**Chapter 2**

**Affective Possibilities of Everyday Encounters with Blindness**

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**Preliminary Discussion: Social Encounters and Affect Theory**

Social encounters have long been a site of sociological fascination (Goffman, 1963). Our encounters shape the very fabric of everyday life. We shape, and are shaped by, our encounters with others, which in turn, are shaped by the kinds of spaces that we are situated within. While we are not able to predict the nuances of social encounters, many of our encounters do abide by particular social norms. For Goffman (1963), these norms constitute our social performances. We interact with the world around us in the ways that are governed by socially accepted routines and structures. Those who abide by these standards are able to pass through social space unnoticed and unmarked. For those who do not neatly pass through these structures, their presence disrupts the rhythm of social space and is met with unease. In the words of Garland-Thompson (1997, 7-8) ‘corporeal departures from dominant expectations never go uninterpreted or unpunished … those bodies deemed inferior become spectacles of otherness while the unmarked are sheltered in the neutral space of normalcy’. By attending to encounters with blindness, this chapter explores how the rules and rituals of social encounters are disrupted by the presence of visual impairment (Scott, 1991) as a result of the culturally nurtured stories, assumptions and attitudes surrounding the concept of ‘blindness’ (Bolt, 2012). These encounters take place within different types of spaces, and constitute cultural stations of blindness.

As spaces are organised in categorical and hierarchical ways, it is important to recognise that these social encounters can affect bodies in different ways. Indeed, bodies are moved by these configurations of space, and aligned to or against one another. In this way, space is not only ‘a passive container of life, but also an active constituent of social relations’ (Kitchin, 1998, 344). Social encounters are affective; they shape the ways that different bodies are able to be and move within different spaces. Indeed, the presence of visual impairment shapes social encounters in both limiting and productive ways. Engaging with affect theory can therefore help us to recognise the diverse possibilities of disabled people, and, in the context of this chapter, to explore the affective possibility of bodies when blindness enters the room. This approach hopes to move away from the understanding that disabled people are passive (Shakespeare, 1994), and recognises that ‘the capacity of a body is never defined by a body alone but is always aided and abetted by, and dovetails with, the field or context of its force-relations’ (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, 3). Indeed, by introducing two cultural stations of blindness, this chapter shows that any single story of blindness is flawed and unable to capture the multiple possibilities of encounters within everyday life. It is only by reflecting upon multiple and often competing stories that we can come to a more nuanced understanding of blindness (and disability more broadly) as a complex, diverse and multi-faceted phenomenon (Shakespeare, 2015). This understanding of blindness recognises moments where affective capacity is limited but is equally attentive to the times where it is enhanced and the possibility of *being* is not limited to the confines of normative social expectations.

In this chapter, I consider two different cultural stations of blindness, each of which constitutes different affective possibilities for moving within social space. The first encounter reflects upon a story shared with me during my research by Shaz. In this encounter, blindness is met with hostility and marked out as ‘a presence couched within the understanding of it as the binary opposite of sight’ (Michalko, 2001, 356). In turn, this encounter shapes the way in which Shaz is able to move within public space, thus limiting his affective capacity. However, the second encounter considers an alternative understanding of the ways in which blindness can enrich educational encounters. Located within the higher education classroom, this second cultural station demonstrates how blindness can change the way in which classrooms are experienced by those within, which opens up new opportunities for engagement with one another. These opposing cultural stations signify competing constructions of blindness, which in turn, constitute different affective possibilities within encounters of visual impairment.

**Everyday Hate and Social Space: The Affects of Unsolicited Contact**

It is well documented that hate can become an intrusive, yet ordinary part of disabled people’s day-to-day lives (Burch, 2021a; EHRC, 2011) particularly as they move within social spaces. Indeed, social spaces can be risky terrain to occupy for disabled people, due to the strict norms and expectations that govern these spaces. During my PhD research, disabled people shared a range of experiences of hate when occupying social space. In one interview, Shaz described a hate incident that occurred while he was walking through his town centre.

*I was actually going independently using my cane in a public space, and somebody, I nearly walked into something. It wasn’t until later that somebody stopped me and said erm, basically it was a group of lads. I was moving using my long cane as you do. I couldn't distinguish people, but I can distinguish light from dark and erm, things suddenly went dark and I ducked because I thought I was going to walk into something. And somebody told me what it was, it was a group of lads walking towards me and one of the lads held his arm out straight as if I’d, so if I didn’t move I’d have walked into it. And you just can’t understand the, you know, the motivation for that is that the whole thing about wanting to exclude people.*

The above social encounter creates a space that is characterised by both distance and close proximity between Shaz and the ‘group of lads.’ The ‘group of lads’ recognise Shaz’s visual impairment through his use of a cane, and ‘assume authority’ (Bolt, 2021) over the space that is shared between them. Indeed, while the space is shared between both parties, the ‘group of lads’ take ownership of the space by making contact with Shaz. In this moment of contact, Shaz is constructed as an Other who is out of place in this space. Indeed, this unsolicited contact is significant in the way in which Shaz is constructed, as the moment disrupts normative urban codes of keeping your distance from others (Tonkiss, 2003) to reinforce his absence from the space. Following what Leder (1990) refers to as ‘dys-appearing bodies’ we can read this encounter as a cultural station which renders disabled people as both absent and insignificant. Indeed, it is the unsolicited contact with Shaz that renders blindness present within the social encounter and thus, within the surrounding social space. Blindness, as an inferior Other, is presented to the ‘group of lads’ through the symbolic signifier of a visual aid and the physical contact that follows. This cultural station of blindness illuminates how ‘the norms prescribing respectful distance and mutual inattention between strangers in the public realm are not quite as binding in encounters with those whose appearance diverges from the norm’ (Yaron et al, 2018, 748). In doing so, the social space is made in a way that does not accommodate or welcome blindness, and therefore marks Shaz out through unwanted and unanticipated contact.

The moment of contact that is instigated by the ‘group of lads’ involves a movement towards Shaz in order to create distance from him and ensure the boundaries between them are secure (Ahmed, 2014). Indeed, the physical contact can be read as an expression of hostility that secures the relationship between bodies; it aligns the ‘group of lads’ together, against Shaz, who is constituted as the ‘them’ in this encounter (Burch, 2021a). This moment impresses upon the surface of the body and informs future encounters. Indeed, when reflecting upon his experience Shaz recognised this treatment as a means of excluding him, and making him feel like the space is not ‘for’ disabled people. In this cultural station, then, the architecture of space is not within the material structure but embedded within the way in which social interactions configure the meanings and boundaries of space and the affects that this can have on those who encounter this.

In this encounter, unwanted and unsolicited contact is made as an expression of hostility. There are important parallels here between the reading of disabled people as bodies as inferior Others and as bodies in need of help which can elicit unwanted and improperly performed guiding (Calder-Dawe et al, 2020). Indeed, described by disability activist Dr Amy Kavanagh as ‘silent non-consensual touching,’ it can become a routine feature of day-to-day life to be touched by strangers when occupying social spaces (Kavanagh and Mason-Bish, 2019). Yet these ‘unanticipated encounters’ are inherently affective, and can undermine ‘predictive confidence’ within familiar surroundings (Allen, 2004). Indeed, unsolicited contact changes the make-up of an environment for which we are unprepared. While it is possible to become familiar with the physical architecture of space, unwanted contact and the intrusion of space disrupts this. It is also important to recognise the limits imposed upon how people respond to these situations. As Low (2019) has argued, when moments of unsolicited contact are challenged by disabled people, there is a further risk that this will lead to verbal abuse (Low, 2019). Public space can thus *feel* inherently risky for those bodies who are not able to move successfully through space unmarked (Burch, 2021a). Hostile encounters such as the one described above can shape the movement of bodies within different spaces; risky spaces come to be known as ‘not for them’ and avoided. This cultural station therefore demonstrates the way in which social interactions can limit the extent to which people feel they can safely occupy those spaces, and therefore limit their affective capacity to *be* within social spaces in the future.

**Higher Education Classroom: Affective Possibilities of Classroom Encounters**

The higher education classroom is an interesting space to explore as a cultural station of blindness. In this section, I reflect upon my own higher education classroom while studying for a Masters. The module in question was designed and taught by a person with a visual impairment which shaped the way in which blindness was made present in both limiting and affirmative ways. Like all levels of education, the traditional higher education classroom follows a range of ocularcentric rituals that privilege sight as a form of knowing (Bolt, 2016; Jay, 1994). Indeed, the practices that are ingrained within our previous educational encounters follow us to higher education and shape the way in which we occupy the classroom. These spaces rely upon communication through eye contact, and the reading of body language. For example, the act of hand-raising has been culturally implemented as ‘the cardinal rule of the classroom decorum’ (Kleege, 1999; Michalko, 2001). However, these acts rely on the ocularcentric assumption that everyone in the classroom is able to see through visual means (Michalko, 2001) and although unintentional, can be read as excluding people with visual impairments. Within this cultural station of blindness, such encounters effectively ‘disable’ people with visual impairments to denote ‘a blind Other, demarcated by an ocularcentric social aesthetic’ (Bolt, 2014b, 110). This disabling process may not be intentional, but is embedded within typical classroom practices, as illustrated in the following encounter:

*During a classroom discussion, a student raises their hand to ask a question. The student appears to be confused that their hand has not been recognised. After a moment of silence, a support tutor tells them to say their name and continue making their contribution. The student appears confused, but continues to engage in discussion.*

We can assume that the student in this encounter was following normative classroom rituals. However, in doing so, there is an unintentional ignorance or avoidance of visual impairment which permeates the disabling conventions of confusion, irrationality, and ineptness which are subsequently imposed onto people with visual impairments (Bolt, 2014a; Rodas, 2009). Indeed, this encounter is made in the moment of silence as the student waits for their hand to be acknowledged by the tutor. This silence creates an awkward atmosphere which is felt within the classroom by others who are witnessing the encounter. This encounter creates what Brennan (2004 cited in Åhäll, 2018) refers to as ‘affective atmosphere’. This ‘affective atmosphere’ describes the way in which we sense the moods characterised within the spaces that we enter, and that this mood ultimately influences how we feel and become in that space (Burch, 2021a). As a spectator to this encounter, I felt this affective atmosphere impress upon my own body; my presence in the classroom felt tense and unnerving as I became an unwilling participant in a disabling encounter. I felt stuck within the awkwardness of the encounter, unsure whether to sit within the silence, or to disrupt this and advise the student to say their name.

This encounter illustrates the affectivity of social encounters and the stickiness of emotions as they move to shape those within shared spaces (Ahmed, 2014). Emotions surfaced to create a collective ‘us’ who, in our shared understanding of the communicative conflicts at play and refusal to disrupt, became unwillingly active in the creation of a disabling social environment. This encounter demonstrates the often unintentional, yet inherently disabling practices that key people with visual impairments to a metanarrative of ‘blindness’ (Bolt, 2005; 2012). Indeed, while there is an overall shared understanding of more affirmative classroom practices, the collective ignorance and awkwardness of these marks out visual impairment as an Other figure that does not align to the normative higher education classroom. In this encounter, then, the higher education classroom as a cultural station becomes a space that is limiting. Similar to the first encounter experienced by Shaz, blindness is constructed as an Other to the normative configuration of social space.

While we must continue to draw attention to, and reflect upon, moments of awkwardness and oppression, we must also be attentive to ‘how people make sense of their circumstances and negotiate and initiate patterns of activity in concert with others’ (Wetherell et al, 2020, 18). Importantly then, paying attention to affective capacity opens up a space to recognise the ways that the navigation of everyday space represents a unique and embodied way of knowing and being in the world – that is, affective possibility (Burch, 2021b). Attending to what Wetherall et al (2020) term as ‘acts of quiet resistance,’ it is possible to consider the different ways that disabled people come to negotiate the spaces around them. Such an approach takes into account the ways in which we are affected by, and go on to affect, our surrounding worlds. In doing so, it is possible to ask questions about our affective capacity to address and combat the harsh realities of oppressive environments by drawing attention to the strategies that we develop. Indeed, the higher education classroom is not solely a disabling cultural station, but one of affective possibility and opportunity enriched by blindness. As Scott suggests, ‘the norms governing ordinary personal interactions cannot, as a rule, be applied when one of the actors is unable to see’ (1991, 25). Thus, in order to overcome the exclusionary conventions of ocularcentric classroom practices, the tutor invited us to communicate with him and one another in different ways:

*During the first taught session, the tutor asks students not to raise their hands when responding to questions. Instead, he invites students to say their name before continuing to make a contribution to discussion.*

The presence of visual impairment within the classroom invited students to engage in different ways with each other and the tutor. Importantly, a shift from hand-raising to verbal identification changed the way in which ‘visual impairment’ and ‘blindness’ are marked by the social encounter as it enabled the visual to become present through means other than sight (Michalko, 1999). Indeed, by moving away from a reliance upon the visual means of sight, deviance is no longer problematized and typical barriers are alleviated (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Corker & Shakespeare, 2002). That is, the construct and assumptions of ‘blindness’ are no longer imposed upon people with visual impairments, as the setting no longer requires the ability to communicate through visual means (Bolt, 2014a). Knowledge and experience of oppression can therefore pave the way for new ways of interacting with what would typically be a disabling environment. It encourages different ways of *being* and *doing* within surrounding space based upon the unique knowledge of disabled people.

This encounter demonstrates a small shift that can change the way in which the higher education classroom is experienced, and the way in which blindness becomes part of that space. While the previous encounters have constructed blindness as Other, this encounter welcomes blindness as an opportunity to engage with one another in different ways. Indeed, while the shift away from hand-raising removes a barrier to communicating within the classroom, it constituted a range of affective possibilities for those in the room. Asking students to say their name as opposed to hand-raising invited alternative ways of being *in* and engaging with the classroom environment and with one another. As a change to established educational norms, social encounters that encourage self-identification are established as ‘oral events which are interpretively transformed into the communication event’ (Michalko, 2001, 352). This small change helped to create a space that was inclusive, open and welcoming to all (Bolt, 2016; Oliver, 2004). Indeed, saying our names as a means of making ourselves present and offering our contribution helped to create a more interactive classroom environment. As someone who has to be reminded of someone’s name several times before remembering it, this shift in classroom practice dispelled the usual awkwardness I feel when meeting new people. The onus was not on me to ask what people’s names were and remember them for the first time, as I was continually reminded of names as different students engaged with discussion. This practice gave us the time and space to get to know one each other and changed the rhythm of the classroom. Indeed, as noted above, hand-raising is a classroom practice that informs power relations; it is a form of classroom management whereby the tutor controls the flow and direction of discussion. This one-directional power relation can create jolted discussion practices, and can impede the flow of conversation. On the contrary, by no longer watching for visual cues, we were able to just *be* in open dialogue and discussion. In this way, moving away from normative classroom behaviours offered alternative and more comfortable ways of being and participating in the classroom.

**Concluding Discussion: Affective Possibilities of Blindness**

In this chapter, I engage with the theoretical framework of affect theory to explore two cultural stations of blindness. Affect theory helps to move beyond the mere shaping of bodies according to social space, and instead attends to how the existence and interaction of those bodies shape the space around them (Burch, 2021a). Moving away from thinking about the body as a singular entity, affect theory considers ‘how bodies are always thoroughly entangled processes, and [are] defined by their capacities to affect and be affected’ (Blackman and Venn, 2010, 9). By engaging with affect theory, then, we are asked to think about the way that bodies (both human and non-human) interact with one another, which is also shaped by the characteristics of the space that we are in. Affect theory asks questions about affectivity within the context of our everyday encounters, spaces, and lives (Jóhannsdóttir et al, 2020; Wetherell, 2015). It considers how feelings and movements are negotiated in the public sphere which come to be experienced through the body (Gorton, 2007). Indeed, the way that we are moved by these feelings can shape how we interact with those around us and how we situate ourselves within particular social spaces. This diversity of affects is explored throughout this chapter, both by attending to how cultural stations of blindness can be limiting and enhancing.

Cultural station one ‘everyday hate’ explores hostility within the context of everyday social space, and the making of blindness as both absent and present. In this encounter, Shaz is marked out as a blind person, as the ‘group of lads’ physically interfere with the space around him. The encounter treats Shaz as an absent presence; absent from the space while simultaneously present through the marker of blindness. The unsolicited contact is an affirmation of boundaries between Shaz and the ‘group of lads’ which constructs a space that is ‘not for’ people with visual impairments. Indeed, social spaces that are known as ‘hot spots’ for hate encounters are made sense of as inherently risky and thus constructed as spaces to avoid. This sense of space and marginalization can impress upon the bodies of disabled people and limit their affective futures. The boundaries that are constructed between non-disabled and disabled people within social encounters are felt under the skin, shaping the extent to which people feel free to move through and between different spaces (Burch, 2021b). Such encounters can therefore constitute a disabling cultural station of blindness which imposes limits upon the affective capacity of individuals and shapes how they interact with social spaces in the future.

Cultural station two ‘the higher education classroom’ is more attentive to the affective possibilities of blindness and the ability of disabled people to disrupt normative standards and expectations. While the normative conventions of classroom practice can continue to mark out blindness as Other, there is an opportunity to transcend these standards and offer alternative ways of being in the classroom. Due to the requirement of many disabled people in navigating an inaccessible social world, disability is considered to be a body of knowledge (Siebers, 2014), within which disabled people ‘embrace complex embodiment as a means to take on unsuspected forms and to hold them in memory for the possession and use of the disability community (Siebers, 2015, 244). Indeed, it is through ‘their unique navigation of, and movement within, society (physically and symbolically), disabled people generate deep understandings of their surrounding world, which can come to critically inform future encounters’ (Burch, 2021b, 86). From this perspective, visual impairment and blindness ‘emerge not just as the Other side of the oppression coin but also as a resistant alternative’ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016, 4). Indeed, cultural station two shows how the presence of visual impairment within the classroom created a space that was not limited by or tied to conventional classroom rituals, but was more free, welcoming and participatory. That is, space does not determine the capacity of bodies entirely, but can be shaped by the interactions that take place within them. This cultural station of blindness thereby demonstrates the ways in which visual impairment shapes surrounding space and creates the possibility for more inclusive affective futures. Encounters with blindness are affective, and these affects are long-lasting.

To quote Ahmed (2004, 39) ‘the impressions we have of others, and the impressions left by others are shaped by histories that stick, at the same time as they generate the surfaces and boundaries that allow bodies to appear in the present. The impressions left by others should impress us for sure; it is here, on the skin surface, that histories are made’.

As a non-disabled person who does not have a visual impairment, I am a spectator in the different encounters shared in this chapter, but all have had a lasting impression upon me. Indeed, the cultural stations that I share reflect encounters that have resonated with me and encouraged me to think about the affective possibilities of blindness. These encounters ask questions about the ways in which the architecture of space is not limited to physical characteristics, but to the way in which bodies interact and engage with one another. Being attentive to these interactions, and reflecting upon how they make us feel, *be,* and think is important. We learn about ourselves and the world around us by reflecting upon social encounters. The cultural stations of blindness shared in this chapter therefore offer an important learning opportunity, to ask ourselves about our own experiences with, and perceptions of, blindness.

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