

“Just go straight ahead”

How Blind and Sighted Pedestrians Negotiate Space

Siegfried Saerberg

ABSTRACT Space is not a given. Rather, space is constructed through subjective experience and social interaction. This paper draws on the phenomenology of Schütz and Merleau-Ponty, the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel, autoethnography and the emergent field of the sociology of the senses to arrive at an account of how space is constructed and lived differently by blind and sighted individuals. Once having mapped the sensory and social infrastructures of the blind and sighted “styles of perception”, the paper considers how a blind pedestrian might try to elicit route descriptions from sighted strangers. Over 300 encounters were recorded. The transcripts of these encounters, most of which involved failures of communication, are analyzed for what they reveal about the lack of congruency between the two aforementioned styles of

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Figure 1
Siegfried Saerberg.

perception. The paper concludes by suggesting some adjustments to the social model of disability that comes out of Disability Studies, and offering some guidelines for the education of the senses that would substantially enhance the prospects for the meaningful communication of directions between blind and sighted persons.

KEYWORDS: blindness, phenomenology, spatial orientation, sensory perception, social construction

And you want to travel with him,
and you want to travel blind,
and you think maybe you'll trust him,
for he's touched your perfect body with his mind.

Leonard Cohen



Western culture has often been described as dominated by a “hegemony of vision” (Levin 1993; see further Edwards 2008). A blind pedestrian realizes this with every step he or she takes. Here is a short ethnographic note from a diary of mine from the early 1980s:

How stupid sighted people are! This afternoon I was at Cologne main station trying to find my way to the bus. I asked the official at the ticket counter to describe the direction that I had to take. But he wasn't able to do so! Just: “go that way.” Nothing more!

Communication and interaction between the blind and sighted is complicated. And for both sides it seems that the other is the one with the disability. But the relations of power being what they are in our society, only the blind viewpoint is regarded as the disabled one and devalued relative to that of the dominant culture.

However, an alternative experiential standpoint is possible, a standpoint from which the senses and their functions are ordered differently, for specific social contexts, than they otherwise would be. Here is a second autoethnographic note. I dictated it while I was performing an exercise in the phenomenology of perception and spatial orientation. This experiment in “immediate description” follows a method that I have developed to bring background experiences into the forefront of consciousness:

I’m standing in the house. Here it’s quite quiet. Windows and doors are closed. The refrigerator is buzzing to my left, a clock is ticking at the diagonal left behind me and a fly is buzzing in front of me. I am in a room without echoes. The ceiling is close above me. I feel kind of enclosed, coddled? I move forward in direction of the outside. To the door of the balcony. I open it. Immediately I hear the sound of an aeroplane that buzzes in a very far distance. I hear birds twittering in front of me, from the diagonal left. Outside it is warmer... . The sound of the landscape, it does not fill out the whole 360 degrees, only approximately 100 degrees. And it is not filled continuously with sounds, instead it has gaps. Behind me, the other half of the field of sound, the house, dumb, still with its warm absorbing wooden wall. I turn around, the soundscape moves with my motions, I touch the wall, careful, silk and splints. I turn around, start to walk holding the balustrade. It is painted, lacquered, warm from the sun.

This passage demonstrates that the world can be full of signs, or “orientation cues,” for me – that is, for the blind. Conversely, when it comes to socially standardized signs such as traffic lights, road signs, and street or house numbers, they are not for me, which is why I, as a blind person, have to rely on other sensually based methods of orientation, which in turn brings us to the main subject of this article.

Subjectivity and Sociality

This reliance leads to friction between subjectivity and sociality. In a groundbreaking work on the sociology of knowledge, Alfred Schütz (1962, 1964, 1966 and Schütz and Luckmann 1989) has described this friction, going back to its formal structures. His primary aim was to heal any fracture. After summarizing Schütz’s viewpoint, this article will attempt to show the limits of his analysis of the constitution of the life-world from a standpoint which is grounded in both disability studies and the sociology of the senses.

According to Schütz, every acquisition of knowledge is based on two primordial principles: experiential subjectivity and sociality. All socially based and culturally mediated knowledge is subjective, i.e. it can be acquired only through immediate and personal experience. As for the spatial structure of such experience (see especially Schütz 1962: 306–8, 326–9; Schütz and Luckmann 1989: 36–45), the subjective life-world is divided into “the world within my actual reach” and “the world within my potential reach.” The latter is divided into “the world within restorable reach” – in half an hour I will go into my kitchen in order to drink my afternoon cup of tea; every day I go to my office in Cologne; I once have been to New York – and “the world within attainable reach” – I never have been to Montreal but maybe one day I will go there. So space has a temporal horizon.

The center of space is my own body (this Schütz, an eclectic, has taken from the late Husserl and Merleau-Ponty). From this center, the world is divided into “here” and “there,” “near” and “far,” and, according to a body-related system of orientation, “left” and “right,” “above” and “below,” and “front” and “back.” The center contains what G.H. Mead (1934) has called “the manipulatory sphere.” Around it, we can find layers of reach tied to particular sensory fields, such as “the world within my visual reach,” “the world within my acoustic reach,” or “the world within my olfactory reach,” etc. Though “the world within my actual reach” can be divided into such layers of practically focused perception, in everyday perception such divisions are ignored. Mundane perception tends to overlook the multifaceted nature of things and people; the look, the smell, the sound or the feeling of a certain thing are supposed to all fall together within the constant sameness of that thing. And this view is not affected by location changes. For example, even though the glass of whiskey on ice I held in my hand a moment ago could well taste, smell, feel, or sound different from the glass now in front of me on the table, I assume the two glasses remain the same over short distances of space and time. The idealization of sameness in such ways is what maintains the unity of things throughout sensory, temporal, and spatial variation.

I now turn to the meaning of sociality in Schütz’s writings. Schütz uses the term “sociality” to denote the ways in which subjective experience is formed and influenced by the social stock of knowledge and in intersubjective interaction with one or more alter egos.

The standardization and typification of knowledge is the condition for intersubjectivity (see Schütz and Luckmann 1989: 59–99). Everyone can come up with type-classifications for fellow human beings. Such types can be general and anonymous, such as “what I can expect from a customs officer.” Or they can be specific and familiar: over the course of a lifetime, for example, I learn about what I can expect from my wife in a variety of situations – we “grow old together,” as Schütz says. Schemes of interpretation and correlated schemes of expression are bound together in situations of

face-to-face interaction. That there is at least some kind of correlation between these two sets of schemes is another condition for the possibility of intersubjectivity.

Within the commonsense world it is simply taken for granted that there exists a “reciprocity of perspectives,” consisting of “the idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints” and “the idealization of the congruency of the systems of relevances” (Schütz 1962: 312–19).

We have dealt with “the idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints” already in the example of the glass of whiskey. There we saw how the idealization of the sameness of a thing holds across sensory, temporal, and spatial variation. Reflecting on the social embedding of subjective experience, we can now discover a fourth aspect of constancy. Let me invite the reader to imagine himself or herself caught up in a little virtual face-to-face (nose-to-nose) round of drinking with the author of this article. For reasons of civility, let us now assume that there are two glasses in front of us. Although – due to the difference in our spatial relationships to the glasses – we both have different sensorial perspectives on them, we neglect this difference in the interest of letting their identities remain the same. For example, if you say, “this glass here ...,” I will understand “that glass over there ...” And if I say, “how delicious this whiskey smells,” you will understand, “how delicious that whiskey smells.” So we both rely on a socially standardized and typified spatial perception. Otherwise – despite our doubling of the glass – we might find ourselves fighting about who is in charge of emptying which glass!

After having considered the first idealization, which is concerned mainly with formal elements of spatial construction, we now turn to the second idealization, namely the congruency of relevances. We can break our question down as follows: (a) In a given social situation, how do the participants interpret the situation and the actions of their consociates – which schemes of interpretation are relevant to them?; (b) What kind of verbal and non-verbal expressions do the participants use to communicate and interact with their consociates and the environment – which schemes of expression are relevant to them? (c) Which senses do the participants use for these purposes?; (d) And, which senses predominate in the forming of these relevances in a particular social context? For example, one person may drink whiskey to get drunk, another drinks it simply to follow a social ritual and a third – the real connoisseur – drinks it to enjoy a synaesthetic experience.

The preceding discussion has shown how strongly normalcy depends on the way common sense (in both meanings of the term) implicitly relies on the social structuring of sensory perception. Now, in what follows, I would like to bring out how, in his strong emphasis on the aspect of congruency, Schütz may be oversimplifying normalcy, especially insofar as contemporary society is concerned, given that it is made up of differently abled individuals, not to mention

persons of different cultural backgrounds. I would argue that, on the one hand, Schütz does not consider the extent to which different subjectivities may entail different spatial constitutions of experience. Standpoints and relevances must be deconstructed before their interchangeability and their congruency can be postulated. On the other hand, he appears to underestimate the available strategies for resisting the seemingly overwhelming self-evidence of “normalcy.”

First, the reflections of Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding the bodily constitution of the intersensorial world are relevant here (see Merleau-Ponty 1962: 222–5). In interpreting von Senden’s famous study of the before and after experience of persons blind from birth who have undergone some operation that enables them to see (von Senden 1960), Merleau-Ponty argues that there is never any question of a deficit in a particular bodily constitution of a sensed world. Not a single sense is missing when one sense is “missing.” It’s just that the whole is composed of a different mixture of senses. For the blind person, for example, touching is a different path to the world before the operation than it is after the operation. It’s not only that every sense has its world; every world has its sense and is constituted through a particular combination of senses. “The blind man’s world differs from the normal person’s not only through the quantity of material at his disposal, but also through the structure of the whole,” Merleau-Ponty (1962: 224) writes. So one has to ask whether the interchangeability of standpoints holds not only regarding spatial variations but also with regard to variations in the sensory constitution of experience.

Second, the question arises: How is space sensually and verbally negotiated in a situation in which the congruency of relevances and the interchangeability of standpoints break down? This may be supposed to have the potential to occur in any situation where the abled and the disabled interact. In this regard my study tries to make some suggestions by elaborating a phenomenology of disability which is consonant with what Thomas Luckmann (1970) has shown in his work on the boundaries of the life-world.

Blind Space

In my adaptation of phenomenology, I have used autoethnography as a technique to reconstruct my perceptual orientation and movement in what I call “blind space.” To avoid having to rely solely on memory, this technique involves tape-recording my own comments on my own movements and perceptions as I walk through various places (for more details see Saerberg 2006).

My own body is my center of spatial orientation. As I move from “here” to “there,” its boundary is shifting in space and time; the world within my potential reach constantly changes into the world within my actual reach. Via a sense of my own body, I divide the world into close and distant, left and right, above and below, and in front and in back. My body is linked pragmatically to the environment via

its actions (“wirken” in the words of A. Schütz). As a blind person, I obtain orientation and generate movement by creating a multimodal space of related sensory perception in a sensed unity of the world within my felt, tactile, acoustic, and olfactory reach. For analytic purposes I will now divide this unity of sensed perception in my immediate experience into separate spheres of reach. I will identify special sensual schemes of interpretation in these layers of reach and practically focused perception that are relevant in the blind style of perception:

I gain a first sense of position by feeling and hearing what is under my feet: a stone platform, metal escalator steps, or asphalt. All these things I perceive through schemes of interpretation that are very sense based. They are tactile images, as it were. It is the nearest part of the world around me, very close indeed to my body. It is the world within my tactile reach.

This sensed world within my tactile reach is then amplified via my elongated touch with the cane. The tip of the cane marks the boundary between the world within my potential and the world within my actual reach: by feeling obstacles with the cane I am able to sidestep them. For a short moment of time the obstacle has invaded the world of my actual reach and I have been in this world’s reach. But at the next moment I exclude the obstacle from the world within my reach. By doing this I separate myself and my body from the world that reaches out towards me in the figure of an obstacle. Here it becomes evident how the world in my reach and me in the reach of the world are bound together. Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm between world and sense is illustrated here: every world has its sense and every sense has its world. The manipulatory sphere is mine and the world’s at the same time.

Moving now to a consideration of the world within my acoustic reach, the sounds that make up this world are important in a number of ways. Sounds amplify the world within my potential reach. All sounds serve as concrete schemes of interpretation, acoustic images you might call them.

- Sounds signal the what and where, the nature and the locations of objects, persons and actions – for example, voices, footsteps, engines, rustling plastic bags and rolling suitcases.
- Sounds show direction of movement, creating a network of directions around the subject of perception. The first basic distinction that I make is whether the movement I hear is a walking, a running, a cycling, or a driving one. This is followed by the observation whether this movement has the same direction as my movement, is crossing my path, or is heading towards me.
- As “basic sounds” and as typical soundscapes, sound identifies the places that surround the perceiving subject. Examples of types of places that have typical soundscapes include railway platforms, airport concourses, suburban streets, and country roads.

- Places can have highly characteristic, even unique, echoes and basic sounds. Examples of such places for me include my home street and Cologne main station.
- Sound from a moving subject can be reflected – for example, from walls or solitary objects. Such reflections can be synaesthetically perceived – as sound, and as touch, as the impression of a density, or even of a slight pressure on the forehead. Reflections are thus a tool for identifying obstacles. They also support a more direct method of path-finding, as when I use the reflected sound of a wall to move along it.
- Sound can be covered by other sound, such as loud noises. For example, very loud engines that may belong to a locomotive, to a truck, a plane, a motorbike, or a pneumatic hammer destroy acoustic orientation because they inundate and overwhelm all other sonic structures of the environment. But sounds also can be muffled or amplified by the spatial structure itself or by objects in the environment.
- Sound can be channeled, especially when it “flows” – for example, when it is produced by a multitude of walking feet or rolling wheels. In the case of streets or roads, sidewalks or pedestrian crossings, this acoustic flow is also paralleled by a material structure of the architectural environment. For example, if I walk through Cologne main station I can judge from the direction of the sound’s flow where the exit or the platforms may be.

Shifting registers, sounds mingle with smells, with perceptions of body movement and with skin sensations – with tactile, olfactory, sensorimotor, and even gustatory schemes of interpretation.

For example, arriving hungry at Cologne main station one day, for my trip down from the platform I happened to choose an escalator that leads directly into a zone where many snack shops, cafes, and bakeries are located. As I descended on the escalator, I smelled a succession of French fries, fish, hamburgers, coffee, and bread. Later, down in the hall, I was able to move back into this zone by relying on an olfactory map I had constructed. I did this by projecting the temporal succession of the shifting world of my actual olfactory reach on to the spatial ordering of the world within actual and potential reach in a reverse way.

To shift registers again, the ups and downs of a particular path or street make up a kinesthetically felt structure. Similarly, holes in the ground can be used as landmarks for orientation. Skin sensations also provide guidance. The movement of cold air on my face, for example, can indicate that I’m coming close to a stairway leading up to a platform or to the exit of a mall or pub.

I call the complex of ways of sensing described above the “blind style of perception.” It contains sensory based schemes of interpretation that become relevant in a spatial and embodied process of interpreting the material environment and social situations

with alter egos. This style is rooted deeply inside the socialized body and draws on a complex stock of knowledge of perceptions and the circumstances they signify. This knowledge includes implicit knowledge deep inside the body – Schütz divides this routine-based knowledge into skills, useful knowledge, and knowledge of recipes – and knowledge which becomes explicit during the mastering of practical challenges in a situation. But this division between explicit and implicit knowledge is not a strict one: Implicit elements of the subjective stock of knowledge can become explicit if a more elaborate process of interpretation becomes necessary, for example in a situation of navigational crisis. “Style of perception” is thus a shorthand way of describing identities that have their own explicit knowledge, skills, useful knowledge, knowledge of recipes, and interests and needs. Thus it includes both explicit cognitive and implicit bodily elements. Styles of perception are never simply given; rather, they are constructed via complex interactions between bodily, social, economic, cultural, and even biographical elements.

Sighted Style

The blind style of perception is not the only style of perception. Needless to say, there are many other such styles, and one of them is the “sighted style of perception.” To reconstruct sighted space, I shall here be drawing on my analysis of 200 or so in-depth interviews with sighted visitors to the exhibition “Dialogue in the Dark” and on discussions with participants in other, similar exhibits. At “Dialogue in the Dark,” darkness is used as a “mediator of blindness” (Saerberg 2007) – that is, as a way of giving sighted people a bodily impression of blindness. The sighted visitors carry canes and let themselves be guided by blind and visually impaired people through a totally dark area in the exhibition. This area presents a series of simulated everyday environments, such as a park, a street, a drugstore, a bar, and everyday situations, like buying a beverage. I used the exhibition as a natural experiment of “irritation” in Harold Garfinkel’s sense (Garfinkel 1967): the routine grounds and background expectations of everyday spatial and social orientation were destroyed for the sighted visitors and thus began to move into the foreground of attention. In this way, while the sighted visitors tried to learn about blindness, the participating blind observer could learn about sightedness.

By way of example, one of the observations I made is that sighted visitors tend to scuff their feet while moving. This made a distinctive noise, which is observable for the blind sociologist. Furthermore, while moving about in this way they would track materials like soil or sand that lay scattered on one part of the exhibition floor throughout the whole exhibition. In one instance this practice on the part of sighted people stirred up so much dust that the automatic warning system (which normally should detect smoke) was activated several times. This outcome could only be prevented by wetting the materials.

I interpret this as follows: Sighted people control the moving flow from their world within potential reach into their world within actual reach visually. As this strategy does not work in darkness, they try to compensate for this by keeping as close as possible to the world of actual reach that is apprehensible

The same thing became evident in the interviews. Sighted people depend especially on visual skills in both spatial orientation and social interaction. As noted by Goffman (1963) and carefully analyzed by Adam Kendon (1990), sighted strangers exchange glances, gestures, body movements, and facial expressions in the highly ritualized act of initiating and maintaining conversation (Goodwin 1980, 1984, 1986).

Interaction Between the Blind Subject and Sighted Pedestrians

To explore this matter further, I set about tape-recording encounters with sighted pedestrians (for more details, see Saerberg 2006). In all about 300 encounters in different cities all over Germany were recorded. The design of this part of the project was naturalistic. I did what I usually do in such situations: In each encounter, I asked the sighted person to describe a particular route – how to get to a certain street, building, or store. I took pains to avoid any use of artificial, specially designed questions.

The first task for the blind navigator is to initiate an encounter. To this end I typically perform an “ethnomethod,” to use Garfinkel’s term (Garfinkel 1967), which uses bodily schemes of expression. These schemes of expression depend on my consociate’s ability to interpret them by means of schemes of interpretation. To guarantee adequate social interaction and communication both sets of schemes must be correlated to one another. This is possible either through a process of standardization and typification drawing on the social stock of knowledge or through a process of adjusting and negotiating schemes of expression and schemes of interpretation by both sides in the concrete social situation. Here are some examples of the ethnomethods I have employed:

- I imitate glances by controlling the direction of my voice (scheme of expression). In this method I use the sound of the stranger’s voice or steps as a guideline for directing my speaking. Sometimes I also use rustling plastic bags and rolling suitcases as clues for the existence of a moving human force (schemes of interpretation).
- I position my own body directly in front of the selected approaching stranger. This method serves my purpose by producing a minor collision. But sometimes it prompts the stranger to sidestep the blind navigator sportily, undermining my strategy which means that my schemes of expression and his/her schemes of interpretation are not fitting.

- I use touch to initiate contact. Here I try to respect the social taboos on touching people on the “private” parts of their bodies. So I try to form a mental image of the bodily position of people in space, an image that shows me where their back or their arms might be. But this method sometimes fails producing feelings of embarrassment.
- I initiate contact in the direct context of events occurring in the middle of a crowd moving in the same direction. Here it is much easier to avoid violating social taboos of touch because, from the flow of sounds, mainly walking feet, it is easy to judge where the various parts of bodies are likely to be.
- I keep my listener’s attention by maintaining a continuous flow of talk. For example, I don’t open a conversation with a short “excuse me.” Instead I elongate the phrase by saying: “Excuse me, I am looking for a garbage bin; somebody I asked before told me that someplace around here there should be one... .”
- I talk to myself, out loud, as a way of indirectly announcing my interest in contact. I call this an “acoustic personal ad” For example, I might say, on hearing an approaching bus, “Oh, this could be bus number nine.” So anybody who feels concerned can answer. This method may be misunderstood as an “occult behavior” in Goffman’s terms – that is, as the unintended expressions of a madman. In that case again my schemes of expression and their schemes of expression are not fitting.

This context-sensitive set of ethnomethods has been useful in creating spaces of relevance to me. The methods do not work every time – for example, some people simply ignore me, turning the space I wish to share with them into an asocial desert. In these cases schemes of expression and schemes of interpretation do not fit or could not be made to cohere by the actors. In such cases, the taken for granted congruency of relevances has failed.

Once an encounter with a sighted person has been established, numerous problems of route description can arise. First, there is the problem of pointing.¹ Pointing, a mostly visual gesture is constantly used in route descriptions by sighted people. I often recorded utterances like: “you’ve got to go THAT way.” And these directions are repeated until I, with a slight chuckle, politely point out to my interlocutors that “I can’t see THAT; in fact, I can’t see you pointing.”

In the situations I have recorded, sighted people immediately come up against the problem of not being able to use conventional pointing gestures to indicate or describe the route. They then sometimes turn to unconventional pointing strategies to repair the interchangeability of standpoints as schemes of expression:

- The sighted person points with the blind person’s cane, while the blind person continues to hold it. I don’t like this method because it hinders my own pragmatic involvement with the world

through my cane. My capacity to manipulate things or movement is degraded in that way.

- The sighted person takes the blind person by the shoulders and points him in the right direction. This method for me is an invasion of my sphere of bodily integrity – a violation of my personal space, as Goffman says.
- The sighted person relies on the blind person’s assistance in pointing. For example, one tactic I use is to wheel my outstretched arms around, like the hands of a clock, and have the sighted person stop me when I’m pointing in the right direction.
- In the exhibition “Dialogue in the Dark,” a loudspeaker, emitting a ticking sound, was used to indicate the exit of the exhibition. When trying to show this exit to their guests, blind guides referred to it by imitating the sound and its frequency with their voice. Such a technique is an aural/oral deixis to the world, with verbal demonstrata and iconically functioning sound imitation, to use C.S. Pierce’s terms.

In Schütz’s terms, pointing is the socially appropriate and routinely embodied recipe for constructing the interchangeability of viewpoints in a context of social interaction. Under conditions of normalcy, I would add. Sighted people, in the cases I recorded, always used visual pointing and never used aural/oral deixis. In the recorded cases, only once did I, the blind interlocutor, use an aural/oral deixis: “Hm yes, now just point me in the right direction. Ok, that way – where the car is moving past right now?”

Based on my study, I would conclude, first, that the idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints doesn’t usually hold for encounters between sighted and blind pedestrians, and that while there are strategies to repair the communication by way of negotiating a shared space, they were not very effective. In the conclusion we will come back to this point.

Second, blind and sighted people often find themselves unable to agree on any useful landmarks.² While both may share a common language for denoting landmarks, they lack the common experiences – the sensually based schemes of interpretation – that would make the landmarks appropriate for orientation. One sighted interlocutor tried to describe the proper route via sensorimotor information, as follows: “If you realize you’re going down quite steeply, then ... um ... don’t go down there, ok!” This means that also the idealization of congruency of relevances breaks down in encounters between blind and sighted strangers.

Third, sighted persons tend to assume their directions are self-evident, for both sighted and blind persons. One consequence of this is that they feel free to change their reference point for directions, from the speaker to the recipient, without warning. In the worst form of this assumption, they position the blind person in a certain way and then announce “Now just go straight ahead.”

They forget that “straight ahead” is not self-explanatory. Very few sighted persons are able to move beyond such assumptions. They fail to ask the all-important question: what functions as the “origin of deixis” (Bühler 1965)? The head, the shoulders, the feet? Of the blind person? Of the sighted person? In spite of such flagrant ambiguity of speech and place in commonsense knowledge and conduct, the interchangeability of standpoints is idealized as self-evident and taken for granted. As one sighted pedestrian puts it: “there’s only one straight ahead.”

In most cases, no useful route description was given, because no methods to construct a mutual and interchangeable standpoint and no relevant sensually based knowledge of use to both sides were discovered (such as non-visual pointing, landmarks, and spatial directions). In most situations, the sighted person wound up simply escorting the blind person (“yes! you know what we’ll do um ... we’ll come along with you a little-bit”) to a point from which the sighted person supposed that the blind person could proceed on his own (and that point was usually the point at which the key phrase “just go straight ahead” was uttered).

But what other meaning could the phrase “straight ahead” have? When symbols fail in communication between blind and sighted pedestrians, I have found that the interacting partners turn back to the materiality of the environment: a street or wall, a staircase or a sidewalk. Where the pointed deixis can’t be apprehended, the direction of stairs or the edge of a sidewalk are enlisted to serve as surrogate pointing “fingers” made of stone. But sighted partners tend not to rely on such aids explicitly. Instead, they frequently utter words such as “there you go” or “now straight ahead.” So their words are bound together with the materiality of the world through different perceptions of this world.

In this regard at least some elements of shared knowledge are found: stairs or sidewalks are perceived differently, but the touched sidewalk and the viewed sidewalk fall together in the same thing. However, they do this not by social construction in interaction and communication but by chance of material closeness to the signified thing or environmental structure. So the success of communication remains opaque as the deixis or the iconic gesture turns out to be clumsy and inappropriate when the perception isn’t a shared one.

Naming of things seems to be a difficult task. This problem is intensified in that verbal route descriptions tend to be rather vague. Here is a short exchange between two sighted interlocutors (A and O), taken from the “city hall” transcript:

- 47 A: To get to city hall I think you’ve got to turn a little bit to the right.
 48 O: No, um, if you’re right at the top you’re at S. Go down a little further.
 49 A: Maybe just a little further down.

At this juncture, an optimistic reference to other people who are supposed to be in a better position to point – i.e. who are closer to materiality as it is understood in the sighted world – is given:

50 A: Yes and then you can always ask somebody, okay.

The primary contact with the material world is achieved by pointing, a visual gesture, and by escorting the blind person to a point of verbally signified straightness. It is not achieved by, for example, knocking on wood or stone, a tactile gesture that is uncommon, or that most sighted interlocutors would consider to be socially inappropriate – much to the frustration of the blind.

But one material element rooted in direct communication also needs to be mentioned. It is a deictic gesture towards the “here” – and not the “there” – of the conversation’s environment. Karl Bühler (1965) has called this the “Zeigfeld” of speech. Every word an interlocutor utters provides the message, “Here I am.” And that message precisely locates the speaker within the materiality of the environment. This is an excellent clue for orientation in blind navigation.

Conclusions

This study has explored the reasons why blind persons find it difficult to obtain useful route descriptions from sighted persons. Its conclusions and implications may be summarized as follows:

The Variation Called “Normalcy”

Under the concept of “style of perception,” social interaction and communication are linked to bodily experience. Using mainly sighted schemes of expression and sighted schemes of interpretation in perception, communication, and interaction, sighted persons constitute and construct their own normalcy of space, a normalcy that facilitates their orientation and mobility and that makes space sociable and comprehensible for them. This process is taken as self-evident by those who belong to the dominant society and the “sighted style of perception” thus becomes entrenched as normal space. The idealization of the reciprocity of perspectives with its idealizations of the interchangeability of standpoints and the congruency of relevances tends to conceal the conditions under which normalcy is constructed. The social grounds that guarantee the correlation between schemes of expression and schemes of interpretation are overlooked as this is taken for granted too. And this socially constructed normalcy is then naturalized as the only possible way of perceiving space.

The Variation Called a “Problem”

This normalcy creates difficulties for blind people. Blind people create space via their own knowledge, skills, and needs – that

is, via the “blind style of perception.” The latter style perceives and constitutes space via the blind person’s own sensually based relevances with correlated schemes of expression and schemes of interpretation, and the blind person’s own way of constructing an interchangeable standpoint. The sighted style of perception is not appropriate for communication with the blind style of perception. But this inappropriateness comes not by necessity. Its sense of normalcy depends on a knowledge base that is taken for granted. Taken for granted knowledge hinders the acquisition of typical knowledge about the blind style of perception that would inform sighted people about the relevances of blind people. This neglect leads in turn to social oppression. In the present study, this disconnect and this problem has been illustrated through an analysis of the ways in which sighted persons assume they can describe routes to anyone, whether sighted or blind. Normalcy fails in the case of blind strangers.

General Argument: The Everyday Social Construction of the Able Body

Society creates normalcy via ritualized interaction and communication. Without these rituals, everyone would be a disabled stranger. Yet, all persons – be they blind or sighted, deaf or hearing, etc. – are “disabled” strangers at one time or another: for example, a sighted stranger who needs directions can be considered “disabled,” in a certain sense. At the same time, society, with its communicative tools rooted in everyday life, can enable all kinds of disabled strangers. Hence, able-ism is socially constructed in and through the routines of mundane interaction and communication.

The Variation in Which a Problem is Normalcy

In demonstrating how conventional route descriptions are enabling strategies for some (the sighted) and disabling for others (the blind), this study points to a larger issue: the need for socially institutionalized, ritualized enabling strategies for the so-called “disabled.”³ At the same time, the study suggests how such strategies must be linked to disabled persons’ own styles of perception and cognition. Knowledge must be generated and disseminated to the members of the dominant society that tells them by which methods an interchangeable standpoint can be constructed interactively and how shared sensually based relevances in schemes of interpretation and expression can be communicated between persons of different social and corporal identities.

But how can this be done? Here science ends and practice begins. Mutual situations with communication and interaction are the creative grounds for elaborating new and appropriate ways and methods of conduct. For such situations to arise, however, social oppression and exclusion must be overcome and inclusion has to be realized.

In addition to advocating inclusion, I advocate education – the education of the senses. Artistic education can give all people – and here I am referring to the “normal disabled” in the first place – a deeper appreciation for the non-visual senses. This includes schools, exhibitions, and museums. Sighted people can start to ask questions like: “What is that succession of smells? How does this wall feel? What is the sound of a street? Where are little holes in the ground and how can I detect them? By this the perception of the environment can be changed by way of directing attention to non-visual clues. So the different styles of perception of blind and sighted people can start to communicate in a more appropriate way.

The sociology and anthropology of the senses can also be of help in this connection. They point to the different sensory ways in which cultures form their stock of knowledge about the world, and promoting an appreciation for these ways may help sighted people generally to become more open to tactile, acoustic, sensorimotor, olfactory, and gustatory based knowledge to interpret their world and to express themselves towards their others. By way of example, consider Aporta and Higgs’ account of Inuit wayfinding, which traditionally relied on the smell and feel of the wind, among other indices:

Inuit orient themselves on the land by understanding wind behaviour, snowdrift patterns, animal behaviour, tidal cycles, currents, and astronomical phenomena... . [T]hese methods are understood and used in connection to a few spatial references of which the most important is the one determined by the prevailing winds... . 16 bearings in relation to four wind directions [are recognized and distinguished verbally] ... These bearings constitute a wind-compass that Inuit use to situate objects, describe locations, and locate peoples’ relative positions while travelling. (Aporta and Higgs 2005: 731)

Carpenter gives an example of how this Inuit style of orientation is able to function even when there are no visible landmarks to be relied on for navigation:

When travelling by boat along the coastline in heavy fog, a navigator relies on the sound of waves and the direction of the wind. Without seeing light or land or star he is still able to find his course by checking the wind and listening to the sound of the surf. (Carpenter 1973: 20)

The Inuit may be said to have developed techniques for “travelling blind,” in the words of the Leonard Cohen song. Wind can be a powerful direction indicator, even though it is invisible, as blind people can also tell you.

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Notes

1. For sociolinguistic enquiries on pointing between sighted individuals, see Kita (2003) and Jarvella and Klein (1982).
2. See Schegloff (1972) on this topic from the viewpoint of conversation analysis.
3. I here draw on the discussion within the field of disability studies. For details, see the articles in Albrecht, Seelman, and Bury (2001) and Davis (2010).

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