

Let's Stick Together – Notes and Thoughts from Fieldwork

An Autoethnographic Account of Method, Shame, and Laughter

By Maria Bäckman

The background to this article is an ongoing study of the white stick, its materiality and consequences, with the purpose of reaching an understanding of visually impaired people's position in society. Many people have an ambivalent attitude towards the stick despite it being an excellent tool that facilitates orientation and mobility. Besides increasing the understanding of the cultural dynamics of the stick, the article also has an intradisciplinary aim. Since I, like my informants, have a visual impairment that started in adulthood, the study is clearly influenced by autoethnographic methodology, but not exclusively so.¹ The text is therefore also formulated as a methodological reflection of the autoethnographic approach and its implications for my own gathering of knowledge. Hereby, an additional aim of the article is to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the benefits, as well as the potential pitfalls, that occur when researchers let themselves be inspired by autoethnographic methods.

Even at an early stage of my own rehabilitation, I started to keep an account of events as if in a field diary. To begin with, there was no underlying research motive, but over the course of time the object of writing became more focused on my own experiences of the new way of life. Extracts from this diary, which have been revised as to language, will guide the reader throughout this exposition. To be able to demonstrate the sense of discomfort sometimes evoked by the stick, and my own method for studying and analysing these ambiguous feelings, two recurring points in my empirical material are particularly highlighted here. One part includes the strong feelings of shame that the stick risks evoking during use. The other is laughing

practices included in the setting of the field in various ways.

The persistent focus on the white stick helps illuminate how individual choices and experiences are constantly related to the surrounding society. In line with other findings in the vast field of critical disability studies I want to emphasize the aid as a device that cannot be isolated from norms concerning physical abilities that create normality and deviation, nor from associated values and hierarchies (Shakespeare 2000; Sandahl & Auslander 2005; McRuer 2006; Hughes 2007; Rydström 2012; Shildrick 2020). When individual users of the white stick describe their relation to the aid, this illustrates how both cultural and social norms, as well as impediments of a more structural character, affect the everyday life of visually impaired people. In particular my discussion of these issues is informed by the notion of ableism, as an equivalent to more well-known concepts like racism and sexism (McRuer 2006; Campbell 2009; Harpur 2009; see also Grue 2019; Bylund 2022). From such a perspective the so-called disability arises when somebody with other abilities encounters a world that was designed to suit physically able-bodied people. There and then, the person with a physical impairment is literally disabled in their interaction with the surrounding world.

My Stick and I

Today I have decided to use my stick. I'll choose the more discreet symbol cane instead of the longer mobility cane. I tell myself that it is only for going to work, the shorter cane will do. I take (rather seriously) a deep breath and leave the house, brace myself, and start the walk to the bus

stop. It's crowded with people who will see me approaching. I therefore choose a different way than I usually go. It's a detour but it means that I can approach the bus stop from behind. I think maybe many of my neighbours are there and I might not notice them, and I don't want them to see me. With the stick. When I get to the long queue that formed when the bus came in, I realize the detour did not help. They have already seen me, and have reacted. All the people in the queue step aside and let me onto the bus first. My stomach turns but I walk past the queue, I don't want to be impolite. I gaze unseeingly, stoop and lower my head when I go past. Why can't I keep my back straight when I am "blind"? I quickly walk to the back of the bus and sit down. I hurriedly fold up my stick and put earphones in my ears. I try to disappear into my audio book and not notice my surroundings.

Since I live in the same kind of life-world as many of my visually impaired informants, the situation described above is an example of experiences that occur whether I like it or not. At the same time, the personal background means that I have gathered my own experiences [first hand-observations] of what is involved in using a white stick in public. As a researcher, when I position myself in a field where I partly share experiences with several participants in the study, this brings into focus a sensitive balancing act between empirical closeness and analytical distance. From that perspective, my own experiences may be both a resource and an encumbrance (Davies 2008; Farahani 2010; Adams et al. 2015).

This on-the-spot account of my bus trip clarifies one of the keys to the study. When I undertake the discussion about the abili-

ty of the white stick to alternately facilitate and complicate matters for persons with impaired sight in coping with their being-in-the-world, this is a discussion immediately related to myself. Questions and formulations of problems are partly based on my own life as a visually impaired person.

This also applies to my concrete approach as a researcher to the field. I have often let my own experiences of rehabilitation and use of the stick guide me in the work with my main material: a six-year ethnographic study, carried out with some longer and shorter interruptions at Stockholm Sight Centre. As a user, I have participated during my, still ongoing, rehabilitation in several activities offered to individuals and groups at the centre. As a researcher, I have interviewed other users and a number of professionals at the centre. In my role as a researcher, I have recurrently carried out observations of various activities without being a participant myself.²

What does the above-mentioned formulation that this text "is immediately related to myself" actually mean? Further, as researchers, how can we use such a literally self-reflecting, self-referential, and subjective method in a meaningful way in our own research practices? Without any claims to being complete, or providing any definite answers, I intend to use my current research on the white stick to illuminate and discuss the uses of the autoethnographic approach to the field. But to begin with, to outline the method, a few introductory words would be in place.

Why Autoethnography?

Recently, it has become more common for qualitative research to apply a method characterized as autoethnographic. It is more

usual to integrate the researcher's own self into the analyses, not least among those who are interested in processes of subordination and marginalization (Ellis 1999; Khosravi 2010; Kafer 2013; Denzin 2014). Nonetheless, how should we actually understand the concept of autoethnography? The ethnologist Britta Lundgren (2020) has written a lengthy retrospective account of her own career; what it was like to pursue a career as a woman and find one's place in the academic world. She takes the reader back to her childhood and adolescent years; the account thereby develops into a discussion of how class- and gender-related conditions, in combination, contributed to shape both herself as a person and her future choices. As she herself states, it is an autoethnographic text. Lundgren uses her own experiences to illuminate and reflect on structures and incidents that frame her as a person, but also extend beyond her.

In this context, an important clarification is made concerning the method; Lundgren points out that autoethnography can be applied in many different ways. Referring to Leon Anderson (2006), she draws attention to a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, an emotionally and empathetically oriented autoethnography, and on the other, a more dissociated and analytical variant (Lundgren 2020; see also Liliequist & Silow Kallenberg 2022). In this article, I would like to place myself, in line with Lundgren, in between these two stereotyped extremities.

This mediating position can be further pinpointed with the help of three criteria used by Heewon Chang (2008), and additionally put forward by Lundgren, to characterize autoethnographic methodology. In this characterization, it is an approach to

research in which “the content is autobiographical, the method is ethnographical, and the scientific analysis is oriented towards making a difference and achieving social and cultural understanding” (Chang 2008:49, cited from Lundgren 2020:26; see also Khosravi 2010; Palmgren 2011, 2021).

The distinct emphasis of Lundgren on the inherent tension and variation of autoethnographic methodology is hardly surprising. The same could be said of other ethnographic methods. Just as there are several ways of carrying out an interview, the ethnographic methodology stands for a multitude of possibilities and choices. Therefore, researchers usually adapt their choice of method to the purposes of their research (Öhlander 2011; Jönsson & Nilsson 2017). The choice of method does not only affect the collection of material, but also the following analysis. In turn, this is moreover consequential with regard to the questions that precede and/or arise in parallel with the developing investigation (Bäckman & Ekström 2022).

Indeed, none of the above-mentioned characteristics are unique for autoethnography. On the contrary, they are closely related to common procedures among ethnologists and anthropologists: long-established methods for collecting material and for ethnographical writing. There are, for example, obvious similarities to classical methods involving observation and participant observation (see Öhlander & Pripp 2011 on the difference); the researcher's conscious shifting between techniques for engaging and disengaging approaches to the field (Ehn & Löfgren 2001); as well as insider/outsider considerations (Farahani 2010; Hansson 2021). Furthermore, the

intentional inclusion and presence of the individual self of the researcher has long been an important part of research traditions that emphasize positioning, reflexivity and collaborative knowledge production (Ehn & Klein 1994; Gunnemark 2011; see also Bylund 2022). This has been juxtaposed with the more impersonal and as it would appear more objective ideal of other approaches. Autoethnography borders on all these previous debates and conflicts, moreover sometimes highlighting these lines of conflict more clearly.

In addition, even if it is not called autoethnography, there are elements of this in other scientific traditions of research and writing. In a historical perspective, research and observations have been carried out on the researcher's own body within medical science; for example, experiments with vaccines and other foreign substances (Ståhl 2019).³ A relatively recent example is the background to Barry Marshall's 2005 Nobel Prize in medicine (together with Robin Warren). To prove the then controversial thesis that most kinds of stomach ulcers were caused by bacteria, antibiotics thereby being a cure, Marshall infected himself by taking a cocktail of the harmful bacteria.⁴ A well-known literary example comes from Walter Benjamin's *On Hashish* (2019 [1972]), where he takes a controlled dose of hashish and then keeps a detailed account in diary-form of how his own senses are affected by the drug. Another similar case is Aldous Huxley's just as controlled procedure with psychedelic drugs, described in *The Doors of Perception* (2020/1954).

Consequently, in line with the theme of the article, I will conclude this introduction by returning to myself. I can thus state that

the autoethnographic approach has had a clear operative function in my study. To be brief, it has helped me sharpen the analytical questions and to find a number of theoretically founded approaches. Nonetheless, it is just as true that this kind of self-application has led me to consider the limits of autoethnography. In order to illuminate my reflections on the methodological use of myself, I will distinguish three ways of integrating the method in the study. Even if this is based on my own research practice, the discussion is of general interest.

Firstly, autoethnography can be a (usually supplementary) method for collecting material, and a way to establish contact with the field. Secondly, autoethnography can, as already mentioned, facilitate the identification of relevant questions and the formulation of problems; it can moreover be used to build up the study and to elaborate theoretical aspects. Thirdly, autoethnography provides an opportunity for reflexivity; one's own experiences can contribute to deepening the analysis in the sense mentioned above, to carry out research on oneself. All three aspects of the method will be considered and commented on in the following. And the point of departure is shame and laughter.

White Cane Group Discussion

On one occasion during the fieldwork, I am sitting together with seven other participants describing myself as a (reluctant) user of the white stick. The setting is the "White Cane Group Discussion", a discussion group arranged by Stockholm Sight Centre. I am there in my double role as participant and researcher. It is the first session of three, and we start with a round where we presented ourselves briefly. The first

to speak is the welfare officer Emma, who gives a short account of who she is and her role during the discussion. Thereafter, the physiotherapist and braille teacher Martin, whom most of us have already met, tells us about himself:

My diagnosis is RP [retinis pigmentosa, a hereditary eye disease], and for me the central parts of my sight went first; in my twenties I started to see less and slowly it got worse and worse. So, I can see a little at the sides, oh and mostly just distinguish between light and darkness, nowadays. But later, this white stick, it is a hobbyhorse for me, being able to move around on my own, so... we're likely to get back to this.

One of the participants wonders if the welfare officer has worked with visually impaired people earlier. She has not, she says, and adds apologetically that if she needs to ask, we now know she is a beginner. Martin mentions that he has worked at the Sight Centre since 1996. "That is quite a while," somebody exclaims, impressed; and the rest of us around the table laugh. "So, there is a good deal of experience from me," he continues. The welfare officer Emma gives info on practical details: like turning off our mobile phones; what is said in the room stays there; the importance of everybody being responsible for "keeping a decent conversational tone" and not interrupting each other. "A common cause," she emphasizes, and we hum in agreement. Then she apologizes for just having interrupted Martin and we all laugh again. After this introduction from the leaders, it is our turn. Emma turns to Stefan and asks if he would like to start.

To be able, in some degree, to communicate the atmosphere of the group and the room during this first meeting, I have

chosen to give a fairly detailed and close empirical account of the participants' presentations, which followed the presentation of the leaders.

"Yes, I can begin. I'm all for it. Let's see now... my name is Stefan and I have had my stick for sort of three years almost now, but it was a drawn-out start. I work at a preschool. I have RP, so I have slight vision, but the opposite to you Martin. So, I see straight forward but not to the sides." "Not good in the dark," Martin adds. "Yes, night vision, use the stick locally, and that kind of thing, going to the shops, like. But not at work. It's difficult there. Well, that's me," he concludes. "How old is Stefan?," one of the women asks. "I am forty," he answers. "May I ask something?" another woman says. "Yes," says Martin. "You work at a preschool, how do you manage the children, in the corridors, like. Don't you fall over them, like?" "Yes," says Stefan and laughs, "if I'm not careful. But that stays here." We all laugh out loud together. "Well, yes, it is a bit of a dilemma sometimes. If I'm tired or so, then I have to be very careful." "Yes and toys and such like," someone adds. "But I have told everyone. And I use the stick going back and forth from work. But it takes them a long time, for them to catch on I mean, but they notice too, when they try to communicate with body language, and such like, the teachers. It's like, 'I see, it's as [serious] as that,' then I think they try to convey that to the children. But I don't want to make a big thing of it either. You need to find a good balance; you don't want throw dirt at yourself. You need to find a good level, that's how I feel anyway."

Martin thanks Stefan and the next person continues. "Is it my turn? My name

is Nikolaj. I am 48 and I have glaucoma. Don't see anything in the dark. Use my hearing quite a lot. But I have sufficient sight for moving around. I can see a person who is dressed in white or in black, partly, so that's good. Well, I haven't a job, no. Disability pension. (Clears his throat). Well, anyway. The white stick; I've had a white stick for a long time, a few years, but it never really comes out of my bag." Several of the group laugh and hum in agreement. "Well, I'm shy of it, shy of people; about what they might say. 'That damn idiot.'" Stefan agrees "Yes, that's how one feels." Nikolaj continues, "I know I'll only see that person once, but I'm so sensitive. I'm easily upset and hurt, like. I've started using the stick now actually; started to take it out a little bit, now and then. Six months ago. But I'm still shy. Someone should kick my behind. That's how I am." One woman says, "Then I can help you" and another adds "We can do it!"

The room fills with laughter again and Stefan adds, "Can I ask a question? Does the stick give any advantage? Apart from having to be ashamed, is there any kind of benefit?" "Yes," says Nikolaj, "If I use the stick when it is dark, because I can't see anything then. Yes, that's a good thing; I can feel, I mean the stick feels things before I do, before my head or my knees do, so that's good. Aaah. I've tried using the stick a bit in the daytime, and I notice that people move out of my way." He sounds surprised and the rest of us laugh. He continues, "Noo then there are people who walk around with their telephones, and sometimes they fall over me, perhaps. But otherwise, they move out of the way. That is quite nice."

After Nikolaj it is Kerstin's turn. "I was born in 1950. I was born with some degree

of sight loss, but then I had an accident, perhaps ... well, I don't quite remember, seven years ago perhaps, yes, seven years ago, and it got worse. But I don't work ... I have a disability pension, so I have tried to manage ... without a stick. Though I've had one for probably five years." Kerstin speaks slowly and thoughtfully with many pauses. "And I suppose I am in the same position as Nikolaj ... that ... it takes a lot of space. Or, it feels as if I take up so much space when I use it, or try to. At the same time ... it obviously gives ... relief to your mind. Or, I can understand that if I learnt to trust it, it would save me quite a lot of energy." There is silence and Kerstin laughs in a slightly embarrassed way. Martin agrees, "Yes, it is hard to get over that step ... and then it becomes a habit." Silence again, and then Martin turns to me, "Maria, when do you use the stick?"

When the question lands with me, it becomes obvious that I am not just the visiting researcher with permission to record the conversation, I am also there as a participant in the group on the same terms as the others. My own presentation slots in with the others':

Well, I have loss of sight, but with little windows, or whatever you would say, which I can see out through. But they don't overlap, so I have double vision to a certain degree but ... otherwise I suppose ... mostly I use the stick when, like Stefan, when I am finding my way to and from places. But ... I am not very good at using it to work, for instance. And perhaps for the same reasons as you are saying; it feels as if a lot of focus is on the stick and not on me ... [clear my throat] for example as a lecturer giving lessons or such like, then ... even if I have to tell the students, of course, that I don't see very well since I can't see when they put their hand up, and that kind of thing, when they want to say

something, like. So, it's ... well, ambiguous. But obviously, it helps a lot when you want to move around amongst people. Because it's really rather cool ... they actually move out of the way.

My presentation does not arouse any reactions, but one of the participants wants to hear more from Martin. 'You're not going to say when you started?' 'Yes,' answers Martin, and then he starts filling the gaps:

I can say that I walked around, keeping the stick in my pocket or backpack for a long time, bumping into people and they said "Look where you're going." And things like that. You bump into posts that are grey against the grey pavement and such like, so ... But when I started at the physiotherapist education, I felt that I was meeting other people who didn't know me, so I started using the stick from day one, even if ... I felt that I wouldn't need it the whole time, in daylight for instance. But then I thought ... better get started immediately so that it was part of me, rather than beginning to use a stick after a term or so. So that was my strategy, and I think it worked very well. Then it was difficult, as you say, at home, fetching the kids at preschool and... Certain days I had good eyesight, and was cycling and...

Everybody starts to laugh. "Oh my God" one woman says laughing, "that's hard to understand!" Martin continues, "and all of a sudden there you are with a stick, and of course," he breaks off and everyone laughs out loud "people wonder," Nikolaj says, "Yes, people would wonder ... what's he playing at ... with his sight?" Martin: "Yes, so it ... it's a difficult process we're going through, getting to the point where we see that the advantages of the stick are greater than the disadvantages."

This is what it could be like when a group of strangers, previously unknown to each other and only brought together for

a group discussion as an initiative of the Sight Centre, were telling each other of their use of the white stick. Laughter and gallows humour was a recurrent element, but it was an inclusive and acknowledging laughter. During the presentations and conversation, the humorous elements had a supportive function which relieved and acted as confirmation. Difficult experiences were not laughed at in any derogatory way, but instead recognized as real and relevant. "Yes, that is just how it is." Together, we could laugh at our wretchedness.

Like much other comedy, it was thus a case of humour as an emotional relief (Freud 2002/1905). At the same time, the most characteristic element of the confirming laughter that spread through the room was that it was a laughter between equals. Later, I will return to the hierarchical laughter, which is instead directed from above and downwards (Billig 2005; Jönsson & Nilsson 2014).

However, in another place in my field notes, I have chosen to write a detailed account of my own more negative experiences of myself as a white stick user. Compared with my presentation in the discussion group above, I reveal more of the discomfort and oddly complex feelings of shame that tend to take over when I am in public with the stick.

My sight educator Anna-Lena gave me a new white stick. A short symbol cane, for use at work. White, shiny with a black plastic roller tip, which has a slippery feel to it. No wear and tear yet. I hang it on a peg in my room at work. Probably won't use it, I think. A couple of days later I'm on my way to the Sight Centre with my old mobility cane, which I have got out again. As soon as I'm outside the front door, I

feel like an infernal drama queen. The stick seems gigantic, at least three metres long. It's as if it is shouting out: "Look at mee! Here I am!! I certainly am visually impaired!!!" It rattles too. I try holding it slightly above the pavement so people won't turn and stare, but then I can't feel the ground, so I have to give that up. The whole situation feels like when I was a teenager in town with Mum at an age when I preferably shouldn't even have a Mum. At least not one that was visible to other people. In my teens I coped with the embarrassing company by pretending I was just there by chance. I kept a few steps behind and checked the shop windows. Now I notice that I'm doing the same. In my mind, I am sort of walking a few steps behind the stick, but it is hard to pretend that it isn't mine. When I'm amongst people I cannot deny that the stick is part of me. I am just as embarrassing as I was afraid to be as a teenager.

In the autoethnographic text, it can be seen that I can choose to portion out more of the complex, and often bewildering, feelings of shame and discomfort that the stick evoked in me on this occasion. At the same time, it is clear that I am in control over, perhaps not the actual situation, but the pen describing the situation afterwards (Briggs 1970; Ehn & Klein 1994). One question is what happens when I, as a researcher, transfer my own discomfort to ethnographical text, namely, autoethnography.

A Sense of Affinity and Trust – Access to a Field

Such a circumstance is that the autoethnographic work invites, almost encourages, an emotional approach. There is thus a risk that the autobiographical text is considered

unnecessarily intimate, becoming more private than personal. Nevertheless, it is access to the private that is one of the main benefits of the method, the revealing an emotional and vulnerable layer that the researcher cannot demand from the informants. Consequently, the autoethnography also raises a number of ethical questions about the involvement of the researcher's self in the researcher's own work process. Is it possible as a researcher to treat oneself in an unethical way? Does the method lead to a too great degree of (ill-considered) self-exposure? Researchers must reasonably be answerable for this themselves. However, the fact is that I, as an autoethnographic researcher, for ethical reasons can choose to expose myself and my own experiences to a greater degree than I could (or want to) request of my other informants (for a similar discussion, see Bylund 2022). Certain questions are not even possible to ask an informant.

The other side of the matter is, of course, that the autoethnographic analysis can be seen as unnecessarily self-centred, like an uncalled for rummaging in one's own feelings and experiences without any connection to relevant research questions and problem formulation.

A more positive contrary observation is that the autoethnographic approach has provided an opening to a field of research that would otherwise have been much more inaccessible. It is not the contacts with the Sight Centre or professional sight educators that I have in mind here, even if they have been of considerable importance for the study. Rather, I mean the knowledge that can only be provided by my own experience of what it is like to live as a visually impaired person, and how this has bridged

over much of the scepticism that is easily directed towards an outsider – a person who does not belong to the field of those who are involved, but is instead a visitor to the field. To be visually impaired oneself is to be ascribed a necessary insight into conditions and difficulties that are relevant for the group. In short, I am included amongst those who know what it is like.

A concrete example is when the discussion group in the long extract above speaks of how much energy it takes to handle the difficulties of the surroundings to understand that visually impaired does not mean blind. This is otherwise often taken for granted and the white stick pinpoints the matter. It is common to equate the use of a white stick and being completely without sight, i.e. blind. Those who have residual sight or have an eyesight that varies from day to day are therefore placed in a limbo-like situation. The visually impaired person is neither completely blind, nor fully able to see. Not infrequently, this can create stress about what surrounding people may think or believe. As when Martin tells us that before his visual impairment developed into total loss of sight, he might walk to preschool to fetch his child, equipped with a white stick, and the next day he might come on his bike with a child seat. There is a common fear that other people will think that you are some sort of a cheat when you are using a stick; that you for some unknown reason want to be perceived as being blind. This is a problem that is not only known to me from the outside, I am also familiar with it as part of my own reality.

Personal experience is therefore a means of both studying in greater detail and taking part emotionally in central cultural ways of

creating meaning. It helps me catch sight of matters that otherwise would be difficult to understand or even to get any kind of a hold on; it also illuminates the grounds for inclusion and exclusion, marginalization of the non-normative, as well as the resulting self-contempt. Frequently, my own feelings of shame have been like a dowsing rod, helping me to identify and analyse situations and contexts where the particular vulnerability of visually impaired people is expressed.

Laughter that Unites and Differentiates

It is an August evening. The city is still warm and my sister and I are on our way to the Photographic Museum in Stockholm for some food at the open-air restaurant and then a stand-up comedy show. The event has been advertised in the calendar of the museum for a long time. It is a beautiful evening and the dinner is good. After a while, it is time to go indoors and find a seat in front of the stage. The comedians perform one after another and nothing remarkable happens until the last artist enters the stage. His performance is almost entirely based on classical sick humour. And his jokes are all about visually impaired people; for example, arguing that no visually impaired people go to the Photographic Museum because they cannot see anything. Well, imagine something so amazingly funny as a group of blind people with white sticks at the Photographic Museum. The performance continues and the audience is now laughing loudly at blind people at nudist camps, and blind people with their backs to the stage because they cannot see.

The visit described above is of a somewhat earlier date than the other accounts in

the text. This means that I was much more vulnerable and uncertain on this occasion about my then relatively new identity as visually impaired, which is not an insignificant point in how I experienced the situation. However, I was not only a person who has been afflicted by visual impairment in the middle of life, I was also a researcher. So, as a visually impaired person and a researcher, what does one make of such an evening and such an experience?

Of course, I started by letting my researcher competence set up the necessary distance to the event, which was a case of sheer survival. You could say that I retreated into the comparatively safe world of theory and scientific concepts. But now I am lying. The first thing that happened was not at all that my professional “researcher’s self” was set in motion. That was later, after a while. Instead, I was overwhelmed by the strong feelings of shame that arise when a whole auditorium full of people are laughing at you. Indeed, I realized that they were not laughing at me personally, but the laughter had a direction, and it was pointing my way, towards the person I had become. I was completely struck by my own disability; that I now belonged to those who are crippled, subordinate, and unimportant; the comical ones that apparently can be laughed at.

What was it then that the researcher found, after a while, when it was possible to step aside from the immediate experience? A first conclusion was that the laughter established a common bond amongst the audience. But the inclusive and laughing us that was created as the self-evident visitor at the Photographic Museum was also a company of seeing people. The group that was not expected to visit the museum

– and in their absence could be laughed at in an unrestrained way – were visually impaired people. Another reflection was more personal and troubling. Even though I had studied, lectured on, and written about several of the processes that emerge as a result of cultural delimitations and social hierarchies, it was the first time I had in reality deeply felt and experienced them myself. The most alarming insight was that, when I sat there in front of the stage, I was not filled with constructive and outraged indignation directed outwards, which I would have wished for. Instead, it was a destructive and paralysing feeling of shame that was directed inwards. The comedy on stage is about me, they are laughing and having fun about people like me.

The event and my own reaction to the jokes performed demonstrate how explicit and implicit norms about who can be considered capable and fully functioning effectively close and open possibilities of inclusion and exclusion of certain kinds of bodies. For those whose body has an exterior and interior making it possible for them to be regarded as anybody, the process involved in this distinction is almost always invisible. Just like being white or heterosexual, a functional body acts as a lubricant enabling some people to live their lives without distressing resistance (Siebers 2008; also Ahmed 2006; Grue 2019). This is not the same as saying that these people do not encounter misfortune and difficulties. Embodying a norm is no guarantee that you do not chafe against other people, neither does it protect against other kinds of difficulties. What it does mean, however, is that some people, because they manage to embody a norm, are ascribed a self-evident agency (Shakespeare 2000; McRuer

2006; Ambjörnsson 2021). In their very existence, they are an entirely self-evident reference point, which means that they, without any problems, can give themselves the right to laugh at others; or as is also often the case, to engage in a staring practice (Garland-Thomson 2009).

The jocular setting at the museum illuminates the hierarchical relationship between those who embody a normative functional inclusion, and those who for some reason find themselves further out in the periphery. Nevertheless, there are several keys to the question of who it is at all possible to joke about. Nowadays it is no longer acceptable or unproblematic to joke about, for example, black people or Jews. This does not mean that it never happens, but such jokes may provoke objections and criticism. For some reason, it was still all right to joke about blind people at the Photographic Museum. This calls for reflection. Are people with visual impairment (and perhaps other people with similar disabilities) more legitimate targets for jokes than, for instance, various ethnic minorities? Is there an ethical sensitivity that is unevenly distributed among so called marginalized groups?

These seem to be legitimate questions. However, what I would like to emphasize here is how the event, and my own distress over the situation, at an early stage became a guidance for what would later become a systematic study. Afterwards, I could constructively consider my own experience and feelings and thereby identify a broader complex of problems. I could also formulate research questions relevant for the field and the study. Investigating my own fears, reactions, and shortcomings later helped me to relate to my informants in an

empathetic way, not least based on experience. There was something here that we shared. Or, in actual fact, the method pointed to something that we potentially shared, since we cannot assume that all visually impaired people have identical experiences or interpretations of such.

This takes us back to laughter and shame. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984/1965) maintains that the medieval carnivalesque laughter was a merriness that disrobes and deconstructs. It was laughter that came from beneath and was directed upwards, to the rulers. By heeding the body with its inevitable exudations and sounds, this reveals basic human similarities that traverse all social divides. At the Photographic Museum, I encountered laughter that, in my own interpretation of the event, instead struck downwards and established differences, denying inclusion. It was, as I understood it, an instance of ridiculing a group in a position of structural vulnerability. Both cases resemble external laughter where the butt of the joke is directed towards someone other than the laughing persons themselves.

The difference is great compared with the internal laughter that arose and was shared among the participants of the “White Cane Group Discussion”. Here, the function of the laughter was instead usually supportive and strengthening. A different kind of affinity was created, which was based on recognition, acknowledgment, and empathy. The observation underlines the significance of humour as an effective strategy for coping with difficulties in life, making them easier to handle (Albrecht 1999; Macpherson 2008; Bylund 2022).⁵ It was not by chance that the inside jokes took the form of gallows humour. Its dark and drastic sides easily generate under-

standing laughs among those who recognize each other's misery.

Another observation from the ongoing fieldwork is that much of the laughter – both external/vertical and inside/horizontal – arises from distinct communicative and dialogical practices. This is a fundamental difference from the way shame is based on the idea of a secret that must be kept from the surrounding world. The experience of shame is basically non-communicative and only possible to share in a secure setting (Goffman 1990/1958; Harper 2011). Considering the ways laughter and shame occur in my study, these can therefore be seen as mirror-images of each other. The dialogical laughter together with others is contrasted against the individual, and thus secret, shame. The latter denies somebody access to the longed-for sense of belonging to a particular group of people (Skeggs 1997). Shame is negative energy that keeps people away from what they are hoping for. Laughter, on the other hand, paints with much broader cultural brushstrokes and encompasses situations that can be both excluding and including.

Inside Out – an Autoethnographic Dilemma

Autoethnography can be described as a general term for a number of methods of collecting material, analysis, and writing based, to an unusually high degree, on the researcher's own connection to the studied field. At the same time, the point of departure in personal experience is also related to a claim of knowing things from an insider point of view. The opportunity thus also arises to use autoethnography as a means to support the researcher's own argumentation. So, what happens when

you become your own empirical material as a researcher? Moreover, with unlimited access to what might be described as privileged information. Having discussed several advantages of the method, I will return to some possible problems. I would particularly underline two relevant objections. First, the autoethnography runs the risk of making itself almost indisputable in the sense that the analysis of the researcher's, literally, "own" empirical material is not possible to argue against. For easily understood reasons this is not a particularly scientifically fruitful approach. Furthermore, this research position is even more difficult to question if the autoethnographic analysis is based on the researcher's own belonging to a marginalized group.

The other drawback is based on old truths about ethnographic methods in general, namely, that the researcher is both part of the field and not part of it. After the fieldwork is over, there is a return to academic work and further processing of the collected material. Despite the level of engagement and participation in the field, the researcher is still essentially a temporary guest and a comparative stranger. The question then is what it is like for the autoethnographic researcher who really is part of the field, when the sense of belonging among the studied participants is the driving force and motivation for applying the method. This concerns the plausibility of the research: does not all the subjectivity of an autoethnographic project easily tip over into a scientifically impossible position? You cannot leave yourself. Thus, what happens to the supposedly necessary distance if the researcher lacks the means of withdrawing to formulate reflections in a different place?

I have no definite answers to any of these questions. On the contrary, I believe there is good reason to keep them living, open and topical. This does not prevent me from considering them best answered by the individual researcher and thereby dependent on the research in question. For my part, it means that I share some matters, but not others. I also make sure that the autoethnographic elements of the study are only part of the total collection of material. By presenting my own experiences side by side with other types of empirical material, I have also tried to minimize the risk of them being understood as unassailable “truths”. This is moreover the reason for my choice of discussing the close relation between theoretical approaches and my own research practices.

Finally, it can be added that the autoethnographic method must also be related to the critical discussion which over the years has emphasized that ethnographic authority, in a historical perspective, has been constructed through a clearly distinguished author's voice (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Ehn & Klein 1994; Davies 2008). This is another reason for clarifying that autoethnography should not be seen as a short-cut (even less a key) to this, or any other, study. Use of the method is conversely justified through the in-depth understanding of other parts of the material.

Broadening and Limiting

Now it is time to tie up the loose ends. A synthesizing empirical focus for this article is the complicated relationships that persons with acquired vision loss tend to develop in relation to the mobility aid known as ‘the white stick’. However, consistent attention to the relationship between the

autoethnographic researcher and collection of the material and writing has been just as important.

As stated earlier, above all the autoethnographic approach has had a clear operative function in my study. Thanks to the method I have continuously been able to sharpen the analytical and theoretical aspects of the ongoing inquiry. Alongside the application of the method, however, there are also some potentially troublesome issues that had to be dealt with. With no intention to resolve all of these questions, I have aimed my writing in that direction. Here, when the article is about to reach its end, I will take the opportunity to remind the reader of the three different ways that autoethnographic methods have influenced my own findings. Hopefully, this will inspire others to make their own efforts in the vast field of autoethnography.

Firstly, together with the use of other methods, autoethnography has helped me to collect relevant material, and it has also facilitated my contact with informants. Secondly, it had a strong impact on the process of identifying meaningful questions and formulating appropriate problems. For this reason, I have benefitted from autoethnography in building up the study and elaborating on certain theoretical aspects. Thirdly, and not least, autoethnography has provided an opportunity for reflexivity, and has also contributed to the inquiry even in that matter.

Subsequently, this is a text that is very much hovering over both methodological questions and empirical findings, and I am not quite ready to leave my empirical focus. In the introductory extract from my field diary, when I adjusted my posture in front of the bus queue according to what I

thought was a more suitable enactment of a person with impaired sight, and then disappeared as quickly as I could into the protection of my audio book, this was because of the moment of shame I experience. I was ashamed of the deviation I displayed. I was ashamed to be somebody whom the others had to notice and move aside for. I was ashamed of my own feelings of shame of not wanting to belong among those who are vulnerable and different. Nevertheless, it was not my inability to see that evoked these unwanted feelings of discomfort. Instead, it was the white stick, the tool, the aid, which attracted attention to my disability through its mere existence. Without the stick, I would have stood in the queue and got onto the bus like everybody else. It was the stick that clarified my functional failure.

Belonging to the norm involves the privilege of being invisible, being able to pass under the radar. Correspondingly, being positioned outside the norm involves negative visibility. The white stick, which in many ways appears to be so well-suited for visually impaired people, is at the same time an aid that marks the user as a person who has some form of serious loss of vision. Hence, the white stick effectively prevents passing as a fully sighted person, which is just what many of the users want to strive for as far as possible. Simultaneously, the aid also places the user outside functionality norms that value and award physically able-bodied individuals (Campbell 2009; Harpur 2009; see also Frank 1999).

This unwelcome and unwanted attention has bearing on the shame that recurs in various ways in this text. Consequently, it is not just any kind of visibility, it is a kind that degrades and leads to loss of societal

status. Furthermore, it is not just any kind of shame, it is the shame of not having access to a fully functioning body. The reason is simple. In our society, full functionality means not only normality, but also differences in various conditions of life such as education, professional activity, economy, family and health, self-esteem and independence.

To be positioned as disabled means that you risk being placed among losers, those who are discriminated against in society and subordinate. Not that this is necessarily the objective truth, but it appeals to cultural logics the creep under your skin.

Such feelings have become analytically accessible to myself largely owing to the application of autoethnographic methodology. As a researcher, the method has enabled me to come into contact with visually impaired people's life conditions at both an individual and a structural level. However, a more important methodological realization is that these and other similar (and different) experiences have directed me in the questions to ask and in my ongoing fieldwork. I would have had greater difficulties in accessing my field and my informants' life stories without that knowledge.

I will end this article as I started it by referring to my own experience as a visually impaired user of a white stick. My stick is my helping friend. On occasion, I really do experience it as an extension of my senses, part of myself; and at times I am thankful for the extra space it creates around me. But it is also a magic wand, painfully making me shrink, depriving me of my abilities. It turns me into someone other than those who, much more self-evidently, fulfil the norm of functionality.

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Notes

- 1 Since the spring of 2012, I have had a post-operative sight impairment with severe and permanent reduction of my field of vision in both eyes.
- 2 A few that can be mentioned are White Cane Education, White Cane Group Discussion, as well as parental courses for people with visual impairment and their families. So far, I have carried out interviews with around ten sight educators and around 30 adults with visual impairment. At the Sight Centre, the word *user* (Sw. *brukare*) refers to persons who are registered in any way at the centre, or who use their facilities. Throughout the article, the word is used in this sense but also as a synonym for the user of a mobility cane. It should be mentioned that names of participants in the article are fictitious.
- 3 This has become a recurring theme in a large number of films, which were to a greater or lesser degree based on reality. For a brief overview see <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/sa-realistisk-ar-filmens-vilda-jakt-pa-vaccin/>
- 4 See *Dagens Nyheter* 10 December 2005: Han tog en drink och vann till slut.
- 5 An extreme example is the jokes and humour that were part of the everyday experience during the Holocaust (Ostrower 2015).

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Fieldwork

Interviews with informants carried out between 2018 and 2022. All transcripts and recordings are in the possession of the researcher.

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