

**Draft Copy, final copy to appear in The Journal of Rural Studies,
November 2016**

**Walkers with visual-impairments in the British Countryside:
picturesque legacies, collective enjoyments and well-being benefits**

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Abstract

This paper draws on ethnographic research to explore the experiences of members of specialist blind and visually impaired walking groups who visit areas of the Peak District and Lake District, notable rural locations in Britain. For many people, a visit to these areas is associated with the apprehension of picturesque beauty through the physical faculty of sight. However, data from participant observation and interviews reveal that people also derive many other key social, well-being and health benefits by visiting and walking in these areas. This paper identifies some of these other benefits and places them within the context of recent theory that addresses therapeutic landscapes and people with visual-impairments' cultural and sensory apprehensions. The well-being experiences of visually-impaired walking participants include; exploration outside of known (usually urban) routes; reaching summits and areas that have collective symbolic value; the facilitation of social networks; and improvements in physical fitness and self-reported weight loss or maintenance. The paper combats a pervasive ocularcentrism in appraisals of British landscape and contributes to emerging debates on 'therapeutic mobilities' - a place where disability and rurality intersect.

Key words: Walking, Blindness, Visual-impairment, Health, Countryside Recreation

Introduction

Over two million people in the United Kingdom live with sight loss and, of this group, 360 000 are registered with their local authority as blind or partially sighted (Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2015). While some members of this group

experience multiple disabilities that render rural walking exercise inappropriate (Tate et al., 2005), there is a significant and growing proportion of adults with visual-impairments who are fit, able and likely to benefit from visiting the countryside and enjoying walking exercise. This is particularly critical given that scholarship has demonstrated people with blindness or visual-impairment tend to be at greater than average risk of not being able to access adequate recreation and exercise facilities (Longmuir and Barr-or, 2001; Tregaskis 2003; Jana et al. 2009); experience social isolation and rely disproportionately on immediate family for leisure opportunities (Carr, 2004), maybe limited to known and researched routes through urban space (Butler and Bowlby, 1997); and suffer from relatively poor physical fitness compared to their sighted counterparts (Holbrook et al. 2009).

Between 2004 and 2006 I undertook research on blind and visually impaired people's engagement in rural space for walking by acting as a volunteer sighted guide. I conducted ethnographic research with members of specialist blind and visually-impaired walking groups who visit the Peak and Lake Districts in the British countryside. Both districts offer a wide range of walks with the former known for its steep sided limestone dales as well as high moorlands covered with gritstone and the latter its gentle lakeside strolls as well as challenging mountain expeditions.

In the national imagination the Peak and Lake Districts are often represented as areas of 'outstanding natural beauty' (Natural England, 2015).¹ These constructions arguably reinforce a pronounced ocularcentrism in the modern Western heritage of how landscapes, and particularly rural landscapes of both remote wilderness and domesticated countryside, are supposed to be conceived, encountered and managed (Macpherson, 2005), (Cosgrove, 1985, 1993, 2003). Rural landscapes are commonly positioned within intersecting 'fields of vision' (Daniels, 1993), replete with complex nationalist, political and other identity-based contestations, as well as more simply and popularly being cast as pretty scenes, nice-to-look-at vistas and enchanting diversions. Whatever the exact content of such rural aesthetics, though, the countrysides in question appear as ones to be visited, enjoyed and debated by fully sighted people. A question might then be asked about the significance, of these

¹ The phrase 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' (AONB) is common in British rural policy, being a formal designation within a variety of policy statements and instruments.

countrysides for people with blindness or visual impairment: How are these localities apprehended by these people? Are they to be regarded as ‘out of place’ in rural localities, notably areas supposedly valued for their visual appeal? Finally, questions might be posed as to whether there is any point in even thinking about how and why blind and visually impaired might be there, want to be there or could be enabled better to be there?²

This paper takes up these questions as a contribution to the emerging critical appraisal of where disability and rurality intersect (Barton et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2013). Also informing the paper is Gesler’s (1992) notion of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ which has been taken up in health geographies as a way to understand the interrelationship between wellbeing and place. In an editorial introducing a collection of writing on the subject Williams (2007) writes that the concept ‘provides a framework for analysis of natural, built, social and symbolic environments as they contribute to healing and wellbeing in places – broadly termed landscapes’ (p1-2). In subsequent work geographers have argued that therapeutic landscapes may encompass everyday places in addition to well-known and singular sites and may be both important in the maintenance of health as well as in recovery and healing (Wilson 2003; Milligan et al 2004). Gatrell (2013) has added a further dimension to the literature on the subject of particular importance to this paper in work highlighting ‘moving experiences’ as a critical to therapeutic landscapes. He argues that greater attention needs to be given to ‘therapeutic mobilities’ such as walking which can be beneficial in terms of physical activity, sociality and context. Notably in elaborating upon the latter he asserts that we need to avoid conflating health benefits with only what we may see while walking, and instead attend to some of the non-visual ways in which bodies interact with places to foster well-being (Gatrell, 2013 p100).

I begin the paper by drawing on literature which has established the dominance of associating visiting the British landscape with an embodied faculty of sight and introduce Cachia’s (2013) critique ocularcentrism as manifest in museums. Following

² Note that there is a quite other suite of considerations attaching to people with visual-impairments who already *live* in rural areas – ie. are not visiting such localities for recreation and leisure – although of course some disabled rural-dwellers may also wish to walk in the countryside or, indeed, in AONBs.

this I turn to my ethnographic data which demonstrates that while the popularity of places such as the Peak and Lake Districts in England is often explained through the symbolic construction of their scenic and picturesque beauty, there are many other embodied and social factors that have to be taken into account when considering the enjoyment of a walk in such countrysides for sighted or less-sighted participants. These include health, physical and social benefits. At the same time walking groups face considerable challenges including managing rough rural terrain and negotiating walker-guide relations. After detailing these challenges I conclude the paper returning to Cachia (2013) and enumerating strategies for ‘combatting occularcentrism’ in our constructions of the British countryside.

Situating the Study

This research contributes to the growing academic and policy literature on social, ethnic and embodied diversity in the British countryside (eg. Askins, 2006; Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Burns et al., 2009; Countryside Agency, 2005a; 2005b; Macpherson, 2009a; Slee et al., 2001; Tolia-Kelly, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). The presence of people with blindness or visual-impairment in areas of landscape traditionally valued for their scenic beauty disrupts the traditional association of landscape with an individual’s visual apprehension, potentially drawing attention to other, *non-visual*, embodied, collective, tactile and sonic aspects of visitors’ experiences in these locations (Hetherington 2003; Hill 1985; Macpherson, 2009a, 2009b). Previous research on understandings of the British countryside and stated rationales for visiting these areas often focus on the visual sense (Andrews 1989; Darby, 2000; Ousby, 1990; Urry 1990). Indeed, in popular imaginaries and in academic literature sight is often understood as central to experience the landscape. Such a way of conceptualising the landscape has a long history dating back to between 1600 and 1850. In this period picturesque modes of enjoying the landscape came to the fore as improvements in transport and developments in perspectival representation, architecture and theatre fostered European travels and saw the emergence of the ‘grand tourist’ (Agnew, 1998; Andrews, 1989; Cole, 2015; Cosgrove, 1985, 1993, 2003; Olwig 2002; Wallace 1993).

The belief that a ‘fit and able body’ (Lorimer and Lund 2003) is a prerequisite to appreciating the landscape finds echoes in dominant constructions of museums and

art. This is a subject taken up by Amanda Cachia.³ (2013) in a paper in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, in which she ponders an experience retold by Georgina Kleege (1999) about viewing a painting in a Matisse exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art. As someone with macular degeneration, Kleege had to stand very close to the picture to gain any sense of its scale, texture and colour, but a male visitor lectured her that she was *too* close and that the only proper way to appreciate the picture was to step back, to gain some distance and perspective on the artwork. In so doing, this visitor displayed an unthinking ocularcentrism, convinced by the supremacy of sight in the epistemological, aesthetic and interpretational tasks of viewing a painting; and not just any form of sight, but a particular mode of viewing dependent on a distanced, even panoramic gaze, arguably of a piece with what is usually conceived as the correct form of landscape viewing. Akin to common reactions to people with visual-impairments visiting rural landscapes, whether wildernesses or pastoral regions, which turn on surprise at both their presence and their apparent interest in encountering these landscapes, it can be anticipated that other gallery visitors would be similarly puzzled by what someone with poor or no sight might be doing in their spaces: what, in short, is the point if you cannot properly see the artworks?

Prompted by her experience here, Cachia was led to critical reflections on how an art gallery might be reconstituted to serve not just the sighted but also those with poor or no sight. Moreover, she widened the span of her reflections to include art and other museums, other interior spaces where, it might normally be intuited, visitors would be expected to be able to see the artefacts – indeed, to *want* to see the artefacts – and where too the lay-out and organisation of the spaces would grow from this primal ocularcentric logic. Cachia then reports on experiments with other ways of creating a museum, specifically a ‘blind museum’, which seek to depart from other logics, ones suggesting the primacy of other senses for encountering and learning about the museum’s holdings.⁴ Hence her question, quoted at the head of the conclusion above,

³ This ‘blind field shuttle’ was part of a composite exhibition *What Can a Body Do?*, held at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, US, October-December 2012, curated by Cachia as an explicit follow-on from *Blind at the Museum* and actually narrowing the question to ‘what can a disabled body do?’ It should be noted that the ‘shuttle’ involved visual deprivation for sighted participants, forcing them to encounter the local environment through other, non-visual sensory mechanisms.

⁴ Specifically, she discusses the *Blind at the Museum* exhibition held at the Berkeley Art Museum’s Theatre Gallery, US, January-July 2005, which exhibited artworks by twelve artists, mostly with

about what might happen if the museum was re-thought ‘as an institution for sensorial culture rather than purely visual culture’. More than this, though, Cachia explodes her reasoning out of interior into exterior spaces, discussing other experiments such as the ‘blind field shuttle’ as ‘a non-visual walking tour’ which explicitly prioritised meeting with a wider world through the means of smell, sound and feel.⁵

Cachia’s (2013) reflections provide an entry point for exploring the experiences of blind and visually impaired people in rural space for they highlight that such experiences cannot be reduced solely to the representational, visual or symbolic (cf. Edensor, 2000; Thrift, 2000). In sum, ‘To be without sight is not necessarily to be without landscape’ (Macpherson, 2005: 98), or, to put it another way, to be with landscape is not necessarily just to be looking at it. As the following sections of the paper will explain there are many other multi-sensory, embodied and neurochemical dimensions that make rural walking appealing to both the sighted and to people with visual-impairments, which is precisely to take seriously the overall human embodiment of and in landscape as a terrain of ‘whole-body activity’ (Macpherson, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2010).

Methodology

The research findings reported in this paper form part of a wider doctoral project (Macpherson, 2007) which investigated the experiences of blind and visually impaired walking group members in the British countryside and their relationships with sighted guides, using ethnographic, interview, video and photographic methods. This paper draws on interview, photo and ethnographic data from day walks and walking holidays. The ethnographic approach to the research was chosen because it immerses a researcher in the lives of participants affording the opportunity to access an understanding of the world from their perspective (Herbert, 2000) and helped to create of rich, information-dense qualitative data that could not have been generated by using quantitative methods, questionnaires or highly structured interviews. The use

visual-impairments, that experimented with optical effects integral to visual impairment – ‘peripheral vision, distortions, floaters’ – as well as ‘emphasi[sing] sound, touch, and multisensory expression through a variety of media’. See also Macpherson (2008b) for reflections on the artworks of a visually-impaired artist.

of ethnography also constituted part of a strategy which attempted to go beyond the remit of a one-off interview and construct particular 'spaces of disclosure' which might enable participants to comfortably illustrate and elaborate upon their particular experiences of the countryside (Macpherson, 2016). Informed consent for the ethnographic, interview and photographic data was given from the outset from all participants mentioned here.

The research involved participant observation acting as a volunteer sighted guide (Figures 1 and 2), traditional 'sit-down' interviews and what have been referred to in the literature as 'walks and talks' or 'go along' interviews (Anderson, 2004; Kusenbach, 2003) with six volunteer sighted guides and 19 visually impaired members of the Sheffield Visually Impaired Walking Group and a specialist disabled holidays charity called Vitalise which provides week long walking holidays for people with visual impairments. Each group consisted of a walk leader and between five and ten people with visual-impairment or blindness, each accompanied by a volunteer sighted guide. The groups walked between five and eight miles each day. The Sheffield group was a self organised collective of people with visual-impairments and volunteers largely drawn from the local Ramblers association, supported by the social-services rehabilitation officer. This group provided weekday and weekend walks every fortnight. The Vitalise groups were facilitated by this disabled holidays charity. They visited the Lake District, stayed in youth hostels, and were led and organised by a paid walk leader and consisted of people with visual-impairments and volunteers from across Britain who had paid for the holiday.

In total 18 day walks and 3 week-long holiday trips were attended. Due to the occasional nature of the walking trips and holidays and the small numbers of walkers attending in winter, this research engagement was not an intense period of 'ethnographic immersion in the field' but, rather, was spread out over the course of almost two years, between February 2004 and December 2006. There were 11 men and 8 women interviewed with the age of walking participants and interviewees ranged from 22-80. The majority of the people who participated in this research were visually impaired or had age onset blindness rather than being blind since birth. What can be seen through such residual sight varies depending on the medical condition, its stage of progression and the properties of the environment through which seeing takes

place. The majority of walkers were over 55 and of white working or middle class backgrounds. However, amongst the interviewees there was one person who was born and raised in Iran and was of Iranian decent and one person of Afro-Caribbean parentage. While ethnicity, class and gender were not a primary focus for this piece of research, such positionings are worth noting, for whilst blindness may have some specific embodied effects, we cannot assume a singular identity of participants based around their disability. Nor can we assume that blind walkers inherit a single homogenous cultural inheritance of walking or viewing the countryside; rather, contemporary views and interpretations of the countryside potentially emerge from a diversity of landscape experiences and a variety of socio-spatial, gender, class and ethnic networks (Tolia-Kelly, 2006a).

Interviews are valued as a participatory research approach, for building rapport with participants and for contextualising responses of participants in specific environments (Garcia et al, 2012). However, the testimony from such walking and sit down interviews must be understood in context and has limitations – we cannot simply ‘hoover up’ themes such as embodiment, experience, well-being and sensation from personal testimony. Rather, it is important to reflect on the ‘sphere of applicability’ of such subjective testimony (Massumi, 2002 p3) and to the potential of landscape and the body to be otherwise to reported experience; for there is no utterly subjective, socially constructed world (Clark 2003). Furthermore, if we take autobiographical and interview statements of blind sensory experience and landscape encounter at face value we risk ignoring wider discursive and political structures which operate to constrain the blind body, its actions and interpretations. This includes the ways in which people (including people with visual-impairment) may participate in collective (predominantly sighted) regimes of truth about the world and may respond to longstanding stereotypes of touch and blindness.

Thus it is worth noting that there is no pure blind sensory experience to be uncovered, sight and blindness are mutually defining. We must therefore be wary of relying on blind and visually-impaired testimony about sensory experience as somehow authentic. For blind embodiment and speech emerges through interweavings with other objects, bodies and narratives (Macpherson, 2009b). In this paper I attend to what interview testimony and ethnography *can* speak of where data was analysed

through a process of annotating, categorising and coding while looking for similarities and differences as well as ambiguities and silences (Kitchen and Tate, 2000). In keeping with the ethnographic intent of the study data analysis was also informed by a reflexive approach with questions relating to participant and researcher subjectivities and the politics of research taken into account (Cloke et al., 2000).

Visual hegemonies

If there is one overarching reason why people would choose to push themselves very hard physically, often under unpleasant or even downright nasty conditions, it seems to be the glorious spectrum of views. (Darby, 2000, 213)

When they first told me that this visually impaired group were coming to walk in the national park and visit the centre, I thought they were joking you know? (Laughs) I suppose I just thought... Why bother? I mean normally... well as park guides we point out landscape features, natural history and the like. I suppose I just wondered what we were going to have to do and why they were coming. (Volunteer ranger, Field notes, 22nd April, 2006)

The first quotation here derives from an ethnographer of Lake District walking tours. The second quotation was stated to me by a volunteer ranger in the course of my field research: In both cases, there is the sense that visiting the locations in question must, first and foremost, be about viewing the stunning landscapes on offer. The two quotations help to clarify just what blind and visually-impaired people may have to overcome in terms of their own and other people's subtle – or sometimes not so subtle – prejudices or resistances to their presence and walking activities in rural space. As one keen Rambler with a visual-impairment explained to me:

people they lose their vision and they think they can't do it (walk in the countryside) any more – they have the same stereotypes as any sighted person, so they turn it against themselves (Ellen).⁶

⁶ Pseudonyms have been used here to protect the identity of participants. All quotable research material used in this paper is in italics and is drawn from the author's doctoral research acting as a sighted guide.

Dominant pictureseque modes of viewing the Lake District and Peak District still remain a significant aspect of visitor rationales and practices today (Urry, 1990; Darby, 2000). In fact, what was significant from my own research was that, far from subverting or rendering insignificant visual and symbolic forms of landscape viewing and enjoyment, people with blindness and visual-impairment actively participated in collective modes of visual enjoyment. For example, at times they would take an interest in the sight of others and ensure that they were present in summit photos that they could subsequently circulate to sighted friends and family. I discuss these symbolic ‘feelings of achievement’ in more depth in a later section of this paper, while the complex visual negotiations involved in the relations between sighted guides, visually-impaired walkers and the material landscape are discussed elsewhere (Macpherson, 2009a).

Going Beyond the Visual: Physical exercise and feelings of achievement

A wide range of benefits of walking in rural areas and walking collectively were identified by members of the group and observed by myself and the rehabilitation worker who accompanied the group. These benefits included: ‘feelings of achievement’ derived from reaching summits and sites of collective national significance; ‘feelings of well-being’ enabled through time spent walking in relatively tranquil rural settings; self-reported weight loss and weight maintenance; improved physical fitness; ‘feelings of freedom’ as related to the fast pace of walking movement enabled through a human guide; escape from known routes in urban and suburban areas; social networking opportunities; the sharing of experiences of sight loss or blindness; and some exercise for guide dogs who were relieved from their duties and were able to exercise off the lead.

One of the most obvious benefits of visually-impaired people’s participation in walking groups was the ‘healthy’ aerobic exercise that walking 5-8 miles afforded. In this sense they demonstrate the veracity of Gatrell’s (2013 p100) notion of ‘therapeutic mobilities’ and ‘the idea that movement itself can be conducive to wellbeing and health’. While members did not always frame their discussion or motivations for joining the group in terms of fitness, I witnessed how members of the

group would comment on their fitness as we walked uphill and would discuss how the walking group helped them to manage their weight. Of course, individual visually impaired participants had a range of athletic abilities and walking aspirations. Participants in the Vitalise groups who visit the Lake District were fit and adventurous and keen to reach the summits of Lake District hills. This is a long way from stereotypes of elderly visually-impaired walkers in need of level surfaces and short marked trails. For example, Derek commented about the Vitalise group,

I like the fact that we seem to go to wilder places. I like it because I can do it fairly well I must admit and I think, if I was restricted to pottering around meadows, I probably wouldn't go. I like going up hill and the sense of standing on top of somewhere and of looking down you know? And the sense of achievement when you have actually got up to the top.

Derek uses an oculacentric construction – ‘looking down’ – to capture a sense of his achievement, which not only underlines both the hegemony of visual tropes but also the ways in which they are sometimes deployed, even if in a subversive manner, by some visually-impaired walkers.

Walking uphill or across rough terrain raised participants’ pulses and heightened self-awareness of their weight and fitness. In this respect the steep terrain of the Lake and Peak District landscapes contributes to a ‘relational sense of self’ where fitness became something significant and immediately felt (cf. Conradson, 2005).

Participants themselves noted the importance of the walking groups for providing the opportunity to get some exercise. When I asked Ben and Bethan “What is the main thing you get out of coming out with a specialist walking group?”, they stated:

It keeps you fit ... and, rather than walking in the streets of Manchester, I would rather be walking here [the Lake District] – fresh air, no cars exhaust and all of that, it is better for you. (Ben)

... first of all the exercise, I get a lot out of that, then a different pace of life, a different pace having to walk everywhere and that whole sort of process of movement slows and changes your whole perspective on things. Oh the smells, I just love the different smells you get. There is a definite smell you get from the ground when it has been raining and there is some heat on it ... I do feel cleansed by the experience. (Bethan)

Aspects of these responses are fairly unsurprising and echo the rationales for walking that many sighted people would state when asked about their reasons for visiting the

Lakes and Peaks areas (eg. Darby, 2000). However, it must be recognised that 'keeping fit' is a particular challenge for some people with visual-impairments and blindness, given their limited access to recreational facilities and the fact that their walking is often circumscribed to relatively short and known routes. Therefore, it is particularly important that people with visual-impairments are afforded the same level of access and opportunity to recreational walking exercise as their sighted counterparts. The rhythm and process of walking itself, and the smells and other sensory aspects that rural locations afford, also have mental and physical health benefits that extend far beyond measurable physical fitness indicators. For example, as well as the exercise, Bethan emphasises some of the less tangible benefits of walking; that it requires a 'different pace' and that the smells and pace leave you feeling 'cleansed'. Such remarks are also potent reminders of the how environments can be encountered through far more than just the eyes. This is a claim that someone with limited sight, such as Bethan, can so articulately turn back upon sighted walkers who arguably fail to deploy these other avenues for environmental encounter.

Reaching a summit of national significance or the end of a walk also enabled feelings of achievement and pride (cf. Lorimer and Lund, 2003), and such 'feelings of achievement.' were demonstrated through participants' practices. For example, in the Lake District some participants with limited sight brought cameras and asked guides to take pictures of them on top of summits in order circulate photos of their achievements amongst friends and family. Thus, while people with blindness or visual-impairment may seem to be a 'paradoxical presence' in the Lake and Peak areas, ones traditionally valued for their picturesque qualities (Andrews, 1989), here the walkers were embracing that paradox, laughing at it even (Macpherson, 2008a). They were knowingly participating in, acknowledging and valuing the symbolic and visual qualities of these areas, taking pride in their achievements and rendering themselves visible for others to appreciate. As deaf-blind author Helen Keller wrote over a century ago:

The sun does not shine for my physical eyes, nor does the lightning flash, nor do the trees turn green in spring; but they have not therefore ceased to exist, any more than the landscape is annihilated when you turn your back on it (Keller, 1908: 67).

Going Beyond the Visual: Feelings of freedom and opportunities to socialise

Another set of key benefits brought by the walking groups, as identified by the majority of members, was the feeling of relative freedom that walking in the countryside with a sighted guide enabled. For example, when I asked in one interview with a regular member, Paul, “What do you get out of going walking with a guide?”, he replied:

Freedom, freedom, that is the main thing, not having to worry about the next obstacle, when you hold somebody's arm, you sort of switch off ... It's brilliant, you know? Yeah, so you can listen to what is happening in the countryside, you can relax more; you know, sort of sometimes you're tense, thinking you might get a cut in the head or you could fall over something that someone has put in the way. [Instead,] it is just freedom really to walk unhindered with a guide.

While the idea that one can ‘walk unhindered with a guide’ may sound like another paradoxical construct, many people with visual-impairments are normally limited to known routes that they can navigate with a guide dog or cane. Having a sighted companion opens up spaces that they would otherwise be unable to access. It also enables people with visual-impairments to move at a reasonably fast pace and to reap the maximum exercise benefits, safe in the knowledge that significant obstacles or hazards will be negotiated by their guide. Ellen and Jenny affirmed these ideas:

... well I was always physical, I used to like athletics and stuff, so there is a whole physical aspect to it, and being outdoors and having a guide gives me freedom, to me a guide represents freedom to me. (Ellen)

... well in day-to-day life walking around the streets with a long cane, you don't build up any speed and you don't relax at all really, it is quite a tense thing. But if you walk with somebody who is good at guiding you, you can get up a good pace and really relax and enjoy it, and that is important to me. (Jenny)

Being with a sighted guide thus opens up opportunities for visually impaired people in the countryside. Not only does a guide provide companionship, a guide represents the opportunity – quite literally – to grasp a relative feeling of freedom. It may be best to understand this guide-walker relationship less as one of dependent walker and independent guide, and more as one of ‘interdependence’. The social dimensions of ‘therapeutic mobilities’ are thus as relevant to the guide as they are to the walker

(Gatrell, 2013 p100). Volunteer guides are themselves participating in a form of ‘alternative tourism’, enjoying the feeling of volunteering and of usefully leading their companions on walks (Macpherson, 2008a). In this case they have a certain form of ‘dependence’ upon those they guide. However, at times negotiating the guide-walker relationship can also constitute one of the challenges that walkers with visual-impairments who visit the countryside must face. This issue is taken up in the following section.

Challenges and difficulties faced by walkers with visual impairments

This section outlines some of the key challenges and difficulties that walkers with poor sight who visit the countryside face. As Gatrell (2013 p104) advises, we need to avoid romanticising walking despite its potential therapeutic benefits for ‘walking as a practice depends on opportunities’ and our social location. For people with visual impairments four issues require highlighting.

Firstly, walking in rural areas with visual impairment or blindness is not necessarily easy, since it requires a degree of skill, trust, bravery, concentration and enthusiasm more akin to a day’s climbing for a person with sight than a mere stroll in the countryside. In particular, the rough terrain of the Lake and Peak Districts means that participants need to adopt a high step and heel toe style of walking in order to avoid tripping on the uneven ground. Furthermore, some of the countryside infrastructure in parts of both the Peak and Lake Districts remains deeply unsuited to visually-impaired access. Notably, high stiles represented a significant challenge for many (see Figure 3). As Greg explained:

Stiles are a pain, they take 25 meters out of you! We measured it once, we timed how far a pair could get ahead while someone was getting over a stile and it worked out at about 25 to 30 metres ... I don’t enjoy them, they knock your rhythm out!

Secondly, while the health benefits of walking are clear, it is important to realise that the opportunities for people with visual-impairments to join a walking group, and hence to get regular walking exercise, are not uniform across the United Kingdom, let alone globally. There are currently a number of specialist groups in the United Kingdom that offer blind and visually-impaired adults the opportunity to go walking in the countryside, including; London Blind Rambling Club (operating across the

South East of England), St Dunstan's Blind Walkers Group in Brighton, Cardiff Ramblers, Newcastle Society of the Blind Walking group, and the Sheffield Visually Impaired Walking Group. There are also specialist charities that provide walking Holidays for people with visual impairments such as Vitalise and the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). Additionally there are some informal, individual arrangements across the country provided by sighted volunteers willing to lead particular individuals on walks⁷. Nonetheless, research participants on the Vitalise holiday trips explained that they sometimes encountered a shortage of opportunities to go walking and hence experienced difficulties in being able to visit the countryside on a regular basis.

Some of the visually-impaired members of the two walking groups studied developed agreements with sighted guides that enabled them to telephone their guide and go out as a pair or, with their guide, join walks with mainstream walking clubs such as the Ramblers Association or Walking for Health initiatives. That said, many people with visual-impairments to whom I spoke did not have this regular opportunity and found it hard to maintain their fitness between weekly walks or the occasional week-long walking holiday. This situation would be relatively easy to resolve if there was a bank of walking volunteers in each region that could be paired up with keen walkers with visual impairments (following the model offered by British Blind Sport and England Athletics who now have a bank of guide runners). There also continues to be a role for specialist groups that target people with visual-impairments, even so, for participants as a collective can actively benefit from the companionship of other people who have also experienced sight loss. Over the course of my research participants often shared recollections of their sight loss and discussed its impact on their capabilities and opportunities for walking, running or taking other forms of exercise or holidaying. They also shared tips about coping as a visually-impaired walker in terms of embodied movement and dealing with sighted guides. Participants with sight loss sometimes, if not always, walk at a slower pace (particularly downhill) and may lack the confidence and skills needed to walk in a mainstream, sighted group. The disadvantage of these specialist groups for younger or more able members

⁷ I know about these groups through a call for information via the RNIB specialist publication "New Beacon", but a more thorough review of ad-hoc groups and walking arrangements was beyond the remit of this project.

was that the age profile of both participants and sighted guides tended to be around retirement age. This meant that the pace was sometimes quite slow in order to accommodate all members. I gained the sense that this discouraged younger members of working age, perhaps lessening the challenge and adventure desired by the likes of Derek (see above).

Thirdly, it must also be appreciated that the experience of being guided by a sighted volunteer was not always entirely positive. While guides often enable freedom of movement, guiding in a countryside context sometimes placed people with visual-impairments into a position of ‘dependency’ (see Figures 1 and 2). This is a stereotype that visually impaired people have typically had to work hard to subvert. As Jim and Bethan explained:

... I think I feel more of a sense of freedom in the city – in an area I know – than I do in the country[side], where I am totally dependent on a sighted guide ... if I lost my grip on the guide’s rucksack or sleeve, I would immediately have to stop and call to my guide and say, ‘could you stop? I have lost your sleeve.’ (Jim)

... it is the assumptions some people have and it is a difficult context in which to break those assumptions if they are guiding you. There was one lady ... she would treat you as if you were completely incapable: ‘Sit, stay’ [laughs] ‘step with your left there and your left foot there’, and she would get really cross if you didn’t put the right foot down. It was actually funny and everyone had the same experience, and we laughed about it and bonded over it... but, if I had been on my own, I would have felt quite upset I think after that. I think that is what creates the tension, and, if someone is going out of their way to make your life more enjoyable, it is difficult. It is great if you communicate well, but if they can’t pick up on conventional signals [laughs], it can be a bit problematic. (Bethan)

Walking in the countryside as a visually-impaired rambler or a sighted guide involves participating in an interdependent relationship with benefits and enjoyments for both parties. The guide-walker relationship can be a source of bonding for both parties, facilitate conversation, help establish trust and new friendships, and – it strikes me – perform as a positive antidote to the ‘competitive individualism’ often characteristic of contemporary capitalist society (Gilbert, 2004). However, at times this relationship becomes dependent or awkward which is often dealt with through humour and laughter (Macpherson, 2008a). As a result the guide-walker relationship needs careful consideration if opportunities for walking exercise with sighted guides are to be more

widely encouraged. ‘Charitable sentiments’ among volunteers can be well-meaning but ultimately corrosive to visually-impaired participants’ self-esteem. In particular, I think it will be important for any future guiding schemes to encourage an ethos of ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing for’ (Carr, 2004), to prevent the unintentional but still negative impacts of the teacherly ‘lady’ guide mentioned by Bethan (for whom *co-participation* was evidently not the watchword).

Fourthly, some guides expressed nervousness at the responsibility of accompanying and leading their companions across challenging terrain. Thus, guides themselves sometimes need reassurance, encouragement and training. While visual-impairment awareness courses are available and run by social services, the best people to reassure guides, and indeed to teach them how to guide, may well be the walkers with visual impairments themselves when they are out on real countryside walks. There are some standard practices such as guiding with a ‘C-Grip’ or a strap for narrow or steep sections (see Figures 1 and 2). However, each person’s guiding needs will differ depending on their particular sight impairment and skills, and therefore volunteer guides should explore and effectively negotiate guiding needs with individuals themselves.

Conclusions: from the ‘blind gallery’ to the ‘blind countryside’?

This paper began by introducing Cachia’s (2013) ruminations on occularcentrism which she uses to ask ‘What would happen if the museum began to re-think of itself as an institution for sensorial culture rather than purely visual culture?’ The data presented in this paper invite the reposing of Cachia’s question to what happens when interested parties begin to re-think the rural landscape, or more specifically ‘areas of outstanding natural beauty’, as a site for sensorial culture rather than purely visual culture?

Finally, then, let me recap on this narrower focus for my paper, albeit as set within this broader problematic as inspired by Cachia (2013). A significant proportion of scholarship on the Lake and Peak Districts draws attention to how these areas have been constructed and promoted for their scenic, picturesque beauty. Such work draws attention to the visual rationales supposedly drawing visitors to such attractive rural

settings. In this environment people with a visual impairment are often seen as ‘out-of-place’ and thus walking is a ‘powerful way’ of asserting their ‘social presence’ (Andrews et al., 2012 p192). Further to this political imperative there are also numerous other social, health and well-being benefits to be derived from walking in the Lakes and Peaks, ones comprising elements in an enlarged sensorial culture that includes but does not reduce to, nor depend upon, the visual. This paper has identified and explored some of these benefits, which arguably reach from the realms of the senses, embodiment and physical health through to the realms of achievement, sociability and mental well-being, and has done so through drawing upon ethnographic and interview research with specialist visually-impaired walking groups. Further to these benefits are the political imperatives of visually-impaired people.

In a normative vein, I conclude that opportunities should continue to be made available for people with visual-impairments to join mainstream walking groups and walking holidays.⁸ That accepted, it is clear that specialist groups are still considered, by participants, to provide a helpful and important role. This is because some visually-impaired walkers move more slowly than their sighted counterparts, particularly downhill or over rough terrain, while members may also benefit socially through sharing experiences of sight loss in these informal walking forums. Provision of specialist groups is not uniform across the country, and further research and funding is required to see if it might be feasible and appropriate to establish a countrywide network of specialist walking groups that open up opportunities for visually-impaired participants. Furthermore, specialist groups should not be the only opportunity for people with visual-impairments to get regular walking exercise. Rather than risk being a ‘segregative solution’ (cf. Carr, 2004) following the Sheffield model, specialist groups also need to facilitate integration with other walking groups in the community. It would be useful if every region in the United Kingdom had a bank of volunteer sighted guides, willing to lead individuals with sight problems to

⁸ As they walked in the Peak District on a Wednesday, a weekday, a few of the members of the specialist visually-impaired walking group were evidently walking rather than working, and for some their unemployment or early retirement seemed to be at least a partial consequence of discrimination based on their visual disability. It struck me that, while walkers in the Lakes and Peaks have, for over a century, used walking as an escape from the grind of a weekly job, some participants of working age in this instance were perhaps escaping to the countryside during the week to go walking because they were unable to secure a job. Specialist walking groups for people with visual-impairments do not redress this employment situation, and the provision of recreation and leisure opportunities for disabled people should complement rather than distract from other significant employment research agendas.

walks and to help build up the confidence and skills of visually-impaired walkers – the Walking for Health Initiative and the Ramblers Association could potentially adopt a more active role in this regard (following in the footsteps of British Blind Sport and England Athletics who now have a bank of guide runners). Any such programme targeting volunteer guides and participants with visual-impairments should develop from an ethos of co-participation (‘walking with’ rather than ‘volunteering for’). Where the encounters enabled with rural landscapes can be a source of unity – interdependence – between the sighted and those with less or no sight, and with *all* involved potentially contributing to a new sensorially-inclusive (and non-ocularcentric) meeting-place between disability and rurality.

In the wake of the Equality Act (2010) (previously the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) and the Countryside Agency Diversity Review (2005), action has been taken to improve countryside infrastructures and thereby to encourage more potential disabled visitors to use the recreation and exercise opportunities that the countryside affords. Excellent best practice ‘accessible design’ examples that can now be found on the ‘Natural England’ and ‘Sensory Trust’ websites. Nonetheless, further research is required into the opportunity, attitudes and experiences of groups with specific sorts of disability (Countryside Agency, 2005b; cf. Burns et al., 2009, 2013) who do seek to access countryside locations for leisure and recreation.

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