

# **Social participation of elderly people: a participative inquiry with particular focus on people with lifelong intellectual disabilities in later ages**

**Sylvia Rainer**

**University of Bolzano Bozen**

Elderly people and particularly people with lifelong intellectual disabilities in advanced age are to be considered as social groups who are exposed to multiple risks of marginalisation. Their overall representations in society appear to involve the portrait of burdensome members of community not being able to take part in the so called active and autonomous life which generally shapes the construction of identity in adulthood. Yet, the present inquiry grounds in the assumption that social participation of senior citizens is both meaningful at an individual level and offers great treasure for every community in terms of social capital and social cohesion. The research design is thus indebted to a participatory action research approach and entails the direct involvement of those growing older. The research participants have been recruited with the help of gatekeepers such as social workers, representatives of social associations and elderly people themselves. The process of data collection involves the collection of life histories through qualitative interviews. Such approach encompasses important ethical and methodological challenges, requires the building of trust relationships between the researcher and the participants and the continuous development and adjustment of adequate research strategies. A further characteristic and innovative aspect of this study is the involvement of an advisory board consisting of elderly people who accompany the whole research process in the role of scientific supervisors. The first results of the study reveal a broad array of individual strategies elderly people develop in order to participate in social life and to contribute to their communities. Further, the study aims to disclose what social spaces and resources communities offer to elderly people and what socially constructed barriers to meaningful participation they need to address. Thus, the overall intention is to reveal emerging mandates for social work and social policy.

**KEY WORDS:** participation, disabilities, elderly, action research