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# **The environment for managing invisible handicap in France: a case study of dyslexic workers' idiosyncratic skills.**

**34<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium, Estonian Business School, July 5-7 2018, Tallin**

**Short paper submitted to Sub-theme 17: Diversity and Diversity Management :**

**Beyond the Familiar into the Unexpected**

**Authors: Damien Aimar and Jean-François Chanlat**

Confronted with a sizeable challenge, organisations have not yet awoken to the fact that, in France, 5% of each generation is affected by dyslexia. Among advances on the subject of handicap, theories are above all concerned with the implementation of a handicap policy. The individual viewpoint is very often mentioned without really being analysed in a segmented manner (Durkheim, 1930). Management research must respond to the issue of this forgotten reality (Chanlat, 1990), which is why the approach chosen for this project focuses on the individual. In order to better understand the elements of our research into invisible handicap (Santuzzi *et al.*, 2014), the study starts from a wider definition of strategic skills developed in psychology. The method used in the context of analysing this field is the “life history” (Bertaux, 2016), this method being compatible with the subjects of this study: “dyslexic workers”.

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Although dyslexia is considered to be a handicap, Ronald Davis (1995) considers it, paradoxically, to be a gift. He is referring to dyslexic workers' "idiosyncratic skills". Is Davis right in saying that, for the affected person, the anomaly has specific skills inherent to it, or leads to the development of such skills? This question leads us towards a debate coinciding with the approach combining the individual skills that are common to "invisible" handicap (Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein and Rupp, 2014).

Although the overall issue of diversity includes handicap (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2008; Chanlat and Özbilgin, 2017), it is not much dealt with in this strand of research (Stone, 1997; Chanlat and Özbilgin, 2017) because many managers consider handicap difficult to include an organisation due to the constraints it creates. Looked at from this classical point of view, the specific difficulty of invisible handicap is much more complex, particularly that of dyslexic workers, who have not been studied as such in management science. In France, dyslexics have been considered as handicapped workers since the introduction of a law on the subject in 2005.

According to the INSERM, France's biggest health research institute, dyslexia is defined as: "poor association between graphemes (written signs) and phonemes (sounds), as well as an inability to quickly grasp a word in its totality. These dysfunctions are often linked to poor phonological development before learning to read (difficulties in discriminating between closely-related sounds, poor phonological awareness) and/or problems with orthographic processing (confusions between and inversions of letters, poor coding of the position of letters)". Dyslexia is particularly difficult to study because it is often associated with other types of handicap such as acalculia, dyspraxia, dysorthographie, dysgraphie, dysphasie, or even hyperactivité<sup>1</sup>. In order to simplify our approach to the problem, the type of dyslexia dealt with in this article involves the main handicap, but not the other disorders listed above.

Studying the question of the dyslexic worker's idiosyncratic skills – the objective of this article – is interesting for all types of French organisations, which are obliged by the 2005 law to ensure that 6% of their workforce are handicapped individuals. It is even more interesting in that we are presenting this paper to the SIG 05 organised by EURAM, the European Academy of Management, thus enabling us to share French experience on this subject with other researchers.

This article is divided into two parts. In the first part, we present a definition and the characteristics of what can be called an idiosyncratic skill. This approach leads us to examine

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.inserm.fr/thematiques/neurosciences-sciences-cognitives-neurologie-psychiatrie/dossiers-d-information/troubles-des-apprentissages-les-troubles-dys>

the dyadic relationship between individual skills and microfoundations. The observation of this dyadic relationship will enable us to concentrate on one of the actionable psychological elements of idiosyncratic skills: resilience. In the second part, we present our method, which is ethno-sociological. We conclude by trying to find a response to the question of dyslexic workers using the initial results obtained from research in the field.

## **I. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH: DEVELOPING THE DEFINITION OF THE DYSLEXIC SUBJECT'S IDIOSYNCRATIC SKILLS: ENDOGENOUS SKILLS**

Although Santuzzi *et al.* (2014) classify dyslexic workers in the invisible handicap category, their analysis only focuses on the fact of declaring oneself as a handicapped worker with an invisible handicap. Miller (2011) was the first management researcher to mention the potential of dyslexics in the work situation. Given their numbers throughout society, dyslexic workers are in fact present at all levels in all types of organisation – private, public and voluntary. Some are even famous entrepreneurs, such as Elon Musk, chairman of Tesla, Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, Richard Branson, chairman of Virgin, Steve Jobs, the late chairman of Apple and John Chambers, executive chairman of Cisco<sup>2</sup>. Their skills are expressed in the creativity and innovation that they have demonstrated in their respective fields. Dyslexics can develop artistic skills, like Disney and Picasso, or creative scientific abilities, like Bell and Einstein; the list of all the dyslexic personalities who have expressed their unique abilities in their field would be long.

The objective of our research, which is the basis of this article, is to discover whether dyslexic workers demonstrate such skills within their organisations. All dyslexic workers are faced with an often-hostile environment that encourages them to surpass themselves. Although their abilities and skills can thus be expressed in a unique way, the idiosyncratic and strategic nature of these skills is marked by an absence of learning and an articulation peculiar to dyslexics. To develop our definition of idiosyncratic skills, we use the theory of skills by microfoundations, which enables us to explain how these skills can fit into an organisation. Moreover, a case study approach involving dyslexic workers provides empirical validation of the theories of resources and skills (Durand, 2006), at the same time providing knowledge of a category of workers who have been studied little or not at all.

### **1. Individual skills widened to the dyslexic handicapped worker**

Managers often perceive handicapped workers as being counter-productive (Stone and Collela, 1997; Tisserand, 2012). However, with suitable adjustments in the workplace, handicapped workers can exploit their skills (Collela, 2001; Tisserand, 2012). This is why, in France, the term “people in a situation of handicap” tends to be used (Tisserand, 2012), because dyslexic workers can out-perform their colleagues in work-related tasks when the context is well-adapted to their situation (Santuzzi *et al.*, 2014). It is, moreover, essential to promote an individual approach to skill if the stigmatisation to which workers suffering from

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.letemps.ch/economie/2015/04/16/genie-handicap-se-tutoient-tete-entreprises>

an invisible handicap are subject is to be reduced. By its very nature, this type of handicap is difficult for colleagues to diagnose (Collela, 2001; Santuzzi *et al.*, 2014).

Although the personalised management of human resources (HR), as practiced in France (Arnauld, Frimousse and Peretti, 2009), enables us to rethink the concept of individual skills, and although, according to Dietrich, Gilbert and Pigeyre (2010), individual skills refer to the association between an individual and his work situation, for the dyslexic worker, skill finds its roots in the sense that is given to an action in its context (Retour, 2005). In fact, some research suggests that dyslexics are endowed with a number of innate skills such as intuition, discernment, creativity, the ability to analyse graphic information and excellent communication abilities (Miller, 2011). It should be quite clear that these skills are inherent to dyslexic workers. These results corroborate the idea developed recently in France by Loufrani-Fedida and Saint-Germes (2013) according to which skills are real and should always be placed in their context.

In the context of our study of dyslexic workers, idiosyncratic skills (Teece, 2012) are considered to be individual capacities that form part of an action and are characterised by a neuro-reflexive behaviour. Although, according to Durand (2006), skills have three dimensions – knowledge, practical ability and attitudes – idiosyncratic skills have the particular characteristic of being activated after a neuro-reflexive process; part of the cerebral cortex develops more than in the non-dyslexic individual in order to compensate for the situations that handicap the dyslexic worker. Brock and Fernet (2011) have demonstrated that dyslexics' abilities really are linked to this unusual cerebral development. In other words, the intersection between subconscious reflexive elaboration and the carrying out of actions enables us to understand how the behaviour and actions of dyslexic individuals may be interpreted.

As we can see, neurological research is very useful here because it enables us to find an explanation for dyslexics' idiosyncratic skills, just as research into skills specific to dyslexic workers enables us to see that they make sense in an organisational environment where they can indeed be observed in individual routines (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Teece, 2007, 2012; Haas, 2016) and thus be included in an organisational dimension. The idiosyncratic skill then becomes a positive capacity (Durand 2006). Although Durand defines skill as an intangible and identity-related asset, we have found these elements in all dyslexic workers. The dovetailing of this skill (Sirmon, 2011) into the organisational context moreover makes this asset unique, which cannot be understood by a simple mechanism of embeddedness (Durand, 2006). We find it in the idea of profession (Coulet, 2014), this skill being inimitable (Barney, 1991). We observe this when a non-dyslexic individual does not articulate all his skills in the same way in the organisational context to which he belongs.

The manager's role in relation to the handicapped worker thus becomes essential in making the most of the idiosyncratic skill (Collela, 2001; Teece, 2012). In fact, it is the manager who makes it possible to identify those skills that are key to the organisation (Hamel and Prahalad, 1990). This approach, through the dyslexic worker's idiosyncratic skills, enables us to circumvent one of the difficulties identified by Durand (2006), relating to the integration of new resources and skills in an organisation, the idiosyncratic skill being based above all on the observation of dyslexics' attitudes and actions *in situ*. This leads us to highlight the importance of work on the microfoundations of actions.

## **2. An approach using individual skills: a means to understanding through microfoundations.**

Work on microfoundations involves taking account of individuals both at the micro scale and in interaction with the organisation being studied (Felin, Foss, Heimerik and Madsen, 2012). An approach of this type applied to individual capacities has the advantage of emphasising the translation of dyslexic workers' predispositions into unique skills. Associating the microfoundations of actions and dyslexic workers' idiosyncratic skills facilitates the observation of their integration into the organisations being studied. The insertion of microfoundations into idiosyncratic skills also enables an interdisciplinary approach to be adopted, using knowledge from both human resources management and strategic management.

Charles-Pauvers and Schieb-Bienfait (2010) and Rouby, Oiry and Thomas (2012) have observed that little research work has managed to identify and articulate individual skills with strategic capacities. They remedied this by using three theories to make the link between these two types of skill: the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), the Skill-Based Theory of the Firm (*ibid.*) and the theory of Dynamic Capabilities (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997). These theories form the basis of the *Mouvement Ressources Compétences* (Skills Resources Movement). Their analysis converges with that of Teece (2007) who demonstrates, using the microfoundation approach, the role played by individual skills in the potential for an organisation's development. This is how the relationship between individual skills and strategic skills is defined (Rouby, Oiry and Thomas, 2012), enabling us to shed light on one of the characteristics of dyslexic workers' skills: their ability to apply and spread them by means of the organisation's strategy, or even within society as a whole via their organisation.

According to Durand (2006), if one wants to deal with individual skill, it is necessary to extend its scope to organisation-wide skills. Here, we are seeing the beginning of an extension of the microfoundations approach (Barney and Felin, 2013), these authors considering that microfoundations should include the knowledge produced by psychology and human resources management. This confluence would help to explain how the actions and the psychology of dyslexics' idiosyncratic skills spread within organisations. Felin, Foss, Heimeriks and Madsen (2012) demonstrate the role of the individual in the construction of his own skill: their analysis thus enables the skill-based approach to be anchored in a holistic vision (Angeloni, 2013) of the invisible handicap (Santuzzi *et al.*, 2014), while reducing their theoretical myopia in relation to the study of skills. This led Gavetti (2005) to take a close interest in the cognition of individuals in organisations, in accordance with the microfoundation approach.

As suggested by Haas (2016), such a confrontation between the theory of microfoundations and Strategy As Practice enables the role of individuals to be better considered in organisational phenomena. His paper also underlines the role that idiosyncratic skills – such as those possessed by a dyslexic worker – can play, and the common points that they share with entrepreneurs (Teece, 2012). The particular characteristic of dyslexics is in fact integrated into the whole range of skills contained in the organisation in the same way as routines (Felin *et al.*, 2012), thus favouring a pragmatic approach to idiosyncratic skills.

Individual skills observed through the prism of microfoundations enable us to explain the performative nature of these idiosyncratic skills, peculiar to the dyslexic worker. If Felin *et al.* (2012) state that individuals have a role to play in the performance observed in the organisation, the skills proper to dyslexics can then demonstrate the important role they can

play in the context being studied (Foss *et al.*, 2008; Teece, 2012). For example, a microfoundation approach can enable skills to be observed in terms of leadership in the specific context of the company (Felin *et al.*, 2012).

In order to better characterise the performance of dyslexic workers we can also use the concept developed by Muniesa and Callon (2008), and refined by Ambroise, Salle and Sobel (2015), concerning performativity, which refers to the ability to change reality. Although the work of Ambroise *et al.* (2015) underlines the fact that the skills acquired by students of French commercial and engineering graduate schools fit into the organisations studied, we can observe a similar situation in terms of the unique skills of dyslexics, coupled as they often are with their entrepreneurial skills developed in the organisation. These skills are able to produce significant changes in society. This is proved, as we have previously indicated, by the cases of dyslexics occupying positions as leading researchers, entrepreneurs, politicians and artists.

### **3. The contribution of individual psychology in the praxis of the idiosyncratic skill: the acuity of resilience**

Referring to Winter (2013), Haas (2016) suggests in recent research that individual psychology should be used in understanding behaviour when a microfoundation approach is used.

#### ***3.1 Identifying the symptoms of resilience in management science literature relating to handicap.***

Research carried out in France by Alter (2012) on atypical company bosses highlights the role played by their resilience, and also underlines to what extent this specific strength has enabled them to succeed in the face of adversity. His work shows that it is this strength that contributes to creating veritable psychosocial skills that he defines as “successful resilience skills”. Although Alter (2012) and Santuzzi *et al.* (2014, 2016) note that, in the case of these atypical workers, they develop a stigma due to their atypicality or their handicap, this is no doubt a common element to the identity of all handicapped workers. Finally, Santuzzi and Waltz (2016) underline the fact that the identity of a handicapped person is constructed around a denial of his handicap and a low self-esteem. The context may accentuate the stigma of the handicapped worker. Let us now look at how this fits into our analysis of dyslexic workers.

#### ***3.2 The contribution of psychology to the study of resilience.***

Psychological studies by Tychey (2001) and Bernard (2011) enable us to understand the role of stigma and traumatism in the first symptoms of resilience. Resilience is an individual construction (Anaut, 2011) and is perceived as multidimensional (Tychey, 2001; Anaut, 2005). It results from traumatic experiences. Three major etiological categories of trauma correspond to these individualised pathways (Fougeyrollas, 2011). The first is a physical pathology caused by a shock at a given moment. The second concerns etiologies linked to congenital biological conditions. The third is diachronic and is induced by an imbalance, a lack of adaptation when faced with personal or environmental risks. Although each person’s life story contributes to the process of resilience as he is affected by injuries that are experienced as critical events, Manciaux (2001) notes that resilience is a long-term process, forming part of the context and the pathway through life (Henley, 2010).

A trauma can have many consequences and can cause feelings of displeasure or even anxiety and produce depressive or aggressive reactions, such as anger or rage (Ferenczi, 1933)<sup>3</sup>. How these feelings are dealt with determines the emergence of resilience (Tychev, 2001), which is characterised as an ability to deal with perturbations and refers to the individual's capacity to adapt (Obrist, Pfeiffer and Henley 2010; Richardson 2002, 2011; Cyrulnik, 2014).

### ***3.3 Individual characteristics and resilience***

Individual characteristics are the driving force in implementing a strategy of resilience (Jourdan-Ionescu, 2001; Anaut, 2009; Rousseau, 2011). In this respect, several characteristics may be highlighted: 1) Self-esteem (Jourdan-Ionescu 2001; Henley, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Bernard, 2011; Manciaux, 2005), which enables the individual to be able to judge his personal worth against the image that others have of him (Rousseau, 2011). Cyrulnick (1999, p66) shows that self-esteem is fashioned by “miniscule behaviours: tiny gestures and banal words with a structuring role”; it equates to the ability to distinguish one's strengths and weaknesses (Rousseau, 2011); 2) The development of a system of beliefs (Barnard, 2011) which leads to detachment (Anaut, 2011; Bernard, 2011) and an intellectualisation of this detachment enabling the subject to deal with adversity and contributing to the development of an analysis of events that is both predictive (Tychev, 2001; Barnard, 2011; Rousseau, 2011) and intuitive (Richardson, 2011); and 3) the mobilisation of internal resources that are tactical responses to difficult situations. The subject is then able to accept the shock while the intellectualisation helps him to overcome the situation.

### ***3.4 Monitors of resilience***

The expression “monitors of resilience” was developed by Cyrulnik in his book *Les vilains petits canards* (Ugly Ducklings) (1999). He presents meeting a monitor as “the event that triggers everything” (p111). Monitors may be peers, close friends, teachers (Anaut, 2009; Rousseau, 2011) or a community (Richardson, 2011). Their role is essential in the strategy of resilience (Bernard, 2011). It helps to create a psychic balance in the subject as well as exploiting resilience to the utmost (Fougeyrollas, 2011; Anaut, 2011). In other words, monitors are facilitators who help traumatised individuals begin the process of resilience, while continuing to act as protectors (Anaut, 2009). For his part, Alter talks of “fairies” when describing those who have helped people with an atypical profile to succeed, despite the difficulties encountered, particularly at the beginning of their lives (2012).

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Our research is based on anthropological methodology. Research into idiosyncratic skills, particularly using the microfoundations approach, permits the use of such a methodology (Felin *et al.*, 2012). As these authors point out, this enables techniques to be used to resolve individual problems.

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<sup>3</sup> Ferenczi, (2006), *Le traumatisme*, 1933, p. 56



## **1. The value of an anthropological approach.**

Ethnography is concerned with praxis (Denzin, 2006) as suggested in the study of microfoundations (Felin *et al.*, 2012; Haas, 2016). Many researchers have demonstrated the interest of ethno-sociological methods for organisational research (Whyte, 1994; Van Maanen, 1998; Ybema, Yanow, Wels and Kamsteeg, 2009; Chanlat, 2000, 2005). These methods render intelligible behaviours that are difficult to analyse using quantitative methods.

As no research has been carried out to date in the field of organisational studies of dyslexic workers in management, an anthropological approach quickly became the obvious choice since, by definition, it aims to understand widely ignored realities on the basis of life experience (Chanlat, 2005). Since the reality of this social segmentation (Durkeim, 1930) has not often been considered in organisations, it is, as Van Maanen (2006) points out, not location-specific. This is why we have opted in this research to make both participative and non-participative observations (Van Maanen, 1998; Chanlat, 2005; Rouleau, 2013). This approach allows the researcher to create detachment.

The fact that one of the co-authors has the status of high school teacher as well as researcher represents a double identity that facilitates the creation of distance between field work and analysis. Moreover, in an interdisciplinary context (Chanlat, 1990, 1998; Van Maanen, 2006; Rouleau, 2013) analysis by life stories (Bertaux, 1997) seeks to reinforce the objectivation of our conclusions, particularly through the saturation of data that we observe at a given moment.

In order to deal with the criticisms that are made of this type of research – one of the co-authors being dyslexic himself, the data could be biased and affect the veracity of the conclusions (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) through the implication of the subject in the objective of the research – it was decided that the interpretation of the results would be regularly presented to other experts in the field in order to consolidate or readjust them. The advantage for a researcher concerned by the subject of the thesis being the ability to make sense of the analysis of those involved (Rouleau, 2013), it may be understood that the “secrets” of this field might be more easily identifiable by those who actually have the cultural codes to grasp them (Alter, 2012; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

During this research, we became fully aware of the complexity of our subject, the reading of the reality being studied only being made possible by highlighting the subtlety of the invisible realities of the work involved: that of dyslexic workers. When one of the researchers is concerned by the subject, which is the case here, and has a similar life story, we may define this ethnological approach as a committed and detached self-analysis. In the light of Denzin’s (2006) analysis that ethnographic practice is not innocent and that its aim is to be performative, educational and political, self-analysis became an obvious part of this research, while allowing the researcher reflexivity in relation to his own experience (Denzin, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Rouleau, 2013).

## **2. An anthropological moratorium on the handicapped worker**

Cavan (1972: 16) defined ethnography as the science of observing the social routines and collective practices of those concerned. Our duty here is to bring to light dyslexic workers’ unconscious practices in their particular context: that of an invisible handicap. A long time ago, Mauss (1925), one of the founders of the discipline (Chanlat, 2014), clearly

underlined the fact that an ethnographer's primary role is to acquire understanding by observing the relationships of interdependence that are created in any social situation. By using this approach, researchers concerned by handicap – such as the authors of this article – will be able to produce, as suggested by Emerson (1981), a more coherent piece of research, the anthropology of the handicapped worker enabling "disabled washing" to be reduced and the case of the dyslexic worker contributing to changing the role of the researcher who will have to deal with the dividing up of this social reality. The major advantage of self-analysis in the field of invisible handicap lies, as stated by Richards Rose (2009), in the desire to break the silence of an unrecognised social reality.

In the world of the organisation, there is no doubt that handicap is a forgotten dimension (Chanlat 1990). Although Emerson (1981) supports the argument that researchers who are involved in the subject of their own research have knowledge and experience that cannot always be articulated, his analysis is truncated by generalisation that does not take handicap into account. Studying a worker with a handicap requires thorough knowledge and understanding of the reality of the handicap that someone who is unaffected would take longer to acquire. The handicapped researcher can go more deeply into aspects that other researchers would not consider. Already, in 1930, Durkheim described the capacity for adaptation of a handicapped person thus: "if his brain is inadequate he will have, no doubt, to give up the idea of confronting great intellectual competition; but society has secondary alveolae in its hive, small enough places, that prevent him from being eliminated" (p.254). In this situation, the role of the dyslexic researcher is to understand exactly how handicapped workers have managed to fit into the professional world using the strengths and weaknesses of their natural skills and finding a place in spite of competition from non-handicapped workers.

Knowledge of handicapped workers remains too normative and influenced by hard science; in these disciplines, handicap is generally analysed from the point of view of incapacity (see the Inserm definition of dyslexia above), and very rarely from the point of view of ability, as shown by Habib (2014). Social sciences may be more fertile in this respect.

Researching into handicapped workers, as this article attempts to do, has the power of performativity described by Durkheim (1930) in relation to singularities: "Distinctive personalities are formed but become aware of themselves, however, this growth in the individual's psychic life does not weaken that of society, only changing it" (p.139). This research shows that, as a dyslexic person analysing himself, one of the co-authors of this article has seen to what extent a social transformation took shape through his survey. The doctorate for which he is studying becomes a veritable "give and take" when the interviewees give their accounts and he undertakes, in return, to send a strong message to French society and to the whole of the management research community based on the results obtained from his research.

After the interviews had been carried out, two of the interviewees revealed that the fact of talking to the researcher had made them aware of their skills and made them decide to seek further training in order to obtain professional advancement. Indeed, all the interviewees insisted that one of the missions of this research is "particular, they wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

### **3. Life history**

Our research also uses life history, which is also associated with an anthropological approach (Chanlat, 2005). As shown by Bertaux (1997), one of the pioneers of this method, it enables the researcher to focus on the individual's experience both inside and outside work.

#### ***3.1 The relevance of the life history method***

In order to find data relating to the activation of idiosyncratic skills, we had to concentrate on the personal history of dyslexic workers (Miller, 2011). That is why Daniel Bertaux's (1997) life history method was chosen for the semi-structured interviews and the analysis of the field research. This methodological choice is closely correlated with the subject: "The dyslexic worker", by enabling us to examine the singularity of his social situation (Chanlat, 2005). Since, according to our observations, dyslexic workers tend to present their pathway through life in terms of interaction with the social system as well as the things that they have done in order to succeed, experience occupies a large part of their life history (Chanlat, 2005).

One of the co-authors of this article noticed during the first interviews that this method enables the creation of a framework which makes sense to the interlocutors and that it also enabled the social context to be considered, which is very important in the context of this invisible handicap (Chanlat, 2005). This method also has the advantage of being able to include the role of time in the introduction of modifications to accommodate the dyslexic worker, this lapse of time revealing the effects of social change on the worker. Finally, this method enabled us to identify the organisational mechanisms introduced by the dyslexic person into the range of skills that he develops at work.

#### ***3.2 Life history and personal implication in drawing up the interview guide***

Self-analysis enabled the interviewer, himself dyslexic, to become aware of the common points that exist between his own life story and those of the interviewees he was going to meet. His life history thus had a definite influence on the drawing up of the interview guide, which also benefitted from the contribution of several dyslexics and representatives of dyslexia associations before the final version was drawn up. The researcher was then able to see that certain common themes would emerge during his interviews.

The interview guide was broken down into themes, as recommended by Wacheux (1996) and Romelaer (2005). It should be pointed out that the themes were also determined by the researcher's intuition, based on his own life story. Once this exercise had been carried out, three themes emerged. The first relates to the interviewee's experience of the educational system, a decisive stage in the process of developing resilience in order to enter working life. The second theme centres on the interviewee's professional career and reveals the different working situations to which he has been subject. The last theme concerns the individual's loss of impetus in the organisations where he worked. Each of these themes is made up of sub-themes, enabling different parts of the interviews to be dealt with in depth by asking further – open – questions of the interviewee.

#### **4. Data collection: strength of persuasion and confidence in “observational research”**

As already stated, one of the characteristics of this study was to develop research into a learning difficulty – dyslexia – from which the principal author suffers. This had several positive effects. Because, in the case of dyslexia, presentation of oneself is essential. The fact that the principal author had the same background as the public concerned encouraged openness towards the field of research and identification with the subject.

In the case presented here, the interviewees in a way analysed themselves. Our observations were made in ephemeral places (bars, the subjects’ houses...), rather than in the fixed sites suggested by Peneff (1995) and Arborio (2007). This situation may be explained by the fact that some subjects were found through associations for dyslexic children, where the subjects were parents, themselves dyslexic, working voluntarily for the association.

##### ***4.1 Difficult access to the field of research: “observational research”***

Dealing with the subject of invisible handicap, and particularly dyslexia at work, is difficult. Indeed, the first difficulty confronting the principal author was to find subjects. The medical profession was unavailing because doctors and others dealing with handicapped patients are bound by rules of confidentiality. Associations proved to be essential in finding people who could talk about the subject, because they helped to identify people who are both working and suffering from dyslexia. However, this was not easy. On the one hand, the *Fédération des Dys de France* (French Federation of Dyslexics), run by volunteers, was not easy to contact. On the other hand, it was necessary to develop links with other local associations which did not necessarily specialise in dyslexia but rather in dyspraxia and dysphasia, which are learning difficulties associated with dyslexia. The principal author was finally able to meet these associations at one of their main events, the *10<sup>ème</sup> journée des Dys* (10<sup>th</sup> Dyslexics’ Day) (2015). After making contact, in order to establish mutual trust, the researcher was obliged to explain the reasons that had led him to choose this subject for his thesis.

During the event, one of the guest speakers, who has written a book on the professional integration of dyslexics, made a presentation during which the principal author of this article raised a question about the absence of continuity in the systems set up for dyslexics in French public administrative bodies even though such systems are in place during these same dyslexics’ education. Although the principal author tried to make the most of this speaker’s contacts, this avenue unfortunately led nowhere.

After this exchange, those responsible for the local association *Dys13* (Dyslexics in the Bouches-du-Rhône *département*) put the researcher in touch with dyslexics that they knew and with another association, *Apedys PACA* (Association for the Parents of Dyslexic Children in the Provence-Alps-Côte d’Azur Region).

Dealing with these associations brought to light a reality that created difficulties for the principal author: the existence of divisions between the associations on the subject of the position to adopt in the recognition of learning difficulties, since dyslexia is not defined as an isolated problem. Nevertheless, thanks to the relationships established, the associations passed

on the principal author's call for volunteers, thus making it easier for him to find people willing to act as subjects.

#### ***4.2 The relationship between the researcher into handicap and the associative community.***

While getting to know the associations, the principal author had to share his experiences and observations in order to gain their trust. In fact, one of the associations' fears was to see research into dyslexia used for commercial ends. The principal author's transparency was thus essential to convincing those responsible for the associations to put him into touch with all those involved in the world of dyslexia. New people also came forward to help the principal author with his project, particularly neurologists, speech therapists and those using the Davis Method. It was only after frank immersion within this whole group of stakeholders that the principal author was able to develop his research tools.

The principal author's legitimacy and credibility had to be developed through his actions. For example, he was able to take part in a round table organised at the *11<sup>ème</sup> journée de Dys* (11<sup>th</sup> Dyslexics' Day) (2016), and speak to an audience of around 100 people. His message emphasised the difficulties he had encountered during his education, which found an echo with the difficulties experienced by certain members of the audience. After his intervention, people spontaneously offered to provide personal accounts for his research and his name was circulated around all the Dyslexia Days.

The principal author's acceptance within the Dyslexia community was confirmed by an invitation to the Annual General Meeting of the Association of French Dyslexics. His presence is now considered indispensable to the extent that the Chairman organised the date of the AGM around the availability of the principal author. He was thus able to present his initial results and this close link with the associations made him aware of the culture disseminated within this "invisible" community.

#### ***4.3 The pre-interview cooperation protocol***

The experiences lived through by the researcher and shared with those of the interviewees no doubt facilitated the relationship of trust. A protocol was established during the interviews in which the researcher explained the reasons for the interview and described his own experience as a dyslexic in order to remove the taboo that exists around the condition. This helped to gain the trust of the interviewees, who no longer felt they were being judged, and facilitated their answers to what are very personal questions. It was not easy for those interviewed to talk about subjects that recalled bad experiences. Here, we were faced with a definite *intuitu personae* relationship (Dameron and Joffre, 2007).

Next, the researcher used the "tu" form of "you"<sup>4</sup> to address the interviewees in order to create the proximity necessary to the revelation of information that was very important for his

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<sup>4</sup> In French, the normal form of address to someone who is not a close friend or family member is "vous". The use of this form, however, creates a barrier between the speakers which is to a large extent removed if the interviewee accepts to be addressed using "tu". (Translator's note)

research. He had discovered by experience that this was the form of address used by the dyslexic community.

During the discussions, the interviewees admitted to the researcher that their motive for taking part in the project was that they had recognised similarities between their own story and the researcher's.

#### ***4.4 Interviews and secrets: the beginning of a "coming out"***

To date we have conducted 17 interviews. All but six of them took place in complete privacy, i.e. outside the workplace. However, the first four took place in the interviewees' offices, but with the door closed, while two others took place in the presence of colleagues.

The remaining interviews took place either at the interviewee's home, but in a room separate from the rest of the family, or in a bar. This discretion may be explained by the fact that the interviewees did not wish to reveal their dyslexia to their professional colleagues. However, this project provided the opportunity for participants who wished to be interviewed on their company premises to reveal their situation to their colleagues. It should be said that since those concerned had a relationship involving very little written communication in the professional context, they did not fear being judged.

The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours.

After the interviews, it was clear to the principal author that the interviewees suffered profoundly from the stigmas caused by their dyslexia (loss of self-esteem) to the extent that they minimised the skills that they use in their professional activity. Depending on the situation, the principal author found himself having to ask questions more directly in order to bring out these skills that were unknown to the interviewee him/herself. This initiative, taken by the principal author, may be explained by the fact that dyslexics tend to get lost in a discussion and to forget certain information that they had intended to mention when the interview started. This context, peculiar to the handicap in question, confirms the difficulties in acquiring information during interviews. The researcher had to adapt during the interviews, thanks to his knowledge of the handicap, thus using several methods (either focused semi-structured or more directive questions applied to the life history).

At the end of each interview, the interviewees felt the need to continue the discussion beyond the subjects already dealt with, particularly so that the researcher could tell them about the points they shared with the other interviewees. This need to continue the discussion was therapeutic. However, the researcher was careful not to breach any ethical codes: he mentioned no names and quoted a fictitious person who included all the characteristics resulting from his research (a modal type).

#### ***4.5 Sampling***

This research project is still under way; at the time of writing the sample consists of 17 individuals. There are seven senior managers, including four from the public sector and three from the private. There are three middle managers from the private sector and five business owners. Finally, two are private-sector employees. In order to guarantee the authenticity of their handicap, it was previously decided that those interviewed must have been diagnosed as dyslexic. This diagnosis had to have been made by a health professional: a general

practitioner whose diagnosis was confirmed by a speech therapist, a speech therapist, psychologist or neurologist. This degree of rigour was essential to avoid people who had simply declared themselves to be dyslexic workers. However, since the reflex of having oneself diagnosed as dyslexic is only recent, four further interviews that were carried out have not been included in the sample because the individuals concerned had not been diagnosed at the time of the interview. It should be pointed out that in the 1960s, dyslexia was neither recognised nor diagnosed. The common characteristic of the interviewees that form this sample is that they are professionally active.

#### ***4.6 Analysis of the interviews: thematic analysis of the life histories***

Seventeen interviews were thus transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis. Sanseau (2005) presents the thematic approach to the analysis of life histories. This approach, “applied to life histories, consists of identifying, in each history, the passages relating to different themes in order to subsequently compare the content of these passages between histories.” (Sanseau, 2005). Bertaux (1997) also notes that a life history should be correlated with a thematic interview guide.

The passages selected for this ongoing study show the most striking elements identified to date in our research into dyslexic workers. This approach enables the researcher to identify, among all the interviews, the key moments and those that best express the convergent elements. Given that the profile of the interview guide was based on a typical individual life history, it is possible to find strong trends corresponding to the research question. Bertaux (1997) warns against breaking up passages from the interviews and recommends keeping them in context. He also underlines the fact that the thematic analysis enables the researcher to concentrate on the social situation. In our thematic analysis the social situation studied is a forgotten dimension of diversity.

The partial results of this study are presented here in the form of emerging ideas following the approach used in the article by Joyeau, Robert-Demontrond and Schmidt (2010). The extracts from the interviews are included in the results and form, *sensu* Gombault (2005), part of a case study. Alter (2012) presents his results in the same way, his analysis of life histories using numerous extracts in his book *La force de la différence* (The Strength of Difference), soon to be available in English.

The final analysis of our results will be carried out at three levels. An initial analysis will be carried out using the NVIVO program. A second analysis will be carried out by the PhD student himself, referred to in this article as the principal author. Finally, an interdisciplinary meeting will be organised, as suggested by Bertaux (1997), with one or two neurologists and a sociologist. The decoding of the data is effectively limited by NVIVO, which is unable to consider the mobilisation of the skills observed in the day-to-day life of individuals from diverse organisations.

### **III. The partial results of the research**

The material used in this paper results from collaboration with those involved in associations and a panel of 17 individuals who work for public and private organisations. Our

research is as yet incomplete. The results and conclusions that we present here are thus preliminary.

The subject of this research and the constraints already described have led us to carry out individual case studies (Siggelkow, 2007). The interest of the case study is to deal with the lack of theoretical knowledge about the idiosyncratic skills of dyslexic workers by using an inductive and constructivist approach as described by Gombault (2005). The partial results are presented in the form of emerging ideas peculiar to life histories (Joyeau, Robert-Demontrond, Schmidt, 2010)

In particular, we have noted that the dyslexic worker's idiosyncratic skills emerge from a social stigma. Those skills may be observed through actions that possess various common characteristics, which may be considered as personal resources that adapt innately to a work context. The performance of an idiosyncratic skill must thus be redefined not only in terms of organisations but also of society. Here are the key points:

### **Emerging idea 1: The beginning of a stigma marked by the educational system – the resilience of the future employee**

The life history of a dyslexic before he is employed is marked by the development of idiosyncratic skills. The dyslexic is often confronted with the incomprehension of the educational system from a very early age. The unfamiliarity of the educational system with his invisible handicap obliges him to accept courses that schools offer him in relation to his level. This marks the start of his development of resilience. The interviews rapidly brought to light the fact that the dyslexic workers had had difficult and tortuous school careers. They are full of examples of choices made by default. The dyslexics interviewed had been orientated towards occupational training. Some even mentioned their refusal to stay on these courses.

*Interviewee: "At school, er, I always had great difficulty at school, repeated the first year of primary school. At the time no-one talked about learning difficulties and even less about dyslexia, which led me to have a chaotic school career so that I struggled to get to the bac(calaureate)...But before the bac, er... so before the bac, I... at 15, I went to do a vocational qualification to be a beautician, yes, in Nîmes at that time. So, after a few months, there was someone who absolutely wanted... who was the deputy principal of the school in Nîmes where I was studying, so, for this vocational qualification, he wanted to contact my parents to tell them that I shouldn't be there and that I should continue my studies and do something else."* (Senior civil servant in higher education)

The dyslexic person in such a situation develops an individual resilience mechanism. Meeting various people who act as "monitors" enables the dyslexic to avoid going down and to explain what career he would really like. He will then find openings in a system that doesn't want him. This is how the first determinants of the idiosyncratic skill are activated. The dyslexic person will seize opportunities, as we will see, once he is inside an organisation:

*"So, I finished my year, and at the end of that first year of vocational training to be a beautician, someone whose name was... there was a woman who, well. At the end of that academic year, er, that person managed to convince my mum that I should go back to a normal course. And so at that time I went into the Lower Sixth form to help me prepare to take a 'G1' baccalaureate. At that time G1 was to become a shorthand-typist, on the basis that, obviously, I couldn't do a "general" bac and that I should do... that's why I said that something was missing. So, I took [...] the bac, which I passed with distinction. Still convinced that studying wasn't for me, I went to work for four years in a special*



*school...After four years, well, three and a half actually [...] I went back to studying [...]. So that means that I got my PhD at the age of 36, because obviously it was a bit tortuous. I had a university career, I got a job, etc.” (Senior civil servant in higher education)*

The interviews show that the idiosyncratic skill activates with the resilience of the dyslexics interviewed. They learn to become flexible to deal with difficult situations, for example by anticipating a professional future. The resilience and the idiosyncratic skills develop in the same direction in order to seize new opportunities. The dyslexics’ experiences thus pushed them to develop flexibility and to temporarily accept different career paths. However, it can be observed that their determination may be distinguished from their skill, the former being a trait of their personality and of their life history.

## **Emerging idea 2: The transposition of idiosyncratic skills into the organisation – endogenous, creative, managerial and performative skills.**

### ***Creative endogenous skills***

Idiosyncratic skill is defined by an interlinking of endogenous skills such as creativity and imagination. This interlinking is articulated in the daily activities of the dyslexic worker. It is encouraged by the quality of the trust and independence given by the manager to his subordinates in carrying out their work. All the management styles observed present these characteristics at a given moment.

#### ***[Question asked about skills]***

***INTERVIEWEE:*** *About the creative aspect perhaps?*

***INTERVIEWER:*** *Yes*

***INTERVIEWEE:*** *Yes, yes because I contribute to the design of the company’s brochure. Moreover, I write the technical parts of the tender documents that I work on with my Director. I prepare it and he checks that everything is OK with respect to the tender requirements. And... and then, we discuss how we’ll organise things, I can say that it’s not... that’s how I am. You see, there’s a degree of flexibility and communication, it’s a great opportunity. (Administrative employee in a small subsidiary of STEF)*

The creative skill is activated when the management is based on mutual trust. This management environment creates interdependence with the creativity of dyslexics. The specific characteristic of this management style is to enable the dyslexic employee to work unsupervised. A favourable climate based on communication is thus essential. The boundary of the interpersonal relationship is one of the common characteristics in the articulation of the dynamism of this idiosyncratic endogenous skill.

### ***The endogenous managerial skill***

The pragmatism and sincerity of the dyslexic worker’s actions enable him to develop a collective management style. His ability to communicate federates colleagues. He knows, thanks to his experience of the school system, that he can cope thanks to a number of

collective strengths. This endogenous managerial skill may thus be observed when he takes responsibilities that are not attributable to his status in the company.

*“the site needed a staff representative and someone else wanted to stand, but he wanted to bring in a trade union which has a very negative attitude, and I said to myself ‘oh là là’, if he gets in he’ll ruin the atmosphere, so I stood as staff representative and now I am the staff representative. I said, ‘go on, vote for me lads’ and they said ‘hey, wait, it’s too much responsibility and all that’. I said, ‘yes, but look, if the other guy gets in it’ll create havoc in the company, we’ll lose the family feeling and... it’ll ruin everything, you just don’t realise.’”* (Administrative employee in a small subsidiary of STEF)

In another situation, we can observe that the dyslexic worker expresses his *endogenous managerial skill* through the ability to be flexible so that his team can achieve the objective it has fixed itself.

*“So, once it’s from human to human, you can say OK, we’ll rehearse then and all that, you see, I can organise, organise rehearsals with 10 people and, 10 places and, and there you are. That’s what I did and I think that’s the main quality that you can talk about”.* (Company head, theatre producer)

In this context, we observe not only a strong propensity to mobilise colleagues but also a large capacity for adaptation. The need to consider the interest of each individual in a collective project shows another of the dyslexic worker’s skills: his capacity for empathy. This capacity facilitates the adherence to a project of all those involved. The sensitivity of the dyslexic worker enables him to anticipate his colleagues’ reservations. The dyslexic manager thus easily accepts having to manage complex situations in order to ensure cohesion in everyone’s interest. He makes the most of each person’s drive. We define this skill as an *endogenous managerial skill* which is more particularly activated in “extreme” cases. In each of the two cases presented, we may note that this skill follows from the subjects’ experience throughout their often-traumatic school careers. We also note that these two situations have a point in common: an uncertain and hostile environment.

### ***The endogenous performative skill***

In certain cases, the dyslexic worker’s idiosyncratic skill is performative. Innovations are introduced by dyslexic workers and then spread, in the first place to the rest of the organisation, and later to the public sphere.

*— “And we ran the project so well that it was taken up in Paris. Then we set up a Steering Committee with people who were working on the family at that time which was very recent as a theme ... I still know the origin. Today, it makes me laugh because everyone says that the CAF (benefits office) invented it, and so on, but it’s funny. And the REAAP (network of support and accompaniment for parents), still exists.”* (Senior local authority officer)

This skill leads to a decisive change in society and in the organisation. Dyslexic workers’ initiatives then go beyond the internal environment, beyond the organisation, becoming fully part of society. The quality of this performance is to create a lasting innovation. Their actions demonstrate the reliability of the performance of this idiosyncratic skill. As we can see, studying these dyslexics in their working context once again demonstrates the strength of their difference (Alter, 2012; Chanlat, 2011).

## IV. Conclusion

The objective of this article was to report on a situation of invisible handicap – that of dyslexic workers – and to show how these workers, by virtue of their handicap, develop idiosyncratic skills that vary according to context.

To do this, we have chosen to call upon, in the context of the idea of skill, the existing links between the management of human resources and organisation theories. We have observed the points of convergence between these disciplines, such as the approach using personal skill and idiosyncratic skill (Teece, 2012). This phase enabled us to find a consensus through the microfoundation approach, the use of this strand of research enabling the skills of dyslexic workers to be identified and characterised.

This process enabled us to define idiosyncratic skills as being endogenous, intrinsic and common to all dyslexics. The inclusion of work on resilience from psychology helped us to better define idiosyncratic skills as endogenous skills.

One of the characteristics of our research into idiosyncratic skills is the methodological approach that we have adopted. The ethno-sociological approach is an anthropological method which has enabled us to create a coherent framework in terms of the individual's history. The life histories that we have collected provide this research with an articulation between the personal story of each dyslexic and the activation of his idiosyncratic skills. It also offers the researcher a multidimensional approach whose interdisciplinary nature provides a pragmatic explanation of the development of this skill and facilitates modifications such as inductive and deductive processes between his own life history and that of the interviewees. The principal author was thus able to continually refine the conclusions of his research.

Several avenues of research are possible with respect to dyslexic workers. First of all, we can mention the potential consequences of these endogenous skills for intercultural skills (Livian, 2012). Dyslexics' skills, such as empathy and being good listeners, are also found in intercultural skills. Their idiosyncratic skills have the characteristic of being observed in action, which seems to be another point in common with intercultural skills. The second avenue that we mention relates to the delicate process of the collective acceptance of modifications in the working environment (Collela, 2001) of the invisible handicap, this process considering both individual needs and learning about the invisible handicap by colleagues in the work context.

Although these endogenous skills open up new horizons in research into handicap, particularly research into management of diversity, future research must be carried out using the necessary ethical precautions and by researchers with good knowledge of the handicap being studied. This was the case in this research and it provided access to dyslexic individuals. More generally, this research shows once again how difference may be a source of social performance, creativity and innovation. In the context of SIG 05, we consider this to be an interesting contribution, all the more so in that it concerns a difference that is largely forgotten: people with invisible handicaps, i.e. dyslexics.

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