

Turning Pages

Perception Change in the Living Library



Photo credit: Martijn Bergsma

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Utrecht University Faculty of Humanities

Thesis supervisor: Zuleika Bibi Sheik
Second reader: Adnan Hossain

Lilja Kanerva
4639324



**Universiteit
Utrecht**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates what happens in the Living Library social change intervention regarding perception change. This is done through the general research question: *How can the Living Library intervention act as a catalyst for perception change?* The thesis is focused on analysing the dialogue encounter between the participants referred to as ‘readers’ and ‘living books’ to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes at play in the dialogue. **This is important** because in a polarized and divided society understanding interventions that address these challenging topics is relevant in order to be able to fight for social justice effectively. Academically, this intervention has previously been studied through quantitative methods, and only including the side of the ‘readers’. **This thesis adds** a qualitative, feminist understanding of the inner working of the dialogue encounter. Moreover, to gain a holistic perspective this thesis includes not only the ‘readers’ but also the ‘living books’ as research participants. **The information for the research is gained** through a literature search, participant observation and seven semi-structured interviews. **This thesis argues** that the Living Library dialogue encounter is seen, both by the ‘readers’ and the ‘living books’ as a space that can help in bridging differences in society by bringing people together through dialogue. However, the perception change towards less prejudice is hampered by two challenges: the bias of openness and the choosing of ‘familiar’ living books. However, these challenges can also bring up feelings of connectedness and peer support in the dialogue, which are seen as highly valuable in a neoliberal society that prioritises individualism over community. **The conclusion** is that the Living Library offers a space for creating bridges across difference in society due to its unique set-up. However, when it comes to fostering prejudice reduction as effectively as possible it is important to pay attention that the people visiting the Living Library are from as diverse backgrounds as possible and that the ‘readers’ are encouraged to also opt for ‘living books’ that they are not familiar with.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences” - Audre Lorde

We live in a divided society where prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination towards people perceived as the ‘other’ seems to be the rule rather than the exception (PAMedia, 2023; Dougall, 2023; “Amsterdam ‘erotic centre’: EMA unhappy at planned red-light district”, 2023). In this kind of societal atmosphere intergroup contact between social groups should be encouraged as it has been shown to reduce prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination (Handke, 2017; Orosz et al., 2016; Van den Dool, 2022). Effective interventions are urgently needed to foster relationality and shape “attitudes of openness and acceptance towards ‘otherness’” (Condit, 2006; livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). One such intervention is the Living Library. It is a Danish-based dialogue intervention that aims to unite people to challenge prejudices: *“In the Living Library, you don’t read books, but people”* (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). It was first introduced by a Danish Youth NGO “Stop the Violence” (Foreningen Stop Volden) which hosted the Living Library as part of the activities they offered for the Roskilde Festival in the year 2000 (Abergel et al., 2005). Now the concept is used in a variety of different contexts. In my project, I specifically focus on the Dutch Living Library which started in Groningen in 2014 (livinglibrary.nl). The Living Library NL has been organising Living Libraries in different cities across the Netherlands since 2017, with the support of Europe Direct (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.).

In the intervention, the visitors, referred to as ‘readers’, are invited to have a dialogue with people from different identity groups, referred to as ‘living books’. These ‘living books’ have different ‘book titles’, based on their life history, such as ‘refugee’, ‘transgender’, or ‘sex worker’. The ‘reader’ is encouraged to have a dialogue with the ‘living books’ in order to “meet their prejudice” as stated on the website of the Living Library (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). In this way, the ‘reader’ gets to speak with people who they might not otherwise meet in their everyday life (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). The general aim of the Living Library is to “investigate and challenge prejudice” and to offer the ‘readers’ the possibility “to step into the world of the other person” (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). More elaborately, the goals of the Living Library stated on their website are the following: “Creating a space of dialogue and understanding, promoting respect for human rights, passing knowledge and experience of people exposed to discrimination,

stereotyping, prejudices and exclusion and shaping attitudes of openness and acceptance towards 'otherness'" (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.).

More practically, in the intervention, you can register yourself as a 'reader' and lend a 'living book' at the Living Library desk. Before the dialogue, a volunteer will introduce you to the 'living book' and explain the code of conduct. The code of conduct is important for the safety of both the 'reader' as well as the 'living book'. Instructions such as treating each other with respect, the ability to not answer a question, or the right to end the conversation at any point are explained before the dialogue takes place. Moreover, as stated on the website, the 'living book' must be returned in the same physical and mental condition in which it was issued and thus the "readers do not have the right to bend or tear pages" from the 'living books' (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). After agreeing to the rules, the 'reader' has twenty minutes to hold a dialogue with the 'living book'. After the twenty minutes are over the 'reader' is offered the possibility of a ten-minute extension. From observing the intervention, it became clear that in most cases 'readers' opt for the extension. Keeping in mind the division in society that I referred to earlier in the chapter, in my project, I aim to see what happens in the dialogue encounter between the 'reader' and the 'living book' and how this can lead to perception change in society, towards less division.

Societal and Scientific Relevance

The Living Library aims to tackle prejudice in society. In my project, I want to understand the benefits as well as challenges of this intervention to learn how the Living Library can best tackle societal division and encourage meaningful, transformative contact between people. To gain this understanding it is necessary to know what happens in the dialogue encounter between the participants. This is the reason why investigating the intervention through an in-depth qualitative lens is societally worthwhile. Therefore, instead of doing a solely theoretical project, I desired to engage with the 'real world' and gain first-hand information about this specific intervention. This is because I wanted to go beyond critiquing the state of society and instead engage with a possible real-life solution that can create more understanding and empathy towards differences in society. This project is relevant to gender studies due to its direct focus on social justice issues and fighting inequality. Additionally, the Living Library has plenty of 'living books' that directly deal with issues of gender and sexuality with 'book titles' such as 'trans gender', 'non-binary', and 'asexual'.

The scientific relevance of my project is two-fold. Firstly, the Living Library intervention has mainly been studied from the viewpoint of the field of psychology. This means

rigorous measurement through surveys and large samples in order to measure the impact of the intervention on prejudice and outgroup attitudes as accurately and reliably as possible. This kind of research is extremely useful and will be elaborated on in the literature review section. However, I want to complement the earlier quantitative findings with qualitative data that uncovers some of the underlying processes present in the intervention and explore how these processes bring about new, unexpected and nuanced information. Additionally, I use feminist theories to analyse the Living Library, which is something that has not been done previously. Secondly, the Living Library has only been studied from the perspective of the ‘readers’. I, on the other hand, include the ‘living books’ in my project to gain a more holistic understanding of what happens in the dialogue and what motivates the ‘living books’ to participate in the intervention.

Main and Sub-Research Questions

The topic I will dive into in this project is the possibilities of the dialogue encounter in the Living Library regarding perception change. I will do this through the following research question: *How can the Living Library intervention act as a catalyst for perception change?* This question helps to uncover the processes at play in the intervention, which either aid or hinder, perception change in society.

This broad question, which forms the ground for my research endeavours, is examined through two sub-questions. The first sub-question is: *How do the ‘readers’ in the Living Library perceive interpersonal relations during and after attending the intervention?* This question helps to uncover what happens in the dialogue encounter from the perspective of the ‘readers’ and what kind of societal as well as personal results emerge. This question will be explored mainly by using the theories of the contact zone by Pratt (1991), ‘world’-travelling by Lugones (1987) and peer support by Mead et al. (2001). The contact zone is used as a lens to understand how the hybridity of knowledge can emerge in the dialogue (Pratt, 1991). ‘World’-travelling is used as an analytical lens in order to understand how perception change occurs through conceptual ‘world’-travelling (Lugones, 1987). Peer support is used to make sense of the connectedness that can appear in the dialogue (Mead et al., 2001).

The second sub-question is: *How do the ‘living books’ in the Living Library experience and negotiate their position as the ‘Other’?* This question helps to understand what happens in the dialogue encounter from the perspective of the ‘living books’ and what aspects motivate the ‘living books’ to join the Living Library as the ‘Other’. This question will be discussed mainly by using Mbembé’s (2003) concept of necropolitics, Spivak’s (1985/2020) concept of

epistemic violence, and Pratt's (1991) concept of autoethnographic text as resistance. Necropolitics (Mbembé, 2003) functions as a critical tool to understand the positioning of the 'living books' as the 'other' in the 'living library' and society at large. Epistemic violence (Spivak, 1985/2020) is used to analyse the resistance that the 'living books' practise by engaging in de-silencing through re-narration. In addition, Pratt's autoethnographic text (1991) is used to make further sense of the resistance practised by the 'living books' through re-narration while being labelled as the 'other' in the intervention. Through the following research questions, and the main theories highlighted I offer a rich picture of the processes at play in the dialogue encounter in the Living Library, grounded in feminist theorising.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Ximena Zúñiga writes about the importance of bridging differences through dialogue by saying: “Building bridges between people from different social backgrounds becomes increasingly important as our society becomes more diverse and socially stratified” (2003, p.8). The need to build bridges across differences appears urgent since it seems that whichever way you turn, polarization is happening left and right (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021). As an example, across Europe, one cannot escape the heated debates in the news around immigration policies, trans-law, or the question of how to deal with sex workers (“Amsterdam ‘erotic centre’: EMA unhappy at planned red-light district”, 2023; Dougall, 2023; PAMedia, 2023).

This kind of polarization, the accusing of one another, as well as subjecting people to unbearable conditions of living through stereotyping and discrimination is directly linked to Mbembé’s concept of necropolitics where “the perception of the existence of the Other [is seen] as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security” (Mbembé, 2003, p.18). What is more, in his article about necropolitics, Mbembé talks about sovereignty as the “capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (2003, p.27). Before moving on, it is important to acknowledge that Mbembé’s theorising is originally about the Global South, former colonies and racialized people. I am, however, using his critical theory in the context of Europe to describe the power relations at play which grant some individuals as less human than others due to their identities which are considered marginal by the mainstream. When violent protests outside asylum seekers’ accommodation take place in the UK, when far-right party members in Finland vote against trans law or when the mayor of Amsterdam wants to do away with the redlight district against the wish of many sex workers who are working in the area, the lives of these marginalized groups are deemed as disposable in the way that Mbembé describes (“Amsterdam ‘erotic centre’: EMA unhappy at planned red-light district”, 2023; Dougall, 2023; Mbembé, 2003; PAMedia, 2023). The concept of necropolitics can thus be used to describe the “unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembé, 2003, p.40). Using Mbembé’s theory, in the context of Europe, we can conclude that not all lives are valued equally and some lives are devalued intentionally.

Keeping this background of polarization and division in mind, it becomes clear that we are in need of interventions to create more understanding and empathy across differences along socio-political, cultural, and economic lines. Living Library is one of these interventions. Previous research about the Living Library has been mostly conducted by psychology students who aimed to investigate the impact of the ‘intergroup contact’ in the Living Library on outgroup attitudes (Handke, 2017; Orosz et al., 2016; Van den Dool, 2022) in a measurable and quantifiable manner through survey research. Moreover, research has been majorly focused on the ‘readers’ while not investigating how the ‘living books’ experience the intervention (Van den Dool, 2022). In her research, Handke (2017) found that the ‘readers’ attitudes towards outgroup members became more favourable after having had a conversation with a member of the respective minority. Moreover, a similar study conducted in Hungary found that the Living Library intervention was effective in reducing prejudice toward Roma and LGBT people (Orosz et al., 2016). These scholars from Hungary conclude that the Living Library can be seen as a useful method to decrease prejudice in contexts where there are strong negative attitudes present toward marginalized groups (Orosz et al., 2016).

The above-mentioned studies use large samples in order to measure in a representative and quantitative manner the impact of the Living Library when it comes to reducing prejudice and increasing empathy towards outgroup members. As an example, Handke (2017) conducted a psychological survey study about the Living Library in the Netherlands which included 94 participants. What I aim to do, is to complement these findings with a qualitative in-depth approach that develops a deep and rich understanding of what happens in the dialogue encounter, not only from the perspective of the ‘reader’ but also from the perspective of the ‘living books’. I focus less on analysing whether the intervention works in reducing prejudice or not and instead, I focus on understanding why and how it works and what (perhaps unexpected strengths and challenges) emerge from it. Therefore, I will not dive deeper into the psychological impact studies in this literature review. I will instead focus on the thematic concepts of Contact Zone, Epistemic Violence, ‘World’-Travelling, Conviviality, Peer Support, Relationality and Brave Space to approach this intervention with a philosophical, feminist, and qualitative lens to develop a story-like product which is grounded in relevant theory.

Postcolonial Perspective

Pratt - Contact Zone & Spivak - Epistemic Violence

Postcolonial theory refers to a critical theory that centres the colonial experience from the point of view of the colonised society (Sawant, 2011, p.1). It emerged in the 1980s from the works of diasporic scholars from the Middle East and South Asia: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak (Bhabra, 2014). Temporally, it refers to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bhabra, 2014). In Spivak's seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985/2020) she talks about epistemic violence as the violent erasure of non-Western knowledges. She describes it as the "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (Spivak, 1985/2020, p.76). She concludes her essay with the statement that the Subaltern can actually never be known on their own terms (Spivak, 1985/2020). Similarly, to this description by Spivak (1985/2020), many of the 'living books' are constituted as the 'other' in society due to their identity. Therefore, I will use Spivak's description of epistemic violence to analyse the possibilities for practising de-silencing in the Living Library.

Another concept I will use to analyse the dialogue encounter is that of Mary Louise Pratt's Contact Zone (1991). Pratt (1991) originally introduced the concept in the context of literary studies but it has been widely used in postcolonial theory (Isaacs & Otruba, 2019). In Pratt's own words, she describes contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (Pratt, 1991, p.34). Contact zone as described by Pratt includes three main characteristics: different power relations, hybridity and resistance (Pratt, 1991). Contact zone as a site for these three qualities is seen as a dynamic and constantly changing venue rather than as something constant and stable. Pratt highlights that a contact zone should be understood as a heterogenous space that offers a space for both conflicts as well as opportunities (Pratt, 1991).

Firstly, I will use contact zones' acute awareness of power imbalances in my project to inform my analysis: to see why this kind of intervention is needed in the first place and how the 'living books' positioned as the 'other' through labelling them according to their (marginalized) identities negotiate this position. Moreover, I will use this lens of power relations in the contact zones to analyse the dialogue encounters to understand how power relations are dealt with in the intervention by the 'living books' and by the 'readers'.

Secondly, the contact zone as a site for hybridity is also something I am paying attention to. Pratt (1991) describes contact zones as hybrid spaces where culture is constantly being

translated and transformed through the process of transculturation. Transculturation has been used to “describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt, 1991, p.36). In this way, the contact zone can be viewed as a site for social transformation where new subjectivities are created (Pratt, 1991). I will analyse the dialogue encounters through the lens of hybridity in the contact zone in order to see what kind of new subjectivities and societal possibilities arise from the dialogue encounters in the Living Library.

Thirdly, the contact zone as articulated by Pratt is also a site of resistance (Pratt, 1991). Pratt uses her own formulation of the concept of autoethnographic text as a tool for resistance. She explains that an autoethnographic text is a text “in which people undertake themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (Pratt, 1991, p.35). To clarify, she does not refer to autoethnography in the traditional way where one’s own experiences are used as a source of data (Ellis et al., 2011). Pratt (1991) explains that in contrast to ethnographic texts which are used to describe the (usually conquered) other by the “European metropolitan subject”, autoethnographic texts are “representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts” and thus resist the dominant narration of themselves constructed by the oppressor (Pratt, 1991, p.35). This concept of resistance and the term autoethnographic text are extremely important for my project. As the ‘living books’ are positioned according to their (marginalized) identity in the intervention, I will look into the ways in which the ‘living books’ resist this stigmatized identity while simultaneously being labelled through it in the intervention.

Decolonial Perspective

Lugones – ‘World’-Travelling

The decolonial approach emerged in the 21st century from Latin American scholars. Among the key thinkers are Anibal Quijano, Maria Lugones and Walter Dignolo (Bhambra, 2014). The decolonial approach looks further back in time, compared to postcolonial theory, referring to the conquest of the Americas from the fifteenth century onwards (Bhambra, 2014). Decolonial thought critiques postcolonial theory for remaining within the colonizers' language and worldview and thus places as its main aim the decentering of Western ways of knowing and being (Quijano, 2000). In my project, I will use a theory from the decolonial scholar Maria Lugones (2016). It is a theory about ‘world’-travelling (1987), which refers to conceptually travelling into another person’s world and way of seeing and experiencing life. In her article, Lugones encourages the use of ‘world’-travelling as a tool for resistance (Lugones, 1987).

‘World’-travelling, according to Lugones, in the most productive case, helps one to understand another person better. In her article, Lugones talks about Fraye’s term called arrogant perception which refers to looking at another person arrogantly and thus not identifying with them. Lugones explains that when we conceptually travel to the other person’s world lovingly we find that there are ‘worlds’ where the people who are perceived arrogantly in the mainstream are “really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable” (1987, p.15). Lugones (1987) proposes a concept of loving perception to counter the arrogant perception. She explains that when you travel to the other person’s world you can “understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” and only after having travelled to each other’s worlds can people fully become subjects to one another (Lugones, 1987, p.17). ‘Word’-travelling will act as a lens through which I will make sense of the dialogue encounter and its possibilities for transforming perceptions away from arrogance and towards the ‘loving perception’ as suggested by Lugones (1987).

Conviviality

Conviviality can be conceptualized as encounters “with strange others” (Fincher & Iveson, 2015, p.24), and further as the “purposeful sharing of activities by individuals who may not necessarily be known to each other; interactions which are usually fleeting rather than sustained, and which are conceptually at some distance from sharing identities” (Fincher & Iveson, 2015, p.24). Illich and Lang describe conviviality as the “opposite of industrial productivity” and as the “creative intercourse of persons among persons” (1973, p.6). Conviviality is seen as highlighting the joy that emerges from personal interdependence that is not forced for the sake of an end (Illich & Lang, 1973, p.7). I am interested in the possibilities of the Living Library in fostering conviviality in an organized manner while simultaneously recognizing that conviviality cannot be coerced and is often the result of “planning with a light touch, organizing without requiring compliance to set outcomes” (Fincher & Iveson, 2015, p.26). Things like park benches at the right spot, low threshold community centres and libraries as well as inviting shop fronts, are examples of infrastructure that, in the best case, invite and enable conviviality. Keeping this in mind, I am curious to see what kind of potential the Living Library has to foster conviviality in a slightly more structured manner.

Peer Support, Relationality and Brave Space in a Neoliberal Society

I will use the concept of peer support to investigate what kind of effects the dialogue encounter has on the 'readers' beyond understanding the 'other' better. Peer support can be defined as a system of "giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful" and is based on "understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience" (Mead et al., 2001, p.6). The authors of *Peer-support in Action: from bystanding to standing by* (2000) Helen Cowie and Patti Wallace explain that peer-support systems often include the following: empathy towards the difficulties experienced by another person, the use of listening skills, willingness to support the other and to offer solutions for interpersonal difficulties. I will use this theoretical ground to analyse the dialogue encounter from a peer support perspective. I will look at how the dialogue can act as peer support and thus enhance connection, empathy and understanding of the 'readers' not only towards the 'other' but also towards 'the self'. Moreover, to make sense of the set-up of the intervention theoretically, I will use a theory about communication as relationality (Condit, 2006), where communication is first and foremost seen as a process of relating and not as a process of transferring information (Condit, 2006). Additionally, to further theorise about the intervention set-up, I will use the facilitation tool called brave space introduced by Arao and Clemens (2013), who question the usefulness of 'safe space' by asking if safety is the right expectation for honest social justice dialogues. I will do this keeping in mind the larger context of the neoliberal society we live in, which prioritises self-reliance and individual gains over community and connection (Becker et al., 2021).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The aim of my research is to find out, in an in-depth manner, what happens in the dialogue encounter between the ‘living book’ and the ‘reader’ and how this can foster perception change in a divided society. I do this through the following research question: “*How can the Living Library intervention act as a catalyst for perception change?*” with the following sub-questions: “*How do the ‘readers’ in the Living Library perceive interpersonal relations during and after attending the intervention?*” and “*How do the ‘human books’ in the Living Library experience and negotiate their position as the ‘Other’?*”. This methodology section includes the research design and the methodology underlying the research design as well as the methods used. Interwoven in all these considerations are the very important questions about research ethics and positionality. I want to create a qualitative, exploratory product that offers a rich understanding of the Living Library dialogue encounter from the perspective of the ‘readers’ and the ‘living books’. The feminist starting point for this project is that knowledge is always situated (Haraway, 1988), meaning that knowledge is always located in specific temporal, spatial and physical contexts and that it is always mediated. By mediation, I mean that the writing on these pages is not a representation of pure outside reality that I describe in objective terms, but rather that the knowledge has arrived on these pages by travelling through me. What I am saying is that I, as the researcher, am intertwined with knowledge production all the way from the practicalities of connecting with specific participants to coding and distinctly analysing the interview data. Instead of seeing this; the missing promise of impartiality and neutrality as a limiting factor, I consider it as a strength for the quality of knowledge which is present here. Aligning myself strongly with Donna Haraway’s description of feminist objectivity as being “about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence” (Haraway, 1988, p.583). I acknowledge the situatedness of knowledge in my project and aim to explicitly recognize my own part in this very process. I do this by writing from the first-person ‘I’ perspective, by explicitly stating my position as a researcher and a human being and by reflecting on my relationship with the research participants. Looking through the feminist lens, there is too much research claiming full objectivity, neutrality and the ability to simplify human life into neat, quantifiable data (Harding, 1995). In opposition to that, in my project, I choose to turn away from these traditionally celebrated signifiers of successful science and instead embrace the complexity, partiality and subjectivity inherent to existing in the world. I use the feminist research approach as a critical lens through which I look at the world and my

research. To me, feminist research is about embodying a critical intersectional outlook towards societal phenomena (Crenshaw, 1989). It is about uncovering hidden processes and not being afraid of showing that you are accountable to the people you research. As Gringeri et al. state: “Feminist research challenges contemplative spectator research by virtue of being openly political, connected, and involved in liberatory actions” (2010, p.393). To me, feminist research is committing to focus on social change and striving to represent human diversity (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007).

In order to create a coherent, informative and understandable research product I used an inductive approach, going from particular to general (Bowen, 2006) and thematically analysing the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that themes do not simply passively ‘emerge’ from the data. Instead, they highlight the researcher’s position in this process, which is in line with the elaborated notes on the situatedness of knowledge earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, through the feminist training I have received, I am very aware that it is not my place to claim that my findings carry a definite, objective and overarching truth. In line with Koobak and Thapar-Björkert’s piece called *Writing the Place from Which One Speaks*, I am aware of my positionality, and the fact that every piece of knowledge I produce is mediated through my located position (Koobak and Thapar-Björkert, 2014). I will consider my writing *as a method of inquiry* as articulated by Richardson and St Pierre (2000). In other words, I do not consider my writings as a pure objective representation of reality, but a method through which I “word the world” into existence (Rose in Richardson & St Pierre, 2000, p.923). In this way, the “worded world never – precisely, completely captures the studied world, yet we persist in trying” (Richardson & St Pierre, 2000, p.923).

Keeping in mind the ways in which I relate to knowledge in this project, let us now turn to more practical aspects. In this project, I was most interested in how the research participants perceive the dialogue encounters in the Living Library intervention. Therefore, I used the method of in-depth semi-structured interviews to get an insight into the thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of the participants. From the basis of my theoretical framework and relevant concepts, I drafted two separate interview guides, one for the ‘readers’ and one for the ‘living books’, which helped me to structure the interviews.

Moreover, to understand the intervention better and to find participants for the project, I joined three Living Library interventions, one as a ‘reader’ in Den Haag and two as a volunteer

in Leiden and Amsterdam. By participating in the Living Library myself, I was able to conduct participant observation and get more deeply involved in the intervention. Moreover, through participating I found people who kindly joined my research as participants. In the end, I interviewed three ‘readers’ and four ‘living books’ in order to grasp the experiences from both sides of the dialogue. The interviews lasted from around thirty minutes up to one and a half hours. From the ‘readers’, I interviewed 28-year-old Cecilia, a woman who was born in Peru and grew up in France. She had visited the Living Library around ten times. I interviewed Lucas, a 29-year-old man, originally from Switzerland who at the time of our conversation had visited the Living Library once. I also interviewed Mila, a 61-year-old woman who was born in Suriname and moved to The Netherlands after her 18th birthday. At the time of our conversation, she had visited the Living Library once. From the ‘living books’, I interviewed Rafael, a 25-year-old man, originally from Syria, with the ‘book title’ ‘refugee’. I interviewed Sarah, a 33-year-old woman, originally from the US, who joined the intervention with the ‘book title’ ‘invisible disability’. I also interviewed Oliver, a 29-year-old man, originally from the Netherlands who joined the Living Library with the book title ‘male sex worker’. I also interviewed a 63-year-old woman, called Remke, whose ‘book title’ in the living library is ‘trans woman’. Remke chose to join the research with her real name as she is already well-known for her activism and work in the transgender community in the Netherlands.

I decided to refer to the ‘living books’ by their pseudonyms (except for Remke who is referred to by her own name) instead of solely talking about their ‘book titles’. This is my conscious strategy to fight against the reduction of the ‘living books’ to their titles. For clarity, you can find two tables below with an overview of the participants of this project.

‘Readers’

Name	Age	Times in the Living Library
Cecilia	28	Around 10 times
Lucas	29	Once
Mila	61	Once

‘Living books’

Name	Age	Times in the Living Library
Rafael (‘refugee’)	25	Twice

Sarah ('invisible disability')	33	Once
Oliver ('male sex worker')	29	Two to three times
Remke ('trans woman')	63	Actively over seven years

When it comes to analysing the interview findings, I conducted thematic analysis manually, by coding the interviews, and by using different colours to group the codes that I found relevant. I found several overlapping codes (such as bridging differences, humanizing, shared life experiences, openness, agency, and motivation) around three themes that I introduce in my empirical chapters. These themes are *perception change and its challenges* (C1), *peer support and connection* (C2) as well as *transforming 'otherness'* (C3). Instead of explaining the codes and themes one by one in the empirical chapters, I opted to bring across the findings in a story-like manner because I consider it more approachable and interesting. Now let us turn to look at the research methods I used.

Semi-structured Interviews

I used in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather knowledge about the dialogue encounters from the perspective of the 'readers' as well as the 'living books'. I asked mostly open-ended questions in order to grasp as much as possible of the experiences of the people I had the interviews with. Interviewing as a method is well suited to my project because, as stated by DeVault and Gross it allows "relatively direct exchanges of views and perspectives among researchers, participants and readers" (2011, p.192), all the while keeping in mind that these views are situated as discussed at the start of this chapter. I further recognize interviewing to be an applicable tool considering my goal to find out about the participants' subjective experiences about the Living Library intervention. As Reinharz and Davidman state: "interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words" (1992, p.19).

When it comes to creating rapport with the research participants with Oakley (1981, p.19) states that "feminist research has emphasized the need to abandon the traditional notions of detachment, objectivity and value-freedom" and it encourages us to create supportive and sensitive rapport with the people who are participating in our research. Therefore, in line with feminist research, from the onset, I aimed to establish rapport with the research participants to create a space where the participants can feel as comfortable as possible to share their thoughts and experiences as truthfully as possible. Moreover, when I introduced my research to the

research participants I highlighted that I wanted the ‘interview’ to be more like a conversation rather than an extractive encounter where I ask and they answer in a structured and rigid manner. This aligns with Hesse-Biber who explains that calling an ‘interview’ a ‘conversation’ instead can help to highlight the “collaborative and reciprocal nature of the relationship between the researcher and participant” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p.31).

When it comes to informed consent I decided to gain consent from the participants orally, because I noticed it fostered my overall aim of creating a relaxed and conversational atmosphere in my research. Before starting the conversation I explained to the participants what my research was about, told them that I would use pseudonyms in the final product (unless requested otherwise) and that they had the right to withdraw from the conversation at any time. Additionally, I also explained that if they wanted to withdraw the data after the conversation had already taken place that was also possible. I then asked if I could record the interview and if the participants could state their consent at the start of the recording. This felt like the most natural and non-intrusive way of requiring informed consent in the research process and helped me to foster a feeling of collaboration and trust with the participants (Liu et al., 2013, p.254).

I conducted three conversations offline and four conversations online. Each lasting from 30 minutes to one hour. The main reason for conducting online interviews, while knowing that it will render some aspects, such as body language, less present, was purely financial. As an international student without a travel discount, it would have simply been too expensive to travel to all the interview locations (located around the Netherlands) physically.

Participant Observation

As mentioned above I participated in three Living Libraries throughout the course of the two-month research period. In the first one in Den Haag, I was a ‘reader’, and this was my first encounter with the field. I introduced myself to the organizer of the Living Library and explained my research idea. I also read three ‘living books’. In the second Living Library in Leiden, I participated as a volunteer and had more of a behind-the-scenes experience by participating in the briefing as well as the debriefing and working at the evaluation table. In the third one, which took place in Amsterdam, I volunteered again and worked at the evaluation table where I was able to recruit new participants for my research as well as ask the ‘readers’ questions directly after their dialogue encounters.

Participant observation allowed me to get a deeper and more personal grasp of the topics that arose in the interviews. This is recognized by Musante who speaks for incorporating

participant observation into one's research as a method because it "enhances the quality of the interpretation of data" (2015, p.245). Although I opted to not write about the participant observation findings in an in-depth manner in the empirical chapters, because the interviews gave me plenty of useful data to work with, I find that conducting the participant observation and 'being there' gave me a deeper understanding of the intervention and thus supported my research journey as well as the writing out process.

Further Ethical Considerations

Power relations are always present in any research context and the conversations that I hosted were no exception. As a researcher, working with other human beings, ethical concerns need to always be at the forefront of considerations. On top of the very basic ethical principles which include no harm to the participants, acquiring informed consent, respecting the privacy of the participants and not deceiving them (Bryman, 2012, p. 136), as a feminist researcher I find it extremely valuable to consider the question of positionality and accountability. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I consider knowledge as situated (Haraway, 1988). This links to positionality, as all the knowledge I present here has travelled through me and thus carries the biases that I as a white, university-educated, cis-gendered female carry with me from my lived experiences. This is important to keep in mind when reading this product. Moreover, I hold a position of power in terms of standards set by society because I do not belong to a marginalized identity group to which the 'living books' belong to. However, as the 'living books' did not consider their respective 'book titles' as something that defined them as people and further willingly spoke about their experiences regarding their identity to educate the 'readers' it seemed to me that their marginalized identity did in no way render them powerless in this research.

Another important consideration is that of accountability. Who am I accountable to, as a researcher and as a human being? Many studies claim and aim towards impartiality, and admitting one's political stance is seen as a huge threat to the validity and reliability of one's work. For me, as a human being, and as a feminist academic admitting my partiality and my aim to be accountable to the research participants it's the least I can do. As the intervention deals with people's marginalized identities and sensitive personal stories it is extremely important to remain mindful of power imbalances and to deal with the knowledge that is shared with me in a responsible, respectable and accountable manner. In the article by Tuck and Yang *R-Words: Refusing Research* (2014) the evident obsession of social science with collecting

pain narratives in research is criticized. They ask, and rightfully so, “How do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over) hear while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze?” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p.223). Keeping this in mind, my aim with this research is not to fetishize the ‘other’ (here the ‘living books’), to cement a wounded victim position (Brown, 2020) or take the experience of the participant as the highest form of evidence (Scott, 1991). Besides, the aim of my research project is not about the reification of the subaltern identity through a colonizing gaze of the spectator, neither that of the Prophet nor the Arrogant Perceiver (Lugones, 1987; Motta, 2016; Said, 1978). The aim is quite the opposite; the aim is to see what is there to gain from positioning oneself as the ‘other’ in the form of the ‘living book’, in one’s own terms. Further, the aim is to see the knowledge that has been gained from the experiences of tragedy and pain and focus on hope, life, and the infinite plurality of the self that refuses to be defined by its injuries (Tuck & Yang, 2014). One practical way I will do this is by giving not only the ‘readers’ but also the ‘living books’ pseudonyms, instead of solely using their book titles in this project, which I find would be adding to the essentialization of their ‘othered’ position. Shortly to return to the question of accountability that I posed earlier. Who am I accountable to? I am accountable to the people that have participated in my research, I am accountable for them to make sure my research does not cause harm to them and that they feel comfortable throughout the research process. I am also accountable to society at large in my aim to create a research product that is truthful and also productive in the fight towards a more understanding society where difference is not frowned upon, not merely tolerated but instead celebrated.

Limitations

Before moving on to the empirical chapters where I bring forth my findings and my analysis I want to point out one of the main limitations present in this research. Due to time pressure the number of interviews I was able to conduct (7) offers only a small window into the experiences of the people who participate in the Living Library. The aim was, to begin with, not to offer generalizable findings but to dive deep into the experiences of a few people to understand some of the processes present in the dialogue encounter and the intervention. Therefore, when reading the empirical chapters it is important to keep in mind that these are the experiences of four ‘living books’ and three ‘readers’ whom I was able to have a longer conversation with and hence much remains still to be discovered.

Chapter 4: Let's Talk the Talk

Why do we need interventions like the Living Library? As mentioned in the theoretical section, we live in a divided society, where the 'other' is too often seen as an unfamiliar threat rather than as a human being worthy of a good life (Mbembé, 2003). Keeping this background in mind, I will start by sharing a story from a 'living book' Remke (book title: 'trans woman'), which reflects the state of our society in a gruesome way, and simultaneously justifies why interventions like the Living Library deserve more scientific attention in order for them to reach as many people as effectively as possible. Remke (book title: 'trans woman') shares this story with me at the end of our 50-minute-long conversation and it brings both of us to tears:

*“Five years ago now, I was, how do you say it in English, well beaten up by three white boys in the train when I was travelling to Utrecht. And now I'm that far that I really would like to talk to them: 'What were you thinking?'. I was sitting on a train on my own, it was empty. Maybe it was stupid of me to sit on an empty train, but I don't know. I would really want to talk to them. You know, I'm not even angry anymore but I would like to know... [*tears up*] Oh, sorry. Yeah. Yeah, that's why I have tissues. So what were you thinking? It was 2018. I was 58. I was a woman of 58. So it's difficult. I really don't understand it. I still don't after all these years. I think why? Why? Even if you don't like me ... “*

This story speaks volumes about the violence and fear of violence that several different marginalized groups in society have to deal with on a daily basis. For me, stories like this; stories of hatred, discrimination and exclusion are hard to witness. Because like Remke, I too, wonder, the simple question of why? Why is there so much cruelty towards difference? Therefore, this project is firstly dedicated to navigating in a society where difference is seen as a threat and secondly to seeking answers on how to build solid bridges across differences, one dialogue at a time.

Perception Change

After seven conversations with people involved in the Living Library, I found that both the 'readers' and the 'living books' are very enthusiastic about the intervention because of its ability to act as a bridge across differences. As Oliver (book title: 'male sex worker') states:

“I think this model carries in it the potential to kind of in these polarizing times to construct bridges. – Be aware that certain kinds of people might come there. It's not a full diversity of society in all its opinions and all its backgrounds. But still, it's a way for people to enter into a dialogue that maybe do not know each other, and that would otherwise not get in touch. And that in itself is, I think, really important and powerful in these polarized times.”

This resonates with Zúñiga (2003) who writes about bridging differences through dialogue. A similar sentiment was shared by all of the seven people I spoke with. One ‘reader’, Mila, beautifully says: *“I really believe that it helps to broaden our inner space for all kinds of people”*. These findings are in line with and support the psychological impact studies (Handke, 2017; Orosz et al., 2016; Van den Dool, 2022) which found a change, towards less prejudice, in the perception of the ‘readers’ towards outgroup members after attending the Living Library. However, my aim is to dig deeper to see how this perception change happens and what kind of challenges are present.

Moving Towards Each Other

Oliver (book title: ‘male sex worker’) is motivated to act as a ‘living book’ in the Living Library because he wants to destigmatize sex work in society. He is active in political lobby groups, gives interviews and writes articles to create awareness about the topic of sex work. During our conversation, he describes a scene that took place in the Living Library. A woman from a rural area in the Netherlands came to have a dialogue with him. He describes her as being very shy at the start of the dialogue and not knowing how to begin the conversation. He recalls that she admitted to him that it was a difficult topic for her and very far away from ‘her path’. As Oliver summarizes the story, he laughingly adds: *“That's like a polite way of saying like I don't understand anything of it or I think it's a bit weird maybe”*. However, throughout the course of the dialogue, he felt her attitude changing and he saw her becoming more open. Oliver recaps: *“We ended up having a really nice conversation, or both of us learned a little bit and came closer to each other. And we did not leave each other the same way that our conversation started”*. I asked him, how he could tell that she felt more comfortable as the dialogue proceeded and he told me that towards the end of the dialogue she was taking more initiative in leading the conversation, she was freer in asking questions that were on her mind, and she was also sharing her own personal things with him in a vulnerable manner. All of which he interpreted as signs that she was feeling more comfortable around the topic in comparison to

the beginning. This story can be seen as a case in point of two people from different backgrounds and life worlds coming together through dialogue and allowing for mutual learning to happen. Pratt refers to this as ‘hybridity’ in her concept of the contact zone (Pratt, 1991). Moreover, this contact perspective highlights that “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (Pratt, 2007, p.7). In the dialogue then the ‘reader’ and the ‘living book’ are not seen as separate entities. Instead through co-presence and interaction, they constitute one another throughout the dialogue in ways that can result in hybridity (Pratt, 1991; Pratt, 2007).

Humanizing

Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’), has actively been a ‘living book’ for seven years. She shares with me that when she was still transitioning, and not yet active in the Living Library, she would encounter a lot of stares on public transport. She explains that sometimes she would politely ask the people looking if she was the first transgender person they had seen. According to her, often, but not always, this interaction proceeded into a fruitful talk where she felt a common understanding emerging. She thought to herself that if she would talk to as many people as possible on the public transport then eventually “*all the people would be fine with transgender people*”. After a while, however, she stopped doing these ‘public transport awareness talks’ as she found them to be too energy-consuming for her. However, she continues her talks now in a slightly more organized manner in the Living Library. She describes her motivation to act as a ‘living book’ for so many years by saying: “*I kind of feel like I can change the world. I can't you know, I can change a really small part. But even if I change the thoughts of a few people that is already fine by me*”.

The Living Library invites people with marginalized identities to share their stories in the intervention. The status of being marginalized grants these individuals a position that is considered, in the dominant narrative, as less human than those who inhabit no marginalized identities (Mbembé, 2003). This is because the ‘living books’ are measured against the yardstick of the ‘universal human’, conceptualization which dates back to Descartes’ description of the Western, rational, all-knowing subject of the man, who in comparison grants all others as ‘less human’ (Grosfoguel, 2012). Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) fights this dehumanisation by authentically sharing her story with the ‘readers’ in order to ‘humanize’ her title.

She finds that by simply initiating contact and sharing her story with the ‘readers’ their perception regarding transgender people changes. This is, according to her, because by sharing

not only her struggles but also the joy and the happiness she experiences after being able to truly be herself the 'readers' gain a new, more personal understanding of how it can be to be transgender. Consequently, the 'readers' start to view her as more of a human. She describes that by sharing her story openly she is able to give a face to the often impersonal news about transgender people. She explains that her readers "*are really happy to hear a real story from a real person in real life*". Often, after the dialogue her 'readers' share with her that the encounter with her really opened their eyes and changed their view on transgender people. This can be viewed as an example of what Lugones (1987) describes as 'world'-travelling. Remke (book title: 'trans woman') takes the 'readers' on a journey by sharing her life story and this allows the 'readers' to conceptually travel into her world. This gives the 'readers' an insight into what it means to be her and allows the 'readers' to perceive her 'book title' through her own words instead of through the mainstream narrative imposed by society. The 'readers' can gain a more personal, human perspective into what Remke's (book title: 'trans woman') lived experience has been. This enables perception change to occur. So, instead of seeing all transgender people with the gaze of an arrogant perceiver, through 'the mainstream construction', travelling into Remke's world, allows the 'readers' to see her as a 'real subject', as a 'lively being' and as a 'constructor of visions' in the way Lugones speaks when she explains about the benefits of 'world'-travelling (1987, p.15).

Moreover, giving a story and a face to an identity category is something that is also mentioned by a 'reader' called Lucas as one of the benefits of the Living Library. He explains that attaching a name, face, and a story to a topic such as 'childhood sexual abuse' makes the topic become 'more evident' and makes it stay with you longer. This communication happening in the dialogue is therefore more than just a mere exchange of verbal information. This can be linked to Condit's (2006) article about communication as a process of relating. She explains that communication can foster relationality and that "relationship is not a discrete, static entity but rather a process of the inter-action of forces" (Condit, 2006, p.6). In this way, by communicating with one another the 'reader' and the 'living book' enter a process that goes beyond exchanging information, and highlights their relationality through communication (Condit, 2006). This highlighted relationality aids perspective change: instead of viewing the 'living books' through the mainstream narrative of arrogant perception the 'reader' starts to see them through loving perception, as worthy human beings (Lugones, 1987). Lucas says: "*It's somehow surprising how evident and blunt it is, but once you talk to people, you just like see the whole issue or a topic in such a different manner*". This speaks to the power of face-to-face

human interaction as something that enables relationality and ‘world’-travelling which can be seen as an antidote to prejudice and stereotyping (Condit, 2006; Lugones, 1987).

The Bias of Openness

Living Libraries are held in various locations, such as libraries, high schools and community centres. However, most Living Libraries take place in the main libraries of cities around the Netherlands. More specifically, the three Living Libraries I visited were held in the main libraries in the centre of Den Haag, Leiden, and Amsterdam. The set-up of the intervention more generally as well as these central locations in big cities caters for a specific group of people and this was noted in all the conversations I had. Firstly, all of the ‘readers’ I had a conversation with are in one way or another societally minded. Cecilia, born in Peru, has volunteered in the Living Library several times and is very enthusiastic about the concept due to its goal of fighting stereotypes and stigma. Mila, another ‘reader’, explains that she has worked with refugees before and due to her background of being born in Suriname and now living in a multicultural part of Amsterdam she has always been in touch with a lot of people from different cultural backgrounds. She describes that the reason she chose a ‘living book’ titled ‘refugee’ in the Living Library was that she was *“busy with the earthquake of Turkey and Syria”*. She continues by saying: *“It aches my heart that help was more available in Turkey than in Syria, which, you know, the country is so damaged in all kinds of ways”*. This shows her societally minded habitus. Similarly, a ‘reader’ named Oliver, recaps that he comes from a working-class background and his mother is a nurse who has always been very engaged with people who suffer and experience a hard time. He says that this has made him inclined towards people who are marginalized in society. It is important to note, that these three ‘readers’ are only a small portion of the people who visit the Living Library. However, this point was also raised by the ‘living books’ I spoke with. When I asked if they had ever felt unsafe during a dialogue, all four books I spoke with answered that they had not felt unsafe and that the ‘readers’ were always respectful even if there were disagreements. This speaks for itself that people who join the intervention are not (physically) threatening to the ‘living books’. Moreover, when I asked Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) if she had experienced harsh prejudice from people who she had had as ‘readers’ she says: *“I think people who would object wouldn't take me as a book. So the people who would read me are, I think are already interested in a subject”*. Similarly, Rafael (book title: ‘refugee’) supports this point by saying: *“People who really believe in these stereotypes -- they won't try in the first place making contact with those kinds of persons. They won't even go maybe to the living library because to them it will*

look absurd or silly". In this way, there is a bias of openness, amongst the visitors of the Living Library, which guarantees a safer environment for the 'living books' to share their life experiences while dampening the effect of prejudice reduction due to lack of baseline prejudice among the readers.

Balance Between Inclusivity and Safety

In the Living Library edition in Amsterdam, I spoke with Oliver (book title: 'male sex worker') who shared with me that sometimes he is frustrated when 'readers' are too polite and do not ask questions that they really have on their minds. During our follow-up conversation on Zoom, when asking him to talk about this in more detail, he states:

"I would never discourage a respectful attitude. But if wanting to be respectful leads to not addressing concerns or prejudices that you do have. Then a problem arises, because in order to get away with prejudice, I need to know what the prejudice are, and I need to be able to tackle them. You cannot tackle them if they are not out in the open."

In this way, the politeness of the 'readers' can also be described as a challenge in reaching the goals of the intervention, one of which is reducing prejudice. However, it is not as simple as just making sure that a more diverse pool of people joins the Living Library. It is also a question of the safety of the 'living books'. To demonstrate, during a Living Library in Leiden, there was a 'reader' who caused problems because of his disrespectful behaviour. As an example, he spoke with a 'living book' titled 'BDSM' and he started the conversation by saying: 'Oh, so you are a mistress, that makes me very horny'. The 'BDSM' 'living book' was able to calmly manage the conversation but afterwards, she told the organizers not to let him 'read' other 'living books' because of his behaviour in the dialogue with her. Speculating about the situation, it seems that this 'reader' held more prejudice than the regular Living Library goer and thus possibly benefitted from the dialogues he had in terms of education and prejudice reduction. However, he also clearly undermined the safety of the 'living books' that he spoke with and thus he was instructed to leave the intervention. It seems a delicate balancing act to ensure that the intervention reaches the people who actually hold prejudice while making sure that the space remains safe for the 'living books' who voluntarily share their personal experiences in the hope of a more just society. An ideal atmosphere could be something described by Arao and Clemens (2013) who introduce a facilitation tool called *brave space*. They use the term *brave space* instead of *safe space* because they question "the degree to which

safety is an appropriate or reasonable expectation for any honest dialogue about social justice” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p.139). They instead highlight the concept of brave space: as a space where common ground rules of communication apply but where the focus is on emphasizing the need for courage to have disagreements rather than the illusion of safety (Arao & Clemens, 2023, p.141). However, downright disrespectful or threatening behaviour, such as described in the situation above, should clearly not be tolerated in the brave space or the Living Library.

Chapter 5: Peer Support and Connectedness

One of the main goals of the Living Library is focused on reducing prejudice, stereotyping and exclusion and increasing attitudes of openness and acceptance towards ‘otherness’ (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). However, another very particular benefit appeared from the conversations I had throughout the research, namely the benefit of peer support and feeling connected not only to the ‘other’ but also to the ‘self’. This can be linked to another goal stated on the website of the Living Library namely: “Creating a space of dialogue and understanding” (livinglibrary.nl, n.d.). As mentioned in the first empirical chapter, the ‘readers’ I spoke with, were already relatively open-minded. Moreover, I observed that the readers had a tendency to choose ‘living books’ that they have some kind of connection to rather than choosing ‘book titles’ they are completely unfamiliar with. What I found was that the ‘readers’ strongly benefitted from having conversations with more familiar ‘living books’. This was due to the highly emotional nature of the dialogues which made the dialogue encounter enhance feelings of connectedness and understanding towards the self. Moreover, three out of the four ‘living books’ enjoyed hearing the stories of the ‘readers’ and made a substantial effort to engage the ‘readers’ to share about their lives. Moreover, both the ‘readers’ and the ‘living books’ mentioned several times that the framework of the Living Library was something that, due to its design, enabled open sharing and consequently a feeling of connection which they appreciated because they felt that it was rarely present in their everyday interactions.

Benefits of Peer Support

I had a conversation with an experienced Living Library goer Cecilia, who had joined the intervention “*a bit less than 10 times in total*” both as a ‘reader’ and as a ‘volunteer’. She describes that during her second visit to the Living Library, she experienced two specific dialogues that moved her deeply. These dialogues made her feel connected to the ‘living books’ but also and especially to herself. After these dialogues, she felt like for the first time in her life she could address topics in her own life that she had repressed until then. These two meaningful dialogues were with the ‘living books’ titled ‘survivor of sexual abuse in childhood’ and ‘ex-incarcerated person’. In both of the encounters, the books shared their challenging experiences but also had an underlying message of hope and positivity. Cecilia recaps that during both of the encounters she cried and afterwards, she felt “*really connected*” and “*inspired*”. She also describes that she felt ‘*relief*’ because she met people she could relate to and open up to. She

describes that she generally gravitates towards choosing books that she has some previous connection to because those dialogues usually touch her on a deeper level and consequently stay with her for a long time. She reflects on her encounter with the ‘survivor of sexual abuse in childhood’ by saying:

“I also had some kind of abuse, but I still find it hard to say abuse, but I never spoke about it. Yeah. And then it was one of the first experiences speaking openly about it”.

For her, meeting this ‘living book’ who openly shared their experiences with this undeniably challenging topic, made Cecilia feel like she can open up about her own experiences. After that dialogue, she began to share her experience of abuse with her mother and her therapist for the first time. This kind of connection can be seen as peer support based on empathetically understanding each other through shared experiences (Mead et al., 2001). Through the ‘living book’ sharing their experience and providing ‘positive self-disclosure’ and acting as a ‘role model for recovery and coping’ Cecilia was able to open up about her experiences of abuse and start dealing with them (Watson, 2019). The second encounter that affected her deeply was with the ‘ex-incarcerated person’. She found the dialogue special because she could, again for the first time, openly talk about her own dad being in prison with someone who understood that experience. She describes that in both of the encounters the ‘living books’ first shared about themselves but she noticed that she quickly started sharing her own experiences around the topics as well. She describes the dialogues in the following way:

“I hadn’t talked about both topics. I really don’t speak about it. Yeah. And then suddenly, I mean in an open place in the library and there are people around and I’m speaking about it to someone”.

As mentioned above, Cecilia’s experience demonstrates the power of Living Library in facilitating connectedness through peer support. The ‘living books’ can act as peer-supporters by sharing their lived experiences with emotional honesty, by acting as role models for recovery and coping, as well as listening to the ‘reader’ with empathy and understanding due to shared life experiences (Mead et al., 2001; Watson, 2019).

In a similar manner, another ‘reader’ called Mila experienced a profound connection with a ‘living book’ titled ‘auteur van kleur’ (‘coloured author’). This ‘living book’ shared about her journey of navigating identity and barriers as a person of colour in the writing industry. Mila and ‘auteur van kleur’ shared a connection to Suriname. ‘Auteur van kleur’ has

ancestral roots in Suriname whereas Mila was born there and lived her young adulthood there until the age of 18 when she moved to the Netherlands. Mila describes that she and the ‘auter van kleur’ found many points of connection around the theme of belonging. Mila describes that she shared with the ‘auter van kleur’ about her struggles to belong in Suriname even though she had been born there:

“You know, I was really white Suriname -- I’ve been born there. But sometimes I became like a symbol of the colonizer. And that could really happen instantly.”

She describes that the ‘auteur van kleur’ was the first person that truly understood her in this regard and she describes that this, in turn, made her understand new things about herself. She says: *“Other people conceptually understand what I’m talking about but I really found that she understands on a more deeper level.”* Mila described feeling ashamed after the conversation because she felt like she was perhaps sharing too much about herself. She was worried that this was not the point of the intervention. I aimed to assure her that this kind of connection was also welcomed in the intervention and that many other ‘readers’ felt connected to and shared their own experiences with the ‘living books’. She felt comforted and said that for her learning is less about new facts and more about *“embodying subtle compassion”*, and this is what she felt happening in the dialogue encounter with the ‘auter van kleur’. In this way, the Living Library dialogue offers a possibility for ‘world’-travelling (Lugones, 1987) which increases loving perception not only towards the ‘other’ but also towards the self.

Convivial Joy as Resistance

Similarly to Cecilia and Mila, a ‘reader’ called Lucas, a 29-year-old white male, describes that he is inclined to pick a ‘living book’ that he is somehow familiar with. However, he continues by saying that *“with the privilege situation of mine, that I really am like the norm, whatever was in the living library was already something different than I’m living myself”*. In this way, especially, to those of us who inhabit a privileged position of being ‘the norm’ in society, picking any ‘living book’ is already something outside of what one is used to. Lucas starts to talk about how the concept is set up to foster openness and connectedness. He reflects on the fine balance between closeness and distance between the ‘reader’ and the ‘living book’ by saying: *“having this distance between you but then maybe for that short amount of time, you can feel close because you really are one-to-one and you also have the option to ask questions”*. Here he reflects on the way in which the Living Library context is promoting open sharing.

Similarly, Mila reflects on what she thinks is the secret to feeling connected during the Living Library dialogue. She describes her experience in the Living Library followingly:

“It’s a safe container. Maybe we need these spaces, which are kind of safe contained places -- maybe we need these kinds of exercise environments because in daily life we’ve learned to be more distant”.

In this manner, the structured way intervention is set up is providing a place where openness and connection can emerge. This can be viewed through conviviality which highlights the joy of interdependence and creative relating among people that is seen as the “opposite of industrial productivity” (Illich & Lang, 1973, p.6). Here the possibility for conviviality is created by structuring the intervention in a specific way that allows for fleeting connections to emerge without a capital gain in mind (Fincher & Iveson, 2015; Illich & Lang, 1973). The peer support and connection also link together with the bias of openness that I discussed in empirical chapter one. The ability to relate with one another and find a connection is linked to the fact that the ‘readers’ in the Living Library are already relatively open-minded and thus ready to connect with the ‘living books’ rather than holding strong prejudice against them.

Not a One-Way Street

Similarly, to the ‘readers’ also some of the ‘living books’ feel a sense of connection in the intervention. To exemplify, Rafael (book title: ‘refugee’) describes in a beautiful manner how he engages with his readers. He starts by saying that he feels the dialogue is not just about him because the ‘reader’ in front of him is also a person. He shares that he asks all of his ‘readers’ what would be their title if they would be a ‘living book’ in the Living Library. He recaps his experiences by saying:

“It was surprisingly a very good conversation starter. As it is also rewarding in a way to hear about other people’s stories, other people, life journeys, what they have suffered from or what are the things they are afraid of. It’s rewarding in so many ways”.

He further echoes what Lucas and Mila had recognized about the structural environment in the Living Library that encourages both the ‘living books’ as well as the ‘readers’ to share openly and thus allow for joy and connectedness in interaction to emerge (Illich & Lang, 1973). He recognizes that having those twenty minutes that are specifically dedicated to discussing with a stranger whom you are unlikely to meet again creates a special container where openness and

subsequently connection can emerge. I asked him how he feels after a day of being a ‘living book’ and his answer was the following:

“In the living library, you hear many stories. All stories are touching and moving in a way. And you are one of these stories. It gives you a feeling of connection. – I feel more connected after going into the Living Library. I feel like I am part of something.”

Equivalently, Oliver (book title: ‘male sex worker’) shares a similar experience about the intervention. He explains that the most rewarding and exciting aspect for him has been “*when people also open up themselves*” during the dialogue. He notices that people feel comfortable sharing about their sexuality and asking sensitive questions from him because of his ‘book title’ ‘male sex worker’. He finds this two-way sharing very valuable. To add to this, Sarah (book title: ‘invisible disability’) praises the fact that in the Living Library, you are given the opportunity “*to speak with strangers that you would never meet before, and will probably never meet again, and talk about quite potentially heavy subjects*”. She explains that it gives a low barrier to opening up communication and through that creates a possibility for connection. If we zoom out for a moment, the society we live in is an individual neoliberal society where the values of self-reliance and the pursuit of individual success can easily undermine a sense of connectedness (Becker et al., 2021). Becker et al., (2021) looked into the adverse mental health effects linked to living in a neoliberal society and one significant finding was the “importance of social connections and social identities as buffers against negative health outcomes” (Becker et al., 2021, p.960). In this way, the Living Library is fighting disconnectedness through offering a platform for connections to emerge. Sarah (book title: ‘invisible disability’) says: “*The living library creates a different set of rules. It opens up the conversation for asking taboo questions*”. In such a manner, the dialogue does not only utilize the pain stories of the ‘living books’ for the benefit of the ‘readers’ but the flow of conversation, as well as its benefits, can be mutual. When the ‘living book’ shares vulnerably about their experience it seems to encourage the ‘readers’ to also share about their experiences which relate to the ‘living book’. In this way, the dialogue is not a one-way street of obsessing over the pain narratives of the ‘living books’ but it encourages mutual vulnerable sharing and thus fosters feelings of peer support and connection which can be scarce in a neoliberal society that prioritises independence and individual success over community and connection (Becker et al., 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Chapter 6: Beyond ‘Otherness’

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind - Edward Said (1993, p.6).

Taking the quote from Edward Said as a starting point, this chapter will explore the ways in which the ‘living books’ challenge their location as the ‘other’ while simultaneously being labelled through their ‘otherness’ in the Living Library. Three out of the four ‘living books’ recognized some form of prejudice towards their respective book title but concurrently felt empowered inhabiting their ‘book title’ in the intervention due to a multitude of reasons. The main reason being that the ‘living books’ believe that by being the ‘other’ they can change the perception of the ‘readers’ towards their respective ‘otherness’ in society more generally.

Pre-Reflections

When I first heard about the Living Library and the way it operates, honestly speaking, I felt both curious and a little worried. Worried about how the titles of the ‘living books’ (‘refugee’, ‘sex worker’, ‘homeless person’, ‘mental illness’, etc.) seemed to reduce a full person into a one-dimensional, stigmatized identity category. These labels, to me, carried the danger of cementing a wounded victim's position of ‘otherness’ (Brown, 2020; Said, 1978). Moreover, questions of a power imbalance between presumably privileged ‘readers’ and presumably underprivileged ‘living books’ were of major concern. Elaborating on power from an academic point of view, Mbembé (2003) highlights in his concept of necropolitics how some bodies and populations are exposed to death through inherent inequalities in the very foundation of the organization of social life. The central question of his thesis is: Who counts as a human? (Mbembé, 2003). Using Mbembé’s (2003) lens, it can be said that the Living Library deals with groups of people who due to their specific marginalized identity (or a ‘book title’) are deemed as disposable and thus are not seen as fully human. This brings power relations to the forefront of the intervention at the very start and raises the question of how the ‘living books’ navigate being the marginalized ‘others’ in this intervention.

Another point, I reflected upon before embarking on this research journey was that of victimhood and trauma. Many of the ‘living books’ have experienced discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice and exclusion because of their marginalized identity position. Therefore, these aforementioned topics will inevitably be present in the dialogue encounters at

the Living Library. In her book *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (2020), Wendy Brown heavily criticises identity politics and the use of the so-called ‘wounded position’ in politics. She is extremely critical of the focus on individual injury and victimhood for the reason that she wants to break away from seeing these identity categories as essential and fixed. This is because, according to her, it hinders collective social action (Brown, 2020). Sharing stories of victimhood, for her, is only replicating them and essentializing them (Brown, 2020). Then, if analysing Living Library through the theorizing of Brown (2020) a question arises about whether the Living Library intervention is perpetuating the essentialized position of woundedness (Brown, 2020) or breaking away from it.

While starting the research with the above-mentioned concerns, I quickly discovered that by intentionally inhabiting a marginalized position the ‘living books’ are actually doing the opposite of cementing and essentializing a wounded position. Being the ‘other’ the ‘living books’ are paradoxically opening up a world beyond these ‘victimised’ and ‘marginalized’ identity labels and revealing rich life worlds of meaning-making and agency beyond the one-dimensional label (Lugones, 1987). Additionally, opposite to Brown’s (2020) thesis, the sharing of stories from the position of the ‘other’ is actually de-essentialising, humanizing, and most interestingly ‘de-othering’ the ‘other’ in the Living Library. Let us then see how the ‘living books’ with the titles: ‘invisible disability’ (Sarah), ‘trans woman’ (Remke), ‘male sex worker’ (Oliver), and ‘refugee’ (Rafael) negotiate being labelled as the ‘other’ in the Living Library and how that negotiation contributes to perception change toward ‘otherness’ in society more generally.

Motivations From Personal to Political

The ‘living books’ whom I had a conversation with had come to the Living Library for a variety of reasons ranging from personal to societal and political. The reasons included: curiosity, the ability to practise Dutch language skills, the possibility to find new connections, wanting to increase awareness about their book title, having a societally concerned activist predisposition, being in favour of the goal of the living library to increase empathy, and because they simply ‘like talking to strangers’. Moreover, all of the ‘living books’ experienced significant gains with regards to feeling like they have made a difference in how their title is viewed in society by positioning themselves as the ‘living book’ for the duration of the intervention.

First Encounters

One motivation for the ‘living books’ to join was that they can act as the first point of encounter with their specific identity group for many of the ‘readers’. For example, Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) describes how the first question she always asks her ‘readers’ is if she is the first transgender person they talk to. The overwhelming majority of people say yes. In this way, she feels like she can make a difference in people’s perception of transgender people by acting as the first transgender that many ‘readers’ meet. She explains that when the ‘readers’ encounter her they think: *“Oh, wow, it's just a person. You know, it's a human being”*. And that realization, she believes, will make a difference in the ‘readers’ perception of what being transgender is, namely just another human being. Similarly, Oliver (book title: ‘male sex worker’) explains that many ‘readers’ share with him that he is the first sex worker they have spoken with. He sees acting as the ‘humanizing’ first point of encounter as valuable towards reducing prejudice towards sex workers among the ‘readers’. Additionally, Oliver (book title: ‘male sex worker’) views the one-to-one interaction as useful because it allows for a deeper interaction where you can address the specific questions the individual ‘readers’ have and thus help reduce their prejudiced perception of sex workers. He explains:

“This format allows a little bit more for deeper interaction. You don't have as big of an audience. I think maybe your impact is bigger because it's one-to-one or you can directly address any kind of questions that they might have particularly. I am interested in destigmatizing sex work. And I think this format allows for that to happen”.

In this way, being the first transgender or sex worker that the ‘readers’ encounter and being able to address their specific concerns is seen as a way to change the perception of the readers towards more openness. This is seen as valuable and therefore can be seen as a motivating factor for the ‘living books’ to inhabit their specific book title in the intervention. From a theoretical viewpoint, it can be seen that these encounters allow the ‘readers’ to conceptually travel to the worlds of the ‘living books’ for the very first time and therefore it can have such a profound impact on the ‘readers’ perception about that specific identity group and this is considered as a motivation by the ‘living books’ (Lugones, 1987).

Re-Narration as Resistance

The ‘living books’ use their position as the ‘other’ to re-narrate the story of being the ‘other’.

To exemplify, Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) describes that she wants to act as a role model and show people that it is okay to be yourself. She powerfully states: *“I always want to convey it's okay to be transgender. You can be happy, you can be successful. So take your own path and be yourself”*. In this way, Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) is re-narrating the mainstream story that positions transgender people at the fringes of society through stigmatisation and discrimination. She is engaging with what Pratt (1991) calls an ‘autoethnographic text’ where the ‘so-defined others’ construct their own story in response to the mainstream narrative. Remke’s (book title: ‘trans woman’) autoethnographic text, a text of resistance, is her very real narrative about being happy and successful while also being transgender. She is using the position of the ‘so-called other’ to transform how the identity category of ‘transgender’ is viewed in the mainstream narrative by adding depth and diversity through sharing her own lived experience with the ‘readers’.

Similarly to Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) Oliver (book title: ‘male sex worker’) considers the position as the ‘other’ in the Living Library as a place where he can affect and change the general narrative told about sex workers by everyone else but the sex workers themselves. Throughout the dialogue in the Living Library, he aims to bring up the diversity in sex workers' experiences. Particularly aiming to counter the single narrative that is told about sex work as always being harmful. He states: *“I want to show them that there's such a big variety and personal stories of different sex workers. And there is not really one narrative that suits all”*. Thus, similarly to Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’), he engages with Pratt’s (1991) autoethnographic text of resistance. He does this by diversifying the mainstream narrative told about sex workers in society.

Society grants the marginalized ‘living books’ with a ‘less of a human status’ (Mbembé, 2003) and therefore narrates their story for them silencing their voices. The Living Library offers a platform for de-silencing when it invites the ‘living books’ to share their own story with their own words and in this way to re-narrate the way in which mainstream society depicts these marginalized identities. Through the lens of Spivak (1985/2020) the intervention offers a platform to fight against epistemic violence that devalues, silences and erases certain stories and ways of knowing and being in the world. Sharing stories of happiness and success as well as highlighting the diversity in peoples’ lived experiences the ‘living books’ find agency in their position as the ‘other’ to challenge the silence and false narration in society when it comes to their respective ‘book titles’.

Education and Awareness as Resistance

Providing education and raising awareness is also seen by the ‘living books’ as a way to successfully utilize their position as the ‘other’ in the intervention. To exemplify, Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) actively uses her position as the ‘living book’ to educate her ‘readers’ about what it can mean to be transgender. For example, she often shares with her ‘readers’ that, against the mainstream assumption, many transgender people do not undergo any surgery at all. She finds it important to share facts and thus correct misconceptions people might hold about being transgender.

In a similar manner, Sarah (book title: ‘invisible disability’) finds it important to raise awareness about differences in healthcare systems internationally. As an American in the Netherlands with chronic illness, she is extremely grateful for the Dutch health care system. She bluntly states: *“If I go back to the US, I don’t have a future, because I don’t have access to health care”*. She continues by saying: *“It’s really great that people have opportunities, regardless of their abilities, and that there is care and support for when people are unable to work”*. She finds it valuable to bring attention to the inequalities in access to health care on a global scale.

In this way, both Remke (book title: ‘trans woman’) and Sarah (book title: ‘invisible disability’) utilize their status as the ‘other’ to educate and bring awareness to topics that they feel are misrepresented or do not get enough attention in the mainstream narration. There is a legitimate critique from the Black communities arguing that it should not be the responsibility of the marginalized people to educate the dominant group about the experiences of being oppressed (DiAngelo, 2016). The dominant group should take the responsibility of educating themselves and not burden the marginalized further by requiring them to act as the ‘experience specialists’ on the topic (DiAngelo, 2016). While while this critique is valid and undoubtedly applies to many circumstances it is not confirmed in my research. All the ‘living books’ I spoke with were enthusiastic about sharing their life stories as a form of activism to educate the ‘readers’. This can be speculated to be linked to the personal preferences of different people. All of the ‘living books’ I spoke with enjoyed talking to strangers and found it satisfying to share their experiences in this structured space of the Living Library. It seems, that the willingness to share their lived experiences was specifically linked to the structure of the intervention and it does by no means automatically mean that the ‘living books’ want to act as peer educators around the clock even when they are not in the Living Library space.

More generally, if the ‘readers’ are open to receiving this new information then these dialogue encounters can act as a breeding ground for hybridity in the sense Pratt (1991) imagines. Moreover, as the ‘readers’ learn new information through ‘world’-travelling they start to more deeply understand the lived experiences of the ‘living books’ (Lugones, 1987). By learning this new information the ‘readers’ can shift their gaze from an arrogant perception to a loving perception towards the ‘living books’ (Lugones, 1987). In this way, the dialogue encounter can act as a site for social transformation where new subjectivities are created and this is considered rewarding from the side of the ‘living books’ (Pratt, 1991).

Going Beyond ‘Otherness’ by Being the ‘Other’

Being labelled as the ‘other’ in terms of marginalized identities in the Living Library does not, however, come without its challenges for the ‘living books’. One challenging encounter, between a ‘reader’ and the ‘BDSM’ ‘living book’, was explained in the first empirical chapter. Although none of the ‘living books’ that I spoke with had experienced unsafe or violent situations in the intervention, there is always the chance that a ‘reader’ might become disrespectful towards a ‘living book’. This is because we are dealing with differential power relations where the ‘living books’ due to their marginalized identities are placed as less powerful and less human according to the standards of our society (Mbembé, 2003; Pratt, 1987).

However, some challenges, relating to inhabiting the ‘book title’ were shared during the conversations with the ‘living books’. To illustrate, when I asked Rafael (book title: ‘refugee’) how he feels and deals with carrying his specific title ‘refugee’ in the intervention he admitted that to an extent he struggles with it. He says:

“It is annoying, to be honest with you – because there are some certain stereotypes about all kinds of people, especially about refugees here. – So it does annoy me, to be honest with you”.

However, with the same breath of air, he continues explaining that it actually does not annoy him *“that much”*. This is because he feels that whenever he starts talking with people and tells them a little bit about himself *“the stereotype about refugees will be broken instantly”*. However, he further shares that he is tired of people continuously assuming that all refugees are Muslims. He highlights that he sees nothing wrong with being a Muslim, but since he is not, the endless inquiries about whether he drinks beer or eats pork *“sound like a broken*

record". However, he feels reassured that when the 'readers' have a dialogue with him their stereotypes will disappear. As an example of this, he explains that speaking to the 'readers' in fluent Dutch only seven months after arriving in the Netherlands has really impressed them. He recaps his thoughts by saying that *"right after starting speaking with me, I can see easily that this assumption or stereotype is already broken. And they're looking to me just as another person"*. He crystallizes his thoughts about inhabiting his 'book title' in the following statement: *"I'm not only a refugee. I'm more than that"*.

Moreover, Remke (book title: 'trans woman') shares that she does not mind being titled through being transgender in the intervention because she wants to create awareness and educate people about it. However, she explains that she actually gave her 'book title' a lot of thought and came to the conclusion that she wants to have a space between the words trans and woman. That is because she wants to clearly indicate that she is not solely defined by this identity:

"You know, I'm a human being in the first place. I'm a woman and I happen to be transgender. But it's not something that completely defines who I am. It's just a characteristic. You know, it's important for me, but it's not something that really defines me."

Thus, the 'living books' Rafael (book title: 'refugee') and Remke (book title: 'trans woman') engage in resistance against stereotypes in the contact zone by highlighting that they are not defined by their title even though they are paradoxically labelled by it in the intervention (Pratt, 1991). They are creating their own autoethnographic text of resistance in Pratt's sense (1991), which challenges their one-dimensional title in the Living Library and further the way that the title is perceived in the mainstream societal narrative. The 'living books' add depth to the titles as soon as one engages in a dialogue with them, just as the quote by Said (1993) at the start of this chapter states. Even though the 'readers' are invited into the dialogue by labelling the 'living books' with one-dimensional labels in the course of the dialogue the 'living books' use their 'otherness' to transform their position beyond 'otherness'. They do this by challenging the mainstream narrative about their respective 'book titles'.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The polarization of opinions in our society is addressed by the Living Library intervention by intentionally bringing people with different life experiences together to engage in a dialogue. As Mbembé (2003) theorises in his concept of necropolitics: some lives are considered less human and thus disposable by the dominant narrative in society. The Living Library aims to challenge this dehumanization of certain identities by bringing people together to reduce prejudice and discrimination. What is more, the ‘living books’ who inhabit the position of the marginalized ‘other’ in the intervention intentionally use their position to challenge the mainstream narrative which locates them at the fringes of society.

Addressing Perception Change

To recap, the main research question was: *How can the Living Library intervention act as a catalyst for perception change?* According to my findings, the Living Library dialogue encounter can act as a catalyst for perception change by constructing bridges across differences as mentioned both by the ‘living books’ and the ‘readers’. To exemplify in more detail, this perception change happens through face-to-face encounters where the ‘living book’ and the ‘reader’ start from having different viewpoints due to different backgrounds and life worlds. By engaging in open and respectful communication they move closer to one another as the dialogue proceeds. In this process, their relationality is highlighted which allows for hybridity to emerge through mutual learning (Condit, 2006; Pratt, 1991). Another way in which perception change occurs is through the ‘humanization’ of the ‘living books’. Through finding out about the personal stories of the ‘living books’, by travelling into their ‘worlds’ and experiencing relationality, the ‘living books’ are ‘humanized’ in the eyes of the ‘readers’ (Condit, 2006; Lugones, 1987). This happens as a part of a process where the ‘readers’ move from viewing the ‘living books’ arrogantly, through the perception of the mainstream society, to viewing them as humans through loving perception after having travelled into their ‘worlds’ (Lugones, 1987).

Moreover, through hearing the personal stories of the ‘living books’ a name and a face are being attached to the otherwise perhaps ‘abstract’ identity categories that the ‘living books’ represent. This makes the stories of the ‘living books’ stay longer with the ‘readers’ if compared to for example reading about these topics in the news. To address the main research question in one sentence: Living Library intervention acts as a catalyst for perception change by offering a space for respectful face-to-face communication which enhances the perception of the ‘living

books' as human beings rather than as a part of an abstract, disposable, identity category. This face-to-face communication highlights relationality and acts as a 'humanizing' encounter which makes the stories of the 'living books' stay longer with the 'readers'. However, more qualitative research with larger sample sizes is needed before generalizable conclusions can be drawn.

Challenges to Perception Change

During the study, it became apparent that the perception change of the 'readers' towards less prejudice is hampered by two challenges. Namely; the bias of openness and the 'readers' opting for 'familiar' 'living books'. The bias of openness refers to the fact that the visitors joining the intervention do not come from all parts of society. The 'readers' that I spoke with were all already open-minded and curious to learn more about different identities. The second challenge refers to the 'readers' choosing a 'living book' that they already have a previous connection to. For example, if the 'reader's' relative is ill, they might choose a 'living book' that has the same illness as their relative to gain peer support. These challenges can be viewed as hindrances to prejudice reduction since the 'readers' already hold less prejudice in general and especially towards the 'living books' that they are previously connected to. Therefore, to foster prejudice reduction as effectively as possible, it is important to pay attention to the diversity of the 'readers' in the intervention all the while keeping in mind safety considerations. Moreover, to support prejudice reduction it is important to encourage the 'readers' to opt for books they are not previously familiar with.

Peer Support and Connectedness

An unexpected finding materialized from the above-mentioned challenges to prejudice reduction (bias of openness and choosing a 'familiar' book) namely that of peer support and connectedness. From a macro perspective, in our neoliberal hyper-individual society where self-reliance and independence are considered strengths, the feeling of disconnection easily appears (Becker et al., 2021). However, when the 'readers' do not hold strong prejudice against the 'living books' to begin with and they choose a 'living book' that they have some familiarity with the feelings of peer support and connectedness can emerge in the dialogue (Mead et al., 2001). The honest, open, and vulnerable sharing of life stories by the 'living books' encourages the 'readers' to open up about their similar life experiences. The shared understanding and empathy, through similar lived experiences, bring about feelings of connectedness and peer

support (Cowie & Wallace, 2000; Mead et al., 2001). To address the first sub-question: *How do the 'readers' in the Living Library perceive interpersonal relations during and after attending the intervention?* According to my findings, the 'readers' that I spoke with came into the intervention relatively open-minded while still recapped having learned new things from the 'living books'. More prominently, however, two out of the three 'readers', that I spoke with, were extremely passionate about the feeling of peer support and connectedness that they felt in and after the dialogues.

'Otherness' as Resistance

Finally, to address the last sub-question: *How do the 'living books' in the Living Library experience and negotiate their position as the 'Other'?* I found that all of the four 'living books' whom I spoke with enthusiastically inhabited the position of the 'other' in the intervention. This is because they felt that it allowed them to share their stories in their own words. This can be seen as creating an autoethnographic text of resistance which engages with the mainstream narrative in order to fight epistemic violence (Pratt, 1991; Spivak, 1985/2020). Moreover, the 'living books' were motivated to be the 'other' in the intervention because they felt it is a place where they can be an activist and educate the 'readers' by creating more awareness about their 'book titles' in order to create more understanding and reduce prejudice. However, not all the 'living books' found it completely unproblematic to inhabit their given 'book title' and they aimed to highlight the fact that they do not want to be defined by their 'book title'. This conflict was negotiated by aiming to break the prejudice about their 'book title' as soon as possible when the dialogue started and by making intentional linguistic choices when choosing their 'book title'. Generally, the 'living books' were motivated to inhabit the position of the 'other' in order to go beyond the 'otherness' of their 'book titles'. For understanding the intervention better future research should be conducted through qualitative methods with larger sample sizes. More specifically, future research should focus on looking into the relationship between the content of the dialogue and prejudice reduction as well as the contradiction between including 'readers' with strong prejudices while still maintaining a safe/brave space for all the participants.

The Value of Stories

I want to end with a vignette from one of the Living Libraries I joined. Every Living Library ends with a debriefing session where people involved in the organisation of the event can share

how their day went and how they are feeling now. In a session in Leiden, a partner of one of the organizers joined this debriefing session. When it came to his turn to speak he shared something touching that I want to end this conclusion with. He was clearly very moved by the day and he pointed out, as a literature graduate, that in the past physical books have been banned, destroyed and burned because their information and stories were deemed unacceptable by authorities. He continued by saying that the reason he finds this intervention extremely valuable is that the 'living books' who are present sharing their stories with the 'readers' are doing invaluable work by speaking out their personal stories and raising awareness about their 'book titles' in a world that still considers some of these books as only worthy of being banned or burned.

“Our freedom is sweet. It will be sweeter when we are all free” - bell hooks

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