs to be viewed as inappropriate at the societal level as has been pointed out by the interviewee.

It is because of the need for the persons with disabilities to live independently that H.A.B. emphasized the necessity of a support system that would allow persons with disabilities to live independently. Furthermore, the speaker spoke about the independent living of persons with disabilities by emphasizing that the current support, that is assistance that persons with disabilities are able to get, is limited to four hours per day. This they consider to be useless because they say that four hours is a too short of a time period especially if we are considering independent living of persons with disabilities. In the further conversation, the interviewee said “we do not live for four hours so that we can turn ourselves off for the rest of the day and then next day turn ourselves back on again”. At the end of the answer, the interlocutor pointed out that persons with disabilities have a lot of things to do in order for society to see what their needs (*I would add and obligations*) are, adding that the society “runs away” from persons with disabilities because they do not know what are their needs.

I think that not only does the general population “run away” from persons with disabilities but they also perceive them as Other and exotic which, as has already been mentioned multiple times, brings us to the conception that such perception must not be viewed exclusively as a credit of neither the persons with disabilities nor able-bodied persons. Instead, it should be looked at as a result of complex relations within society between the population of persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. It is due to these relations that the social construct is formed around the notion as well as around the phenomena of disability.

3.5. Research conclusion

Before the general conclusion, I am going to try to sum up my takes on the research and try to connect them with some of the assumptions made in the theoretical part. The first and in my opinion probably the best starting point for the summation is the fact that no one is immune to the influence of society and the ways in which it communicates attitudes and subsequently messages negative beliefs and attitudes which includes microaggressions, that in my opinion need to be viewed as negative (Platt and Lenzen, 2013: 1014). As we had a chance to observe in the previous section, the possibility for microaggressive behavioral practices does not coincide with the level of informedness of an individual(s) or what I can confirm from my own experience, whether a person is or is not informed at all. It is because of this reason that I think it is necessary for the notion of microaggressions to be represented in the public sphere in order to raise awareness of its existence and implications. It is only when we know at the societal level that certain social phenomena, such as microaggressions and ableist behavioral practices which are firmly linked to one another, exist that we are able to approach them. In turn, and from this, we are able to take into consideration the way(s) which, if applied, could be useful in reducing the usage of ableist and/or microaggressive behavioral practices to a minimum. In the research section, we were also able to see how it is not easy to recognize the aforementioned behavioral practices if the persons, and thus society, has been engaging in such practices for a long period of time. The fact that we as a society are faced with phenomena such as these can potentially lead us to into the trap of accepting them as completely appropriate behaviors at the societal level which has, in my opinion, happened in the Croatian context. Subsequently, the new generations are from the youngest age, implicitly as well as explicitly, being told at multiple levels that microaggressive and ableist behaviors are completely acceptable. All this has created narratives about the inclusion of persons with disabilities, where it is possible to hear throughout the interviews that it is necessary to focus on the preconditions that need to be achieved for “healthy” inclusion. This is mostly prominent when the educational system is concerned because, as we have seen from the experiences of some of the interviewees, the educational system apart from its university level represents a very fertile soil when it comes to creating the foundations for exclusive behaviors in general as well as exclusive behaviors towards persons with disabilities. One of such approaches being the disability first approach which was possible to note in the example given by A.T. when the secondary school teacher was afraid to give them the grade they deserved thinking that it might worsen the interviewee’s condition. I can unfortunately also relate to similar situations during my primary and especially secondary school experience when I witnessed many situations when the standards were lowered because of the student’s disability/ies. Such situations are not only microaggressive towards the person(s) they are related to, but they also teach person(s) with disabilities that she/he has the right to request lower standards specifically for her/himself based on her/his disability/ies. Such situations lead to the fact that a large percentage of persons with disabilities in certain situations like to be looked as inferior in order for the society to have lower expectations from them but they would also like to be perceived as equal when disability-based rights are concerned. On the other hand, these situations influence able-bodied classmates of person(s) with disabilities in the sense that they receive the mostly implicit message that it is acceptable to lower the standards for their classmate with disabilities. Furthermore, the described situation may create doubt in some teachers as to whether it is acceptable to lower the standards for student(s) with disability/ies and some of these teachers may end up lowering the standards because they feel sorry for the student(s) having "struggle" with something else besides her/his disability/ies. Such situations are ideal for spreading and enforcing ableist and subsequently microaggressive behavioral practices as well as spreading and enforcing the opinion that aforementioned behavioral practices are acceptable. As a result, it is possible to conclude that the notion of inclusion is not inherently positive as it may be perceived at the societal level.

It was also possible to observe from the interviews that language also greatly contributes to the spread and enforcement of the previously mentioned phenomena. Since the phenomena I have been discussing throughout this thesis are deeply rooted in Croatian society they can also be found in the Croatian language in their implicit and explicit forms. Terms that are conveying such messages, because of the fact that they are mostly occurring on an unconscious level, are used relatively frequently in daily communication and often also in the educational settings. I personally think that, from my experience of the two previously mentioned educational levels, ableist and/or microaggressive terminology was mostly used with the best intentions. Nevertheless, this does not justify the usage of such terminology. What is even more interesting regarding the usage of the terminology that communicate ableist and/or microaggressive messages is the fact that it is also used by the members of the population of persons with disabilities, which was visible in the research section when they were characterized as "combative and strong" and when able-bodied persons were characterized as "healthy". Such terminology is used by persons with disabilities regardless of their level of informedness when it comes to disability related rights and topics. Not only is the terminology used to bring related rights and topics to the forefront of the disability discussion, but unfortunately it is also the means to further widen the already existing divide between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons, that is, the we-they distinction on conscious and unconscious level. This can remind us of the fact that language can be a particularly powerful and useful tool embracing the new and/or different attitudes or ways of thinking by using the terminology that, apart from its obvious messages, conveys also hidden ones. I think, at least in the Croatian context, that it is especially true for language to convey negative hidden messages. It is for this reason that it is necessary to speak out much more publicly about the hidden messages that a language might transmit. In other words, attention needs to be paid as to how we can as a society use language more cautiously thus contributing to creating a more open-minded society.

The following aspect that I want to draw attention to concerns the concept of inclusion, precisely the preconditions for creating a “healthy” inclusion, and the point that we need to stop viewing the notion of accessibility almost exclusively through the paradigm of architectural barriers. In fact, the need for accessibility and subsequently how this notion is constructed encompasses a much wider field than solely architectural barriers that are arguably the most easily recognizable ones. If we would consider the concept of space and accessibility multidimensionally as suggested by Soja (1996), then it would be much easier to link space with actions that do not necessarily leave physical, that is, material consequences. Ableism and microaggressions are one of the notions that are multidimensionally related to accessibility because by being aware of these phenomena and by paying the attention to them the environment is made accessible for marginalized social groups including persons with disabilities. This was mentioned by E.U. when they underlined the fact that in their interactions with persons with disabilities they are and were trying to make it possible for persons with disabilities to be able to experience certain space in its entirety. Looked at this way, a space does not only represent a sphere where persons (with disabilities) are moving from point A to point B but among many other things it represents a sphere where they are able to act and show what their obligations and needs are. Space could also be observed in the previously described way as a sphere for educating persons with disabilities what disability is, how to cope with it, what are their obligations and rights as well as how would it be desired, primarily because of the person themselves, to be portrayed as. On the other hand, it could also be potentially used to educate able-bodied persons on what is disability, how it can manifest itself, what are the obligations, rights and possibilities of persons with disabilities and how it is acceptable to interact with persons with disabilities. By doing it in this way we can create a truly inclusive society, not only at physical level but also when mutual interaction, that is, relations in the society in general is concerned.

The last but certainly not least important fact emphasized by all the interviewees is the necessity to create the systemic support of persons with disabilities at the level of the society in order to, among other things, improve their social status. For this systemic support to be mutual, education needs to be implemented from a very young age. When it comes to this education, teachers and kindergarten employees have a very important role in drawing out disability as a phenomenon and advocating for mixed interactions to both persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons. Another important aspect when it comes to mixed interactions is the attempt to remove, or rather get rid of, the mutual creation of new assumptions and stereotypes. First and foremost this should be done through educating what type of discourse is acceptable since language, as seen in the previous paragraph, has a strong role in how such interactions evolve and when it comes to assumptions and stereotypes. Secondly, I think it is important to teach persons with disabilities from a very young age to express their opinion and to know what their rights and obligations are. When talking about this, as mentioned above, it is important for the education to start early and that persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons are equal and that there is no easy way out based on someone’s disability/ies. All things considered, observing it in such a way would facilitate and allow persons with disabilities to perceive their disabilities differently and to not look at themselves through disability-colored glasses. They would also need not to perceive themselves in such a way where they are compared to society in general and thus not creating an inferior picture about themselves. Approaching the mixed interactions without preconceived judgments, thanks to not perceiving themselves as inferior compared to the rest of the society, would allow for a better conversation and persons with disabilities would feel more equal. This in turn will potentially later in life, with the help of further education, allow for new generation of kindergarten employees, government bodies and everyone involved in the workings and/or interacting with persons with disabilities to look at the situation and the potentialities surrounding disabilities with much more passion and in greater detail. The aspects that are happening connected to person with disabilities in their relations to society would not happen because of a pure need to fulfill the obligation, but on the contrary, the things would be done for the social benefit in a quality way, taking into consideration all the prerequisites, obligations, possibilities as well as needs. Only then would we as a society think differently about them and their rights and possibilities, with focus on independence, more specifically independent living, being one of the crucial ones currently discussed.

4. Conclusion

The pure fact that a social group is considered and characterized as marginal by itself means that the persons that are members of these groups differ in certain ways from the widely accepted social norms of a particular society. Since they differ from the social norms there are steps that need to be taken to allow (full) participation of marginalized social groups and their members at every level of a society. Simultaneously, steps need to be taken to eliminate the possibilities of creating prejudices and stereotypes about marginalized social groups and their members based on the fact that they do not "fit in" the social norms, to a minimum. In other words, each society needs to make sure that it is taking every possible step in order to treat its marginalized social groups as equal members. If the needed steps are not taken, then it opens further space for creating prejudices and stereotypes, thus paving the way for the implicit and ultimately explicit marginalization. If we reconsider the perception of persons with disabilities, we can recall from the theoretical part of this thesis that it is not an easy task defining persons with disabilities as well as disability itself because the notions represent such a wide field of consequences caused by or considered as disability, that is, the diagnosis as well as their manifestation(s). The difficulties that come into play when trying to define disability make room for the creation of the social construct around the notion of disability and disability as a social phenomenon. My initial argument can be confirmed which is that the notion of disability as well as disability as a social phenomenon should be viewed and perceived as a result of complex mutual relationships between persons with disabilities and the able-bodied persons. It is thus possible to define and perceive the notion and the social phenomenon of disability in a unique way which is done according to the perspective and social position they are being observed: whether from the perspective of the persons with disabilities or from the perspective of able-bodied persons. Taking this aspect into consideration it is important that each society takes a step in the right direction, by taking into consideration its specific social norms and circumstances when making a society accessible for each marginalized social group, which include population of persons with disabilities, in the broadest sense.

On the other hand, when disability related topics and questions in Croatian society are concerned, they are without a doubt given much more (public) space than they were given fifteen to twenty years ago. Due to this, some overall minor aspects have changed when it comes to disability perception where, to the untrained eye, the most easily recognizable fact is that nowadays more public spaces are accessible for persons with disabilities. The reality and the social position of persons with disabilities in Croatia does not offer the conditions for a dignified life with different forms of, at least ableist behaviors, forming an integral part of daily life of the member(s) of the aforementioned marginalized social group, observable itself from the thesis. Despite the mentioned changes, the overall thinking about disability on the societal level is still heavily based on the disability first approach and disability itself is often still perceived as a phenomenon that needs to be or is observed with pity. Such an approach leaves more room for the creation as well as the enforcement of the attitude that puts able-bodied persons in a superior social position compared to persons with disabilities. Since the members of the mentioned marginalized social group are frequently being looked at with pity by able-bodied persons, such a view is easily and unfortunately efficiently spreading based on the fact that they are “different”. On the other hand, because of the fact that they are frequently faced with such behaviors it is not easy to recognize them as negative or to recognize them at all. Looking from another perspective it could easily be concluded that a significant number of the members of disability community contribute to the described perception of persons with disabilities by waiting for others to help them achieve things in life and to fight for their rights instead of doing it themselves. All things mentioned bring us to the fact that Croatia, dare I say, desperately needs a (better and far more efficient) systemic approach when the population of persons with disabilities is concerned as well as when it comes to the relationship between persons with disabilities and the society, and vice versa. Such a systemic approach needs to be present on all societal levels and primarily needs to be based on the raising of the collective awareness when it comes to the notions that were mentioned in this thesis, that is: the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, ableism and disability/ableist microaggressions. Another key factor of the previously mentioned systemic approach when it comes to the relationship between persons with disabilities and society must be a mutual change of perception. This is greatly needed in order for society to be able to provide human rights to persons with disabilities whose implementation would require significant mutual efforts such as the possibility for persons with disabilities to live on their own. These efforts do not necessarily need to focus on physical, or rather physically visible outcomes. Efforts and actions in my opinion need to be focused on changing the collective perception of persons with disabilities from the perspective of the general population, as well as on changing the perception of able-bodied persons, that is the general population from the perspective of persons with disabilities. Taking all this into consideration it is possible to conclude that the mentioned change in perception would ultimately contribute to the fact that both sides would be able to treat each other as equally as possible without creating prejudices based on the physical or any other kind of difference while focusing on the things and aspects that a person(s) is able to do instead of focusing on the things and aspects that a person(s) is not able to do. It is also necessary when thinking about the systemic approach to help and teach persons with disabilities about how to cope with their disability/ies, in order to encourage them to participate in the society. While doing this, it is also important that we consider the fact that disability affects each person in a specific way, so this is why it is important to approach each person individually when helping and teaching an individual how to cope with her/his disability/ies. We will ultimately be able to help members of the aforementioned marginalized social group to get out of their "bubbles" by not perceiving disability as an inherently negative phenomena and show them that not all difficulties they are faced with are unique to them because of their disability/ies. Related to the fact of not perceiving the disability as inherently negative, when more persons with disabilities start actively contributing to society, more and more people will get used to seeing person(s) with disabilities on a daily basis. This would subsequently offer the chance for people to see that the majority of persons with disabilities are able to do all the things that able-bodied persons are doing which would hopefully contribute to the change of their perception of disability.

Bearing all this in mind, further research is necessary in order to elaborate and determine in detail how exactly the systemic support for persons with disabilities should look like in order to meet all the necessary criteria that would allow persons with disabilities to have equal rights and opportunities and to be fully integrated in the society. This thesis has shown that, among other things, generally speaking, Croatian society is unfortunately far from the level of consciousness about disability that is needed in order to start to think systematically about persons with disabilities at all levels. On the other hand, there are a very small number of members of the disability community that are actively and passionately constantly pointing out the current social position of their marginalized social group and the things that need to be changed in order for their social position to improve, that is, to get (as close to) equal. Although I personally agree with and admire their efforts, I also think that in order for such changes to occur we need to start focusing on the less visible aspects such as ableism and disability microaggressions which, as the thesis has shown, are particularly present at all levels of the Croatian society regardless of the fact if it is a person(s) with disabilities or able-bodied person(s). In order to be able to achieve all this, there needs to be a shift in paradigm when it comes to the perception of disability in general together with raising awareness about the existence of ableism and disability microaggressions as well as their implications on the population of persons with disabilities and on the general population.

The following paradigm that needs to be changed is the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy. Inclusion must not be looked exclusively as positive without focusing on the prerequisites that need to be fulfilled in order for inclusion to function properly. Otherwise, taking into consideration the fact that the desire for inclusion to be implemented is based on the best of intentions towards person with disabilities and society in general, completely different consequences arise that, in my opinion, lead potentially to worst-case scenario. This potential worst-case scenario proliferates itself in the notion that individuals within the system who carry out the inclusion completely miss the mark due to the not focusing, paying the needed attention, to the prerequisites for the inclusion to be fully functional. By doing so they create a sense of “virtual reality”, which according to Žižek, “…is the virtualization of the very "true" reality: by the mirage of "virtual reality," the "true" reality itself is posited as a semblance of itself, as a pure symbolic edifice.” (Žižek, 1993: 44-45) Despite the best intentions of the inner workings of the system, the gap between persons with disabilities and able-bodied persons will be widened. On the other hand, exclusion should be looked at as not always be exclusively negative, but as a useful tool when it comes to changing the paradigm of perception of persons with disabilities and the perception of inclusion-exclusion dichotomy. Exclusion is looked at through the prism of the ability to distance ourselves from the ideals we cling on to in order to be able to see the wider context when it comes to different, more open perception of persons with disabilities and their inclusion which would enable a (more) equal perception of the population of persons with disabilities and vice versa, that is, perception of able-bodied persons by persons with disabilities.

Such an outlook on exclusion is confirmed by Ferri and Connor who state that “By attending to the discourses of racial segregation and exclusion of students with disabilities, we call attention to the discursive construction of student subjects deemed unworthy of integration or inclusion. Moreover, by questioning the taken-for-granted notions of the "normal," "regular," "general," and "average" student, we highlight the interplay of racism and ableism and question the efficacy of gradualism as a means of reform.” (Ferri and Connor, 2005: 463) Subsequently, further discussion needs to be opened, researched and elaborated on. Since I myself am a person with disability and because the aforementioned marginalized social group is the focus of my academic writing, it was a conscious decision to start problematizing the mentioned subjects in this MA thesis the moment I became fully aware of them. This is with the hope of raising awareness about the need to perceive persons with disabilities as equal, taking into consideration their needs, obligations and the provision of equal possibilities, not only in the context of the Croatian society, but also at the global level, since I consider the need for the change to come from the persons with disabilities themselves.

To conclude, I think that theorizing the aspects in need of change offers a window into a more open perspective as corroborated by bell hooks when she “…saw in theory then a location for healing.” (hooks, 1991: 1) This statement personally motivates me to delve deeper into studying and researching the relations between marginalized social groups, persons with disabilities in particular, and society.

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