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'Oh, Look, There's That Blind Woman. What's She Doing Taking Photographs?' Performing Tourism through Vision Impaired Bodies

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Title: 'Oh, Look, There's That Blind Woman. What's She Doing Taking Photographs?'
Performing Tourism through Vision Impaired Bodies

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Abstract:

There are certain rituals and performances associated with being a tourist and how we manage ourselves. How we speak and dress and our demeanour and behaviour are performances which we and others understand and expect. In this sense, tourist bodies are “subject to the disciplinary gaze of co-participants and onlookers” (Edensor, 2000, p. 327). The disciplining tourist gaze is even more in evidence in the performance of the disabled body. Little is known about how vision impaired bodies engage with the disciplined rituals and performances of tourism—rituals which are highly ocular-centric (such as taking photographs and posing and framing the tourist sight/site). Similarly, we know little of how the vision impaired body ‘learns’ to be a tourist, and, given that many vision impaired tourists were once sighted tourists, how the sighted self interacts with and shapes the experience of the vision impaired self.

Therefore, this paper will present and discuss findings from a PhD study which involved in-depth focus groups with vision impairment support groups and in-depth interviews with five families in South East Wales, underpinned by the emancipatory disability research methodology. Overall the co-researchers were presented with a dilemma when holidaying and travelling in how they manage, present, and ‘perform’ themselves. In the same way as being a tourist requires people to embrace a series of cues, props, and behaviours, so too does being a vision impaired tourist—as people expect to see the white cane, dark glasses, and guide dog. Additionally, the loss of sighted selves acutely sharpened the experience of their vision impaired selves, and this was particularly evident in tourism encounters which, by definition, were removed from their everyday life and routines, and where they had more control and familiarity. The consensus amongst my co-researchers is that their behaviour is highly influenced by how they are perceived by a sighted world and by concerns about ‘policing’ their behaviour in response—asking for assistance, using a white cane to gain a discount, accepting inappropriate help, and conforming to stereotypical views of being blind.

Their experiences exemplify that disclosing vision impairment has consequences that will exclude or include them, and their stories confirm that social attitudes can dictate a transformation of self in order to conform to expected behaviour and appearances.