

Kamil Pietrowiak

Groping the World. Social and Cultural Determinants of the Relations, Practices and Feelings of Blind People

The aim of this dissertation is providing a detailed and manifold description of the lives of congenitally blind people, and especially of those of its physical and cultural conditions that determine the specificity of functioning, the course of socialization and education, mobility difficulties and opportunities and work or interpersonal relationships of these people. In addition, I strive to detail the distinctive experiences of blind people that result from their cognitive limitations and from the common perceptions of blindness, and thus shape their daily interactions, strategies for action, sense of (ab)normality and agency.

The basic source of the presented data is ethnographic research conducted in a group of blind people in 2011-2017. Their main participants were 22 blind people aged 18-42, vast majority of which lost their ability to see soon after birth or in the first years of childhood. The research was based upon numerous, regular and possibly diverse meetings with individual participants (coming to a total of ca.400 meetings), including recorded research interviews (92 recordings). In addition, during the field work I additionally met dozens of other blind and visually impaired people, their friends and family members, as well as employees of institutions and organizations working for the benefits of this group, which contributed to enriching the collected data (ca. 100 meetings).

The dissertation consists of four parts consequently divided into chapters and subchapters. In the first part – *Research Process: Participants, Methods, Ethical Aspects* – I outline the course of field research, criteria applied to research group selection, general characteristics of the participants, methods and circumstances of data collection, ethical assumptions made together with their consequences in practice, as well as the relationship between the empirical and analytical dimension of research.

In the second part – *(Ab)normality: Socialization, Identity and Community of Blind People* – I discuss how being typecast as abnormal – meaning people who do not fit in the accepted health, cognition or agency standards – impacts the early stages of life and social development of research participants. I focus on describing the groundbreaking experience that most of the interlocutors shared, which was a long-term stay in a special educational center, which on the one hand affirmed them in believing they were different from healthy peers, and on the other hand let them feel 'normal' among other blind people and establish

close relationships with them. In the following chapters, I discuss how the sense of (ab)normality affects the group identity as well as the life strategies of individual blind people: how it brings them closer or pushes them apart depending on the situation.

In the third part of the dissertation – *(In)visibility: Blind People in Relation to Norms, Values and Rules of Visual Culture* – I discuss the most important elements of the visual socialization of blind people, in which they learn the rules and duties that prevail in the world of the ‘sighted’ and result directly from the qualities and functions having the ability to see. In the following chapters, I describe how research participants gradually discover the patterns and relationships occurring within the visible world, how they assimilate concepts and phrases related directly to visual cognition, and also how they come into contact with various types of images and representations. In addition, I show how the participants incorporate basic visual responsibilities related to the sphere of image, expression or non-verbal communication, how they manage the visibility of their own ‘stigma’, and how they use similar activities in constructing their own identity, sense of attractiveness or sexuality.

In the fourth part of the dissertation – *(Dis)ability: Dimensions of Agency and Independence of Blind People* – I present those material, social and institutional opportunities and limitations of research participants that have a significant impact on their scope of capability and independence. I discuss the functioning of the public support system for people with disabilities in Poland, as well as its practical impact on life decisions and tactics of the research participants. Next, I describe the course of the rehabilitation process designed for the blind people, controlled and evaluated by representatives of relevant institutions, including special education centers. An important subject touched in this part are also issues related to the employment of blind people – their professional potential and public forms of support. In the last chapter of the dissertation, I focus on the skills and limitations of blind people in the field of independent mobility and spatial orientation, which translates directly into many other areas of their daily lives and activities. At the end, I address the topic of using the help of sighted guides and assistants, as well as the related emotions, needs and dilemmas that the research participants have to face.

Kamil Pietrowiak