

[page 574]

Visual Impairment in the City: Young People's Social Strategies for Independent Mobility

Nancy Worth

Abstract This article examines the mobility strategies that visually impaired (VI) young people employ as they negotiate their daily lives in the city. In contrast to research which foregrounds difficulties navigating the built environment, the article provides new insights into how VI young people engage with the city as a social space, arguing that VI young people's goal of achieving 'unremarkable' mobility is constrained by an ableist society that constantly marks them out, frustrating goals of independent mobility which are important to young people's transitions to adulthood. Drawing on young people's narratives, three mobility strategies of young people are examined: concealing VI with friends, performing VI with white canes and travelling with guide dogs. Each is evaluated for its potential to help VI young people achieve identities as 'competent spatial actors'.

Introduction

For young people, the goal of greater mobility parallels transitions to adulthood, which are generally interested in the shift from dependence to independence. Most research on youth and mobility has focused on education-to-work moves, leaving home (including rural to urban moves), or even youth migration across borders (Cox, 2007; Jamieson, 2000; Jones, 2000; Holdsworth, 2000). Yet, on a more everyday scale, increasing physical mobility is also important to the experience of growing up. According to Henderson et al.

Learning to crawl then walk, crossing the road, walking to school with friends, learning to drive and travelling alone are widely viewed as stages in a story of social development (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 101).

In this article, I take the parallel between mobility and the transition to adulthood

[page 575]

further, arguing that within young people's discussions of physical mobility there is a goal to be recognised as a competent spatial actor.[1]

I focus on the experiences of visually impaired (VI) young people, aged 16–25, living across the north of England. In particular, I examine how VI young people use different mobility strategies to work against the potential for patronising or discriminatory reactions to their presence in public space. Morris (1991, p. 25) states that, although the built environment is often difficult to navigate, "the knowledge that each entry into the public world will be dominated by stares, by condescension, by pity and by hostility" can be more challenging. For the VI young people involved in this research, their spatial competence is often undermined by social perceptions of their identity as both visually impaired and young. Although young people are common users of public spaces, when young people have a disability their age often adds the perception of double dependency (Lee, 2001). So while disabled users of public space may have the experience noted in the quote from Morris, the mobility of young disabled people becomes even more remarkable to an adult, non-disabled majority. The intersection of youth, disability and mobility is complex and highly contingent on time and place (Valentine, 2007), yet it offers a valuable insight into

young people's agential push towards independent mobility and adulthood, and an ableist society's often well-meaning tendency to frustrate their attempts.

Building on a recent call for more research on the relationship between youth and mobility (Barker et al., 2009), this article examines the everyday mobility strategies of visually impaired (VI) young people and their quest to be seen as capable users of public space. Rather than focus on how participants move through the city, I am more interested in how VI young people's goal of an 'unremarkable' mobility is constrained by an ableist society that constantly marks them out. Using the narratives of visually impaired young people, I examine three typical (although not the only or mutually exclusive) mobility strategies—concealing VI with friends, performing VI with white canes and travelling with guide dogs—evaluating each for its potential to help VI young people achieve the identity of a competent spatial actor.

Visual Impairment and Mobility

Geographical work on visual impairment and mobility has emerged from two strands of thought, with a large contribution from the medical or behavioural perspective of Golledge, Kitchin, Marston, Jacobson and others (Golledge, 1993; Kitchin et al., 1997; Kitchen et al., 1998; Marston et al., 1997; for a detailed review see Park et al., 1998.) The goal of their cognitive mapping studies is to give "insight into the 'mental landscapes' of people with blindness or visual impairments" (Kitchin et al., 1997, p. 226). While valuable, VI people's spatial capabilities are only part of understanding their mobility. There is much research to suggest that VI people feel more 'disabled' by the social attitudes of those around them than by their impairment (Reeve, 2005).

The second strand of research is interested in the social experience of being visually impaired in public space (Hill, 1985; Cook, 1991; Butler, 1994, 1998; Butler and Bowlby, 1997; Pow, 2000; Allen, 2004a, 2004b; Macpherson, 2007). Early work used phenomenology to understand the experience of blindness (Hill, 1985; Cook, 1991). Through the ethnographies of four research participants, Cook (1991, pp. 43–44) examines the complexities of VI mobility as a "fluid combination of direct perception,

[page 576]

familiarity and visualization". Using structuration theory, Cook offers an understanding of blindness beyond impairment effects, examining a complex interplay of structure and agency in each participant's lifeworld, including individual attitudes to VI (from being a 'normal kid' to accepting 'abnormality') and an analysis of the power relations inherent to VI.

This focus on agency continues in Butler and Bowlby's work, where they use feminist theories of the body and a social understanding of disability to examine personal experiences of disability, focusing on ableist social attitudes. Beginning with questions of selfimage, the authors found that many visually impaired people are highly selfconscious and self-critical about their appearance and behaviour in public (Butler and Bowlby, 1997, p. 423).

Similar to the impact on women's bodies, the media and daily interactions with others are powerful actors on the self-worth of disabled people. Feelings of clumsiness about physical movement and shyness about appearance affect people with visual impairments, who can then feel not 'normal'. Their conception of disability as something to be negotiated in space on both a personal and social level is a significant contribution.

Pow (2000) adds complexity to a discussion of sensory spatial strategies by exploring the social dimension of public space. Pow (2000, p. 176) contends that while "the social signification and limitations placed on the functioning of the disabled body can severely restrict the spatial efficacy of the visually impaired", notions of marginality and powerlessness are also constantly being challenged. The research takes an emancipatory outlook that works against ableism by positioning people with visual

impairments as 'creative spatial dissidents'. A focus on agency continues in Allen's (2004b) phenomenological examination of VI young people's daily encounters with home, school and the built environment. For VI young people, once spatial knowledge of home or school is learned through sounds, partial sight or counting, the body develops "an individualised sociospatial history that eventually become 'sedimented' within 'body techniques'"—the body-in-itself (Allen, 2004b, p. 727). This intuitive bodily knowledge leads to a strong sense of agency, as children are highly confident of their local spatial awareness. Yet, VI young people still need to convince parents of their ability—mobility quickly moves beyond orientation skills, towards a need for parents and others to recognise competence.

Finally, Butler's (1998) research on the social image of disabled young people has inspired this research. She uses the work of Goffman (1963) and Shakespeare (1994) to examine the power of social 'norms' around bodily appearance and ability as well as common public reactions to disabled bodies in public space like fear, pity and hostility. This ableism stems from a fear of bodily infirmity and the perception of abnormality as deviance and danger—especially if bodies are not seen as 'under control'. These negative reactions to disability can make moving through public space a constant struggle, as young people must constantly confront the notion that they are 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996). My work switches the focus from why VI young people are disabled in public space to how they use mobility to try and negotiate an ableist society.

Mobility, Youth and Public Space: A Quest for Recognition

Before engaging with the empirical material, it is important to define some key terms in my argument—that VI young people use

[page 577]

different mobility strategies in public space in order to be recognised as competent spatial actors. First is the concept of mobility; I find Thomson and Taylor's (2005) conception of mobility as a 'resource' for transitions to adulthood particularly helpful for my analysis. Yet while Thomson and Taylor focus on different localities, and how they create 'local economies of mobility', I am more interested in everyday physical mobility as a social experience for young people (although see also Leyshon's (2011) work on barriers to young people's rural mobility and Bulthuis' (2011) on the suburban). The social experience of moving through the city is at the centre of Cahill's (2000) research on 'street literacy' with urban teenagers, suggesting a complex relationship between the experience of public space, young people's sense of self and their place in the world (see also Kato, 2009). This kind of social focus on mobility is missing from much of the research on visual impairment and the city (Devlieger et al., 2006), where VI is individualised and mobility remains in the realm of navigating space. It is important to note that, while this paper focuses on VI young people's social experience of urban mobility, sighted young people can also struggle to attain this 'resource', as other social categories of difference can create social barriers to mobility (see Thomas, 2005; and Nayak, 2003).

Secondly, space becomes important, especially since young people value particular spaces over others in their quest for increasing independence. Rather than school or home, which are defined by parents or teachers, young people value the openness of public space during their transition to adulthood. This is especially true for disabled young people, who often spend the majority of their time in spaces controlled by adults (Priestley, 1999). In her review of the growing field of youth geographies, Evans (2008) notes the importance of urban space to youth transitions, citing the work of Valentine and Skelton (2003) and their use of particular clubs and bars as 'transition spaces' for gay young people. Other geographers have recognised the importance for occupying public spaces more generally, especially the inherent power of claiming space in the street (see Woolley's (2006) work with skateboarders). Skelton adds to research in youth geography by challenging stereotypes that the street is a male space, as Rhondda's 'valley girls'

actively worked at being out and about, at 'hanging around' and participating in a dynamic and public teenage girl culture based on the streets (Skelton, 2000, p. 82).

Following Matthews (2003), this article also conceptually positions the street as a 'liminal' space, a space of openness and possibility, where different aspects of identity can be tried out. Removing the image of linearity that a metaphor of the street might imply, Matthews stresses multiple futures and possibilities of adulthood, positioning the street as a site where hybrid child/adult identities are negotiated, rather than a passageway from childhood to adulthood.

Finally, theoretical issues around social identity and 'recognition' are crucial. Here, the stress is on the dialogic nature of identity, where identities are created by the mutual recognition of equals. Rather than descending into the identity politics of disability, the value of considering recognition centres around an individual's quest for social status within society (Fraser, 2000). According to Charles Taylor

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the

[page 578]

people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves(Taylor, 1997, p. 97).

While using different theoretical language, I would argue that there is a strong connection between the damage caused by misrecognition and the recent push towards an 'extended social relational definition of disability' (Reeve, 2009; Thomas, 2007), where disabled people's emotional wellbeing is under threat when they are not recognised as equals in public space. Building from this dynamic set of literature, I will briefly touch on some methodological issues before considering three strategies VI young people use to claim an identity of a competent spatial actor: friends, white canes and guide dogs. I conclude with some thoughts about the intersection between independent mobility, disability and adulthood.

Telling Stories about Mobility

This article uses narratives from part of a larger research project on transitions to adulthood and the changing category of lifecourse (Worth, 2009b). Twenty-eight young people between the age of 16 and 25 took part in the research. Participants who selfidentified as visually impaired responded to calls to participate that were distributed through universities, local authorities, charities, on-line and through word-of-mouth. During the research, participants chose their own pseudonyms and agreed on 'VI' as a common identifier (instead of 'disabled' and as a preferable short form for 'visually impaired'). Regarding the narratives included later, all participants considered themselves VI from birth, representing the moderate to severe end of a wide spectrum of visual impairment that varies between no light perception and mild sight loss, with a wide range of conditions in between. All had experience of both mainstream and specialist school; the typical experience for VI young people with a severe impairment was to start off in mainstream primary school and switch to a specialist high school or college when more support was needed. All participants also struggled with various levels of understanding and support from sighted parents, leading to the linkage between mobility and independence (Imrie, 2000) that emerges in the narratives, as VI young people worked at negotiating space on their own terms.

My approach to narrative is interested in key events in the lives of young people, with the resulting 'episodic' or 'topical' stories moving the research away from biography by allowing comparisons across theme (Flick, 1997; Riessman, 2008). Rather than chop down participants' stories, I have taken a case study approach by focusing my analysis on large chunks of text that include a participant's complete narrative arc. A few of the stories included here emerged from the first stage of the research, a narrative interview, where mobility was brought up by several participants. The majority of the extracts are from the second stage of the research, an audio diary that was completed a few months after the interview (Worth, 2009a). The diary allowed participants to further consider the main aims of the research and to

add anything about their experience that they felt was missing from the interview. It was helpful specifically in this case as I was able to add an open-ended prompt about mobility to the guide that accompanied the diary, allowing me to pick up on important stories that came through in the interviews. Moreover, the confessional and emotional aspect of many of the extracts is most likely to be the result of the

[page 579]

audio diary format which encourages contemplation and reflection.

Mobility Strategies of VI Young People in Public Space

The following section details three strategies, what Kullman (2010, p. 842) might call “situated styles of being in public” that VI young people employ to manage their experience of public space. These three strategies were the most common across the group, with some participants matching different strategies to different situations.

Concealing Visual Impairment

Youth is a time when people experiment most with their appearance, and often take great pains to present themselves in particular ways (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007); for VI young people it is no different. Unlike positive cultural associations around D/ deaf identities (Valentine and Skelton, 2007), for the VI young people involved in this research visual impairment is something they often want to keep to themselves (see also Butler, 1998). Following Hahn’s (1986) classic argument that disability is created through its visibility to others, one common strategy for being seen as a competent spatial actor is to minimise the visibility of visual impairment. Although some partially sighted young people were able to get by pretending to see more than they could, most participants chose to link arms with friends, only moving through public space when they could be accompanied. This strategy engages with the loaded term of ‘passing’ (Stone, 1995; Kafer, 2003), although it was not a term participants used. Instead, VI young people who used this strategy believed they simply were not announcing their impairment to others. This subtle repositioning is critical, as young people were not actively disavowing VI; they simply position it as an aspect of themselves that people only find out about when a relationship goes beyond the casual.

Many of the younger participants in the research aimed to ‘fit in’ and chose to conceal VI, with Sarah being one of the most vehement opponents to using a cane when out in public. Sarah talked about canes first in our interview and became one of the participants who inspired me to include more about mobility in the audio diary, where she had more to say

I’ve never really been hot on the idea of canes cause they don’t look so great. So I’ve never used it. . I don’t like the look of it and I don’t like the fact that it makes you, it brings you more attention than other people. And people know [pause] straight off that you’re a bit ‘spesh’ [special], if you get me. . I don’t know when it started . Like, when I rebelled and said like, ‘No I’m not using it. I don’t want to use it. I don’t want to be the odd one out’. Everyone says that everybody else uses the cane and all that stuff. But when I went to my [specialist school visit], they say the majority of people don’t like using one. Who don’t want to use them and would rather rely upon their friends than look weird (interview).[2]

For my family I guess [not using a cane] was a really big deal and for like, the service-y people who I work with they always found it, like ‘Ooh, why aren’t you using it’. ‘Ooh you should do this, this is like for your own benefit’. But I don’t really see the benefit. [laughs] I just think you get bullied, and I’d rather not to be fair. I’d rather trip over a piece of paper than get bullied for being special (Sarah, 16, blind, audio diary).

A downside to Sarah’s strategy emerges within her narrative—her reliance on her friends. While her family and others want to encourage her ability for independent travel,

[page 580]

Sarah does not believe that the potential harassment it could bring her is worth the risk. Elsewhere in her narrative, Sarah justifies not wanting to use a cane by listing various instances of verbal abuse aimed at her by the general public. For this reason, many other participants also chose to 'pass' as fully sighted in public space, even if this would cause them difficulty with mobility.

Concealment is a strategy that works only in public space, where encounters are brief. Dyck's (1999) research highlights the situational nature of what she calls 'concealment strategies'. In Dyck's research, women often concealed their MS diagnosis at work fearing the consequences of the stigma around impairment and disability. For VI young people, 'faking it' was only done in public space, aimed at casual encounters with passers-by, never at home or school. Not only would it be exhausting to keep up, but 'faking it' becomes unnecessary when VI young people move through networks of family, friends and partners, as their close connections often see their visual impairment as only one part of a multifaceted identity. Yet when VI young people meet new people for the first time, or engage in daily activities in public space, their visual impairment often takes centre stage, an unwanted focus that often becomes a negative point of otherness that must always be contested.

Overall, most VI young people find that passing as sighted is only temporarily successful, as participants who chose this strategy were often 'found out' and still experienced discrimination. Moreover, travelling only when accompanied by friends partially sacrifices the idea of independent mobility that is so important to young people's definitions of growing up (as it only allows for independence from parents/ authority figures). Looking across the age range of respondents, a clear pattern begins to emerge, with the youngest often wanting to conceal their VI and older participants attempting to forge the image of a competent VI spatial actor by working with canes and guide dogs.

Performing Visual Impairment with a White Cane

The most common mobility strategy used by young people involved specific kinds of performance with a white cane. (There are two types of canes, long canes, which are primarily used for navigation, and symbol canes which are held diagonally across the body as a signal of sight loss). White canes are used in many different ways by the young people in this research, from reluctant users who feel it is 'expected of them' to those who enjoy being treated 'much beyond the ordinary' when they use their cane. The most complex uses centre around what Porter (2000) calls playing 'the disabled role'. Will's discussion of his cane became a way of describing how he relates his often invisible VI to the outside world, and how he feels he is perceived by others. Will occasionally employs a symbol cane if he needs assistance, to pre-empt questions he does not want to answer and to manage expectations about his vision

I've got a symbol cane . It's just there to tell people—if I get into a situation where people are, 'Oh can't you see that .?' And the cane is there to say, 'This guy has a visual impairment. Just be careful and don't expect too much'. When I say that I mean, like don't expect me to see something a mile away or anything.

I don't always use my symbol cane and a lot of people will think that I don't have a visual impairment and expect a lot from me. Such as, oh if I bump into somebody they'll get mad at me, it's 'cause they don't understand that I have a visual impairment. If I explain

[page 581]

that to them, they'll apologise. But it's sometimes the same even when I have my cane with me because a lot of people, mainly people my age and [pause] well just anybody that's not older, as I think that, I don't know, they just characterise a blind person as somebody who has no idea where they are all the time, and just carrying this stick or a guide dog (Will, 17, partially sighted, audio diary).

Will's high level of mobility combined with his strategic use of a symbol cane to signal his visual impairment is often confusing to others, especially his peers, as he does not fit into their stereotypical image of VI people as blind and always in need of help. Will has actively sought out a network of older friends, avoiding occasions where he could be misrecognised and marked out by people his own age. Instead, he chooses activities where his style of independent mobility is seen as unremarkable. Frustration about the limited and negative image of visual impairment was expressed by many participants, most often by partially sighted young people who do not feel they are recognised at all—falling in between society's dualistic expectations of blind and sighted.

In contrast to the symbolic way Will uses a white cane, James uses a long cane to travel to and from work and to get around in town. For him, using the cane as more of a performance was a recent consideration and he reflected on the power of the cane as an object in our interview

It's strange to think that it's such a small thing but the impact's quite big. It's pretty cool for crossing roads and stuff. It's like cars stop a lot right by my side so . [laughs] In like more close spaces and stuff, you kind of always get somebody that will move out the way as well when they see you, so it works out not too bad. I've got a good spatial awareness and stuff, so I'm a little better at getting around than some other people are. . But I don't like—I always feel a bit awkward when somebody's offering to help you to cross a road or something. 'Cause although I don't need help to cross a road it's always kind of quite nice when somebody asks. And you kind of don't put them off by going, 'No, no, no. I'm alright.' Because there might be somebody else two weeks later that struggles to cross roads and they'd like somebody to offer them their hand. Like it doesn't really bother me, but it's always kind of a thing not to put people off, so (James, 24, blind, interview).

In the first part of James' narrative, he uses laughter and sarcasm almost jokingly to explain the drastic impact his white cane has; this kind of humour has been described by Macpherson (2008) as a form of coping strategy to the experience of being marked out and here people's reactions to his white cane powerfully show its ability to create 'otherness'. In the second part of his narrative, James talks about accepting unneeded help crossing roads—performing the 'disabled role' of submissive dependency that goes totally against his self-sufficient nature (see also Butler, 1998). Here, rather than defy his potential helper and prove his capacity to negotiate the street, James allows himself to be misrecognised to increase the potential mobility of other VI people. Both Will and James illustrate their engagement with independence and adulthood through their considered use of their white canes as they travel the city. Will actively chooses places where older young people are more likely to see him as a competent spatial actor, while James has become confident enough in his own abilities to temporarily sacrifice the appearance of independent mobility, for what he would probably say was a greater good.

[page 582]

Travelling with a Guide Dog

The third mobility strategy for being recognised as a competent spatial actor involves independent travel with a guide dog. On a personal level, working with a guide dog is a sign of maturity and adulthood within the VI world, as it shows that you are capable of learning increasingly complex routes, and feel responsible enough to look after the welfare of the animal—the experience is often compared with having a child. Several participants were looking forward to getting a guide dog in the future, as a milestone on their way to adulthood. Regarding mobility, one participant told me about the freedom her dog gives her to have to remember only macro details in the landscape (like junctions), rather than having to keep track of micro details (like lamp posts and telephone boxes), vastly increasing her personal independence.

Yet the social impact of guide dogs is more complicated, as guide dogs have a different kind of significance in the sighted world. For Willow, having a guide dog helped her to meet people and she loved talking about her dog as she could often forge a positive, inclusive conversation with people about

travel, without VI being the centre of attention (see Sanders, 2000). Yet, for other participants, the 'ice-breaker' quality of a guide dog did not mean that young people were also recognised as competent spatial actors. Beth's story explains how her mobility with her dog can be hindered

I cannot believe that for instance, people don't know that you're not supposed to stroke a guide dog, but people still genuinely seem unaware of it or just don't take any notice. . [One] instance is when someone tries to take over when you know best: my dog wears a nose piece and if she pulls it inevitably does go near her eyes –but then that should teach her not to pull. And then I get people coming up and saying, 'It's pulling near her eyes! Here, let me.' And they start to actually handle the dog. I had a nurse in a hospital untying her when I had tied her for a reason. People come and start picking up your belongings and untying your dog for you. It's like, 'I'm an adult and if I want this doing could I not be given the space to ask for these things?' (Beth, 24, blind, audio diary).

Research has consistently shown that the presence of a service dog increases social interaction in public space, as the dog is said to make the disabled person more 'approachable' (Mader et al., 1989; Sachs- Ericsson et al., 2002), but the quality of this interaction is less well known. Although Beth experiences a high level of sociality while out with her dog, she often talks of being treated like a child, where her requests are ignored and people try and 'correct' or take over her attempts at greater mobility. In Modlin's (2008) research, young people had to weigh the utility of service dogs against their presence as a distraction when out in public—distracting for the young person who has to field people's questioning, and as a distraction between regular communication when people speak to the dog before the young disabled person. Therefore, while personally a guide dog symbolises a very 'grown-up' kind of mobility for VI young people, their hyper visibility when out in public often draws unwanted attention and unneeded help.

Independent Mobility, Disability and Adulthood

VI young people often feel liberated by mobility aids, as each one has the power to increase independence and improve the experience of moving through the city— throughout the transition to adulthood, VI

[page 583]

young people can add in 'learning the long cane' and 'getting a guide dog' as important moments. Yet the achievement of greater mobility and independence is frequently harmed when these achievements go unrecognised by society, where VI young people are still often seen as in need of help or as an object of ridicule. The sighted majority have the power to deny VI young people's attempts at becoming a competent spatial actor, and they do so, sometimes with the most helpful intentions. Yet the young people involved in this research persevere, constantly developing new mobility strategies (from memorising routes to investigating wayfinding technology) that encourage others to accept their autonomy.

One subtle strategy that emerged in the narratives was wearing headphones while travelling a familiar route on the bus or train. Besides the obvious benefit of listening to music, young people could pre-empt conversations that questioned their ability to move through space. Returning to the first strategy, developing a strong network of friends has the further benefit of demonstrating that VI is unexceptional—when out in a group, a VI young person becomes one of many young people instead of 'the blind girl'. Jessica's narrative gets at these themes of recognition and independent mobility with great verve

[My mum] is overprotective, and she doesn't see me the way my friends see me, so she doesn't see me as me. And the fact that I'm ringing her and I'm on a bus, or I'm ringing her, and I'm walking along at the same time with my cane, she's worried about that and she thinks 'oh how would I find my way home?' She doesn't understand that I've been doing it for the whole of my life

and that learning about how to get off a bus and when to know—how to know just from the twists and turns of the buses and that, amazing— it's just the way that I live my life. And just because she, if she closed her eyes, she wouldn't be able to do it, because she's not used to that. It's not the same thing, because she hasn't experienced it, she hasn't been there, so of course she's going to think it's difficult. But it's not, and I wish she could overcome that, and just see me for who I am because I'm no different from anyone else. And my friends do see that, and you know, they don't guide me around thinking about it and if I want to talk to them on the way home they're not worrying about if I'm going to get there, they are just thinking about what I'm saying to them (Jessica, 24, blind, audio diary).

Overall, the lack of recognition from parents, and growing allegiance to friends in Jessica's narrative, parallel the more general shift in social networks during the transition to adulthood, finding 'families of choice' (Weeks et al., 2001) who see beyond visual impairment.

I have tried to show that for many of the young people involved in this research, independent physical mobility represents independence on a more conceptual level as well. Yet it is important to point out that 'independent mobility' does not always mean travelling through the city alone. As Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) have argued, independent mobility for young people is often a social process. Participants' friends were sometimes included in definitions of independent mobility, while parents, teachers, carers and others were not— essentially young people valued a kind of mobility alongside their peers, separate from those in authority.

This article enhances the literature around mobility by taking the power of recognition into account, situating the city as a social space, full of people who (mis) recognise the capabilities of disabled young people. Returning to Taylor's language, ableism often means that my participants'

[page 584]

attempts at independent mobility are often mirrored back in a distorted way, as recognising a 'competent spatial actor' who is also visually impaired is challenging for the sighted majority. The ableist notion of a disabled person does not fit with an image of a confident, capable user of public space. Within the 'dualistic epistemology' of abled/disabled (Dyck, 1999), unremarkable mobility proficiency is generalised to able bodies and is denied to the disabled 'other'. Yet for many VI young people who already feel grown up, being recognised as a competent spatial actor is critically important as it supports their own developing sense of themselves as an independent adult. While not always recognised, VI young people's continued presence in public space—going to school, going to work, hanging out with friends—is already challenging sighted people's expectations.

Notes

1. This phrase is adapted from the sociology of childhood literature's 'competent social actor', adding in a spatial component to the positioning of children as agents in their own right (James et al., 1998).
2. . indicates where the text has been edited for clarity.

Funding Statement

The author wishes to acknowledge financial support during the research from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Gill Valentine, Robert Vanderbeck and three anonymous referees for their valuable comments and suggestions as well as Tracey Skelton and Kate Gough for organising the Special Issue.

References

- Allen, C. (2004a) Bourdieu's habitus, social class and the spatial worlds of visually impaired children, *Urban Studies*, 41, pp. 487–506.
- Allen, C. (2004b) Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and the body-in-space encounters of visually impaired children, *Environment and Planning D*, 22, pp. 719–735.
- Barker, J., Krafft, P., Horton, J. and Tucker, F. (2009) The road less travelled? New directions in children's and young people's mobility, *Mobilities*, 4, pp. 1–10.
- Bulthuis, M. (2011) The imagined and lived rights of young people to urban space and places. Paper presented at the Association of American Geographers' Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA, April.
- Butler, R. (1994) Geography and visually impaired and blind populations, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 19, pp. 366–368.
- Butler, R. (1998) Rehabilitating the images of disabled youths, in: T. Skelton and G. Valentine (Eds) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, pp. 83–100. London: Routledge.
- Butler, R. and Bowlby, S. (1997) Bodies and spaces: an exploration of disabled people's experiences of public space, *Environment and Planning D*, 15, pp. 411–433.
- Cahill, C. (2000) Street literacy: urban teenagers' strategies for negotiating their neighbourhood, *Youth Studies*, 3, pp. 251–277.
- Cook, I. (1991) Drowning in see-world? Critical ethnographies of blindness. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kentucky, Lexington.
- Cox, P. (2007) Young people, migration and metanarratives: arguments for a critical theoretical approach, in: T. Geisen (Ed.) *Youth and Migration*, pp. 51–66. Frankfurt: VSVerlag.
- Cresswell, T. (1996) *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Devlieger, P., Renders, F., Froyen, H. and Wildiers, K. (Eds) (2006) *Blindness and the Multisensorial City*. Antwerp: Garant.
- Dyck, I. (1999) Body troubles: women, the workplace and negotiations of disabled identity, in: R. Butler and H. Parr (Eds) *Mind and Body Spaces: Geographies of Illness, Impairment and Disability*, pp. 119–137. London: Routledge.
- [page 585]
- Evans, B. (2008) Geographies of youth/young people, *Geography Compass*, 2, pp. 1659–1680.
- Flick, U. (1997) The episodic interview: small scale narratives as approach to relevant experiences. *Discussion Papers in Qualitative Research*, London School of Economics.
- Fraser, N. (2000) Rethinking recognition, *New Left Review*, 3, pp. 107–120 (<http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2248>).

- Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma*. Englewood Hills, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Golledge, R. G. (1993) Geography and the disabled: a survey with special reference to vision impaired and blind populations, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 18, pp. 63–85.
- Hahn, H. (1986) Disability and the urban environment: a perspective on Los Angeles, *Environment and Planning D*, 4, pp. 273–288.
- Henderson, S., Holland, J., McGrellis, S., Sharpe, S. and Thomson, R. (2007) *Inventing Adulthood: A Biographical Approach to Youth Transitions*. London: Sage.
- Hill, M. H. (1985) Bound to the environment: towards a phenomenology of sightlessness, in: D. Seamon and R. Mugerauer (Eds) *Dwelling, Place and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*, pp. 99–111. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Holdsworth, C. (2000) Leaving home in Britain and Spain, *European Sociological Review*, 16, pp. 201–222. Imrie, R. (2000) Disability and discourses of mobility and movement, *Environment and Planning A*, 32, pp. 1641–1656.
- James, A., Jenks, C. and Prout, A. (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Jamieson, L. (2000) Migration, place and class: youth in a rural area, *Sociological Review*, 48, pp. 203–223.
- Jones, G. (2000) Trail-blazers and path-followers: social reproduction and geographical mobility in youth, in: S. Arber and C. Attias- Donfut (Eds) *The Myth of Generational Conflict: Family and State in Ageing Societies*, pp. 154–173. London: Routledge.
- Kafer, A. (2003) Compulsory bodies: reflections on heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, *Journal of Women's History*, 15, pp. 77–89.
- Kato, Y. (2009) Doing consumption and sitting cars: adolescent bodies in suburban commercial spaces, *Children's Geographies*, 7, pp. 51–66.
- Kitchin, R., Blades, M. and Golledge, R. G. (1997) Understanding spatial concepts at the geographic scale without the use of vision, *Progress in Human Geography*, 21, pp. 225–242.
- Kitchin, R., Jacobson, R. D., Golledge, R. G. and Blades, M. (1998) Belfast without sight: exploring geographies of blindness, *Irish Geography*, 31, pp. 34–46.
- Kullman, K. (2010) Transitional geographies: making mobile children, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11, pp. 829–846.
- Lee, N. (2001) *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Leyshon, M. (2011) The struggle to belong: young people on the move in the countryside, *Population, Space and Place*, 17, pp. 304–325.
- Macpherson, H. M. (2007) *Landscapes of blindness and visual impairment: sight, touch and laughter in the English countryside*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Macpherson, H. M. (2008) 'I don't know why they call it the Lake District they might as well call it the rock district!' The workings of humour and laughter in research with members of visually impaired walking groups, *Environment and Planning D*, 26, pp. 1080–1095.

Mader, B., Hart, L. A. and Bergin, B. (1989) Social acknowledgements for children with disabilities: effects of service dogs, *Child Development*, 60, pp. 1529–1534.

Marston, J. R., Golledge, R. G. and Costanzo, C. M. (1997) Investigating travel behaviour of blind and vision impaired people: the role of public transit, *The Professional Geographer*, 49, pp. 235–245.

Matthews, H. (2003) The street as a liminal space: the barbed spaces of childhood, in: P. Christensen and M. O'Brien (Eds) *Children in the City: Home, Neighbourhood and Community*, pp. 101–116. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Mikkelsen, M. R. and Christensen, P. (2009) Is children's independent mobility really independent? A study of children's mobility combining ethnography and GPS/mobile phone technologies, *Mobilities*, 4, pp. 37–58.

[page 586]

Modlin, S. J. (2008) *Transition to adulthood: the experience of youth with physical disabilities living with a service dog*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Indiana University.

Morris, J. (1991) *Pride against Prejudice*. London: Women's Press.

Nayak, A. (2003) *Race, Place and Globalization: Youth Cultures in a Changing World*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Park, D., Radford, J. and Vickers, M. (1998) Disability studies in human geography, *Progress in Human Geography*, 22, pp. 208–233.

Porter, A. (2000) Playing the 'disabled role' in local travel, *Area*, 32, pp. 41–48.

Pow, C. P. (2000) 'Sense and sensibility': socialspatial experiences of the visually-impaired in Singapore, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 21, pp. 166–182.

Priestley, M. (1999) *Life as a disabled child*. Centre for Disability Studies, Leeds.

Reeve, D. (2005) Towards a psychology of disability: the emotional effects of living in a disabling society, in: D. Goodley and R. Lawthom (Eds) *Disability and Psychology: Critical Introductions and Reflections*, pp. 94–107. London: Palgrave.

Reeve, D. (2009) 'Sick or disabled?': a discussion of the interaction between chronic illness and psycho-emotional disability. Paper presented at the Disability and Chronic Illness Workshop, University of the West of England, Bristol, January.

Riessman, C. K. (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. London: Sage.

Sachs-Ericsson, N., Hansen, N. K. and Fitzgerald, S. (2002) Benefits of assistance dogs: a review, *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 47, pp. 251–277.

- Sanders, C. R. (2000) The impact of guide dogs on the identity of people with visual impairments, *Anthrozoos*, 13, pp. 131–139.
- Shakespeare, T. (1994) Cultural representation of disabled people: dustbins for disavowal, *Disability & Society*, 9, pp. 283–299.
- Skelton, T. (2000) Nothing to do, nowhere to go? Teenage girls and ‘public’ space in the Rhondda Valleys, South Wales, in: S. L. Holloway and G. Valentine (Eds) *Children’s Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*, pp. 69–85. London: Routledge.
- Stone, S. D. (1995) The myth of bodily perfection, *Disability & Society*, 10, pp. 413–424.
- Taylor, C. (1997) The politics of recognition, in: A. Heble, D. Palmateer Pennee and J. R. T. Struthers (Eds) *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, pp. 97–131. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.
- Thomas, C. (2007) *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thomas, M. E. (2005) Girls, consumption space and the contradictions of hanging out in the city, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6, pp. 587–605. Thomson, R. and Taylor, R. (2005) Between cosmopolitanism and the locals, *Young*, 13, pp. 327–342.
- Valentine, G. (2007) Theorizing and researching intersectionality: a challenge for feminist geography, *The Professional Geographer*, 59, pp. 10–21.
- Valentine, G. and Skelton, T. (2003) Finding oneself, losing oneself: the lesbian and gay ‘scene’ as a paradoxical space, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27, pp. 849–866.
- Valentine, G. and Skelton, T. (2007) Re-defining ‘norms’: D/deaf young people’s transitions to independence, *The Sociological Review*, 55, pp. 104–123.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan, C. (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*. London: Routledge.
- Woolley, H. (2006) Freedom of the city: contemporary issues and policy influences on children and young people’s use of public open space in England, *Children’s Geographies*, 4, pp. 45–59.
- Worth, N. (2009a) Making use of audio diaries in research with young people: examining narrative, participation and audience, *Sociological Research Online*, 14 (<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/4/9.html>).
- Worth, N. (2009b) *Transition spaces: youth, visual impairment and identity*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds.