

**Stories from the Dark Side**

*A Rhetorical Analysis of the Stories Legally Blind and Totally  
Blind People Tell About Unplanned Encounters with the  
Sighted Community*

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#### 1. Abstract

This is a rhetorical study of narratives told by blind people about the reactions of sighted people to their disability. The researcher conducted a small group interview with several legally blind persons, asking them for stories about their encounters with the sighted community where the sighted person did not initially realize the presence of a disability. Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Pentad revealed that these narratives contained the ultimate motive of identification (with or separate from) the blind community. The study concludes with a cluster analysis constructing the participants' ideal reaction to blindness: no reaction at all.

#### 2. Introduction

Within the last fifty years the field of disabilities studies has expanded into a multifaceted exploration of the culture, lifestyle, concerns, medical research, communication, and identity of persons with disabilities. Recently, the focus has shifted away from the economics of disability toward how disability is perceived as a whole. Because I myself am legally blind, this paper reflects my personal interest in how blindness and visual impairment are perceived. Included in this section is a survey of literature describing the search for a way to alter the way blindness is viewed by the sighted community, and examples of how Burkeian analyses of personal narratives have been used in the past to discover peoples' motives and perceptions in given scenarios. The study of the public's perception of disability is a developing field of research that hopes to bridge the social gaps between the disabled and abled because "disability-rights

activists realized that society's reaction to disability was every bit as limiting, often more so, than disability itself." (Shultz 231).

There is a well-documented discomfort between the sighted and blind communities, and this study hopes, through analyzing the language of one party about another, to make a contribution to the process of easing this discomfort. Kenneth Jernigan, former President of the National Federation of the Blind, stated that while "the blind today are closer to acceptance and full integration than at any point in history" (66), negative public attitudes and widespread misconceptions of blindness continue to present major impediments to integration and acceptance" (Olansky 2). Ultimately, acceptance and integration is the goal of the disabled community, as it should be of any well-rounded and ethical civilization.

### 3. Review of Relevant Literature

This study focuses on a small number of narratives as an example of the kind of dialogue that currently exists between the sighted and blind communities. Narratives are constructed by language, containing specific terminology that reflects the nature of the narrator's terministic screen. The terministic screen is a concept described by Kenneth Burke in the third chapter of *Language as Symbolic Action*, that explains how language (terms) construct the filters (screens) through which we interact with reality (Burke 43). The terms we use to describe ourselves, our experiences, and our environments reflect strongly upon how we construct our beliefs about the world. "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (45). Simply stated, Burke meant that by choosing one word to describe an object we have highlighted one aspect of this object and drawn attention away from another.

He used the rather dated example of two photographs of a single object to explain his terministic screen. A single camera is used to capture the image of a single object, such as a chair, but when the film is developed it appears as if the photographer took pictures of two different chairs. For example, the chair in one photograph may look greenish, but in the other it appears quite reddish in hue. The discrepancy in image is the lenses used to take the pictures. The photographer used differently colored filter lenses to capture the images of the chair. This is how the terministic screen work.

Similarly, several people may encounter the same blind person, but because of the “lenses” they view the person through—that is, the language they have previously associated with that disability, their experience with blind people in the past, and the cultural connotation of ‘disability’ in general—the people react very differently to it. Someone whose sum experience with blind people includes a vaguely recalled paragraph in a history text about Helen Keller may speak very loudly around a blind person, or ask if he knows sign language (yes, this has happened to me personally). In contrast, someone who knew Erik Weihenmayer may see a potential hero or historic figure because he automatically thinks of the first blind man to reach the summit of Mt. Everest.

And a third person will be uncomfortable around the blind person because he has lived in a very polite environment where differences are celebrated and reminders of previous oppression and persecution of minority populations are very present and visible. This study is chiefly concerned with encounters of this third kind. This discomfort often presents itself as a barrier between the well-meaning sighted and the blind person as they awkwardly try to re-establish friendly communication without accidentally offending one another. By analyzing the rhetoric involved in these exchanges I hope to highlight how the blind perceive the awkwardness of the

sighted participants. If the two parties are made aware of each other's desires in conversation an open and respectful dialogue can be established, promoting further social integration.

Much of the latest research in this area have focused on the premise that by shifting the connotation of the terminology that make up their terministic screens regarding blindness we can change the dynamic of these situations, thus removing another limitation to the integration of blind persons into "normal" society. There is, however, a significant barrier to this approach. Research on the accuracy and acceptability of the current terminology that should be applied to those who are blind or visually impaired has been entirely inconclusive and, in many cases, even contradictory (Olansky 2). Just as "black", "colored", and "African American" are some examples of terms used to refer to a racial minority, "visually impaired," "blind," "legally blind," and "visually handicapped" are a few of the terms used for the blind community (Olansky 2). Which one do blind people prefer?

Several studies show that those who have at least some usable vision prefer "legally blind" or "visually impaired" (Olansky 2), but support for "visually handicapped" comes largely from professionals who are not themselves blind or legally blind (Olansky 2). In a survey of 140 randomly selected sighted individuals, 62% of them expressed the belief that "blind" was the appropriate term, 22% said "legally blind" or "visually impaired" and only one person inquired about the level of blindness indicated in the question (Olansky 4). Disabilities rights activists have provided studies showing that there is no consensus among the blind and visually impaired community about what is and is not offensive or inaccurate (Kudlick, 764).

Other strategies for creating this social acceptance include attempts to refute a perceived culture of "ableism." Ableism is an ideology that claims that able-bodied individuals have

greater value than those with disabilities. Many disability studies professionals and rights activists believe that this attitude is rampant in America and cite instances where language that is currently considered offensive is used by able-bodied Americans in their daily vocabulary. There are hundreds of articles and other literature available on strategies to defeat this perceived proponent of disability discrimination—a phenomenon that I, a legally blind American have never encountered—and they argue for immediate, wide-sweeping changes to the average American vocabulary to stifle this apparent threat.

“Public demonstrations, countercultural performances, autobiography, transformative histories of disability, and critiques of ableism films and novels all apply rhetorical solutions to the problem” (Chemey 7), but the majority of these are targeted at very narrow bands of the American audience such as government employees, researchers, and cultural critics, not the laypeople that a blind person would interact with at the grocery store or a service establishment. Anti-ableist authors such as Chemey cite rhetorical examples of language that they believe fosters an attitude of devaluing toward persons with disability. They argue that it is this that bears pity in those the disabled meet on a day-to-day basis, and it is their attempt to hide this pity from us, the disabled, that breeds the awkwardness between the two communities. I contend, however, that this is merely a misunderstanding and a lack of open communication. Through my own personal, albeit limited, experience as a legally blind American I can testify that I perceived no ill will from, or suffered discrimination at the hands of my sighted countrymen and women.

Disability rights activists have up until now focused almost exclusively on top-down campaigns to change the rhetoric associated with disability by lobbying for governmental policy changes, instead of reaching out to the general public with educational programs and first-person interactions. This study proposes to focus on such first-person interactions and analyze the

current rhetoric exchanged during initial encounters between sighted and blind individuals in order to provide a starting point for outreach programs designed to reach the public at large.

This is a much more effective strategy because its impact is not confined to those privy to monthly emails sent to government employees informing them of new terminology appropriate for their workplace. Instead, it has the potential to reach every type of person in every walk of life with a more meaningful, personal, and impactful strategy for building Identification through language, and through identification, social acceptance for Americans who are blind or visually impaired.

This study approaches the problem from a much more personal direction. Public attitudes are made up of hundreds of thousands, even millions of terministic screens. A single film or policy will be interpreted differently by each one. Therefore the solution is in continual and profitable personal interaction between the blind and sighted. Let each blind person sharing his or her story with as many sighted persons as possible to influence their terministic screens when they see that film or policy email. Rhetorical analysis of personal narrative provides us a window into the emotional motives of the speaker (Rinaldi 821). Rinaldi, who conducted a study of disabled persons sharing personal narratives about negative experiences or experiences of failure, wrote “at the core of a therapeutic rhetoric is an assumption that any experience of failure is amenable to being reconstructed in a way that makes that failure tolerable, even beneficial according to a different set of values” (Rinaldi 822). In this case, personal narratives of awkward encounters with sighted people constitutes the pain or sense of personal failure which we aim to turn into a successful meeting ground to discuss and close the gap between these two communities.

One of the primary ways humans achieve acceptance into groups is through Identification. . According to Burke in his *Rhetoric of Motives*, Identification is a method of persuasion that works through representations or proofs of “I am like you” or “I am not like them” and “therefore, you should do/believe X.” One of the key components to building Identification with an audience is terminology (Burke 20). When a blind person first identifies that key difference between himself and another participant in the conversation he has claimed “I am not like you.” This is usually not out of a desire to create social separation between himself and the other conversant, but merely a sharing of personal information or explanation of an otherwise unnatural behavior. By exposing how the blind person perceives the sighted person’s reaction to this revelation this study hopes to highlight where the disconnect between what the sighted person wants to achieve and what he or she actually communicates exists.

Burke’s Dramatistic pentad provides us with a flexible and efficient tool for determining a person’s motive from his or her actions, including his or her language. The five elements of the Pentadic analysis—act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose—answer the five basic questions we ask ourselves when examining a complex problem. Who, what, where and when, how, and why did this person say about what he or she did? The pentad is gaining in popularity as a means by which to measure motive through personal narrative.

In *A Grammar of Motives* Burke writes about guilt redemption as the purpose of all human drama. He divides how people attempt to assuage their negative feelings—anxiety, anger, grief, guilt, et cetera—into two categories: mortification and scapegoating. Mortification occurs when a person takes these negative or guilty feelings and attempts to rectify whatever situation caused them, atoning for some wrongdoing or harsh circumstance, or just sympathizing



with a victim. Scapegoating is the strategy which people employ to shift the negative emotion from themselves to someone else, usually through defensiveness, self-victimization, or anger.

In the case of unexpectedly encountering blindness, sighted people would likely respond in one of these two ways: either attempting to compensate for what they perceive as nature's tragedy enacted upon another human being (feeling sorry for a blind person), or by informing the blind person that he or she violates the expected rules of "blindness" (i.e. working in a service industry, not playing a musical instrument, or pursuing a career in science). The former of these two reactions is mortification, trying to atone for fate's mistake or cruelty. The second, trying to corral the unexpected data back into its acceptable parameters, is scapegoating. The sighted person blames the blind person for his or her inability to cope with the presence of blindness in that situation.

Two noteworthy examples are Darr's Pentadic analysis of celebrity testimony to Congressional hearings and Meisenbach's research on women's narrative of experience with maternity leave. In both cases the researchers applied the pentad to a set of narratives on a common theme to discover the motives embedded in the narratives. In Darr's case he focused on the motives of celebrities using their access to congressional hearings to achieve national attention for their "pet cause" (Darr 7), and in Meisenbach's work she describes the common narrative of "pink collar" women in the workforce who were unaware of the availability of paid maternity leave. I have used this approach to illuminate how blind persons perceive the reactions of sighted individuals to their disability. For the sighted to see how their reaction affects their blind neighbors is a step toward the two groups interacting on a more level field.

#### 4. Research Question

- 4.1 How do blind people perceive the reactions of sighted persons to the unexpected revelation of the presence of a disability in the conversation?
- 4.2 What messages (verbal, nonverbal, et cetera) influence these perceptions?

## 5. Methodology

### 4.1 *Participants*

The group interview consisted of four legally blind persons of assorted age, gender, and race. All had a limited amount of vision, classified as “legally blind” or “high partial.” Only one out of the four participants used a cane or service dog, the most obvious indicators of vision impairment familiar to the sighted public. Participants were invited through their involvement with the Alabama institute for the Deaf and Blind, Huntsville Chapter. Greater participation was expected but due to scheduling conflicts and the restricted nature of the time available for data collection I was unable to interview the other potential participants. Those present provided multiple narratives for each question, though, providing a wealth of perspective from which to build this preliminary analysis of such narratives.

The Alabama Institute for the Deaf and blind is a state-level government-operated agency that includes schools for the blind and the deaf and educational and vocational resources and support groups for children and adults with vision and hearing loss in the state of Alabama. It has several satellite offices to its main office in Talladega, Alabama. I worked with the Huntsville office because of the location convenient. Whenever the legally blind are involved in anything, as I myself know from personal experience, there are transportation concerns. So for my own convenience and those of the participants, the focus group consisted of local residents of the Huntsville area.

I chose AIDB as my source for participants because there is already an established group of legally blind persons who meet regularly and are familiar with one another. This familiarity provides a comfortable atmosphere in which to share personal narratives, encouraging discussion

and hypothesizing amongst the participants. This kind of hypothesizing is a crystallization of perceptions distilled down to one or two statements, making the analysis of the interview transcripts simpler.

#### 4.2 *Procedure*

I conducted a one-time, audio-recorded focus group interview where participants were asked a series of prepared questions but encouraged to follow up on relevant unscripted topics if time allows. Due to the interest of the participants in the project, the amount of discussion they offered, and a relaxed ending time constraint the group interview lasted nearly two hours, instead of the proposed one-hour time period. The extended time was voluntary and by the participants' choice. I designed the questions to encourage discussion and the sharing of personal narratives with each other and the researcher. I transcribed the recorded interview to text for analysis. The interview questions are listed in the appendix.

#### 4.3 *Analysis*

Personal narratives are little dramas that play out in a person's day-to-day life. They contain characters, a climactic action, and a scene. I have used a Burkeian Dramatistic Pentad analysis to dissect these narratives. The questions act (what), agent (who), scene (when/where), agency (how), and purpose (why) describe the perceptions of the story-tellers. After I separated each term from the narratives into its category I have attempted to accurately construct the motive of each agent in the story.

## 6. Results and Discussion

I found myself personally identifying with many of the experiences shared by my participants, though during the interview I kept that to myself to avoid influencing their participation.

Though I had intended to describe specific encounters the participants chose to share generalizations of typical encounters they had experienced multiple times. Although the participants did share some specific stories, the majority of the narratives offered were summaries of generic experiences all the participants shared. This combination produced some very interesting and very telling agent/act and scene/act ratios.

When splitting the narratives into their Pentadic elements I noticed that the participants focused much more on the acts and scenes of each narrative, offering almost no or only very generic descriptions of agents, agencies, and purposes. The participants offered descriptions of attitude, as well. They cared very much about the act itself and in what manner, but not who acted, or by what means they accomplished their act.

### Act

There are three categories of act I would like to examine from these narratives: specific acts, generic acts, and two negative generic acts. The first is a specific act associated with a detailed narrative regarding a single incident. The second includes generalized reactions experienced and expressed by all the participants as a common response to the revelation of the presence of blindness in a particular scene. And the third category includes two types of experiences that participants described—these are acts that *did not* take place, but should have as part of normal social interactions.

“I don’t understand how blind people can eat. I don’t understand how they can just live. How do they live?” A student at an elementary school asked this question of one participant. The participant was giving an educational talk to school children about blindness. This child’s questions expose a fact that is painfully obvious to most of the legally blind in America. Legal blindness affects around 0.4% of Americans, according to a study done by the American Council of the Blind in 2010. When we remove the population of the legally blind affected by additional disabilities that severely limit travel, or those too young to travel without a parent or guardian escort, we find ourselves left with less than one million individuals spread out over the entire United States. Few sighted people ever encounter a legally blind person in their lifetime.

The following questions are just a few examples of acts of curiosity that the participants encounter on a regular basis.

“Does your mother fix your hair?”

“How do you dial the phone?”

“Do I need to run your bath water for you?”

“how do you get dressed?”

The school child’s act was twofold. He asked a question, and revealed a lack of understanding that is not uncommon to the American public. This basic lack of exposure contributes to nearly every reaction to blindness recorded in this interview.

Another participant shared a most telling narrative that sums up the previous point perfectly. She described asking for assistance finding an item at a store. The sales associate responded by pointing in the right direction. “I say “I’m visually impaired” they look at me like they still don’t understand what I’m saying, like I’m talking a foreign language.” This is one of

those generic acts that reflects a similar experience that all participants underwent at least once during their lives. Questions like “what do you mean?” and “what is visually impaired/” usually accompany these narratives.

And then, of course, we have what most blind people consider a “classic’ reaction. “How many fingers am I holding up?” As tacky and insensitive as this may seem, participants all claimed experience with this phenomenon. It seems sighted people feel the need to quantify their understanding of “blindness” or “partial blindness” with a test of some kind, a concrete example of what is and isn’t visible to the blind.

Unfortunately for the sighted community, there are such ranges of blindness that the movements and abilities of blind people can often be misleadingly normal. For instance, one participant shared his experience as a new employee at Wal Mart. He was asked to record some data from a screen high up on the wall, but when he informed the trainer that he could not see the data she did not seem to understand. “I could get around and I could see a price—I mean, I had clearly demonstrated that I could read a receipt, you know. I had to get a little bit closer than some people but I could pull a receipt out of the bag, check the receipt and check the item to make sure that they matched up—but I could not see that number high up on the wall...But it took [her] quite a while—thank goodness it was an older lady that finally just kinda understood.” The act here is the woman’s initial failure to understand. She attempted to reconcile two pieces of information in her mind that did not fit her understanding of the word “blind.”

Another common reaction is an apology. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” One participant described introducing himself to new people at church. “They’ll make a reference across the room, someone in the room; assume that I’ve seen them or the hand gesture, so clearly in their minds they saw me as sighted...” A more specific instance found a participant, employed at a local Kroger store, assisting a customer out to their car. The customer made a specific request of the employee, who then revealed that his disability precluded his fulfillment of this request. The customer immediately apologized. It is not at all uncommon for someone to apologize when one of the participants (or me) reveals visual impairment. According to my participants, it usually goes something like “oh I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

The next-strongest reaction from this is sudden caution. This is a very general experience that did not come with a specific set of narratives. “They think of they talk to you about it that’s an insult itself” one of them summarized the reaction. A sudden change of topic, awkward pauses, or a quick disengagement as the person tries to escape the situation without adding insult to a perceived injury are very common acts as reactions.

The participants expressed frustration over several specific and generic incidents in which sighted people react with sudden concern and protectiveness. One participant even told of a person physically taking him by the arm to try and escort him down a flight of stairs. Another participant said that people had on occasion tried to help him cross a street.

One of the participants unfolded two similar acts he experienced recently in two classes at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University. Two separate professors expressed doubts at the student’s ability to complete the course requirements because of the disability. The

student had self-identified as a disabled student as part of the standard procedure for acquiring the necessary reasonable accommodations, and on two separate occasions was told “I just don’t know how you’re going to keep up.” One of them even said so in so many words to the student.

Expressing an opinion about the limiting nature of a disability is a much stronger act than inquiring about abilities, as in the first few examples. The first act is a request for information, but this act of doubting becomes a suggested limit on performance and achievement. In some cultures that becomes a limit on personal value. When a professor expresses such a doubt he is an expert offering an opinion on what he believes his field of expertise. It is frequently an implied suggestion to not even try to take the course. The implication is “if the professor, who understands teaching and the difficulty of this material, does not believe you can perform to standard, then you probably cannot and should not waste your time.”

Milder versions of these implied limits are acts of incredulity, or even anger. “I’ve seen upset, like I was hiding something from them, and they’ll walk away. I’ve seen people kinda question even the fact that I am visually impaired” one participant told me.

In one case the participants all identified with one of their number, who shared a “negative act.” This is an act that should have, or would normally have taken place, but for some reason did not. Generally when a person joins a new church, members of the congregation will invite the new person out to dinner as a means of forming a bond with the new member. “Sighted people are very uncomfortable inviting you out to dinner. So I’ve taken



the other approach in inviting them out” he shared with me. “They see it as ‘if I invite them, what do I have to do? Do I have to cut their meat..?’”

The second negative act has a much more positive impact on the blind person. Someone who has a personal experience—say a family member or work acquaintance—with legal blindness does not react to this revelation. They may briefly acknowledge understanding of the condition but ultimately the conversation continues as normal.

### Agent

Throughout the interview I tried to encourage the participants to share their insights about the types of people that reacted in various ways. Unfortunately I failed to communicate the kind of details I wanted and came home with categorical descriptions about racial, age, and gender groups that tended to follow certain reaction trends. I have listed the categorical descriptions of group reactions below, as well as examples of the few specific agents involved in these narratives. Ultimately, though, every participant expressed the belief that “it really depends on the person, how they’re going to react.” In this, they all shared the belief that the best method of integrating the blind and sighted communities was through individual outreach and exposure.

In the case of the first act described above, the school child’s questions at the lecture, the agent is a young child who has never met a blind person before. He is likely between the ages of six and eleven years old, male, race unknown, and bold enough to ask questions in the

presence of his peers. He understood that blindness affects most, if not every area of a person's life, but could not wrap his head around the fact that *affects* does not necessarily mean *prohibits* or *precludes*.

Although we have no details on the Wal Mart sales associate who asked "what do you mean, visually impaired/" we do know that the Wal Mart trainer from the comparative act ("you can see and do this, but why not that?") was an older woman. She was in a lower-end management position, playing the role of trainer for new employees. This gave her as an agent initial power in the situation. She made a reasonable request of the employee but found herself stymied with an incongruous piece of information. To a trainer, knowledge is power, and so in order to return the balance of power between trainer and trainee to its normal state she had to inquire farther to offset the knowledge imbalance.

The participant who encountered difficulties with professors at his university, though, did provide some specific information. A Caucasian male psychology professor and a Middle Eastern male mathematics professor both told him in no uncertain terms that they did not expect him to succeed in the class.

The Caucasian was an older man, mid-sixties, from a generation before the majority of access laws and assistive technology (screen reader programs and high-tech magnifiers) were invented. From his experience as a student about forty years ago, the blind stayed home and listened to the radio all day. They had no means of travel and almost no accessible reading material. Today's world of electronic textbooks and high-contrast computer screens had apparently made no impact on his opinion of educational opportunities and availability for the

blind. The participant did not specify whether or not the Middle Eastern professor's lack of faith was a result of his cultural bias or because math is generally taught very visually. Graphs, equations, formulae, symbols, and geometric figures are printed on pages or scrawled on distant whiteboards. How do blind people learn math if they cannot read a textbook and cannot see the professor's notes on the board?

Depending on how long the professor had been teaching and living in the United States, and how long he had been at a smaller university, he may have been truly justified in his concern. However, the agent expressed his doubts once again in that implied suggestion to quit, indicating the professor was unwilling or hesitant to even explore the idea of blind people studying math.

A customer enters Kroger, a typical mid-range quality grocery store. The customer asks an employee for help finding something. He expects to be assisted. He wants to find his food item and move on with his life. This is a simple, routine errand that should not require much effort at all to accomplish. It is something he's done a thousand times in his life. But today he just *happened* to encounter a Kroger employee who helps him find the right aisle but inexplicably walks past the item without seeing it. The employee is legally blind. "You shouldn't be working here" are the first words out of the defensive customer's mouth. In his mind, the employee now needs more help than he the customer does!

Among the questions above, "do you need me to run your bathwater?" represents a specific narrative one of the participants shared. She told us she was on a church retreat with a seniors group, an overnight trip. Her roommate on the trip asked her this question. This agent

is a senior church attender and at least somewhat, but not very well acquainted with her blind roommate. Here she exhibits a somewhat maternal/nurturing instinct, as well as unfamiliarity with visual impairment.

The last specific agent mentioned by the participants was a cousin of one of the participants. She described her interactions with her cousin in contrast with those of people unfamiliar with visual impairment. "I have a first cousin who grew up with me who automatically does the things I can't do, 'cause he's used to me." When this participant and her cousin interact there is no reaction to blindness. It is a normal aspect of their lives together. This not-act, negative act, implies an agent who is comfortable and confident in the scene.

These below are the generic summaries of agent types provided by the participants.

- **More educated people** (agent) tended to **respond better** ("curious," "interested," act) than **those with less education** (agent).
- **Caucasians** (agent) generally had the **most positive or acceptable reactions** (act).
- The reactions of the **African American community** (agent) have significantly **improved** (act) in recent decades.
- **Asian populations** (agent) almost universally **reject** (act) blind individuals as having little or no value.
- The **Hispanic communities** (agent) tended to have a **nurturing or protective response** (act) to blindness.
- The **elderly** (agent) also tended to be more **protective** (act), offering to do such things as assist down stairs, "...when clearly, though, it was safer for both of us if I just used the handrail!" [laughter and general consent from all participants].
- **Teenagers** (agent) **don't understand and don't care to try to understand** (act).

## Agency

The means by which an act is committed by an agent tells us something of the abilities and preferences and patterns of the agent, or characteristics of the scenes in which the acts took place. In this case all of the agencies were verbal conversation. Questions, statements, exclamations, conversation elements, or sudden ends to conversation make up the means by which the sighted people convey their reactions to the blind. If there are visual elements such as hand gestures, facial expressions, or body posture changes these are irrelevant to the blind who observe them because the blind are unaware of these agencies. We rely primarily on verbal communication.

In the case of holding up fingers, though, the agent makes an attempt at using a nonverbal agency to communicate his or her request for knowledge. Unfortunately the message does not translate well to the audience, the blind. There is one instance, however, in which nonverbal agencies are effective means of communicating with the legally blind: when the sighted agent comes into physical contact with the blind. Participants described elderly persons physically touching them to communicate their intention to assist the blind person, such as leading down stairs or across a street. This can be a somewhat surprising agency of communication, depending on the cultures of the agent and blind person. These cultures dictate how comfortable both parties are with physical contact and invasion of personal space. Unfortunately, the vagueness of the narrative precludes any conclusions in this direction.

## Scene

This is one of the more interesting aspects of the set of dramas. Not only do the narratives provide specific or generic locations for the acts to take place, but the participants even offered several examples of how these scenes were generated through separate acts of their own. By being in a specific place and revealing the presence of disability for some purpose the blind person creates the scene to which the sighted person must react.

The participants describe their scenes as a new church, Wal Mart as a retail establishment, Wal Mart as a new job, Kroger as a new job, a church retreat and elementary school, both places not regularly frequented by the blind persons, stairs, street corners, and a university. The majority of these are new and unfamiliar places to the legally blind, places where they would need help or guidance. Navigation and object retrieval—finding something in a store—are challenging when you cannot see signs, obstacles, and other landmarks. These are the types of situations where blind people request assistance—stores, new workplaces with new requirements, unfamiliar buildings like schools.

Street corners, stairs, and the church retreat present a different set of scenes. These are scenes that the sighted community assumes is challenging to navigate safely without vision. They are not, however, as challenging or impossible as expected. In this case, the church retreat scene represents independent living skills, such as bathing and dressing oneself. The street corner, the stairs, and independent living skills are areas in which much study and innovation has been done to compensate for the lack of vision. These are routinely encountered situations, and so much easier to prepare for than entering an unfamiliar store or social gathering.

These are scenes of reaction to blindness that the participants do not intend to create. They are not seeking help and have revealed their blindness for some other purpose. In response to my question about what each participant wished that the sighted community could understand, one participant gave a wonderful summary of this concept. She said she wished people knew “that we’re independent. We’re taught to be independent. WE actually go beyond the call of duty to be independent.”

However, in the case of the new places, the unfamiliar ones, the blind *intentionally* create a scene of query by injecting the presence of their disability in order to acquire help. The scene is one of inquiry, of a sharing of information hoping to gain some in return. It is part of barter for information. This is the situation that the sighted person finds himself unexpectedly placed in.

The last scene of significance is the university. Universities are places of diversity and opportunity and exposure. Especially since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act universities have become a promise of integration for the legally blind. Universities mean job training and independence. And to professors, universities are their workplaces, their personal projects, the places where they are the superior social forces. They have developed their methods, they know their material, and are accustomed to being deferred to. It can be disconcerting, even threatening to have a student suddenly informs you that the way you do your job just won’t work this semester.

## Purpose

The last element of a Pentadic analysis is the purpose of the act. Why does the agent do what he or she does? Why do sighted people react in the ways they do when confronted with a disability? “Surprise,” “kinda idiotic,” “defensive,” “embarrassed,” “ignorance,” “curious,” “not understanding,” “pity,” “anger,” “upset,” and a host of other terms surround the participants’ descriptions of the acts. These terms color the motives behind the acts.

Burke claims that guilt redemption is the root of all human dramas. For Burke, guilt includes tension, anxiety, grief, remorse, and a host of other negative emotions. He breaks down the responses to guilt, the attempt to “redeem” or avoid guilt, into two categories: mortification and scapegoating. People who try to redeem the guilt themselves through acts of atonement, apologies, et cetera, engage in mortification, while those who shift the negative feelings to others—essentially blaming them for their negative feelings—are engaging in scapegoating. The majority of the purposes behind the reactions of the sighted people fall into one or the other of these categories.

Defensiveness, anger, and upset are emotions that shift the cause of the negative feelings from oneself to another person. “It’s not my fault I feel bad, it’s yours.” This is scapegoating. At least two of the participants voiced the feeling that some people reacted as if the blind person was hiding the disability from them. The Kroger customer who said “you shouldn’t be working here,” and the professors who told the blind person he could not pass his classes are just two examples of people who try to shift the focus of the conversation away from themselves. They would rather have the blind person explain how the disability slipped into the conversation without them noticing than respond to it themselves—the participants



expressed the belief that this was due to not knowing how to react. Participants described people who walked away, changed the topic abruptly, suddenly became protective, or even exhibited a guilt reaction, as if having sight in the presence of a blind person.

Mortification is different. The sighted person does what he or she can to take all the negative emotion upon him or herself. Pity and acts or offers of service such as the bathwater incident reflect a desire to somehow atone for an unfair or cruel trick of fate. "It's like they think 'oh you poor thing, you can't see, but I can.'"

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

### 7.1 Limitations

As is the nature with every research endeavor, this study had several limitations. The first of which is that fewer participants than anticipated took part in the group interview. I expected that I would have a very limited sampling of individuals, but this severely limits my ability to generalize accurately the perceptions of the legally blind. Instead, I have focused on specific narratives instead of general conceptions. Additionally, there were some apparent clarity issues with the interview questions.

Since this is my first attempt at designing interview questions for this type of research I take responsibility for this. I intended the questions to elicit specific stories and instances but the participants provided generalizations of their experiences. While the results yielded by this were no less fruitful than specific stories would have been, it did not quite fit my original intent for this study. The amount of time and number of interviews also reduced my ability to portray the community's feelings on the subject.

Next to the number of participants involved in this project, I believe the greatest hindrance to the accuracy of this study comes from the nature of group interviews. Participants in group

activities usually attempt to create some sort of standard or pattern of behavior amongst themselves in order to identify with one another and not be “left out” or deemed somehow separate from the group. In group interviews participants will often take unintended cues from one another about how to answer, or what kind of answer may be considered socially acceptable in a group. For example, when asked “what is the most important color in the American flag?” participants may have different opinions on this matter, but if the first person to answer says “oh, red, definitely. Red signifies the blood of all of those who fought for our freedom!” the others may feel compelled to agree in order to not seem ungrateful to the sacrifices of others. They may not feel this compulsion, but it is more likely they will. In this way, a researcher tends to get somewhat similar answers, or answers in agreement with one another, in a group interview setting, and this can affect the accuracy or range of data collected during the interview process.

## 7.2 Future Research

This is a preliminary study designed to open the door to future researchers interested in how the blind and sighted perceive one another. As such, it contains many opportunities for larger-scale studies to develop. Possible future research questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How do the sighted perceive their reactions to blindness?
- Are the reactions of the sighted related to demographics such as
  - Race
  - Gender
  - Age
  - Education
  - Socio-economic status
  - Religion
  - Political leanings
- A quantitative study of positive and negative reactions to blindness
- A larger sampling of narratives
- Does the way a blind person perceives sighted peoples’ reactions change over time?
- Are these reactions related to visual cues of blindness such as:
  - A white cane

- Nonverbal signals associated with blindness (such as dark glasses, closed eyes, vacant or inexpressive facial features)
- A service dog
- Are some conceptions of blindness associated with specific demographics? blindness (good at music, count steps, et cetera)

## 8. Conclusions

Researchers do their work for the purpose of improving the lives of other people by making advances in scientific knowledge, seeking to understand human behavior, and generally identifying areas of need in life, then suggesting solutions to meet these needs.

While this study is very limited in nature and cannot provide a complete picture of the interactions between sighted and legally blind people, I do hope to offer a preliminary construction of the best and worst reactions to blindness that sighted people can have in order to raise their awareness to how they are perceived, and provoke further discussion on how these two communities should continue their efforts to integrate in the future. To this end I have conducted a cluster-agon analysis, identifying the “god term” and “devil term” of the general act “reaction to blindness” that the agent, a sighted stranger, can have, then examined the terms clustered around these polar values to construct these best and worst reactions.

The devil term is “ignorance” or “not understanding.” While the participants did not blame people for not knowing what visual impairment meant, they found it to be a great barrier in their social interactions with sighted people. Terms like “upset,” “faking it,” “you should not,” “guilt,” “foreign language,” “that’s terrible,” “they feel a little guilty” and “just stared at me” littered the narratives describing way those who did not understand the possibility of competent and independent blind people. These kinds of limiting terms ultimately limited the sighted person’s understanding of the situation, but tragically also often limit the blind person’s ability to achieve what he or she came to do: make a friend, find an item at the store, or safely navigate a flight of stairs.

It may surprise the sighted community to learn that the “god term” or ideal reaction is “no reaction.” When asked “how would you like them to react to you?” participants had this to say:

- I would want them to react like they do to everyone else, which is not to react
- It’s ok to be a little bit of surprise but ultimately what I’d like people to do is... or ask and let me be empowered to tell you
- I guess I’m so used to having to have to explain that I never thought about the idea of “what would be the perfect reaction” but I think my perfect reaction would be for them not to treat it like a tragedy

Narratives about people who reacted “well” to these situations included such words as “curious,” “connect,” “don’t do anything,” “like everyone else,” “just a person,” “reach out,” and the most highly sought-after quality in a person, “willing to listen.” In their minds, the signal that the blind community has truly been integrated into “mainstream America” is when they happen to mention their disability and whoever they speak to reacts as if it were just information like a person’s birthplace, alma mater, or workplace. It is new information that tells you about a person, but it’s not “special” information that requires any extravagant or unwieldy response.

## 9. Conclusion

The first conclusion that this data leads me to is that there is more data to be gathered. From just four participants in a single interview I gathered several specific narratives and several generalized narratives that point toward the hypothesis that the motive behind most reactions to the unexpected presence of a disability are Burkeian guilt—*anxiety, tension, guilt, anger, grief, et cetera*. But that is just a hypothesis that my research leads me to. This is a beginning, a place from which to launch more questions and hypotheses.

The legally blind seek integration and normalization with mainstream society. As separate neurological systems just like every other human being, they seek connections. This study

highlights possible culprits behind the barriers that they currently face on a day-to-day basis. Several of the participants are involved in outreach and educational programs, seeking to advocate for their community and teach the sighted community about their blind neighbors, coworkers, and friends. These narratives demonstrate areas of progress in society's acceptance of blindness, and other areas still in need of improvement. Today it is not uncommon for someone to assume that just because a person is blind he or she must be good at music, one participant told me. "A blind person that doesn't do music? That don't seem to add up." Misconceptions like these could be results of an attempt to socially compensate for nature's apparent unfairness, or just a more informal means of gathering information about blindness and blind people in general.

Because of the limited nature of this study's length of time and number of participants I can offer no conclusions about majority of motives in these encounters. What I can say definitively, though, is that this study proves there is a deficit of knowledge shared between these groups. I asked the participants to share with me one thing they wished all sighted people knew about being blind, blindness, or blind people. Besides the answer I shared in the Scene section, this response stood out to me as a perfect summary of this endeavor to inspire future communication between these two populations.

*"One thing that I would want them to know, that I have lived the American dream despite my blindness. I've raised a family; I'm a lawyer, married to a blind engineer. Own our own house; we have all the debts and assets like everyone else."*

## 10. Works Cited

Brock, Bernard L., ed. *Kenneth Burke and Contemporary European Thought: Rhetoric in Transition*. Tuscaloosa, U of Alabama P, 1995.

Brock has written and compiled six essays containing comparisons of Kenneth Burke's work on language as the foundation of society with modern European philosophers' relevant opinions on the subject. These philosophers are Jurgen Habermas, Ernesto Grassi, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. These works focus primarily on symbolism in language and its impact on society. The comparison of Burke and Foucault is most relevant to this study and so it is feature above the others.

Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives* Berkeley. University of California Press. 1973.

Print.

This book was the first in what burke meant to be a 3-book series on the concept of motive behind action. Burke introduces the concept of his Dramatistic Pentad as a method for discerning motives from peoples' actions, and as language is symbolic action the Pentad as a method for discerning motive from what people say. The *Grammar* does not cover many modes of persuasion or rhetoric, but means by which to determine rhetoric already presented. The Four master Tropes are also introduced in this book. *A Grammar of Motives* seems in some ways more focused upon the audience in a speaker/audience relationship, whereas *A Rhetoric of Motives* suggests strategies and things to keep in mind for speakers in this same relationship. The *Grammar* also explores Burke's concept of Guilt Redemption. Burke laid out his definition of guilt, scapegoating, and mortification as motives for dramatic action—in fact, he called guilt the motive of all human drama.

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*.

Berkeley. University of California Press. 1966. Reprint.

This book is a compilation of many of Kenneth Burke's essays taken from widely published periodicals that focus on his theory of language as symbolic action, as the title implies. It is widely held to be one of the most essential works for understanding Burke's theories and ideas. This book is divided into three collections of essays covering a wide range of topics. The third chapter in Part I contains Burke's concept of the "terministic screen," with which this study is chiefly concerned as a method for explaining the different perspectives on disability held by the blind and sighted communities. The book contains information on Dramatistic analysis, Burke's definition of man, Burke's analysis of several specific authors, and a collection of essays dealing with symbolism. It contains a limited description of the

Dramatistic pentad characterized in *A Rhetoric of Motives* but does not fully expound on the concept.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley, University of California Press. 1973. Print.

Kenneth Burke speculates on the nature of language as literary action in this collection of longer and shorter essays. He offers methods for more quickly locating the act in an artifact or instance, and for critiquing literature using his theories of symbolic action. Among other things, this collection includes the cluster-agon analysis, the dialectic, and the semantic and poetic nature of things. This paper is chiefly concerned with the description as a means by which to determine the key symbols for interpreting a rhetor's work. Burke applies this to a single artifact by a single rhetor, whereas this paper ventures into the relatively (though not entirely) untried territory of using a cluster-agon analysis to discover key symbols in groupings of artifacts by multiple rhetors on a specific topic.

Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley. University of California Press. 1969

The two principle concepts Kenneth Burke presents in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, the second of the intended 3-book series on motives, are Identification and Terministic Screens. These two concepts appear as strategies for consideration for rhetors that are equally identifiable by an audience in persuasion. They are both independent concepts and very closely dependent upon one another. In order to apply identification, one must know the audience's terministic screens, or at least be familiar with them. And in order to develop terministic screens a person learns to or develops identification with one thing and not with another. Burke did not conclude the series with a third book.

Bury, Mike. "Defining and Researching Disability: Challenges and Responses" (ch. 2).

*Exploring the Divide*. Barnes, Colin, Mercer, Geoff. Leads. The Disability Press. 1996. p18-38.

This chapter focuses on two particular aspects of the question of defining "disability." Bury describes the recent history of the definitions associated with physical, mental, and emotional disability, and the socio-medical implications of these changes. Secondly, Bury discusses a current theory that proposes to consider the language associated with

'disability' as "social oppression." This is known, in other works, as "ableism." The chapter does not conclude whether or not the use of words such as "disability" and "rehabilitation" are indeed marks of social oppression, but merely lays out the arguments available on both sides. While it does not specifically pertain to visual impairment, the chapter's discussion of the "able' public's perception of disabilities in general is useful for understanding the reactions of that same public to encountering the disabled in various contexts, and thus relevant to this study.

Chemey, James L. "The Rhetoric of Ableism." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31.3 (2011), p7.

Print.

This is a rhetorical analysis of the language and symbolism employed by those that wish to challenge what they perceive as an "ableist" society. It describes the strategies employed in film critiques, countercultural performances, public demonstrations, and other attempts at undermining what they perceive as a discriminatory fixation on "abled" societies. This study provides a perspective on how a growing portion of the disabled community perceives how they are treated or perceived by others. It does not examine the validity of ableism or chronicle its history. It does not offer countertheories to ableism. It does, however, lend insight into the language blind persons associate with the barrier of miscommunication between the sighted and blind communities.

Darr, Christopher and Strine IV, Harry. "A Pentadic Analysis of Celebrity Testimony in Congressional Hearings: Giving Voice to the Voiceless." *KB Journal*. 6.1 (2009). p3-11.

Print.

This is another example of Pentadic analysis applied to personal testimony. It features celebrities speaking before congressional hearings, and their perceptions of themselves as "giving voice to the voiceless." Celebrities choose social causes, typically medical cases such as Parkinson's Syndrome, and present them before Congress in support of funding or legislation related to those issues, or to prevent hindrances to their pet causes' furtherance from being passed. This Pentadic analysis looks at the rhetoric which they traditionally choose, chiefly *pathos* arguments, to develop their testimonies before the Senate and House of Representatives in the United States' Congress. This kind of analysis of personal testimony is similar to the methods used by this study to analyze the personal testimony of legally blind and totally blind individuals regarding their interactions with sighted persons.



Kudlick, Catherine J. "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other'." *American Historical Review* 108.3 (2003), p763-793. Print.

This study frames disability as an "other" by which to examine history, such as gender, sexuality, religion, or race. It highlights the current struggle to define a "correct" perspective about it, and describes its historical placement and importance. It is not specifically a rhetorical study but provides in its own pages rhetoric which can contribute to the overall perspective that the "abled" public has about the disabled.

McLean, Margaret A. "Getting to Know You: The Prospect of Challenging Ableism through Adult Education." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. n132. (2011). P13-22. Print.

This article discusses the concepts of Ableism, its definitions and institutionalization in the education system. Specifically, tis article focuses on Ableism in adult and continuing education, suggesting that its impacts on the disabled is unrecognized by the "abled." In addition to discussing the problems ableism causes for disabled students in adult educational systems, the article proposes using mutual exchange of information and interaction as a method for breaking down the atmosphere of ableism, ending the perpetuation of harmful social barriers. This article singles out adult and contemporary education institutions, ignoring all other areas where ableism persists.

Meisenbach, Rebecca et al. "We Were Allowed? The Presence of a Bureaucratic Pentad in Women's Maternity leave Discourse." *Conference Papers, International Communication Association*. San Diego, CA. 2003, Print.

Meisenbach conducts a rhetorical analysis of narratives told in audio-recorded interviews regarding participants' experience with maternity leave. Participants were women mostly in "pink collar" workforce positions. Their stories gathered in the interviews were then compiled and analyzed using Kenneth Burke's pentad to construct a narrative of experience. The topical content of Meisenbach's study has no relevance to this study, but the methodology is a source for this study's procedure. Meisenbach used individual interviews

conducted over a period of time. This study uses a single focus group of individuals, owing to the significantly smaller scope of the project. This study incorporates uses of the pentad as a means of narrative analysis, as Meisenbach uses it here.

Orlansky, Michael D. "Public Perception of Terms Relating to Blindness and Visual Impairment." *Journal of Rehabilitation*. 50.3 (1984). Print.

In this 1980's article Orlansky analyzes the perceptions of the general public regarding terminology applied to the blind and vision impaired. He discusses their discomfort with certain terms and misunderstandings of others, describing how these terminologies impact the public's perceptions of blind persons in general. While the study references multiple disabilities and terminologies for different types of handicaps it specifically focuses and gives more attention to those of blindness and vision impairments. It also is limited to terminology, excluding appearance, and behaviorisms.

Pierce, Dann L, "School Children in Dispute: Mass Mediation Stereotypes of Japanese Immigrants in Oregon." *World Communication* 28.1 (1999). p30-43. Print.

Pierce applies Kenneth Burk's cluster-agon analysis to a series of newspaper articles regarding a controversial decision made by a San Francisco school board to segregate Japanese school children during the WWII internment phase. This method of criticism is typically applied to a single artifact but Pierce argued that it is applicable to multiple artifacts because of the individual nature of the authors as rhetors. Pierce uses this to analyze the cluster of terms used by a public's collective consciousness much as in my study I use narratives to sample the perspectives of a minority community, the legally blind, regarding encounters with the sighted community.

Rinaldi, Jacqueline. "Rhetoric and Healing: Refusing Narratives about Disability." *College English*. 58.7 (1996). p820-834. Print.

This piece describes and supports the therapeutic experience of writing for healing in a group of like-experienced persons, such as those with disabilities. Rinaldi argues that

sharing their experiences and making them available to the general public allows for the beginning of a dialogue of healing occurring between the (mostly) ignorant “uninitiated abled” and the disabled. Rinaldi’s study is a broad introduction to the concept, not focused on any specific disability or type of experience in the way that this study is, but it provides a precedent and framework that this one somewhat loosely follows.

Shultz, Kara. “Should We Laugh or Should We Cry? John Callahan’s Humor as a Tool to Change Societal Attitudes toward Disability.” *Howard Journal of Communication*. 9.3 (1998), p229-244. Print.

John Callahan, a quadriplegic cartoonist, is known for his gag comics featuring social commentary on areas of social incongruity, most frequently, disability. This article uses Burkeian *perspective by incongruity* and Steven Toulmin on practical reasoning to demonstrate how Callahan’s cartoons contribute to the current shifts and somewhat contradictory construction of disability in American culture. This piece highlights the public’s discomfort with its own reactions to the presentation of disability.

## 11. Appendix

### **Stories from the Dark Side**

*A Rhetorical Analysis of the Stories Legally Blind and Totally Blind People Tell About Unplanned Encounters with the Sighted Community*

B Anneliese DeVyldere

#### Focus Group Interview Questions

- 1) Tell me about a time when you held a face-to-face conversation with a sighted person where the other person did not initially realize that you were blind.
- 2) How did he/she react upon realizing that you were blind?
- 3) Have you had multiple encounters like this? How frequently does it happen?
- 4) How do you usually respond to such reactions?
- 5) Why do you think people tend to react this way?

- 6) How do you feel about this reaction?
- 7) How does it make you feel that people think they have to respond this way to you?
- 8) How would you like people to react?
- 9) What's one thing you wish you could tell the sighted community about being blind?
- 10) There is a growing social movement that claims using the word "disabled" is offensive. They suggest that being blind is as normal as being sighted. How do you feel about the theory of "ableism (the theory that says blindness is as normal as sight) as social oppression?"
- 11) Do such troubled interactions take place in some places but not others? At some times and not others?
- 12) How would you describe sighted people who handle these interactions poorly? What is their attitude?
- 13) Do certain types of people (age, gender, region) tend to react better than others?