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A person with disabilities in space and place - reading Simmel and Bauman

A stranger according to Georg Simmel (1950, 402) is “the person who comes today and stays tomorrow”. So he is not a passer-by, a traveller or even a nomad. He is something different from the group he is entering. His difference is not individual. None of his individual features matter when the group is defining him as a stranger. His difference is that he is not “one of us”; it is something quite common among other strangers like him, in the place or space he is coming from. (Simmel 1950, 405–406.)

A person with disabilities is a Simmel’s stranger when he enters a group as the first of “his kind”. It is not important which kind of disabilities he has, he is just one of “those” – people with disabilities. His impairments are his individual features, no matter what they are like; they just specify him to be a stranger from “people with disabilities”. He is specified to that group just in the same way as somebody is specified to be “black” or “homosexual”.

If someone who is not “one of us” stays where he belongs, in his own group, he does not bother us. But if he comes to stay with us, among us, we may have a problem. Something that is far comes near at the same time. (Simmel 1950, 402–403.) As long as he stays far we can even be interested in him, pity him, feel sympathy and empathy, and even value him. But if he comes near, he starts to disturb our life.

When a person with disabilities comes as a stranger into our group he has some kind of influence to us, the interaction starts to be two-way. The group may try to avoid that. In the case of disability equal reciprocal interaction can be inhibited by treating a person with disabilities as a customer, a client, somebody we can help and who uses services from our society. We may keep him away from certain places. We can build our houses unreachable to people who don’t walk. We can manage our organisations, for example places of employment, so that one who doesn’t speak can not participate.

Sometimes a person with disabilities himself doesn’t notice prejudiced behaviour of others. At least adults who have lived their whole life with disabilities may be so used to discriminating or underestimating attitudes that they don’t notice them themselves. Being someone with not equal social rights and duties has become part of their own identity and makes no problem to them. Many adults with disabilities have empowered from this, they have got possibility to build a different kind of identity. They are more or less activists.

Bauman (2002, 117–119) writes about “polite disinterest”, which is found the easiest way to escape from the situation when meeting a stranger. This is possible in places where many people

go and stay “together” but in the same time “alone”. Such places are for example shopping centres there are many customers in the same place, often even quite near each other, but having no meaningful interaction with each other. Meeting a stranger there makes no problem; one doesn’t need to choose any way to act. You just pass by and concentrate to your own business. That is easy for both sides; the stranger and the one of the possible “us” in the area. “The temple to consumerism” frees people to engage in their individualistic hobby – shopping – together but without any meaningful social interaction.

When a person with disabilities starts to be something else in a group than a stranger from “people with disabilities”, his individual features start to be seen and noticed. If he is “one of us” his impairments start to be personal parts of him, just like the colour of his hair or the way he uses to dress. He is a person who moves his way, talks his way, thinks his way. If one of these characters is influenced by impairment or not is not fundamental. It just is. It is just him. This is the situation for example in a family when the members have learned to live normal life with the one of them with impairment. Maybe one of them uses a wheelchair because he can’t walk, just like the others use their feet because they can’t fly.

References

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