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"Social Ignorance of Blindness": Images and Narratives on Visual Impairment through Photovoice

This article aims to engage participants in a self-reflective process to inquire about their perception of visual impairment, exploring both the image they have of visual impairment and the preconceptions they have about it. The sample consisted of 223 students two Galician universities (northwest Spain). The study used a participatory approach in which the Photovoice Technique was combined with the Incomplete Sentences strategy to collect information while promoting self-reflection and personal awareness. The information collected was analysed using Maxqda22 and the results revealed that, behind an apparent inclusiveness, there is evidence of the persistence of stereotypes about visual impairment that go beyond lack of vision: glasses as a synonym for "metaphorical darkness", cane and guide-dog as a synonym for dependency, and lottery sales as a synonym for inferiority. These findings suggest implications for educational settings, specifically university settings, along with the need to train university students about visual impairment.

Keywords: Vision impairment; stereotypes; social inclusion; quality education; Photovoice

Introduction

The social model of disability considers that disability is the result of the intersection between a special bodily, structural or functional, congenital or acquired condition, and the barriers that society creates around this condition (Grueso and Sandoval, 2021). Although the idea that people with disabilities are passive beings, unable to be protagonists of their destiny and to be an active part of society, the reality is that the concept of disability has an implicit media content, referring to a topic and a socially constructed concept (Berghs *et al.*, 2019).

Normalisation requires, on the one hand, both the acceptance of the other in their diversity (Ainscow and Messiou, 2018) and the effort to reinforce support for all that really leads to full inclusion (Materechera, 2020); and, on the other hand, the recognition that all people have the same rights. Developing actions and practices aimed at responding to

diversity, working to build a sense of belonging and recognising the value and dignity of all people are the pillars of inclusion (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2020). In line with this, one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all, including equal access for all women and men to quality technical, vocational and higher education (UNESCO, 2017).

The concept of disability is not a neutral concept, as the medical model suggests, but it is a social construct dependent on the social and cultural context. Disability is not an attribute of the individual, but the result of a complex set of conditions, many of which are caused or aggravated by the social environment (Barnes *et al.*, 1999). By making it invisible, with negative values and beliefs that create barriers to mobility, understanding or communication, it constitutes a form of discrimination similar to that of gender or ethnicity, among others, in such a way that the design of a society conceived for people without disabilities leads those with disabilities to suffer significant reductions in their quality of life (Morán *et al.*, 2023). Quality of life consists of personal, interpersonal and social dimensions between which reciprocal relationships are established, so that quality of life encompasses material aspects, but also social conditions that enable participation in the community (Schalock *et al.*, 2022) and desirable positive aspects of people's lives such as well-being or happiness (Morán *et al.*, 2023).

As with other disabilities, psychological health and social participation are functional factors that can be negatively affected as a consequence of blindness or vision loss, impairing the quality of life of those affected. The label of having a visual impairment carries with it many negative stereotypes of disability that, with varying degrees of subtlety, persist and affect the quality of life of many people (Giese *et al.*, 2021). They cloak themselves in a

benevolent appearance of compassion and protection and, behind an apparent favourable affective charge towards the other person, hide a negative hierarchisation, more or less openly provoking rejection, indifference or fear (Szubielska, 2018). Blindness and visual impairment (VI) can increase vulnerability in social interactions and the likelihood of being rejected, while experiences of rejection and isolation can lead to increased distrust of others (Oleszkiewicz *et al.*, 2017).

Attitudes are defined as those automatic thoughts that people have about other people, places or things and the extent to which they are positive (favourable) or negative (unfavourable) determines how individuals relate to the person or item that is the object of the attitude (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2019). The negative connotations and stereotypes that accompany the word blind exert their influence not only on social relations and participation, but also extend into the world of work (Silverman *et al.*, 2019). Reality shows that people with disabilities are sometimes hired just to meet the special human resources quota, with no expectation that they will be productive, leaving people with disabilities struggling to demonstrate their competence and reliability (Cmar and Steverson, 2021; Steverson and Crudden, 2023). However, research on attitudes towards blindness is scarce, highlighting the need to address this issue (Dunuwila *et al.*, 2023).

This research is designed as a participatory process that, around a theme related to inclusion and diversity, involves participants in the analysis and transformation of both their critical awareness and their social reality through the use of participatory techniques for collecting information. The methodology followed, which is innovative in studies on VI, is in line with the objectives of (1) analysing the perception that university students in degrees related to the socio-educational field have of VI, and (2) exploring the image of VI itself and the preconceived ideas about it among the informants.

Materials and methods

The study is part of a coordinated inter-university research strategy which, against the backdrop of socio-educational inclusion, aims to involve students from some of the institutions of the Galician University System in critical reflection on issues related to exclusion. The project, called Researching inclusion with learners, has an annual duration and, each year, focuses on a different theme but always having socio-educational exclusion as a common axis. In turn, beyond an in-depth understanding of a subject of study, in this case VI, the aim is for participants to engage in a self-reflective process that seeks to be inclusive in the terms indicated by Nind (2014): descriptive, interpretative and critical-deliberative.

Participants and sampling procedures

Following the aforementioned inter-university research strategy, students were invited to participate on a voluntary basis if they met the following requirements to acquire the status of informant: (1) be of adolescent age (as established by the World Health Organisation) and (2) be studying in the 2023-2024 academic year at a stage of educational transition (1st year undergraduate students). After a massive formal invitation sent to all possible students who met the aforementioned requirements, 113 students from the University of Santiago de Compostela (Institution A) who, at the time of data collection, were students of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education or the Double Degree in Early Childhood Education Teacher and Primary Education Teacher, and 110 students from the University of Vigo (Institution B) enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Social Education, agreed to take part in the research. Access to the participants was by convenience, their choice being non-random and intentional. The research team is composed of three members, two from Institution A and one from Institution B.

For quality reasons, both the ethical commitments established by the participating

university institutions and the ethical standards set by the American Psychological Association (APA 2017) were adopted. Special attention was paid to the signing of the informed consent of all informants, voluntary participation as well as the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses. Given that the data collection technique applied may imply that, in the taking of images, there may be other people who, by being portrayed, may be involved in the study, if this is the case, the challenge of having their informed consent was also taken on.

Participatory strategies protocol

The fieldwork was carried out during the 2023-2024 academic year in 3 distinct phases.

Phase I. Participatory selection of the research topic. The research topic (VI) was proposed by students who, in the previous academic year, formed part of another inter-university research project coordinated between various Faculties of Education in the Autonomous Community. Thus, during the 2022-2023 academic year, the participants in the previous project democratically chose the topic to be studied in the following 2023-2024 academic year. After an anonymous brainstorming process, in a rotating folio format (Kagan and Kagan, 2009), a wide range of thematic proposals for reflection on social awareness were obtained. The final filtering and selection is carried out through successive voting among the students, resulting in the theme VI being chosen as the future study proposal.

Phase II. Selection of key research questions. After the participatory selection of the research topic, an open round of key research questions is carried out with the students themselves. Repeating the process of the rotating folio, they collaboratively draw up a list of sub-themes related to the VI which, in their opinion, will provoke reflection among future participants. Among all of them, stereotypes about blind people, their education in ordinary schools, possible situations or events that could lead to exclusion, accessibility, sport and the

professional life of people with VI stand out.

Phase III. Design of information collection strategies and fieldwork. The researchers take as a starting point the sub-themes proposed by the students to guide the design of the data collection strategies. Given the inter-university nature of the study, the researchers decided to combine two different strategies, the narrative-visual technique Photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) and Incomplete sentences (University of Southampton and Messiou, 2014) (Table 1). In the former, participants reflect creatively on a research topic, giving a visual (photography) and narrative (written voice) response to it. Its potential lies, among others, in evoking an empathetic and creative understanding of how people experience their worlds (Authors, 2019). In addition, the combined use of visual narratives and photography can promote self-reflection and personal awareness of issues related to their own VI needs. Incomplete sentences, meanwhile, encourage the participant to reflect on the topic in a simpler way by giving a written response to an unfinished sentence in post-it format.

Table 1. Research topics

Sub-themes	Photovoice	Incomplete sentences
Perception VI	My perception of the VI...	For me, the VI represents...
Language	The social language used around the VI...	For me, the words "blind" or "blindness"...
Stereotypes	Stereotypes surrounding the VI...	The stereotypes attributed to people with VI...
Exclusion	The exclusion of people with VI...	Society excludes people with VI...
Inclusion	Inclusion of people with VI...	Inclusion of people with VI...

The collection of information was carried out simultaneously in both institutions, applying the Incomplete Sentences technique in Institution A and Photovoice in Institution B. Both the contact with the participants and the exchange of the information collection

templates was done by e-mail or through the Moodle virtual platform of the corresponding academic institution. In terms of the information produced, the first of the above-mentioned techniques produced 565 incomplete sentences on the subject and the second 550 narratives and 550 images on the VI.

Data analysis

The information collected was analysed following a combination of the classical content model and the current thematic analysis model in 2 distinct stages combining deductive and inductive approaches in the construction of thematic categories. The whole process was carried out using the Maxqda22 programme.

1. Descriptive analysis. Common themes that recurred in participants' responses were identified and a deductive framework was then developed, consisting of 5 core categories with their corresponding codes, namely: images around VI (n=460) (disability, exclusion, accessibility, sport...); meanings (n=184) (lack, personification, metaphorical...); stereotypes (n=424) (specific jobs, inferiority, dependency...); exclusion (n=183); and inclusion (n=174).

2. Interpretative analysis. Based on the in-depth analysis of the images and the relationships found between the deductive categories, a new "in vivo" coding process of an inductive nature was started again, which made it possible to identify new patterns and emerging internal relationships in the information analysed. As a result of this stage, three representations of VI were identified with different levels of depth: as a negative difference (n=579), as dependence (n=526) and as inferiority (n=245).

Results

The results of this study show that the participants admit to using the words "blind" or

"blindness" as the appropriate terms to refer to VI or to people with this disability. In terms of the meaning attributed, their reflections and images show that VI has transcended the loss of the sense of sight and its implication goes beyond a lack of physical sight to "limitations in all areas of life" (P16). This negative or pejorative approach with which participants perceive VI is evident in the stereotypical representations they make of it as it is reduced to 3 traditional symbols (n=122): dark glasses, cane, guide dog and selling the lottery coupon. As an example, see the following reflection of a participant: “if I think of blindness, I think of dark glasses (...), a cane or a guide-dog, and the people who occupy a place in a job at the Spanish National Organisation for the Blind (ONCE)” (P65). Such stereotypes do not derive from the meaning of VI as “deprived of sight” but from the hidden meaning behind each of them (Image 1): glasses as a synonym for “metaphorical darkness”, cane and guide-dog as a synonym for dependence, and selling the coupon as a synonym for inferiority.

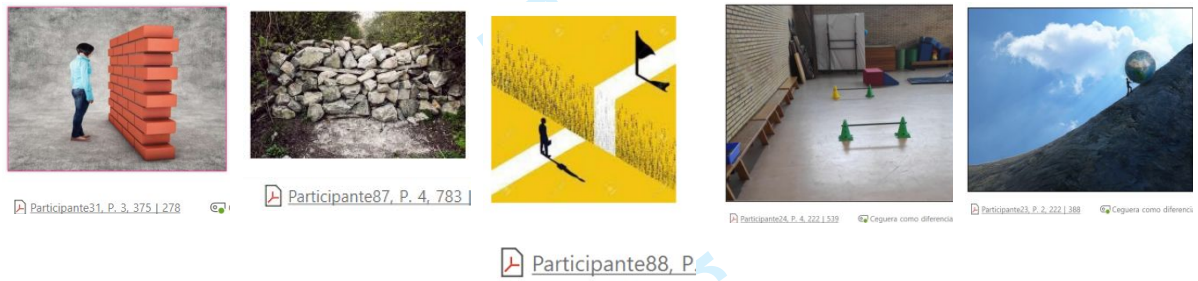
Image 1. Visual map on representations of blindness

Representation 1. “Glasses”: Blindness as “metaphorical darkness”.

Behind the signification of blindness as darkness lie images and narratives that focus on

negative difference (n=78), comparing the potential of people who have all their senses versus those who do not, thus highlighting the absence of the ability of sight to describe people with VI (Table 2). This mindset is also reflected in the images selected by participants to represent their negative perspective of disability (n=28) through, for example, obstacle courses to symbolise the barriers that the person with VI faces on a daily basis; slopes or steep terrain with a person climbing up to personify the difficulties faced by people with VI; stone or brick walls to metaphorically represent limitations; or obstacles such as stairs or steps to illustrate the difficulty of overcoming a physical challenge when the person is deprived of the ability to see.

Table 2. Evidence of VI as a negative difference



This practice of standardisation, of adjusting people to a standard norm, albeit involuntarily, is perceived in the pejorative language of the participants when they resort to terms such as: “difficulty” (P3), “problem” (P37), “lack” (P39), “absence of capacity” (P56), “condition” (P98), “label” (P44), “limitation” (P2), ”loss” (P61) or “dysfunction” (P57). Behind all of them, there is a pernicious thought of extolling the non-quality by which they are distinguished, to the point of turning it into a “limiting condition” (P3), determining because “they are people who do not have the same abilities as someone who can see normally” (P27), and perennial because “they are limited for life because of their visual conditions” (P40).

Personifying VI from a negative point of view also implies that informants generate feelings and emotions (n=24) such as “pity” (P50), “pity” (P45), “compassion” (P65), “vulnerability” (P32), “anguish” (P22) and even “mistrust” (P87). An example of this is the reflection of a participant who states that “when I see a blind person in the street, I think about whether they need help or whether they are disoriented. Probably not a favourable feeling (...) but it is unlikely that I do not have feelings of anxiety when I see them alone in the street” (P22).

Other interpretations of the terms “blind” or “blindness” can be extracted, such as those who resort to defining it as a “disease” (n=16), “they refer to a very sad disease” (P12); or those who argue that there is an absence of negative connotation (n=38), as they are simply words to colloquially refer to a person's visual condition, “I have no qualms about them because they are a reality” (P25). Some informants even equate it to a physical characteristic (such as height or hair colour) in which the person could not choose to have or not to have a VI, hence they are considered words without intentionality that designate a reality: “they are merely descriptive words of a person (...), much less should they be considered a taboo since it is nothing more than a reality” (P32).

On the contrary, other participants express an inclusive mental representation, whose criticism focuses on considering the words mentioned as derogatory and whose use is not justified because they are colloquial designations of VI, “when the term blind is used, it tends to devalue the person, that is why it is derogatory” (P103). They advocate personifying and valuing the person (n=28), in the words of one participant “they are people first and then comes their disability” (P42); and, in order to change the prism, it is also necessary to modulate the language, “we use the terms as labels, above the person, as a business card” (P44). That is to say, to appreciate the human being, regardless of his/her condition, for the

mere fact of being an individual with the right to be respected, to understand that "these words do not define the person as a whole, nor limit his/her capacity to develop skills in other aspects" (P36).

Finally, there are 3 metaphorical meanings that seek to approach VI from a figurative perspective, as the inability to see can manifest itself in different ways and not all of them are related to vision:

(1) "Sightedness of the sighted", understood as the inability of sighted people to see beyond their own prejudices: "it is the inability to see beyond prejudices or critical thinking, (...) people with the disability itself are able to see further than those who can physically see" (P66).

(2) People's lack of empathy towards everything that is not related to themselves: "we become "blind" to the reality around us, to other people's emotions, or to our own limitations, because of indifference, ignorance or the refusal to look beyond our own perspective" (P82).

(3) Inability to accept and respect diversity: "true blindness comes not from being in physical darkness, but from the resistance to see the world from a different perspective. Overcoming blindness means recognising the importance of opening our mental and emotional eyes to recognise diversity" (P92).

Through the images, the participants also represent VI through metaphors (n=30) (Table 3) such as darkness understood as the lack of light to perceive the world around them, the shadow that VI generates in the blind person, the need for people with VI to see through other eyes, or the importance of another person giving light or light to those who cannot see. To artistically represent sunglasses, they use fabrics that cover people's eyes, such as a veil or

gauze, or other people's hands that, with their palms, cover the eyes of people with VI and have two eyes artistically represented on the back.

Table 3. Metaphorical Representations of VI

Regardless of the significance given, for the participants there are several reasons why people with VI are excluded and all of them result in rejection because they are, in society's view, different people (n=76). See, for example, “it is seen as something out of the ordinary and people who suffer from it are considered “raros”” (P24) or “anyone with a disability is going to be treated differently because society emphasises the “different”” (P47). In addition to the simplicity of the argument, there are others such as society's indifference towards difference, “we live in a society that only looks out for itself, when we have to help someone we find it difficult, and if they have diversity we don't even try” (P72); the fear of difference due to a lack of knowledge that “can lead to the relationship with people who lack vision being a barrier because they don't know how to act in certain situations” (P50); or the social tendency to underestimate and "simplify abilities" (P10) simply because they have VI, given that we live in a society that "simply tends to create limitations" (P78).

Exclusion is also represented (n=22). The impossibility of belonging to the large group (Table 4) is expressed through the traditional symbols of VI that identify people with VI within the group, the slice of a pizza as a metaphor for segregation with respect to another larger slice that represents the reference group, or the distance caused by diversity among people. On the other hand, the “obligation” to adapt to the norm is represented by an allegory

of restricting or containing the development of a tree so that its growth is carried out through the established standard.

Table 4. Representation of the exclusion of people with VI

Representation 2. White cane and guide dog: Blindness as a dependency

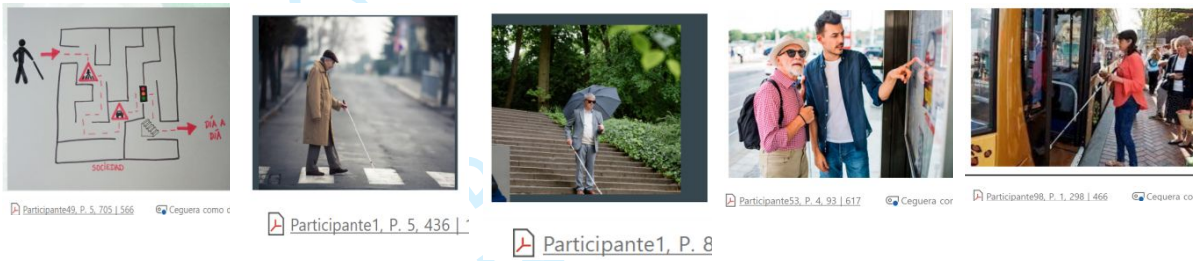
Among all the themes that emerge in the reflections, one of the most dominant (n=149) is that of the dependency of people with VI, relating it to the traditional symbols of a cane and a guide dog. Examples of this debate, for example, are the self-reflective questions asked by the participants themselves about the fine line between dependence and autonomy: "does blindness automatically make you dependent? (Q10), or do you depend on a cane and a guide dog to compensate for your lack of sight?" (Q71).

For some of the participants, VI entails an "obvious" lack of autonomy, which implies dependence in a blind person. Due to this lack of autonomy, it is more complex for them, among other things, to live in society ("they are very dependent and cannot adapt to society and the environment around them" P29), to move around as a citizen ("every blind person in the street is in danger" P51), to practice sport ("limited in some activities such as playing sports" P43), to have a family and friends (n=45), or to enjoy leisure time.

The images selected also have an impact on this debate (n=55) and almost all of them reflect different situations related to autonomy on public roads which, as pedestrians, can be

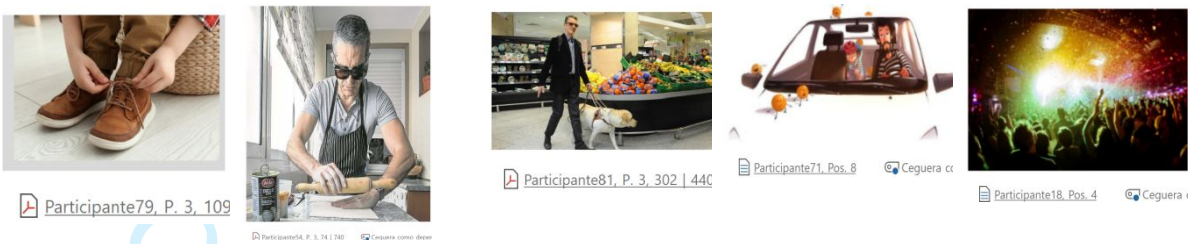
encountered in traffic (Table 5). Crossing a zebra crossing, going down the stairs, finding one's way in a certain place or interpreting a map are the most common. Despite the fact that the narratives mention the possible difficulties that people with VI may encounter when living with other citizens in public areas, it is striking that almost all the images depict the aforementioned everyday scenes but in deserted spaces, in which the blind person appears alone in streets or parks where, in reality, it is assumed that there is a large number of people.

Table 5. Representations of autonomy abroad



This mentality is also reflected in another group of images (n=37) in which they immortalise activities or situations of daily life in which, in their opinion, dependence is notorious as "they cannot do anything without the help of another person or animal" (P21) because they are simply “not prepared for ordinary life” (P3). By way of example, they represent (Table 6) and reflect equally on the inability to live alone (“they can only live constantly accompanied by their relatives” P3); the dependence on relatives “which is a great burden” (P3) or on a guide dog, “the great companions when carrying out everyday tasks” (P30); the difficulty to cope with everyday tasks such as cooking, cleaning or shopping; and the need for “constant vigilance” (P11) for their safety when using public transport, travelling or going on journeys. In short, in the words of one informant, “they need constant care and supervision by a person who does not have the condition” (P41). In addition, the lack of sight also “limits their ability to communicate” (P55) in a society where we have to socialise or do daily administrative procedures.

Table 6. Representations of Autonomy in Everyday Life

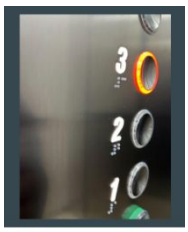


For other participants, both the "theoretical dependency" (P4) and the limitations mentioned are nothing more than stereotypes about VI. Due to lack of knowledge or lack of training, these are "theoretical difficulties" to question "their ability to live independently" (P4). Although there are also claims in the discourse that people with VI "are fully capable of fending for themselves autonomously" (P11), it is striking that the defenders of this autonomy fall back on the criticised stereotype by calling them "autonomous with limitations" (P45). Evidence of this lack of congruence is the following reflection: "I think there is a lot of social ignorance, even if people with blindness have more difficulties than normal, it does not mean that they cannot become autonomous. Obviously, some things can be complicated for them, such as cooking" (P25). Another notable incongruence is the tendency to help, which they recognise is involuntary when dealing with people with VI. Their own reflections lead them to ask themselves why when they see a blind person, for example in the street, their automatic thought is that they should help them or that they need help: "they need help when they ask for it, I shouldn't think that because they have visual diversity they are less capable even if it is more complicated for them, we all have something that is more difficult for us to do" (P34).

The lack of autonomy is mainly attributed to architectural barriers (n=70) and the lack of adapted resources (n=23), with no mention of sighted people or society in general as the cause, thus placing the responsibility on the accessibility of spaces and resources: "adapted resources and technology = included people" (P23). This conception explains why there is an

abundance (n=72) of proposals for improvement of a material nature, “provision of resources and accessibility works to adapt spaces” (P78), as measures to ensure the inclusion of people with VI. Although to a lesser extent, they are no less important and shed light on other reflections which, beyond providing physical adaptations, stress that “true inclusion implies a deconstruction in the mentality of society to ensure that people with VI have full and equal access (...) to life” (P94). Along the same lines, the participants analyse their daily routine and in the images (Table 7) they depict different accessibility resources (n=48) with which they coexist on a daily basis; they mainly recognise the Braille numbering of lifts, the acoustic traffic lights at zebra crossings, tactile tiles that warn of nearby obstacles on the public highway and the stair-step barriers on pavements.

Table 7. Representations of accessibility

 Participante1,				 Participante1,

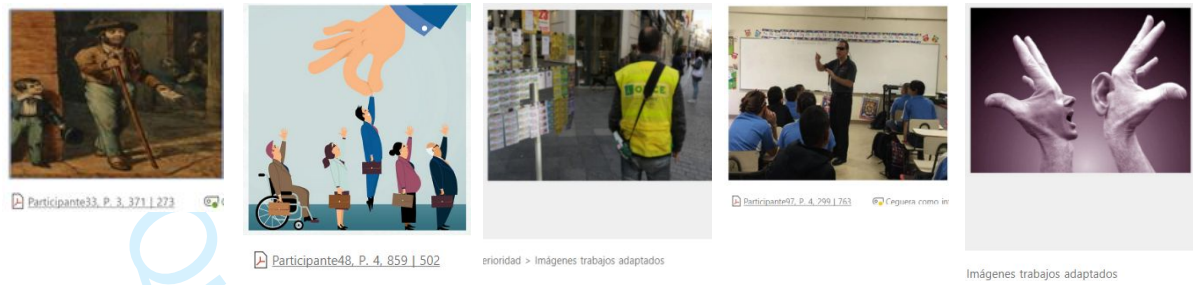
Representation 3. "Lottery sale": Blindness as inferiority

The last representation that can be extracted is related to the ability of people with VI to carry out certain professions or trades (n=103) because “as a society used to relying on the five senses, we tend to distrust anyone who lacks one for certain jobs or activities” (P82). Participants reflect that, for society, the total or partial lack of sight goes hand in hand with the belief that “the inability to not see makes you inferior” (P71). They criticise the social conviction that VI means that a blind person is in a situation of inferiority at work compared to a sighted person because he or she has this characteristic. In this way, negative values are

attributed to diversity or difference that minimise it, such as undervaluing, belittling, or "incompetence for having an apparently physical characteristic" (P14). In many reflections, it is striking that the participants begin their narratives by criticising the social stereotype of blindness as inferiority, but the very sincerity with which they approach this research and their anonymity lead them to recognise that these misconceptions are also accepted by themselves: "sometimes I also fall into these stereotypes because I understand that it is difficult to understand how they are capable when for us it seems impossible" (P20).

In addition to prejudices related to inferiority, blindness is also assumed to be associated with a lack of job opportunities (n=58). This negative discrimination limits their professional or job opportunities to those whose development "does not depend directly on sight" (P61), thus excluding those related to driving, medicine or teaching; this exclusion also occurs when "they are offered a salary instead of a specialised job" (P70). In Spain, "specialised work" refers to the exclusive possibility offered to people with disabilities, including VI, to sell lottery slots as a source of income. This work alternative, colloquially known as "selling the lottery for the blind", the third traditional symbol represented, is wrongly understood as the only work option, with a markedly charitable or supportive character, since the national non-profit organisation that promotes it (ONCE) does not aim to offer "decently paid employment" (P22) but to improve the quality of life of people with VI with "a symbolic occupation" (P41) accompanied by social assistance. Of particular note are the images (Table 8) which depict adapted jobs (n=27) and reflect the view that "society automatically thinks that a blind person's future job is only going to be working for the ONCE" (P112). In addition to lottery, they represent "static" professions that require "more tact and hearing" (P13), such as telephone operators and administrative staff, or other "more manual" (P13) professions such as masseurs.

Table 8. Representations of specialised jobs



Discussion

The purpose of this research was to delve into inclusion and diversity from the point of view of first-year undergraduate students at two Spanish universities (located in Galicia, northwest Spain) in order to find out how they understand visual impairment and blindness. The results show that the medical model is still in force in such a way that stereotypes are maintained and generate barriers to inclusion (Oviedo-Cáceres *et al*., 2023), despite the fact that disability is internationally recognised as a matter of rights (Neille, 2019). It is of little use that institutions strive to legislate with the social model of disability at its core if they fail to make their mark on society, if the line between inclusion and exclusion is blurred when reality sets in: most countries have signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) but it has not always been enforced and the necessary resources have not always been allocated (Berghs *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, while public policies are important tools for the enforceability of rights, they tend to homogenise the population with disabilities, rendering people invisible and standardising the ways in which people with disabilities are treated (Oviedo-Cáceres *et al.*, 2023).

People with disabilities face physical and functional barriers that limit participation, but effective inclusion also requires overcoming social barriers. Social support is one of the elements necessary to achieve a good self-image and fight against barriers to exclusion

(Oviedo-Cáceres *et al.*, 2023). However, the quality of life of people with VI is lower than that of the general population (Jones *et al.*, 2019), whatever age group they belong to (Bonsaksen *et al.*, 2023) because historically and culturally constructed stereotypes about blindness are maintained and also include people with VI, especially in the social context (Fraser *et al.*, 2019).

In the fight against stereotypes, it should not be surprising that people try to hide or not communicate those signs that might reveal that they are not what they wish to appear to be (Bäckman, 2024), such as glasses or a cane. To this end, in their relationship with their environment, they resort to various strategies aimed at avoiding negative associations linked to the disability stereotype (Dos Santos *et al.*, 2020). At the same time as there is an "over" physical visibility of disabled bodies, their personalities remain hidden and invisible, thus denying them the psychological value of being perceived as a whole (Lourens and Swartz, 2016), as this research confirms.

The difficulty of "going unnoticed" explains why people with acquired or progressive VI are reluctant to use it (Bäckman, 2023), associating its use with feelings of personal ambiguity, social stress or social embarrassment (Bäckman, 2023), along with feelings of helplessness (Fraser *et al.*, 2019). By extension, something similar happens with glasses, such that people with VI try to hide their disability, which in the words of Ferrey *et al.* (2024, 2) makes such concealment "a shield against stigma".

Finally, with regard to job opportunities, the participating students maintain an image of people with blindness or VI that is very limited to certain professions and, in particular, to lottery sales. As the Spanish National Organisation of the Blind (ONCE, 2019) points out, blind and HIV-positive European citizens are among the most vulnerable and least visible people in society, with an average unemployment rate of more than 75%, a percentage that is

higher among women. The report raises the under-inclusive approaches to the employment of people with disabilities in some European countries, focusing on whether people with disabilities have the necessary skills and abilities to do a job and neglecting to pay attention to the barriers they face in getting a job; it also shows how people with certain categories of disability are limited to certain occupations or to manufacturing certain goods, which is a violation of the right to employment.

Fraser (2019), drawing on previous research, summarises the main stigmas related to disability, of which the following three stand out: stereotypes about disability are learned early in life through persistent socio-cultural conditioning; the media play an important role in maintaining these stereotypes by portraying people with disabilities as sick, helpless and in pain; and finally, the result of these stereotypes is the marginalisation and social exclusion of those with disabilities. In reality, we should ask ourselves whether the social model is strong enough to enable people with disabilities to thrive with the disability they present, because creating specific legislative instruments or making adjustments or accommodations for them ends up identifying disability as a problem but fails to change society (Williams *et al.*, 2018).

In terms of the impact of the study, this work shows the potential of Photovoice as a visual methodology in social research, especially in participatory or activist studies. It provides a novel and original approach that evokes other ways for informants to reflect on their attitudes towards visual impairment. In this research, Photovoice has proved to be a valuable methodological strategy to deepen the subjectivity of the student participants, the articulation of knowledge and the production of visual messages about visual impairment. This method has facilitated the representation of their perception of visual impairment, while promoting knowledge and critical reflection on their attitudes and preconceived ideas about visual impairment. However, this study is not without limitations, one of which is selection

bias, given the voluntary participation of the students. Another limitation inherent to perception studies is related to social desirability bias, where the participant tends to respond with a greater predisposition towards correct or desirable behaviour, minimising incorrect or undesirable behaviour.

Conclusion

Universities are essential spaces for improving people's quality of life and promoting social inclusion, and their teaching staff must get involved by giving a preferential place to inclusion and equity in their educational conceptions and practices, promoting inclusion in their classrooms, but also in their research and in the transfer of knowledge. The results of this research show the need to train and inform university students about disability. Ignorance favours exclusion and those who are now students will soon be the professionals of the future and will be able to collaborate in the construction of a society aimed at the full inclusion of people with disabilities if many of the existing prejudices and stereotypes have been defeated through solid training in inclusion.

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