

Blindness and Initiating Communication

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For every blind who attempts to participate in social activities despite the many obstacles, and for those who notice and stop when a blind is looking for someone to talk to, giving him or her the feeling of belonging to society.

Abstract

This qualitative case study focuses on how congenital blind interactants initiate communication with strangers. It explores the strategies that the blind use to overcome the problems and feelings which are caused by the lack of visual information, and how they seek to reduce uncertainty in different social situations; when seeking information or help on the one hand, or in making friendship situations on the other hand. The aspect of how sighted people react when approached by a blind person will also be taken into consideration since it is closely connected to the problems and feelings the blind experience and the strategies they adopt.

“If I could not express myself, I would become like the tree in the forest – the one for which it does not matter if it makes a sound when it comes crashing down, because there is no one around to hear it. Unfortunately, there are still a great many silent fallen trees all around us if we stop and look.” (Williams, 2000: 250)

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1. Introduction

Communication is an essential aspect of human life and personal development, and initiating contact with others is the first crucial step towards successful interaction. The most common way to start communication with a stranger is to look into the eye and face area signaling an open channel for communication (Knapp, 2006). Berger and Calabrese (1975) divide the initial phase of interaction with strangers into three stages: the entry stage, the personal stage, and the exit stage. In all of these stages, signals of liking or disliking are exchanged.

The entry stage is characterized by the use of behavioural norms. Common initial questions are, e.g., Where are you from? Or, Do you have any pets? The level of involvement will increase while the strangers move into the second stage, or personal phase. That is when strangers get closer and begin to explore the attitudes and beliefs of the other person. Typically, interactants come to this stage after having several entry stage interactions. One will investigate the other for hints of their values, morals and personal issues and emotional involvement increases when they discover each other's personal values. The final stage of interactional development is the exit phase. Here, the former strangers know whether they want to continue to develop a relationship or not. They might make plans to meet again or, if there is not mutual liking, they may choose not to continue the relationship.

Due to a feeling of uncertainty which is experienced to challenge relationship development, people use a variety of strategies to reduce their uncertainty about each other and to increase the predictability and fluency of the interaction. Understanding the cycle of relational development is key to studying how people seek to reduce uncertainty about others (Berger & Calabrese, 1988).

Among sighted people, as previous research has found, natural face-to-face interactions include both nonverbal and verbal communicative behaviours (strategies). Regarding non-verbal behaviours in the beginning of and also during a conversation, the interactants' facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and so on, frequently provide much of the meaning and information of the conversation. Eye gaze also

regulates the flow of interaction during conversation. As a listener, it can signalize a desire to take a speaking turn; and as a speaker, you can pick up signals about the listener's attention, whether it is still with you or not. The amount of eye gaze varies from situation to situation, but listeners typically gaze more than speakers. Seeking feedback is another function of eye gaze. Each participant wants to know whether their partner is paying attention, showing understanding and acceptance, or in some other way responding to the dialogue (Knapp, 1978). So, what happens when vision is absent?

1.1. Theoretical background

Considering previous research about other strategies in initiating communication, there are some studies that have focused on paralinguistic strategies, including the vocal aspects of communication. It is not only linguistic information that is transmitted via paralinguistic components such as articulation control, pitch height and range, stress, and intonation. Also non-linguistic information about the speaker's culture, emotional state, personality characteristics etc. is mediated by these paralanguage components. For instance, a person's birthplace can often be identified by the paralinguistic information contained in his or her speech rate, articulation control, and extent or clip of speech. Changes in vocal intensity, articulation control, and rhythm may inform a listener about the speaker's emotional state. Other paralinguistic components such as pauses and silence may modify the meaning of a previous statement or position as communicative acts in themselves e.g., the use of silence to respond to an inappropriate question or comment (Higginbotham, Mathy-Laikko & Yoder, 1988).

On the other hand, it is argued by Poyatos (1982) that “the verbal aspect of interaction cannot carry the full communicative influence when conveying a message but must rely on the information carried by one or more nonverbal communication channels in a systematic way”.

However, according to MacCuspie (1996) “nonverbal communication and feedback, which are important components of social interaction, are available to sighted people but are not accessible for visually impaired persons”.

Surely, there are studies that raised the topic of communication when vision is absent. Jindal-Snape (2005) found that verbal feedback was effective in enabling the accurate self-evaluation of social skills that require visual cues. It was found that the accuracy of self-evaluation and of the target behaviour improved considerably after the peers provided feedback to the blind student. This study also argues that sighted peers need to understand why children with visual impairments do not use visual cues. They need to be aware that visually impaired children pay attention to language, tone of voice, the proximity of the speaker and the like. But in this study no information is given about how the blind student initiates communication with his peers and what strategies are used when faced with a new situation. Another question the study does not explore is which problems practically occur when the blind student needs to acquire new information about a particular matter and in what ways he or she communicates with the peers for this purpose. The focus of Jindal-Snape’s study lies most heavily on the peers' ways of communication and not on the blind student's communicative behaviours and problems.

Moreover, Frame (2004) describes how visual impairment affects the performance of the visually impaired person in relationships and social interaction. She found out that to perform successfully, the visually impaired person must be able to adapt to and perform competently within his or her assigned role, establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships with other people, and know how to prepare for and manage the potential responses of the audience. However, she neither describes how a blind person can start a conversation with a stranger, nor does she go further into the blind person's performance in the new social situation.

Another research by Ayres and Ayres (1999) examines whether or not a conversation initiated by an apparently disabled person would affect a non-disabled person's perceptions and behaviour in that interaction. In general, interactions between non-

disabled persons and persons with a disability are often marked by discomfort and avoidance. However, this study revealed that when the interaction is initiated by an apparently disabled person, non-disabled people are less apprehensive, more talkative, more attracted to the other, more satisfied with the interaction and entertained more positive thoughts. Initiating interaction appears to be a useful strategy that people with a disability can employ to facilitate more successful communication. However, it is not specified, whether visually impaired people were included in this study or whether the findings only concern people with other disabilities. Another aspect this study does not deal with is the strategies that the observed group was using to initiate communication and the problems that are connected to that.

Another study in this context is 'Social interaction in blind people: an experimental analysis' by Nigel J. Kemp and Derek R. Rutter (1986). The theory that the researchers wanted to test here was: What matters most about an encounter is the number of social cues available to the participants from whatever source, whether vision or any other. The more cues, the more personalized and spontaneous the conversation, so the theory. A lack of cues or so-called cluelessness supposedly affects all three dimensions of social interaction: content, style and outcome.

According to this theory, blind people, who are limited in the visual cues they send and receive, would experience a greater psychological distance in encounters and the encounters would be more task-oriented and more depersonalized.

To find out whether this was true, the researchers designed an experiment in which they observed and analysed three different groups during conversation - blind-blind, blind-sighted, and sighted-sighted - looking at all the three dimensions of behaviour (content, style and outcome.) It was expected that blind-blind conversations would be most task-oriented and depersonalized and would lack spontaneity and style. Sighted-sighted conversation was expected to be most personalized and spontaneous and blind-sighted conversation was expected to lie somewhere in between. 60 subjects took part in the experiment, 30 sighted and 30 blind. Three groups of ten people were formed. The pairs of two were told to discuss a socio-political subject with their

unknown partner and were asked to evaluate the encounter afterwards.

The experiment proved the original theory to be wrong. It showed that blind people made up for the lack of visible cues by directly asking for the personal information they were interested in. Contrary to the theory, there was not less irrelevant information in the blind-blind conversations than in the sighted-sighted condition, but more. It seems that blind people, far from avoiding the personal dimension, confront it directly and ask for the missing information in words. Also were the blind-blind conversations more spontaneous and contained more utterances. While people in the blind-blind condition formed positive impressions of each other, sighted-sighted perceptions were somewhat critical, and those in the blind-sighted condition were neutral. The prediction that turned out to be true was that the blind-sighted condition lay in between the other two. It showed that concerning accuracy there were no big differences between blind and sighted people. Only that the blind persons had more difficulties with detecting emotionality. Presumably, this is due to the lack of those non-verbal cues which indicate emotionality, especially cues transmitted or received from the face. However, the experiment showed that visual communication was less important than expected.

Although there is previous research about initiating communication and also about communication and the blind, there is no literature directly concerned with the blind's problems, feelings and strategies when it comes to initiating communication.

Indeed, the present study will address the issue of how communication is initiated by the congenitally blind and will explore which problems and feelings are experienced and what strategies are used by the congenitally blind when they initiate communication to reduce uncertainty in a new social situation.

1.2. Outline of the thesis

After the introduction, chapter two presents the main research question and gives a definition of the central terms in this research.

In chapter three, the methodology will be discussed. Research design and material will be described. Then, a look will be taken at the pilot study and the research sample. The subsequent part deals with the interview procedure describing in detail under which conditions the interviews were taken and take up the subject of which challenges occurred during the data collection. The last sub-chapters discuss the reliability and validity of the study as well as the ethical considerations.

In chapter 4, the results of the interviews with the participants will be presented.

Finally, in chapter five, the findings of the present study will be discussed in regard to previous research, mainly in regard to the Uncertainty Reduction theory, and a conclusion will be drawn.

The interview guide is to be found in the appendix of this thesis.

2. Research question and definitions

In this chapter, the main research question will be presented and the central terms used in this study will be clarified.

2.1. Research question

What strategies do the blind use when initiating communication and reducing uncertainty in new social situations: (1) seeking information, and (2) constructing friendly relations?

2.2. Definition and operationalization of central terms

The following terms, that are frequently used in this study, are of special importance to the discussed subject. A definition is given to avoid possible misunderstandings.

A. Congenital blind people:

As defined based on ICF (The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health) by the World Health Organization,

people who are visually impaired do not see well enough to perform everyday tasks, even with the aid of glasses, contact lenses, medicine or surgery. Blindness, the most severe form of visual impairment, deprives people the ability to move about unaided.

In this study, the term congenital blind addresses a group of people that is born with a sight difficulty which prevents them from distinguishing different people and their facial expressions.

B. Initiating communication:

According to the International Communication Encyclopedia, initiating communication means:

the first movement that we take to start contact with people we meet for the first time. We may approach them for two main reasons: first, to make friends or to form a relationship of any kind, and second, to acquire information, for example asking for an address.

In this research initiating communication is used in accordance to the above definition. To prevent repeating this phrase, though, some similar phrases such as starting contact or start talking are used.

C. Social situations

According to the International Communication Encyclopedia, the combined term social situations points to two main situations: “making friends or to form a relationship of any kind, and second, to acquire information, for example asking for an address.” In this study, the different social situations are defined as two main situations: seeking information or help and making friends situations, whereat the latter entails continuous contact. In this study, the expression “new social situations” refers to situations in which people are not familiar to the blind while the environment can be familiar; for instance, the university cafeteria. Each day there are different students sitting and talking together. Although the environment and a handful of people might be familiar, it is quite likely to come into contact with unfamiliar people. In this connection, the new social situation is not necessarily the new environment but the encounter with unfamiliar people.

D. Strategies

According to Berger (1979, and Berger & Bradac, 1982) there are three different strategies when it comes to gathering information about strangers: passive, active and interactive strategies. Passive strategies only involve observation of the other in a variety of social situations. Information about the other is thus gathered without interaction. Active strategies imply that an individual might ask other people questions about the target individual or even structure an environment in ways that information can be gathered by observation. Finally, information can be gathered through interactive strategies. Here the target person is asked direct questions and self-disclosure is used with the hope that reciprocation will lead to more information about the target person. In the present study, the main focus will be placed on passive (e.g., listening) and active, hereunder, verbal and non-verbal strategies.

3. Methodology

In the following chapter, the research design and the research material will be described, followed by a section about the pilot study and the research sample. The subsequent parts deal with the interview procedure describing the conditions the interviews were taken in and the challenges encountered during data collection.

The last two sub-chapters will discuss the reliability and validity of the study as well as the ethical considerations.

3.1. Research design

The qualitative approach was chosen for this study because it provides the participants with the opportunity to give a wide description of their experiences (Yin, 2003).

The Case Study design was found appropriate for the study because it was possible to use the interviews as an opportunity to develop interaction with the informants promoting them in expressing their personal experiences and feelings, and also due to a lack of previous research about this specific topic, the case study was the chosen design. On the other hand, to explore which problems and feelings are experienced and which strategies adopted by the congenital blind participants in everyday life, it was necessary to carry out the research as a case study. Data was gathered by interviewing four congenital blind persons who talked about their experiences of the communicative challenges, their feelings in new social situations and useful strategies to tackle these difficulties.

3.2. Research material

To explore the research topic, the participants of this study were asked open and specific questions. This was done because, as mentioned by Best & Kahn (1998),

“asking open and specific questions enables the interviewees to freely express their thoughts, perceptions and experiences in a more detailed manner relating to the study's topic,” and also the interview method is a flexible tool that the researcher could use even in this special situation with the participants living in Iran, while the researcher is based in Oslo. Moreover, this interview method provided more profound responses about the research topic that may not be possible to obtain by other means and answers could be directly recorded. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because they were found to be flexible while at the same time focusing on the specific topic.

There was no existing framework in form of an interview guide to examine the congenital blind's strategies, problems and feelings in initial interaction. Therefore, the present study made use of the Uncertainty Reduction theory (URT) as an orienting principle, which is the only theory found that directly focuses on the initial stage of communication. So it was this theory that was taken into consideration when designing the interview questions, serving as a kind of framework. The open interview questions connected to the Uncertainty Reduction theory were later complemented by other questions regarding different aspects. According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), “in initial interactions an individual's primary concern is to decrease uncertainty and increase predictability regarding the behaviors of the self and the communicative partner.” To take into consideration the different aspects of initiating communication, it was necessary to ask some questions regarding the feelings of participants about starting communication while the non-verbal information is not accessible for them. One question deals with the experiences of the participants when taking the step to initiate contact in different social situations. Another question asks about possible problems that the blind might encounter due to a lack of non-verbal information.

The Uncertainty Reduction theory has not been discussed in conjunction with lack of vision and its effect on the different strategies to initiate interaction and to reduce uncertainty in people with visual impairment. Therefore, another question has to be

posed at this point: Is there something that can replace the non-verbal information that the blind cannot access and are there strategies the blind can apply to initiate communication and reduce uncertainty?

3.3. The pilot study

As it was mentioned by Gillham (2005), piloting is helpful while the researcher is making the trial run of the final interview guide. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview guide and find out whether it would provide the information it was intended for. By validating the instrument, any necessary adjustments could be made at a later stage. During the pilot study it appeared necessary to add a sub-question to question 2 in the interview guide concerning the choice whom to start communication with. The pilot study was also necessary to test the efficiency of the Daisy player recorder.

The pilot study was conducted with a Norwegian congenital blind in his forties. With him, the interview was done in English which was the only common language between the researcher and him.

While doing the pilot study with a Norwegian blind, the logical order of the questions and the focus on different aspects became more clear and prepared for the final interviews with the research participants. The test person's vague answers showed the necessity of giving some practical and vivid examples to visualize the real situation in which communication takes place to enable the participants to think about details. Since many aspects of initiating interaction happen rather unconsciously, the researcher had to make an effort to direct the participants' attention to these details and make the concept more obvious.

3.4. Research sample

The participants in this study were chosen based on purposeful sampling. As it is mentioned by Gall, Gall & Borg (2007), “this type of sampling is focused to select the informants, which will give the rich information considering the purpose of the study. Purposeful sampling includes criterion sampling, which requires selection of cases to satisfy important criteria.”

The following criteria had to be met to be included in the sample group: First, the participants had to be blind from birth. They are not able to recognize facial expressions or to distinguish different people from another by looking at them. In other words: they are totally, practically and educationally blind. The second criterion is that they have to be adults, from age 20 to 65. The third point, they have to be socially active persons, continuing studies after high school or taking part in working life. Fourth, they are Persian native speakers. Fifth, the group had to consist of both genders, male and female. Sixth, they had to be accessible for the researcher; that means they are able to use internet call software such as Skype.

After searching for Persian speaking blind people who live in Norway through organizations such as Norges Blindeforbund, it was found that only one Persian congenital blind person was available to be interviewed. To prevent every bias in the interview procedure for the whole sample, the interview with this one also was conducted through internet call. The other three participants were chosen randomly among those who live in Iran and are accessible through internet calling.

The basic information about the participants is as follows. Their names have been anonymized.

1. Jane. Age: 43. Gender: female. Occupation: teacher at blind school. Education: master in Persian literature.
2. Bob. Age: 43. Gender: male. Occupation: language teacher. Education: diploma in Social work.

3. John. Age: 29. Gender: male. Occupation: lawyer. Education: master in law.

4. Jim. Age: 31. Gender: male. Occupation: teacher at blind school and musician.
Education: master in history.

3.5. Interview procedure

In this study, the interviews were conducted by face to face conversation with the participants through internet video call, and to capture the data, tape recording was used by means of the Daisy player. Afterwards, the data was transcribed and then translated from Persian (the native language of the participants and the researcher) to English. Each interview session was conducted in an undisturbed room at a time that both suited the interviewee and the researcher. But the following account will clarify the different steps of the interview procedure in a more detailed way:

After contacting one of the non-governmental organizations for the blind in Iran introducing the project and asking them to invite possible participants, the organization talked to some blind persons who met the study's criteria and agreed with being contacted by the researcher. In this way, three blind people who agreed to participate in the study were found and since they had given their permission, the researcher called them on the telephone, with the result that all of them could participate in the study. To contact the last participant who lives in Oslo, the researcher asked Blindeforbundet for help and they passed on the request with the result that he agreed to be called. After contacting possible participants and selecting the final four participants, the researcher told them a little more about herself; i.e. informed them about her educational status and then described the research topic in a more detailed way. Then a proper time to conduct the interview was discussed and an appointment was arranged.

Each interview was started by a warm greeting, followed by talking about daily issues to create a friendly atmosphere. Making the participants feel comfortable helped them to open up and talk about their experiences and express their opinions.

Each interviewee was reassured that the data collected during the interview would be treated with confidentiality. Then, permission to record the interview was sought from the interviewees. The interviews took about 50 minutes and all the interview sessions were covered with the help of a Daisy player recorder. This was considered necessary to secure the accurate and precise transcription of the data. This is similar to what Robson (2000) noted that “tape recording helps to provide permanent record and allows the interviewer time to concentrate during the interview session.” Further, every question was asked in a clear way with examples if needed. The interviewees were not interrupted while responding to the questions. Sometimes, however, it was helpful to repeat the question. After responding to every question, the participants were given a summary of what they had said to make sure that their responses were understood correctly, and to minimize any bias or misunderstanding.

3.6. Challenges during the data collection

Since the researcher is based in Oslo and the participants live in Iran, the different time zones were an issue that had to be considered. The researcher had to be flexible and manage the time accordingly. One challenge was posed by the unstable and rather slow internet connection in Iran. During the interviews the connection was in one or two occasions cut off or slowed down causing interruptions. So the respective interviews were more time-consuming than expected.

Another challenge was that some of the participants were not present at the agreed point of time so another appointment had to be arranged, which delayed the process.

One problem occurred when one of the recorded interviews was lost from the Daisy player’s card due to a technical problem. This entailed that a new participant had to be found and a new interview conducted.

3.7. Reliability and validity

To ensure and increase the validity and reliability, a pilot study was carried out using the designed interview guide.

As noted by Maxwell (1992), “qualitative research includes interpretive, descriptive, theoretical and generalized and evaluation.” In this study, only interpretive and descriptive validity are discussed because they appeared to be of particular relevance in this qualitative study; especially in regard to the fact that the findings cannot be generalized and transferred to a bigger population as this was a case study of four congenitally blind adults who involve in social activities.

As Bohman (1991) and Headland, Pike and Harris (1990) discussed, “interpretive validity is concerned with how the informant understands the phenomenon in his/her own word”. With this idea in mind and since both the participants and the researcher are native Persian speakers, Persian was chosen to be the interview language to avoid possible misunderstandings. Also, as Maxwell (1992) mentions “the concern is to ensure that the information given is not from the researcher but from the participants.” To minimize the errors that could occur in the data collection, the participants’ responses during the interviews were recorded. After every discussed question, the researcher gave the participants a short summary of their reply. At a later stage, the interviews were converted into a pc compatible file format to enable the researcher to listen to the recordings attentively while writing down the responses word by word. Sharing the same linguistic and cultural background with the participants was an important tool in the attempt to interpret the data as accurately as possible. Concerning bias in the research the translation process has to be considered. Although the researcher has a good command of both Persian and English language, there is a validation threat due to the fact that, in translation processes, some connotations and nuances of words and phrases can be lost. Being aware of this problem, the researcher tried to transfer the meaning of what has been said without losing important connotations.

When it comes to generalization, “data obtained from a single case cannot be used to generalize because it may not be possible to tell how representative the case really is”, as pointed out by Gall and Borg (1989). In this regard, the aim of this study was to present valid perspectives which need to be taken into consideration rather than to claim that the collected data summarizes a general view.

3.8. Ethical considerations

Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with questions of how people ought to act toward each other, which pronounces judgments of value about actions and develops rules to guide ethical choice (Gall et. al, 2007).

Research designs should always reflect careful attention to the ethical issues embodied in research projects. The essential purpose of ethical research planning is to protect the welfare and the rights of research participants. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) identify four main considerations when discussing ethical issues in qualitative interviewing which were carefully considered throughout the whole process of conducting this study:

Inform consent: According to Norwegian guidelines, the permission from the Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste (NSD) was required before conducting the interviews and all the participants were informed about the research condition and the purpose of the study. The participants’ permission to record their responses was asked before the interviews began.

Confidentiality: The recorded data was only accessible for the interviewer and no one else could listen to the audio files during the transcribing process and the data was deleted after writing the chapter about the results.

Pseudonyms: All the participants were given a fictive name and no private or sensitive information was recorded or written down.

Consequences: Talking about their experiences and expressing their opinions in regard to the research topic has no negative consequences for the participants of this study. The collected data poses no harm for their security, nor does it impact their future in a negative way.

In the following chapter the data will be presented according to the questions provided in interview guide (see appendix).

4. Results

The present chapter presents all interview data, anchored in an interpretational analysis. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) and Yin (1994) explained that “interpretational analysis is a process of examining case study data to find out concepts, themes and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomena under study.” The data which was collected from all the participants during the interviews was organized as per the headings on the interview guide.

4.1. How do you realize that there is someone you can talk to?

The first tool that all four participants use is their sense of hearing to figure out whether there is someone in their direct proximity. Maybe someone is talking to someone else on the phone or in person or producing sounds by walking around with a baby or a dog, sneezing or coughing. The clacking of shoes on the floor or the rustling of a plastic bag also reveals the presence of another person. Jane states,

When someone takes a seat near me in a small area like a bus station, I can understand that there is someone to talk to.

According to Bob, it is the sound of the breath that indicates the presence of another person. The second major tool is the sense of smell. The scent of perfume, for instance, does not only indicate that there is someone near but can also reveal further information. John remarks,

Since every perfume mostly reflects the gender of a person, I usually guess correctly whether the person is male or female.

The third factor giving away information is the feeling for the space that everyone occupies. According to Jim, everyone has his or her own space and when a space is occupied near him, he can feel it. What's more, according to the amount of space occupied he can also draw conclusions about somebody's height and body size.

The fourth tool, which was only mentioned by two participants (Jim and Jane) is the perception of light and shadow. They use their remaining sight to identify whether there is a shadow of a person around them.

4.2. How do you initiate communication in different social situations? Do you use any specific phrase, movement etc.?

The explored strategies are divided into verbal and non-verbal ones. In the verbal context, all participants use phrases to identify whether there really is another person or whether the sound stems from a different source. Jim, for instance, uses "sorry" or "would you please tell me what time it is" to open communication. According to the situation, the phrases can be different. Jane indicates that when she is at the bus station she asks about the number of the next bus coming. At a university class, which is another setting, she adopts a different strategy by making a comment about the course topic or asking something about the lecturer, e.g. "Do you know the professor teaching this course?"

The non-verbal strategies mostly consist in turning the face towards the respective person. Bob states, "It is important to turn my face and try to look towards the person and smile." Another effective way to draw someone's attention can be taking a step backward or forward, as John mentions. Jane implies that tapping the cane on the ground is a way to make the other person understand that she wants to talk or ask for help.

How do you choose a particular person to start conversation with?

Jim, John and Bob believe that as blind persons they do not have as many choices compared to sighted people. Jane notes,

I choose a particular person just based on the way he or she talks. If he has a kind voice and talks in a calm manner I choose him to start communication with.

Jim says,

Since I am a great musician people mostly come to me, but only when they know it. In other situations, I don't have enough tools to choose someone among many people.

So the first strategy to choose someone to start a conversation with in a group situation is to listen to the different voices and observe people's verbal behavior. Secondly, when someone's voice or way of talking seems appealing and pleasant, the blind decides to initiate communication by asking a question, often related to the environment.

4.3. What problems do you have while you want to start communication with others as a blind in different social situations?

All participants state that blindness makes initial interaction very difficult because the blind cannot access the non-verbal information from the people around them. Bob explains,

Sighted people can understand from the others' facial expression whether they are in a situation to answer you or whether, for instance, they are angry so they are not the proper people to communicate with.

John points out another problem,

As a blind I don't have enough choices to select the right person to initiate communication with, since I can only listen to the voices. There might be someone who doesn't speak at the moment and maybe is the better choice according to my priorities, but I simply cannot know.

Another problem is that in some situations people do not pay attention to the blind at the needed time. Sometimes the blind have to wait for a long time to find someone to ask for information or help or to start a conversation with. Jim explains,

Sometimes when I am alone and not with my friends or family, I need to ask information, for example, at the cafeteria or library but I have to wait for a long time to find someone who responds.

According to John, the biggest problem occurs when the blind decides to initiate communication to establish a friendship because having no sight makes the blind limited in regard to conveying feelings and perceiving the others' reaction. Jane says,

Sometimes I start talking to someone at a crowded party without knowing that he or she is not exactly the person that I wanted to talk to but I have to continue because I feel too shy to say: sorry you are not the person I was eager to communicate with.

Something that all participants point out is that in the communication process the most problematic stage is the initial point. Bob states,

When you can start communication in a proper way with someone by having enough information, then the rest is quite easy.

This indicates that communication without being in possession of any information is very difficult.

Another problem is the general preconception of blindness. The lack of knowledge about the blind's abilities renders initial communication rather difficult. Bob refers,

When I want to start communication with others in different social situation I always wonder how they will react if I contact them.

And also Jane explains,

The most difficult part of communication for me is the starting point because I don't know how much the other person knows about being blind.

Another crucial point, that is mentioned, is the lack of a preparation phase. Bob points out,

Since I can't see their faces and there is no eye contact between me and the other people I have to start without this previous introduction point.

The fact that the blind cannot perceive the others' facial expressions and thus cannot react to them makes the initial communication more complicated, as well. Bob and Jim indicate that when they do not see when someone is smiling at them, they cannot react and for this reason, in some situations, the communication is over before it even began.

4.4. In which social situations is it easier for you to initiate communication?

Initiating communication seems to be more comfortable for the participants when they have to ask for help or specific information, even if this might entail a long waiting time or does not always lead to the desired reaction. In contrast, situations in which they try to start a friendly conversation, maybe with the prospect of establishing a friendship, the situation becomes much more difficult.

Jim explains,

When I am in a street looking for an address if the first passenger doesn't reply I can wait for the next one, but in making friendship situations it's more complicated.

One important aspect that facilitates communication with a sighted person is when he or she has previous experience with blind people. As John and Jane say,

When you meet persons who have previous experience or information about blind people, it is much easier to communicate with them.

Initiating communication in smaller places with only few people seems to be easier, as Jane indicates,

When I am sitting in a classroom, it's easier than in a big area like a park with a wide space.

In a situation in which two people are talking to each other and it is possible to overhear the dialogue, the blind can access valuable information about each person, which makes it easier to join the conversation. Bob puts it this way,

When two people are talking to each other, I can get information about them on the basis of the topic that they are discussing. And if the way they speak and their voices reflect that they are kind and happy, it's easier for me to start talking to them.

In less crowded places initial communication is easier than in noisy places. Jim and John say that they feel confused in crowded places and have problems figuring out whom to talk to.

The presence of a few familiar people facilitates communication with others whom the blind does not know.

Bob indicates,

While I am in a gathering where I know some of present people from before it's easier to start talking to strangers, rather than in a situation where everyone is unfamiliar to me.

Also the familiarity with the environment plays a role in facilitating initial interaction for the blind. When the location is familiar and the people unfamiliar, it is easier to initiate communication than in a new environment with new people. Bob and Jim explain that it is easier to come into contact with people when they ask for information in a familiar area such as the university library or in their local store. Jane says:

I find it easier to meet new people at the school where I work than at a new school that is unfamiliar to me.

4.5. What reactions do you experience when you start communication with sighted people?

In different social situations sighted people react differently to a blind person approaching them. In those situations in which the blind only need help or ask for information they encounter the following reactions:

To begin with, all participants have experienced sympathetic reactions. Bob says,

When I have started communication in seeking information situations, people sometimes seem to feel pity for me.

Another experience is that people just keep passing by ignoring the blind. Jane, John and Bob indicated that nowadays, since people mostly are in a hurry or listening to i-pods or talking on their mobile phones, they don't pay attention to a blind asking for help.

Sometimes, people just give a short reply and keep going without paying attention to whether the blind has received the needed information or not. As John and Bob have experienced, sometimes when the blind asks for directions, the sighted person just seems to point his or her hand in the right direction without any verbal explanation, unaware of the fact that the blind can't see their gesture. So the blind has to find another person to ask for help.

Another reaction could be described as extra help that exceeds the amount of help needed. Jane points out,

Sometimes I want to cross only one street but the person who is helping me takes me even further to another street without asking me.

When a blind starts a conversation with sighted people, often the topic is directed to disability issues. Bob states,

Sometimes I just want to have a normal chat with people as a normal person but they are interested in asking questions because they are curious about my life without sight.

In other social situations, such as making friends situations, it seems that the participants have mostly made negative experiences. Jane says,

Since I don't have enough facilities to initiate communication with the proper person that I can connect with, the reactions are often different from what I expected.

Judging by someone's way of talking the blind can interpret the reaction towards them. "From some people's reaction", as Bob says, "I can understand that they don't want to talk more." Jim states,

Sometimes when I start talking to someone I can tell by their voice that I cannot ask any more questions or form a friendship with them.

The participants' evaluation of how often people react in a positive way towards them when they initiate interaction:

Seeking information situations:

John: 80% positive

Bob: 85% positive

Jane: 90% positive

Jim: 85% positive

Making friendship situations:

John: 60% positive

Bob: 70% positive

Jane: 70% positive

Jim: 70% positive

4.6. How do you feel when you want to initiate communication in different social situations?

According to the situations, the feelings vary. However, the most common feeling is uncertainty. In seeking information situations, the participants feel uncertain in regard to whether they will get a proper answer. Jim indicates,

Although I am not sure whether I get what I need, it is not so important for me. If the first person didn't answer I have to wait and ask the next one.

In making friends situations the participants also feel a high degree of uncertainty and in addition comes the anxiety about being accepted. The uncertainty is also connected to the question whether it is the right person to ask for information or to construct a relation with. Jim reflects,

I feel not sure about whom I am talking to. Is he or she the right person to initiate communication with?

When the blind generally feels more included in the situation or closer to the people they feel more comfortable to initiate communication. Jim states,

I feel less uncertain while I am in academic situations or in the musician group which I feel I belonged to.

Strangers seem even stranger when there is no access to non-verbal information about them. John gives an example of his reluctance to start communication due to his feeling of uncertainty,

When I am sitting in a train for a long time, I like to communicate with other passengers but I don't feel comfortable before they start communication with me because they are strangers to me.

Another feeling is getting extra attention. Bob says,

Sometimes I avoid starting communication with others because I feel they will pay more attention to me than necessary; and in making friends situations I feel that if I start communication with people they will only communicate with me because I am blind. They don't consider my individual personality and interests.

4.7. What experiences do you have with different groups of people while initiating communication?

The participants have made different experiences. However, one factor that might play a role in people's reactions is their gender. According to Jane and Jim, the reactions coming from both genders are generally similar, although Jane indicates that it is a little easier for her to communicate with men. John, on the other hand, states that men are more responsive while initiating communication. He finds women more difficult in general. In Bob's opinion, women are much more approachable when starting communication and easier to establish a relation with in comparison to men. Especially young women, as Bob and Jim agree, are easier to start communication with.

Initiating communication with children also seems to be less difficult for the blind. Jane says that children under the age of 15 are easy to contact. With older teenagers, on the other hand, it is more difficult. Jane indicates,

Since they are mostly with their peers and in more crowded environments it's difficult to communicate with them.

People who have a baby or a dog with them are easier to start talking to. Bob remarks,

When they talk to their babies or dogs you have more information about them and can start communication by finding a common subject.

For Jane and Jim it makes no difference whether the person they start communication with is blind or sighted. For Bob and John, on the other hand, it is different to initiate communication with sighted and blind people. Bob puts it that way,

The blind have similar tools to communicate with each other and they have neither positive nor negative prejudices about you just because you are blind. They are in the same situation so I don't have any problem to initiate communication with them.

People who also belong to a minority or who are affected by a kind of physical problem are easier for the blind to communicate with. Jane explains,

Since these people understand me they approach me more actively and it's not only me who wants to start communication with them.

According to Bob and Jim, talkative people are easier to contact. This is also true for people who are perceived as kind and equipped with a good sense of humor, as all participants agree on. People with good common sense and empathy are easier to initiate communication with. Jane says,

For me the people who can put themselves in my shoes, of course, are easier to contact.

It also makes a difference whether someone has previous experience with blind people inasmuch as they are easier to communicate with. Jane puts it this way,

When I am with people who know a blind from before, they are more approachable because they come and take the step to initiate communication with me or if I do, they respond appropriately.

Jim states that he feels more comfortable with likeminded people like academics and students.

As the results revealed, the lack of vision causes problems to find someone to initiate communication with, to find out how to start communication with people and also how to choose a particular person to establish a relation with. These problems exist in both seeking information or help situations and making friends situations. The feelings that are connected to the absence of vision, and thus the lack of visual information about others, can mainly be described as feelings of uncertainty.

Moreover, the blind participants use verbal, non-verbal and other strategies to initiate communication with others. In the next chapter a discussion of the problems and feelings experienced and strategies adopted by the blind will take place, based on the Uncertainty Reduction theory.

5. Discussion

The present chapter discusses the main research question exploring strategies that blind employ while initiating communication to reduce uncertainty in different social situations. This discussion will take the Uncertainty Reduction theory (URT) into consideration as an orienting principle and connect the findings of this study to the previous available research. First, the focus is placed on the problems the blind face when they need to initiate contact. Then, this chapter will look at the feelings connected to uncertainty in different communicative situations caused by vision absence and finally, the strategies the blind apply to reduce uncertainty will be explored.

5.1. Uncertainty in the initial stage of communication

The main purpose of the following section is to discuss the role of uncertainty in initial interaction in different social situations. In doing so, it is necessary to look at the problems and feelings experienced in the initial stage of communication, from a blind's point of view and in regard to uncertainty and its role.

According to the Uncertainty Reduction theory by Berger and Calabrese (1975), “uncertainty can be both cognitive and behavioral in nature. With cognitive uncertainty, we are unsure about the beliefs and attitudes of the other. With behavioral uncertainty, we are unsure about how the other will behave in interaction.” According to the findings of this study, being uncertain at initial interaction has two different main aspects for the blind: uncertainty about the other person due to the lack of visual information about him or her, and uncertainty about the consequences, i.e. how the other will react. Blind interactants are especially uncertain about initiating communication compared to sighted people because they do not have access to the information that can be gained by sight. As it was revealed by the present findings, when a blind enters a new place and the people are not familiar to him or her, there is

no certainty about the situation. On the contrary, the prevailing feeling is uncertainty together with other related feelings. As it was noted by Berger (1975), “high levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content”. The findings of the present study reveal also that the blind interactants are uncertain in making friendship situations. Due to a high degree of uncertainty, they prefer that the other people approach them. Another point is that, to initiate communication, people usually use eye-contact as the first tool to gather information and convey emotions. In this way, eye-contact provides an opportunity to reduce uncertainty. This also is supported by the statement by Poyatos (1982) that “the verbal aspect of interaction cannot carry the full communicative influence when conveying a message but must rely on the information carried by one or more nonverbal communication channels in a systematic way”. The lack of sight and its role in facing with different problems and experiencing different feelings will be discussed in the following sections.

5.1.1. Lack of visual information

In the present study, it was found that the most problematic stage of communication for the blind is the initial phase compared with the other stages. The reason for this is that the blind do not have access to the wide variety of visual information which is usually exchanged by eye-contact or facial expressions facilitating initial communication. According to the present study, the lack of vision produces uncertainty in initial interaction because it entails a lack of information about the others visual feedback. At the same time, blind people are worried about giving proper visual feedback to sighted people. Another problem which is expressed by the participants in this study is the lack of having various choices when it comes to choosing a communication partner. Due to the limitations that vision loss imposes on the blind, they do not have an overview of the different individuals around them. They have to establish contact to the nearest person not knowing whether it is the right person to start communication with.

5.1.2. People's reactions

The main purpose of this section is to explore people's reaction when the blind starts communication with them. A closer look will also be taken at which social situations the participants of this study experience as easier to initiate communication in. As it was mentioned by the participants in this study, one problem relating to initiating communication is being uncertain about the other's reaction, in other words, being uncertain about the consequences the initial contact will entail.

As reported by the participants, different reactions can be observed from different groups of people when the blind start contact with them. These differences can be based on gender, educational, socio-cultural and personal background. Another factor which plays a role is whether the sighted person has previous experience with visually impaired people or has good knowledge about blindness. There is one previous research that looks at different reactions towards disabled people. The research by Ayres and Ayres (1999) examines whether or not a conversation initiated by an apparently disabled person would affect a non-disabled person's perceptions and behaviour in that interaction. The study revealed that when the interaction is initiated by an apparently disabled person, non-disabled people are less apprehensive, more talkative, more attracted to the other, more satisfied with the interaction and entertained more positive thoughts. However, according to the participants of this study, often experienced reactions in the initial stage of communication were empathy, ignorance, receiving more help than needed or being given incorrect information. The problems vary according to different social situations, though, and with certain groups of people, e.g. academics, it is less problematic to initiate communication.

5.1.3. Different situations

This part looks at the two main social situations; i.e. seeking information or help and making friends, and the uncertainty level in them. According to the participants of this study, in every situation when the blind can pick up pieces of information, e.g. by means of their hearing or sense of smell, they will have less difficulty to start communication with others. Another finding is that situations in which the blind start communication in order to seek information or ask for help are easier to deal with than situations in which they try to establish a friendship or relationship. In the seeking information and asking for help context, even if the blind does not get the desired reaction, there are other opportunities and other people to receive help from. Considering different environments and their effect on initiating communication, the participants of this study made the following observations:

Initiating communication is easier in those places where the blind have been before, places which are not very large or wide, places with little noise but many people, in academic environments, in settings where two people are talking to each other and in social environments where the blind already knows someone from before. In the latter situation it is easier to initiate communication with strangers because the blind can get information about the environment or a third person from the one he or she knows from before. So to already know someone is especially helpful in a new environment, which brings to mind Berger's and Calabrese's (1975) axiom 6, according to which similarities between persons reduce uncertainties, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty. So, there is a difference between initiating communication only with the goal of getting information and with the purpose of establishing a longer relationship. As already mentioned some factors facilitate this and in some conditions the blind face more difficulties and the experienced problems often result in certain feelings which will be discussed in the following section.

5.1.4. Feelings

The main purpose of this section is to identify the feelings that the blind experience while initiating communication. According to the Uncertainty Reduction theory which concentrates on the reduction of the high level of cognitive uncertainty present in initial interaction, Berger and Calabrese (1988) distinguish between a predictive component (e.g., we're uncertain about what a person will do) and an explanatory component (e.g., we're uncertain about why a person did something). Considering the explanations of the participants in this study, both types of uncertainty are relevant. The participants reported that due to their blindness, they were uncertain of how other people would react and what kind of feedback was expressed in a non-verbal way in a particular situation. According to the findings of this study, the most common feeling that the blind experience in different social situations, is the feeling of uncertainty. This feeling was stronger in making friends situations than in the seeking information context. It was also revealed in the research by Solomon & Knobloch (2001) that relational uncertainty is often more critical in close relationships and can include issues such as desire for evaluation of the relationship, relationship goals, and mutuality of feelings in the relationship. The feeling of not being accepted, is another aspect of the uncertainty feeling. Due to the lack of non-verbal information about strangers and their present situation, the blind participants are generally uncertain about whether the approached person might be occupied with something else or whether he or she is in the mood to communicate; and often, this uncertainty prevents them from talking to strangers. On the other hand, some people who have been approached by a blind mainly want to discuss the issue of the blind's disability, which gives the blind the feeling of not being accepted as a normal person. Another feeling which was experienced by the participants is the feeling of avoidance. Since they are not certain about the situation, their motivation to initiate communication is reduced and they avoid initiating communication altogether. Another reason for avoiding initiating communication is the uncertainty about whom to approach and whether the approached person is the right one to talk to. This is especially true for making friends

situations. The participants in the present study also reported that, due to the lack of important non-verbal information, they do not feel secure around strangers.

So the results show that the feeling of uncertainty is common among the participants in different social situations and it is this feeling of uncertainty that leads to the avoidance of taking a step towards the others to start communication with them. As it will be discussed in the following section, the blind use different strategies to overcome the above mentioned feelings and problems.

5.2. Reducing uncertainty by using different strategies

The aim of this section is to present the strategies which the blind use to reduce uncertainty while initiating communication in new social situations and how they overcome problems and unpleasant feelings in this context. As indicated by Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese (1975),

In the initial stage of interaction between strangers, people are motivated by their willing to reduce uncertainty about each other. Individuals use a variety of passive, active, and interactive strategies to reduce uncertainty, though these strategies may vary in use and in terms of effectiveness and social appropriateness.

According to Berger, uncertainty is reduced over time through both verbal and nonverbal interaction. When it comes to the absence of vision, it should be considered that, before the first stage of communication, the blind have to use strategies to find someone to talk to. At this stage the use of the other senses is crucial when trying to find out whether there is someone around to initiate communication with. The findings of the present study show that the blind make use of their hearing sense, sense of smell and the feeling for distance. If there is any sight left to distinguish light from shadow, it also helps them to find out whether there is someone to communicate with. It became clear that the participants of this study use passive and active strategies to reduce uncertainty and start communication in different social situations.

5.2.1 Active strategies to reduce uncertainty

In this section, the strategies that the blind actively use to interact with others will be discussed. As mentioned by Berger and Calabrese (1975), the active strategies include both non-verbal and verbal ones. According to Kendon (1967), “to initiate communication with strangers and reduce uncertainty, people mostly use eye-contact, body language or facial expressions to provide an opportunity for communication.” And also Berger and Calabrese (1975) indicated that “decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness”. It was observed by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1973) that people who are blind from birth and thus have no previous imagination of these non-verbal cues, nevertheless use some of these cues such as smiling, anger and sadness. According to the present findings, the blind draw other’s attention and start interaction reducing their uncertainty by using non-verbal strategies such as smiling, turning their face and taking a step towards others. The research by Galati and his colleagues (2003) found similar results with sighted and congenitally blind children between the ages of six months and five years. There were few differences between the expressions of the sighted and blind children, and scientists who looked at the faces of the children were able to accurately identify the situations that activated the expressions for both. Thus, being able to see the facial expressions of others does not seem to provide a significant advantage in being able to make basic facial displays. On the other hand, as Berger and Calabrees (1975) point out in axiom 2, “as nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease in initial interaction situations.” So the blind, although they cannot perceive non-verbal cues, can still reduce their uncertainty by using non-verbal expressions themselves. However, the present findings indicate that since the non-verbal strategies are very limited for the blind, they use verbal strategies to compensate for this disadvantage. This can be seen in connection to axiom 1 by Berger and Calabrese (1975) which says that “as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty for each interactant in the relationship will decrease.” The findings of this study also show that, using different phrases, which are chosen according to the situation, is the main tool the blind use to reduce

uncertainty and start communication. By using verbal strategies, such as starting to talk about the time or the weather when they are together with unfamiliar people for a longer period of time, e.g. in the cafeteria, they compensate for the lack of visual signals. In seeking information situations, e.g. at a bus stop, they usually say a short word like “sorry” to draw people’s attention before they ask a question or start closer relations. Nigel J. Kemp and Derek R. Rutter (1986) also showed that blind people make up for the lack of visible cues by adopting verbal strategies. According to their research, to gather information about a new acquaintance, the blind people directly asked for the personal information that they were interested in.

5.2.2. Passive strategies to reduce uncertainty

As it was explained by Berger (1979), “passive strategies involve observation of the other in a variety of social situations.” Also the present findings reveal that blind people use such strategies, e.g. observing the way a person interacts in a conversation. Gathering information from people’s way of speaking is one strategy that is also mentioned by Knapp (1978) according to which “changes in vocal intensity, articulation control, and rhythm may inform a listener about the speaker's emotional state.” Additionally, other paralinguistic components such as pauses and silence may alter the meaning of a previous statement or position as communicative acts in themselves e.g., the use of silence to respond to an inappropriate question or comment. The blind participants also reported that they wait and gather information about an individual by listening to the conversation of the others to find the proper person to start talking to.

Frame (2004) describes how visual impairment affects the performance of the visually impaired person in relationships and social interaction.

To perform successfully, the visually impaired person must be able to adapt to and perform competently within his or her assigned role, establish and

maintain mutually satisfying relationships with other people, and know how to prepare for and manage the potential responses of the audience.

The findings of the present study also show that people without vision use their remaining abilities to adapt themselves to different social situations and use active and passive strategies to conquer the problems and overcome negative feelings in the initial phase of communication.

5.3. Closing

The present study explored the strategies that congenital blind people adapt to overcome problems and feelings of uncertainty while initiating communication in different situations and with different groups of people. The findings show that problems occur due to the absence of vision that can result in uncertainty, insecurity, avoidance and a feeling of not being accepted. But this study also looked at which situations and people are easier to deal with when establishing communication. By using active strategies (verbal, non-verbal) and passive strategies (such as listening), the blind participants try to find a way to successfully communicate with strangers in different social situations and to reduce the level of uncertainty. This research provides an opportunity to explore how the blind use their remaining capabilities to establish relations or to seek information or help. Additionally, the present findings give a description of people's reactions and their influence on the blind's feelings in the initiating communication context. This study can be a basis for future studies that wish to promote the knowledge about this matter and find ways to facilitate communication between blind and sighted people. Regarding the field of communication studies, the present study wishes to direct attention to the communication related issues of the blind. Further research on this topic can possibly contribute to promoting the blind's abilities in the communicative context. It would also be of interest to investigate the sighted people's experiences while communicating with a blind. This could open the possibility for a better

understanding between sighted and blind people. Since a good starting point in communication is a crucial key towards the inclusion of the blind preventing them from being isolated and excluded from social activities, this subject deserves greater consideration and will hopefully be taken up in future research.

Appendix

Interview guide

Part 1: Personal information and background

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Education
4. Working situation
5. Do you have any sight? Are you able to recognize people by looking at them?

Part 2: Interview questions

1. How do you realize that there is someone you can talk to?
2. How do you initiate communication in different social situations? Do you use any specific phrase, movement etc.?
3. What problems do you have while you want to start communication with others as a blind in different social situations?
4. In which social situations is it easier for you to initiate communication?
5. What reactions do you experience when you start communication with sighted people?
6. How do you feel when you want to initiate communication in different social situations?
7. What experiences do you have with different groups of people while initiating communication?

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