



## The “Human Library” method and perspectives

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### Abstract

*The pandemic of COVID-19 caused a lot of damage to people's minds and feeling of security and confidence. This led to the exploration of new ways to cope with difficult situations. Not surprisingly, one of these ways appeared to be reading. The subject of this paper is one very interesting method of reading, which appeared in the beginning of the century and gained high popularity in the last 5 years. This is the "Human Library", which offers its readers to borrow, instead of paper or e-books, people. These people willingly tell their stories and freely talk about their differences, answer their readers' questions in the name of breaking some stereotypes. This difficult task turns the "Human Library" into a unique method that creates a safe environment for communication and overcoming prejudices. The study aims to present the essence and good practices of this movement, being interested in its history and development over the last two decades. The research methodology includes a documentary and content analysis (internal and online desk research). Relevant sources were studied as follows: the official web page of the Human Library organization, articles from Forbes, The Economist and The Guardian magazines, the social impact company GOOD & Upworthy etc. The study is focused on the concept of this method in the context of the "Human Library" (HL) organization and its widely spreading work [11].*

**Keywords:** book, communication, human, library, prejudice

### 1. Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 led to the exploration of new ways to cope with difficult situations. Not surprisingly, one of these ways appeared to be reading. Bulgarian researchers' interest has been directed to this trend, activated during the lock down, and project titled „Study of Attitudes to the Therapeutic Potential of Reading in Atypical Situations for the Individual” has been established in November 2020. During the project many different fields have been explored - initiatives born during the pandemic and related to the healing power of books [8]; the importance of the library in a period of crisis [7]; bibliotherapy as a method in the context of education and its advantages during and post COVID-19 crisis [4]; importance of reading and communicating for the psychological status during crisis [9] etc. One of the most innovative and interesting initiative is the "Human Library", which offers its readers to borrow, instead of paper or e-books, people. These people willingly tell their stories and freely talk about their differences, answer their readers' questions in order to break some stereotypes.

### 2. Methodology

The study aims to present the essence and good practices of this movement, being interested in its history and development over the last two decades. The research methodology includes a documentary and content analysis (internal and online desk research). Relevant sources were studied as follows: the official web page of the Human Library organization, articles from Forbes, The Economist and The Guardian magazines, the social impact company GOOD & Upworthy etc. The study is focused on the concept of this method in the context of the “Human Library” (HL) organization and its widely spreading work [11].

### 3. History and contemporary activity of the Human Library

The Human Library is an international organization and movement that first started in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2000. It aims to tackle people's prejudices by helping them talk to others they wouldn't normally meet [10]. The organization uses a library analogy of borrowing people instead of books [2]. These people have "experienced or been victims of prejudice, social exclusion or stigma" and "readers" can ask them questions to learn more about the other person and challenge their own



prejudices [6]. The Human Library Organization is active in 80 countries with a few permanent libraries and most occurring as events. The secretariat of the organization is open on all weekdays from 10 am to 4 pm and can be reached by phone or email.

The official website of the organization contains detailed information about the activities and opportunities for participation and is updated in a timely manner [11]. Using it you can make a donation to the organization, there are links to all social media it is part of, and also a calendar of upcoming events and participation request forms.

The idea to create the organization came after an event held in the form of "Human Library" in 2000. One of the founders and current director of the organization, Ronnie Abergel, saw potential in the idea and began a process of spreading it, traveling and meeting with people from different institutions. The first years after the creation of the organization, the idea of a "Human Library" was still difficult to accept, today it enjoys great success. Our modern society deals more and more diligently with combating prejudices and encouraging tolerance for differences and therefore the success of this initiative is increasing.

Regarding the nature and methodology of the "Human Library", there are several aspects that characterize it. It is designed to build a positive framework for conversations that can help combat stereotypes and prejudice through dialogue. The Human Library is a place where real people are for rent. A place where difficult questions are asked, evaluated and answered [11]. What is special about these conversations is that they bring up things that are difficult to talk about, and are extremely important for building self-confidence and hence for a modern society - devoid of prejudices.

Anyone willing to openly share their story can apply through the organization's website and become a "human book" to take on various events. They are prepared by the organization and promoted through various channels - mainly on the Internet. An example of a current event that has become a regular is the "Reading Garden", open every third Sunday at Union KBH - the so-called house for Copenhageners from all over the world from 12 noon to 3 pm [12]. During this period of time, "human books" can be borrowed there to talk about prejudices and differences. The concept is simple - "readers" appear at the library counter, where they are instructed by the librarians on the subjects available for borrowing. After choosing which "human book" to talk to, they sit in the reading garden and have an open conversation, and any questions on the topic are welcome. The selection of books changes every week. Those interested in the event can contact the organization in advance if they are interested in a topic and be notified when the specific title is available.

Events organized as "Human Library" are already held regularly in many countries. The method is popularized and even some well-known product brands are starting to include it in their events [3]. A number of people share their experiences as readers in the "Human Library" - one of them is Robert Bright, who talks about his first "reading" in 2017. After discussions with two of the proposed "human books," he concludes that, in a very practical way, this experience shows us that if we make an effort to listen and understand people, we quickly begin to see beyond our own world, the fact that we are similar in many ways, not just being people [3].

In 2016, the BBC covered an event in Singapore - "Human Library" by filming a short video in which participants from both sides of the activity - "readers" and "books" - briefly shared the meaning of these conversations and how they felt after them [11]. People who live with disabilities - born or acquired or with diseases that are different in some way or have gone through hardships, been victims of violence etc. confirm that sharing their stories in a frank conversation with the unknown "readers" frees them from the burden, help them in self-discovery, in their personal struggle and brings them closer. The "readers" themselves take a different perspective on challenges that they have faced, or have not, but had the wrong idea about. In addition to hearing their stories, readers can also learn, in the course of the conversation, how to be helpful to people with special needs that they meet in their daily lives or know, but rarely dare to ask out of embarrassment.

#### **4. Contribution to the fight against prejudice**

By offering different characters' viewpoints, stories encourage us to empathise. Studies show that this is particularly true of literary fiction, with its focus on relationships and character development. The psychological awareness that we are endowed with after reading a work of fiction can last for several days. Books filled with stock characters and predictable plotlines tend to have the opposite effect, confirming our expectations of others. Reading a work of fiction is therefore like getting to know a person. The more you learn about their stories, the less you "judge them by their cover" [1]. Prejudice is evaluating a person by an already formed image of him based on some signs, without interest in getting to know him more deeply. Prejudice is inherent in man from the beginning, but it is leading in people who do not read (in every sense of the expression). Thus, thanks to the "Human Library",



reading becomes easier, more interesting and accessible to more people - the participants get to know each other (within the stories they discuss) and destroy the stereotypes built in humanity for centuries. In Bulgaria, unfortunately, this method is not yet applied, and the information about it is quite scarce. The aspiration of specialists to achieve better results and to borrow good practices from all over the world would be supported by the promotion of the "Human Library" at local level.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Telling stories, sharing experiences in conversation with strangers is a frequently used tool in various social activities. The "Human Library" is a modern method of communication that effectively fights against prejudice. The name and methodology are borrowed from the traditional library system, precisely because it is the closest by essence and because the library itself is a place free from prejudice, where people can "communicate" with different books, enrich themselves and feel comfortable, as they are.

The "Human Library" is a unique example of reading with understanding - the "reader" has the opportunity to ask questions directly to the author, which is an extremely interesting process. Here "reading" takes place on several levels - textual (oral transmission of the content), physical (the author and the book are living, emotional human beings with their physical marks, mood, smell and charisma), there is an opportunity not just for feedback, but a two-way communication takes place.

Thanks to the HL organization, this method has the potential to be developed and used in different regions, especially where the number of prejudice victims is high. Its name, inspired by the centuries-old institution is also a reference to the transformation of libraries and their process of becoming social centers with modern role in the future information society. The "Human Library" is a great example of communication, encouraging participants to be honest with strangers, having no fear of judgment and also their readers have the chance to get a different point of view and break some of their own stereotypes. Quite reasonably, we can attribute this method to one of the forms of therapeutic reading and admit that the modern person, who has almost unlimited opportunities to acquire information and communicate, still best "reads" the world by communicating with another person.

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