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‘It’s better if someone can see me for who I am’: Stories of (In)visibility for Students with a visual impairment within South African Universities

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Abstract

Issues of visibility, invisibility and the nondisabled gaze are very relevant to the lives of many disabled persons. With this paper we tentatively show that, despite the physical ‘over’ visibility of disabled bodies, many intricate parts of their personhood remain obscured and invisible. Interviews with 23 students with a visual impairment revealed that they sometimes experienced stares and averted gazes from their sighted counterparts. In response, they often hid their entire impairment, or parts thereof, in an effort to conform and gain acceptance and to earn membership to a nondisabled peer group. Acceptance was often found in companionship with fellow disabled peers. Since these stories told of continuing exclusion for disabled students on tertiary grounds, further participatory research is recommended.

Keywords

Visibility; visual impairment; higher education; South Africa

Introduction

The politics of visibility and invisibility are central to the experience of disability and to the field of disability studies. Garland-Thomson (2009a) has articulated the complexity of what she terms ‘staring’ and the concomitant processes of looking at others and being looked at. One of the paradoxes of having a visible impairment is that, although this may make one immediately visible to others, this very visibility may be experienced as a way in which the person who has the impairment is in fact not seen for themselves but rather as a cipher representing a particular category of people. When Shakespeare (2014, 51) talks of disabled people as ‘dustbins for disavowal’, part of the disavowal may come from disabled people being seen as representing something other than themselves – a category of persons thought to embody negative aspects of human character and experience.

Disability has been, and continues to be, the stuff of freak shows and entertainments, whereby the body and the appearance of the disabled person serves as a means not of recognition of personhood but of the performance of difference, and a way in which people with normative bodies can project their anxieties into a particular group (Garland-Thompson 1996; Hughes 2012). Conversely, and not unrelated to this highly regulated and policed form of display, many disabled people are hidden by their families or choose to obscure their impairment where possible. This is often in order to protect disabled people from stigmatisation and abuse, but concealment strategies may in themselves increase marginalization (French 2004; Reeve 2012).

Issues of looking and being looked at are not unique to disabled people. There are forms of gaze which limit and stereotype various groups of people. There are common stereotypes about what different types of female and male bodies do and should look like, about the bodies of White versus Black people, about normative heterosexual bodies as opposed to the bodies of gay people, and so on. In a highly visual culture in which it is easier than ever to transmit images across the globe, and to choose to present oneself visually in a range of ways, using widely available technology, processes of looking and being looked at become more complex, with layers of representation and misrepresentation being a reality for many people world-wide.

Higher education, and looking at race in South Africa

Ways of seeing and being seen are very pertinent to issues of race in South Africa. For centuries,¹ Black people experienced looks that marginalised them and left them absent and invisible from central spaces. The powerful way in which gaze established and enforced racial hierarchy becomes clear when looking at photographic images from the past. Even before the Apartheid years, what was seen and how it was seen was strictly controlled by the South African Government. In 1931, for example, it was objectionable to portray interactions between White and Black persons in films, photographs or concerts (Hepple 1960). Similarly, to emphasise this 'natural' divide between races and to rationalise the need for separate development, photographic images turned the South African gaze to the rich, traditional cultures of non-White races (Gaule 2002). What these photos obscured – and there were illegal, resistant photographic images that revealed these truths – were the real lived experiences of Black persons under the Apartheid government. What was not legally captured on photographic film was their impoverished living conditions and the torture, abuse and killing they experienced at the hands of Apartheid rulers (Badsha, Harris, Mendel and Weinberg 1989). What was not seen, but visually imagined, was therefore as influential to the segregation of Black people as that which was visible to the eye.

Colour was therefore politically recognised during Apartheid, but used as grounds to keep certain groups of people invisible. People that were classified as non-Whites were not

¹Black (mainly from African descent), White (mainly from European descent), Coloured (from a combination of ethnic groups) and Indian/Asian are the main labels attached to ethnic groups in South Africa. In the national Census of 2011, citizens of South Africa were asked to categorize themselves within one of these groups (with an additional category that was called 'other' for those persons who did not fit into one of these categories). Indian/Asian was omitted from this paper, since none of the participants fell within this category.

allowed to occupy the same spaces as their White compatriots. White and Black citizens did not attend the same schools, live in the same neighbourhoods, use the same public facilities or marry each other (Howell, Chalklen and Alberts 2006). This divide ran deeper than a mere demographic separation; it meant that a small percentage of people enjoyed a wealth of resources while the majority had to contend with very little (Bantjes, Swartz, Conchar and Derman 2015; Leibowitz 2012).

In higher education the situation was no different. In general, White students attended wealthy universities, while other races had to contend with poorly resourced tertiary institutions, where such institutions were available. Twenty years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, historically 'White' universities are generally still more affluent than other tertiary institutions (Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) 2011). Even though steps have been taken to rectify the racial composition on tertiary campuses, many universities are still very homogenous and, if not, internal segregation and racism often prevail (Conradie and Brokensha 2014; Leibowitz 2012). At the time of writing, Black students at University of Cape Town, an historically White South African university, were mobilising to have the statue of Cecil John Rhodes removed from the campus. Rhodes was a British imperialist who donated the land on which the University is built, to the nation. To many, his statue in pride of place on the campus symbolises the extent to which colonialism and Whiteness remain part of the fabric of the university.

Method

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 students with a visual impairment at Stellenbosch University (SU) – a previously Whites-only institution – and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) – which is partly a historically Black institution. All the students with a visual impairment that was listed on the databases of the universities were invited to participate in the study.

The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) shaped our lenses for data collection and analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). This meant, (1) listening to the lived experiences of students, and (2) making sense of/interpreting their narratives. I (the first author) listened to their experiences through two individual and one focus group interview. The students responded to the question, "Tell me about your social experiences on campus?"

According to the principles of IPA, it is important to consider the smallest details of the data while still seeing the larger, holistic picture (Smith et al. 2009). Each interview was analysed separately. We read each line carefully, in the search for underlying meanings and patterns between lines. In this way, themes within one interview were identified, whereafter we rewrote the story of each individual. Hereafter, we searched for themes across the cases so that readers could hear the joined voices of participants (Smith 2011).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from both universities to conduct this study. An informed consent form was e-mailed to each participant prior to their interview. Ethical issues were

once again explained during the interview, particularly their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Thereafter they were requested to sign the consent form or to orally provide their consent on an audio recording.

All interviews were audio recorded and, after transcription, these recordings were destroyed. To protect the identity of each participant, pseudonyms were used in this paper.

Note on terminology

In the social model of disability, the term ‘disabled people’ is preferred, as people are considered to be disabled by social exclusion and discrimination (Oliver 1990). In contrast, impairment refers to the physical or medical basis of a disability that encapsulates the limitations of physical, sensory or psychological function (Watermeyer 2013). In this paper, ‘disabled people’, ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ were used in line with the prescriptions of this model. When we referred to the social exclusion and barriers imposed upon disabled persons, we used the term ‘disability’, while ‘impairment’ was restricted to the physiological impairment (such as visual impairment). Following this logic, we chose to use the phrase ‘students with a visual impairment’ rather than ‘visually impaired students’.

We grouped visual ability into two broad categories, namely blind and partially sighted students. Blind students use Braille or audio assistance for reading and use assistance to walk independently, for example, with a cane or a guide dog. Partially sighted students read large print and use no assistance while walking.

Results and discussion

The data we gathered from the interviews resulted in tentative findings. Data collection stretched over six months and told the stories of 23 participants at one point in time. The findings could have been enhanced through a longitudinal study; following the students over a longer time period. Furthermore, we only listened to students with a visual impairment. Listening to the perceptions on visual impairment from sighted students could have provided a clearer and broader picture on the determinants of the social experiences of students with a visual impairment.

The overarching thread that ran through all the themes was whether students felt seen in their entirety and, when they did not, the strategies they employed to be seen by their sighted counterparts. Three themes told these complex stories. These were: (1) (in)visibility, (2) to hide or not to hide a visual impairment, and (3) being held in the gaze of disabled friends. The first theme addressed the perceived behaviour of nondisabled students towards their disabled counterparts. In the second theme, the students spoke of the strategies they used to become acceptable in the eyes of others, while the third centred on their friendships with other disabled students. Contrary to our expectations, we found no difference between the experiences of students from CPUT and SU.

(In)visibility: Looking and looking away

The students experienced that nondisabled persons sometimes looked at them or looked away from them. Some recalled that the nondisabled gaze was fixedly directed to them in a stare, while, in other instances nondisabled eyes avoided and overlooked them. The real issue here is not whether nondisabled people saw them, but whether the students felt truly seen and validated in the grasp of these looks or averted gazes.

Stares—Participants did not necessarily feel ‘seen’ when someone stared at them. Even though stares meant that someone looked at them and that their presence was physically recognised, these stares often did not make them feel truly seen. Within the stare, they did not see an acknowledgement of their entire personhood, but rather the recognition of their differentness. They felt that they were seen only in part and not in the full variety and complexity of their being. This was movingly reflected by these words of Nandi:

When I’m around people I forget that there’s something with my eyes. At a later stage you’ll go like, oh, someone is looking at me in a strange way. That’s when I’ll come to remember, oh, my eyes are different. So they are looking at me for them, they are not even listening to what I’m saying, they are just looking at my eyes as if something is wrong with them. But it’s better if someone can see and listen, you know, can see me for who I am. (Nandi)

Nandi felt that parts of herself were not validated and affirmed through the stares of others. On the contrary, only her visual impairment was affirmed and, through the eyes of others, she was once again reminded of the differentness of her body – she was reduced to an example of a disabled body. She felt that nondisabled persons were not interested in what she had to say or who she was, since the focus of the stares fell on her visual impairment. In this way, the stare, in some way, invalidated the nondisabled parts of herself and made her into a signifier for their own concerns and anxieties about disability.

Although stares were commonly experienced as an invalidation of parts of the self, some stories showed that stares, paradoxically enough, sometimes served as an opportunity to become fully known. For example, Vicky recalled an incident during her school-going years. In her school, one learner stared at her and thought she was a monster. In response, Vicky used this opportunity to put the learner at ease and to educate her around her visual impairment:

In her eyes I was like a monster. Until I explained to her where it (impairment) came from and why it was like that. Only then she understood. (Vicky)

Such a tangible reality are stares for some disabled persons and/or for people with disfigurements, that feminist disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009a) dedicated an entire book to it. She echoes the experiences of the students when she writes, ‘Staring, then, has the power to sustain or demolish us’ (2009a, 58). Just like the students, she acknowledges that the staring gaze of others may leave one feeling invalidated and ‘not seen’, while simultaneously, and paradoxically, leaving room to become known. Garland-Thomson summarised this neatly when she wrote, ‘Staring becomes a starrer’s quest to know and a staree’s opportunity to be known’ (Garland-Thomson 2009a, 14).

In all these instances, the encounter of stares were only reported by partially sighted students. The reason for this is rather self-explanatory. Blind students could not see that others were staring at them and therefore they did not report it. It could of course also be that nobody stared at the blind students. However, given the fact that people were staring at partially sighted students, this explanation seemed rather unlikely.

Avoidance—At the opposite end of stares – but not very different from it – some students said that nondisabled people did not look at them at all. In many instances, they were ignored, forgotten and avoided by their nondisabled peers:

Many people simply ignore you or forget about you. But then others, they simply walk wide circles around you. (Tracey)

Some nondisabled students even tiptoed around the topic of disability and impairment:

If people talk about it (visual impairment), they don't want to be overheard. It's almost like they are embarrassed that they are talking about it. (Vicky)

As could be expected, these avoidant behaviours did not lead to a feeling of 'being seen' for the participants. To the contrary, it often elicited feelings of self-doubt and being overlooked. For example, many female participants mentioned that men avoided them. In instances like these, they often wondered which part of them was not okay: was it their appearance, their visual impairment, their personality?

There were also some instances when they (men) came to visit me, but as soon as they hear about it (visual impairment) then I simply never hear from them again. (Ashley)

What is particularly difficult for me is that people don't just approach me and talk to me, especially not men. Sometimes I wonder whether it's because I don't look like a Barbie doll? Understand? I don't always know whether it's because of the fact that I can't see or because of the fact that I don't have a superstar body. But I think in instances when men don't approach me it's probably because they see that I'm blind and they don't know how to handle it. (Haily)

I don't know whether they don't want to ask me out, because I'm this passive girl who don't easily go out or is it my disability? Or is it my personality? (Vicky)

However, the students primarily believed that nondisabled persons avoided them because of their fear and discomfort around disability and impairment. For example, they speculated that nondisabled persons were so scared of doing the wrong thing when approaching them that they rather did nothing at all. In this understanding, it seemed like the participants recognised that some nondisabled persons wanted to approach them, but they really did not know how to do so:

Sometimes it's a bit more difficult making friends. Uhm, you know, because some people aren't comfortable with the fact that you are blind. (Carla)

They (sighted people) are so scared that they might do something wrong, so they rather do nothing at all. (Ilse-Marie)

On the whole, the looks or averted eyes of sighted individuals did not contribute to a feeling of being seen. Instead, where the students experienced the looks of nondisabled persons, they mostly felt that only their visual impairment, which was only a part of their identity, was seen. Their lives were much more complex than just the experience of disability and impairment, and it is this complexity and multifaceted nature of their lives (and all lives are complex and multi-faceted) that they felt sighted students could not understand. They felt that only their visual impairment was seen.

According to psychoanalyst, Winnicott (1960), being seen is central to the development of the self. Within the visual gaze of another, human beings come to the precious understanding that they matter to someone else. Reflected in the eyes directed to them, they find validation and, hereby, they are able to see themselves more clearly (Garland-Thomson 2009a; Watermeyer 2013; Watermeyer and Swartz 2008). Thus, since being seen is like a mirror reflecting one's worth, its absence will impede individuals' ability to see and know themselves completely (Watermeyer, 2013).

To hide or not to hide a visual impairment

Everyone spoke about the visibility of their visual impairment. Some partially sighted students, whose impairment was less obvious, went through great lengths to keep the 'secret' of their visual impairment. Others, particularly those who were blind, wanted others to notice their impairment as a measure to keep out of harm's way. Some, irrespective of their visual category, remained silent about the difficult parts of their disability; thereby leading to another form of invisibility.

To hide a visual impairment—The relative invisibility of partial sight left most of these students with the option to conceal their impairment in order to gain acceptance and inclusion into a nondisabled peer group. Many of them tried to obscure their visual impairment; the only part of them that was generally 'seen' by nondisabled persons. For example, Emma, a student with partial sight who attended a mainstream school, succeeded in hiding her visual impairment for three years during secondary education:

And I always hid it, I don't think anyone noticed anything. (Emma)

During tertiary studies this silence around disability and impairment mostly implied that they did not ask for special accommodations:

The problem is I don't want to be like treated differently from the other students.
The help that you get in class ... I don't want special help. I must get the help that all the other students get. (Ryan)

Some students grappled with the conflict of blending in on the one hand, which required obscuring a part or all of the self, hence being accepted more easily; and on the other hand, allowing their visual impairment to be seen, so that they could receive much needed accommodations:

So I'm always between a rock and a hard place: whether I should tell my lecturer in order to try and make my life easier, or whether I should keep quiet and try to fit in. Because sometimes you really just want to fit in. (Emma)

For Ashley, the decision to disclose her visual impairment to a prospective boyfriend was rather complex. Not only did she have to decide on the ‘perfect’ time for this revelation, but she also had to weigh the consequences of each decision:

And should I tell them (prospective boyfriends) or shouldn’t I tell them? And when? And let’s say I don’t tell, then I was dishonest. But let’s say I tell him, then I lose the guy before he even gets to know me. (Ashley)

For Vicky it was important to hide her impairment, because (1) she wanted to protect others from their discomforts around disability and impairment, and (2) she wanted to protect herself from this discomfort:

If I put on my glasses, people are less uncomfortable around me. ... But if I don’t have my glasses on, then they can see, ‘no, she is quite partially sighted’. Because one day I was at the market and I didn’t have my glasses on. And then the one guy told me, ‘your one eye is not moving at all.’ I said, ‘Yes, because it cannot see.’ He only replied by saying, ‘Oh.’ But he probably wondered how I get by, because my one eye is standing still and the other one moves and is quite all right, so what’s the matter? So I don’t know, but if I don’t have my glasses on people treat me differently. So I rather put my glasses on. It makes the next person more comfortable and then they accept me more easily, because, yes, my glasses are sort of like my shield. (Vicky)

From this quote it is clear that her glasses, being her shield, had to protect her from others, and, on the flipside, had to protect others against her. Behind the glasses lay the vulnerable truth about her disability and visual impairment. That truth which makes others uncomfortable and makes her body visible in a foreign way. The truth from which she had to ‘shield’ herself.

These results coincide with various previous research (e.g., Jacklin 2010; Jacklin, Robinson, O’Meara and Harris 2006; Magnus and Tøssebro 2013; Orsini-Jones 2009). These studies showed that, despite the potentially grave academic implications, many disabled students decide not to disclose their visual impairment. In some instances, this was related to the very valid fear that the knowledge of their impairment would overshadow all their other qualities, allowing others to see only their impairment (Magnus and Tøssebro 2013).

However, hiding can have various adverse effects for disabled persons. Donna Reeve (2012) warns that trying to pass as normal (Goffman 1963) might have emotional consequences for disabled persons as they have to live with the ever-present reality that their visual impairment might be discovered. In some respects this is similar to ‘passing for white’ (Nerad 2014) in the context of racial oppression – it means living with the constant anxiety of being unmasked as dishonest. A further consequence, French (2004) and Garland-Thomson (2009b) pointed out, was that disabled persons, in their pursuit to spare nondisabled persons the discomfort of their impairment, might deny their limitations and needs and, hereby, betray themselves. The last-mentioned we saw in the students’ denial of much needed accommodations.

To be visible—Not all the students tried to obscure their entire impairment. In fact, some students, particularly those with a visible disability, hoped that their impairment was visible to others so that they could escape physical harm:

There were instances where students tried walking between me and my cane. ...
They try it or they kick it aside. On the one hand you sort of want to be seen so that they don't walk over me or try to walk between me and my cane or cause my cane to fall and then it's a big mess. (Mia)

This realisation that they needed to be seen was sometimes an evolving process, particularly if they acquired their visual impairment later in life. For example, when Sue became blind at the age of 13, she was ashamed to use her white cane:

What was probably the biggest adjustment for me was walking with a white cane. The fact that I simply appeared blind with it. The fact that others could see that I couldn't see. (Sue)

In time, however, she realised the need to be seen and, today, she wants to be seen:

In the beginning I would've thought, no, I don't want to be so visible. Now it's like, 'Hey! Please see me. Don't walk into me'. (Sue)

She therefore started to appreciate the visibility of her white cane:

I just think that the cane makes you more visible as a blind person. It's a very good thing, because then nobody walks into me or runs me over. (Sue)

Yet, wanting to be visible did not mean that these students did not still long for some invisibility:

On the one hand you want to be seen so that they don't walk over me or try to walk between me and my cane or cause my cane to fall and then it's a whole mess. And on the other hand you want them to see you as part of them. So that was very difficult. (Mia)

To hide parts of disabling experiences and impairment—Some students, irrespective of their visual category, did not hide their visual impairment completely; they brushed over the difficult parts of having a disability. Often these students considered the possible discomfort and anxiety their impairment might have elicited for nondisabled persons. They learned that the painful parts of a disability and impairment, those parts that they perhaps could not make peace with, were anxiety-provoking for nondisabled persons. For example, Carla recounted that others – meaning nondisabled persons – would only be able to 'cope' with her impairment if she appeared to accept it with equanimity:

The way you handle your disability is going to determine how others are going to treat you with your disability or how they are going to treat your disability. And that is where I also saw that it is what you make of your disability that is going to determine how others are going to 'cope' with it. (Carla)

Therefore, in order to make others feel comfortable about their impairment and to fit in, they had to 'accept' their impairment. Generally they felt that only when they accepted their

impairment in a manner which did not cause anxiety to others, others would be able to accept it, too. So, despite limitations, despite the fact that, once in a while, everyone experiences difficulties and hardship, these students had to fabricate bravery (Carel 2013; Watermeyer 2013):

I taught myself that if I don't accept myself, nobody will. And immediately when you start to accept the problems that you have, people start not to realise that, they don't recognise that, because they don't see it in you. (Xavier)

The language of 'acceptance' has a clear basis in the popularisation of psychoanalysis (the opposite of acceptance, presumably, is the stigmatised and pathologised state of 'denial'). Applying popularised psychoanalysis in this way is predicated on the idea that disabled people must have psychological trauma or pathology requiring a prescribed set of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours as a form of treatment or palliation. Sadly, however, the fact is that no amount of thoughts can really 'treat' an impairment and a disability or cure it. Sally French (2004), a disabled writer who grew up with partial sight, wrote about the roots of denying an impairment. From early on, she learned that her close family members became anxious around the 'truth' of her visual limitations. So, in order to 'calm' their fears, she started minimising any talk about difficulties she experienced – in effect, she learned that in order to manage the anxiety of others she had to be inauthentic and to lie about certain key parts of her experience. As an adult, this concealment continued. She noted how disabled persons would frequently assure nondisabled individuals that they were okay, despite difficult circumstances.

However, as stated before, 'being seen', and this means being seen in all our complexity, is an invaluable part of understanding ourselves and knowing that we matter to another. If we thus do not show all of ourselves – our ugly, unlikable, shameful parts, as well as our desirable and attractive qualities – we are stripped of the ability to be fully seen by others and by ourselves (Watermeyer 2013; Watermeyer and Swartz 2008). In the words of Gill (2001, 364), 'how can they be accepted for who they are unless they are knowable as they are?' Of course it can be argued that most people wear masks. Gay people, for example, might not tell others about their sexual orientation and might thus hide parts of themselves. However, what we are interested in here is how being seen or not manifests within the lives of disabled people.

As Brian Watermeyer (2013) noted, disabled persons commonly find themselves between a rock and a hard place – when they show their full selves, this may raise anxieties for nondisabled persons and therefore only their impairment becomes visible. On the other hand, if they obscure their impairment or parts of their disabling experiences, they also live with not being fully seen. At its worst, being fully seen becomes an elusive possibility regardless of what disabled people may or may not do.

Being held in the gaze of disabled friends

Participants mostly found comfort in friendships with their fellow disabled peers. Goffman (1963) referred to people who shared one's stigma, as 'sympathetic others'. He rightfully argued that, amongst sympathetic others, a person could drop the mask of accommodative adjustment and relax in the comfort of feeling at home, feeling accepted and feeling like a

whole normal human being. If they could just 'be' rather than 'become', they could be their entire, complete selves. Amongst their fellow blind students, the participants experienced the value of being seen and accepted in their entirety. Nandi thus referred to the Disability Unit as 'a home', where she felt 'normal', while Emma said that only students with a visual impairment could truly understand her:

I will go like, let me go to the disability unit if it's not busy. I just want to go and spend time there. It's not that I'm trying to avoid the outside, but I felt normal when I went there. ... I feel like the people who are here are dealing with different situations – are dealing with people like me. So. And they won't look at me and go like, oh, something is different. They won't judge me. Yah, I felt so encouraged. ... Being here, being part of the disability unit is like knowing that I have a place; I have people who care. (Nandi)

Similarly, William and Emma appreciated that they could share academic struggles with their blind friends:

I have a friend who is also blind who studies exactly the same course as myself and started studying at the same time I did. ... So another blind person who suffers like me. ... It sort of helps telling someone how bad life is. And then if he also agrees with it, then it's even better. (William)

So here I sort of fell in with the blind circle of friends. And it's a great support in that way to have people to drink coffee with and you bitch together about whose lecturer is the worst and whose work is the most behind, that sort of stuff. It makes it easier. Then you don't feel so alone and caught up in everything. (Emma)

From this it seems that they did not have to hide parts of themselves when they were with their blind friends; here they were free to talk about the painful, difficult parts of disability. Having said this, although it was understandable that these students were somewhat relieved being able to talk about their painful experiences, caution is also warranted. It is somewhat worrying that not one person mentioned, for example, that they felt irritated by other blind students. Surely, not all persons with a visual impairment are alike. In all groups of people, we might find people who we get along with and others who we do not. Why then did it seem that the blind students of this study only had good things to say about their nondisabled counterparts? Of course, it could be that they only chose disabled friends with whom they felt comfortable and with whom they shared commonalities; on the other hand, it could also imply that they once again denied parts of themselves in order to be accepted by their fellow disabled counterparts. For example, even though they might have felt that they did not like some of the blind students in higher education, they might have become friends with them because it is perhaps too hard denying that someone who shared their exclusion was not someone they could relate to. In this way, 'feeling comfortable and seen' by students with a visual impairment might have led to another form of misrecognition altogether.

Conclusion

Disability studies analyses have too often lacked insight into the personal and psychological ramifications of exclusion (Watermeyer 2014). In this regard, stories of visibility and

invisibility are valuable in their ability to reveal felt complexities of disabled lives. In this work, the stories provided insights into issues of misrecognition, concealment and acceptance. Not only did the stories shed light on disability experience, but they also allowed for speculations around the nondisabled gaze.

To some extent, the processes of looking and not looking, of being seen and not being seen, of display and concealment, form part of an inevitable politics of disability and impairment. Where people are perceived to be different from others or to be in a minority, it is inevitable that others will want to look, or to look away, as Garland-Thomson (2009a) suggests. In higher education contexts which have historically been relatively homogeneous, however, issues of visibility and invisibility become more marked. Steps towards inclusion and diversity will inevitably be associated with experiences of difference and exclusion, and it is important to be sensitive to these issues.

Having said this, although looking and not looking are in many regards inevitable in interactions between disabled and nondisabled persons, disability support staff could nonetheless make greater efforts in the social inclusion of disabled students. Instead of only focusing on their learning experiences and the physical accessibility of campuses (FOTIM, 2011), these staff members could, for example, encourage disabled students to participate in accessible social activities such as the university choir. Awareness campaigns and workshops for nondisabled students could also educate and desensitise these students to disability experience; which might make it easier for them to approach their disabled counterparts in a positive manner.

We recommend further research that would include consultation with disability support staff of South African universities, together with disabled students themselves. Collaboration with these important role-players may lead to plans of action to include disabled students on tertiary campuses. There will be great value in the action research cycle of holding dialogue meetings in mixed groups with disabled students, lecturers, and disability units. Given the sensitivities involved, these groups will have to be managed carefully as both deeply personal and intergroup events, but facilitated and supportive dialogue may lead to a broader understanding of issues. Additionally, further studies could also gauge the perceptions of disability from nondisabled persons, since they are involved in gazing and avoidance. Building on this work, our hope is that nondisabled persons would be able to see students with a visual impairment in a world where a core challenge for them is not just that they are unable to see as others see, but that they experience not being seen, as others are seen.

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Points of interest

- The psychological value of being seen in one's entirety is undeniable.
- This paper explores how 23 students with a visual impairment from two historically different universities in South Africa experienced the gaze or non-gaze of nondisabled peers.
- In order to gain acceptance from peers, the students with a visual impairment often hid their impairment or parts thereof.
- Most students made friends with other students with a visual impairment and, with these friends, they often felt they could be their full selves.
- These complex relationships between sighted and disabled students point to the fact that the latter are still not fully included within South African universities.