

# THE EXPERIENCES OF SIGHTED PEOPLE IN COMMON SOCIO-CULTURAL ACTIVITIES WITH BLIND PEOPLE

**Jolanta Kruckauskaite**

The Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted, Lithuania

**Justinas Sadauskas**

Mykolas Romeris university, Lithuania

**Abstract.** *The organisation of joint hikes for the blind and sighted is a completely new and untouched topic, the study of which can help to discover unexpected results, to show the significance and benefits of such activities not only for the blind but also for the sighted, their perception, new inner experiences, discoveries. Joint socio-cultural activities are not only a medium for the empowerment of the disabled, but also the education of empathic members of society and the promotion of new programs. The aim of the research is to reveal the experiences of sighted people participating in joint hikes with blind people. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The research participants were 8 sighted people who had participated in joint hikes with the blind people. Thematic analysis was conducted. The experiences of the sighted and the blind have revealed that joint walks “erase” all differences, all borders. Sighted people see and learn what visual impairment is, what kind of world blind people live in – this brings them even closer to their comrades and encourages the desire to extend their friendship.*

**Keywords:** *blind, inclusion, sighted, socio-cultural activities.*

## Introduction

The prospects for a blind person to live a full life are conditioned by a positive public attitude and the search for mutual interaction opportunities: the readiness of the sighted to accept a different individual and the blind person's efforts to be active and empowered. Blind people should be more actively involved in the social activities of the sighted community, working together with people who have no personal support needs, and joint socio-cultural activities, that increase the inclusion of blind people in society and create positive change by shaping society's empathy and values, can be a tool to achieve this.

For the first time in this kind of work, the experiences of joint socio-cultural activities for blind and sighted people are based on empirical research, using hikes as an instrument. The scientific analysis and the empirical research findings are useful in practice for social work professionals seeking to empower people with visual impairment, working with people with visual impairment, and seeking to get a better understanding of the client's "world". The results of this research are

also useful for managers and specialists in educational institutions and people responsible for education policy-making while implementing the model of inclusive education, for makers and implementers of social policies for people with disabilities focusing on the social well-being and inclusion of people with disabilities.

The aim of the research is to reveal the significance of joint socio-cultural activities of blind and sighted people. Research methods: analysis of scientific literature, legal documentation, ongoing programs; semi-structured interviews with participants (blind and sighted); qualitative content analysis.

### **Literature review**

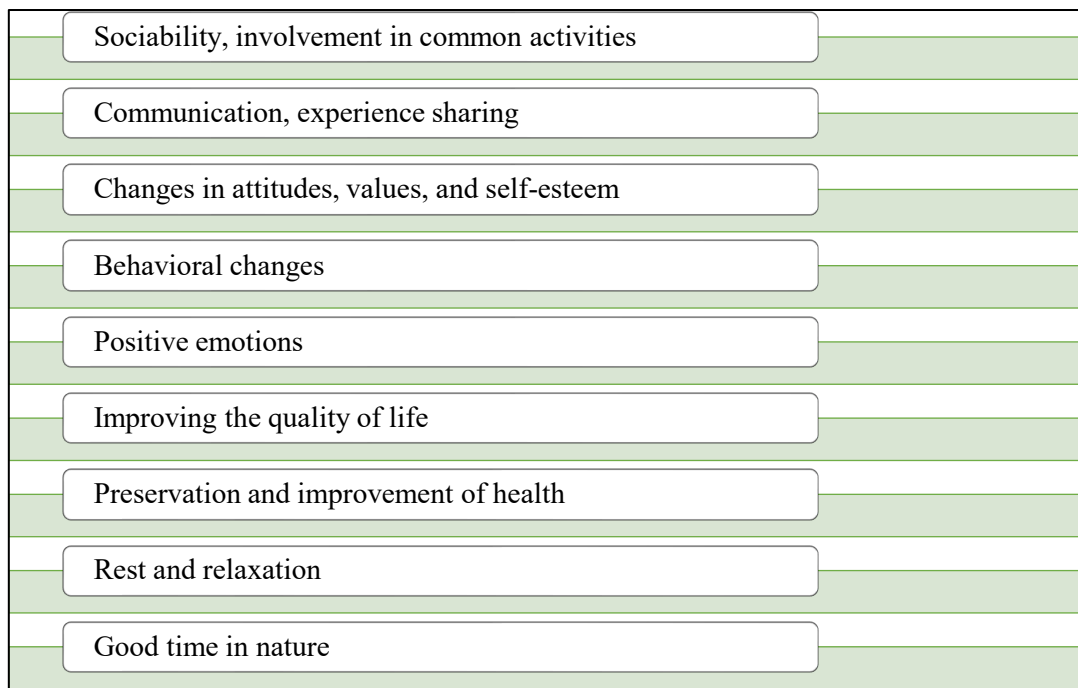
Socio-cultural activities are diverse and include recreation, arts and culture, community building, education and upbringing. These activities often have more than one objective. For example, recreation and leisure activities allow people to relax as well as gain new knowledge, meet people, make contacts, share experiences and have discussions. Sharing ideas and having conversations are also an important condition for educational processes (Spierts, 2003). Therefore, socio-cultural activities are complementary and intertwined. According to J. R. Sinkuniene (2012, 48), socio-cultural activities are "aimed at preserving the traditional cultural values of a nation, so that a person who has learnt to assess and express his/her opinion could successfully fit into society. This facilitates (self-) identification processes, changes people's attitudes, values and self-esteem".

Organised leisure, as one of the socio-cultural activities, helps to involve blind people in the community through activities (from artistic self-expression, crafts (ceramics, weaving, folk art), participation in cultural and religious events, artistic self-expression collectives, to craft fairs and exhibitions presenting their works), travelling, visiting tourist destinations (Blind people and community: experiences, ideas, tips, guidelines, 2008).

Socio-cultural activities are significant for people with disabilities as well as for people without disabilities. According to M.E. Kudryatseva & S.S. Lebedeva (2022), persons with disabilities who actively participate in socio-cultural activities become involved in the community and avoid social exclusion, they feel like equal members of society, as they can make use of their abilities and feel that their lives are meaningful. Socio-cultural activities contribute to constructing an inclusive society. According to E.T. Mirzajonova (2022), socio-cultural activities help people with disabilities to establish social relations, allow them to recognise and develop creative abilities, satisfy aesthetic interests, adapt more easily to society and resolve difficult life situations. V. Gudzinskiene and A. Driskienė (2016) state that activities help people with disabilities in their self-realisation, they reduce feelings of loneliness, increase self-esteem, improve emotional well-being, allow them to engage in their favourite activities and learn new things. If

people with disabilities find meaningful activities where they feel good and safe, it has a positive impact on their self-confidence, health and quality of life.

Socio-cultural activities – recreation as part of tourism – are inseparable from leisure, travel and hikes. Hiking as a tourist activity is considered to provide physical and mental benefits to individuals, and is associated with leisure time, relaxation, and the desire to know, feel and see (Nordbo & Prebensen, 2015). It is one of the cheapest ways of travelling with significant benefits for well-being, behavioural change, socialisation, inclusion, self-fulfilment and promoting communication (Mitten, et al., 2018).



*Figure 1 The significance of hiking as a socio-cultural activity (Mitten, et al., 2018; Gomez-Marti, 2019; Winter, et al., 2020; Bandukda, et al., 2020)*

As indicated in Fig. 1, hiking as a socio-cultural activity changes the values, behaviours, lifestyles, and attitudes towards health in communities and individuals as well as provides multiple benefits for both persons with and without disabilities (i.e., from a sense of community, communication, rest and relaxation, to self-esteem, behavioural changes, improvement of health and overall quality of life.

## Methodology

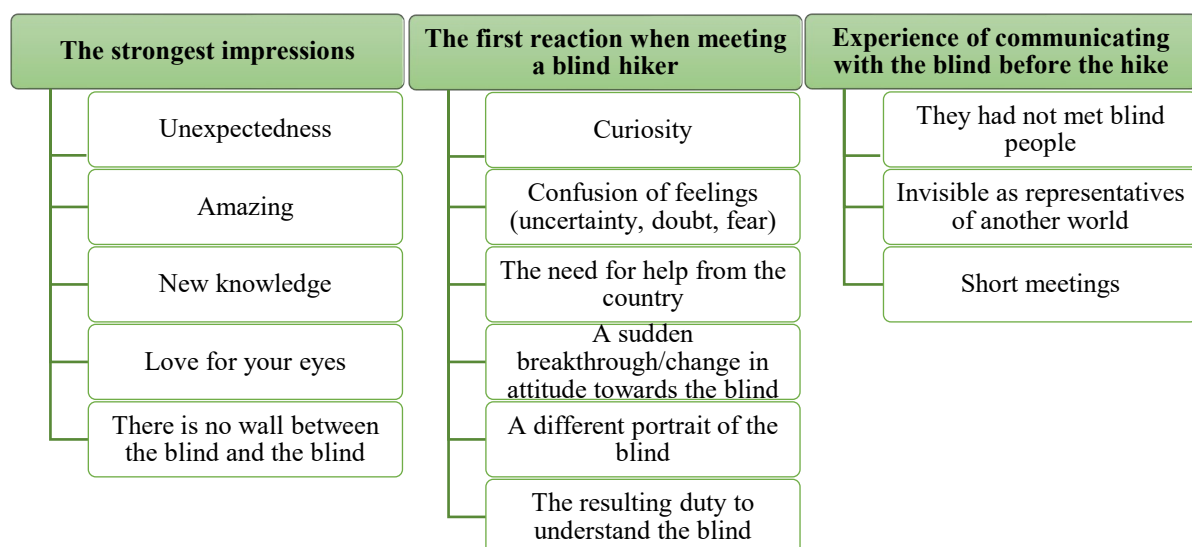
The research was conducted following the theory of the social construction of reality. The essence of this construction was revealed by Berger & Luckmann (1999), who emphasised the importance of the lived experience of the individual as the basis of everyday knowledge.

Qualitative research was conducted. Semi-structured phenomenological interviews were used with blind and sighted individuals participating in joint socio-cultural activities. The composition of the research instrument - interview questionnaires - was designed to find out the following: 1) the experiences, feelings, communication and meaning of joint activities of blind people when participating in joint hikes with people without disabilities; 2) whether the non-disabled people became more aware of the world of the blind people through the joint activities, what they felt and how they behaved and communicated in the joint activities, whether they became more empathic to the blind people, what they lacked, etc.

The following selection criteria were applied for the targeted criteria selection of the research participants: 1) the participant is blind or sighted; 2) the participant has participated in at least five joint hikes of blind and sighted people lasting for at least two days. Only blind and sighted people who had participated in socio-cultural activities together, i.e., at least five two-day hikes, and who were able to share their experiences, impressions and emotions, were selected as interviewees. The sample of the research consisted of 14 participants, including 8 sighted and 6 blind individuals. This number was chosen because this is the average number of participants in one hike. The research was conducted between August 2022 and January 2023.

## Research results

The analysis of the research data helped to identify the experiences of interaction with blind people before the hike and the strongest impressions and reactions when meeting blind hikers (Fig. 2.):



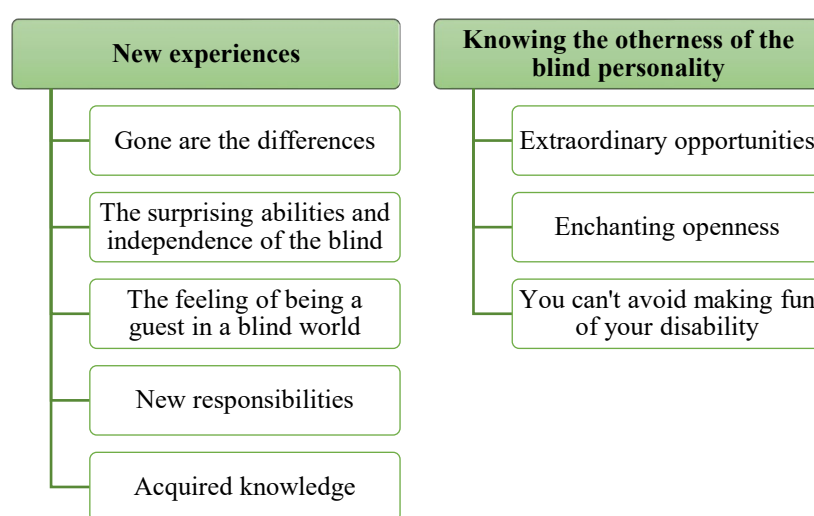
*Figure 2 Analysis of the research participants' strongest impressions after hiking with the blind: categories and subcategories*

Research participants reported that when they saw blind people participating in the hike, they experienced a strong unrecognised emotion. This emotion was both confusing and seemed unusual because they had not had such an experience before the hike: *the unexpected one is not the one that remains after all hikes but the one that was the strongest for me. It is the strongest; sometimes, without knowing, you don't even think that they are blind; the emotion is new, unknown <...> something unusual because it caused me a very strong emotion.* The sighted people participating in the research were amazed at the independence of blind people and their ability to hike together: *surprise at the fact that these people hike as if they could see <...> that I would not be able to do it if I suddenly lost sight; it was quite strange and strange when I have realised that they live just like we do, they just have to have a person by their side at certain times, but otherwise, they are completely independent people.* Research participants, seeing the independence of the blind, began comparing their abilities with their own. They were surprised by what they saw and realised that blind people could live the same life as they did. Sharing their experiences, the sighted research participants noted that after the hike, they gained new knowledge and information about blind people which enriched them greatly by empowering them to think and behave differently. The world of the blind that the research participants got to know allowed them to discover the joy of sight. After the joint hike, the sighted were overwhelmed by the sense/feeling of unity with the blind. The first reactions to meeting blind hikers were very different. Some research participants were curious when they met blind people: *there was a lot of curiosity <...> curiosity led; it was interesting; and you want to interact and so on and you have no idea how.* Meanwhile, others felt a mixture of feelings (from uncertainty to doubt and even fear): *I was scared because I did not know what I would have to do, whether I would have to help or guide them here; at the beginning, I was surprised <...> I had no idea how they were going to go being unable to see; I wished that I would not have to guide them, because I did not know how to do it. Maybe I was even afraid <...> if this hike really was the place where they should be?*

The research revealed that after the hike, the sighted people created a portrait of a blind person which is full of surprising aspects, unexpectedly noticed strengths of the blind that those without visual impairment could learn from: *I have noticed such an inner strength <...> the strong people, as I said, are capable of seeing through the heart. I was surprised by another thing, maybe their determination to achieve their goals <...> they are quite strong-willed. Ambitious. Ambitious but at the same time compassionate; people can fully enjoy life and sometimes those who see everything can learn from them.* Research participants did not feel the difficulties they expected to experience on the hike, they thought that everything would be more difficult with blind people, they would have to be guided; therefore, they were surprised and changed their attitudes towards blind people. For some, it was very simple, while others, when they found themselves

next to blind people, tried to get to know their fellow hikers as well as any other person they met in life. To meet the needs of the blind during the hikes, the research participants tried to understand how the blind perceived the world. Many had no experience interacting with blind people before the hike. Several participants admitted that they had previously thought of blind people as being from another world. There was a disassociation and uncertainty because that world was unfamiliar: *it is not your world and not your business and you do not understand anything there; the world of the blind was unfamiliar to me.*

The significance of joint socio-cultural activities with blind people was revealed (Fig. 3):



*Figure 3 Significance of research participants' socio-cultural activities with blind people: categories and subcategories*

Research participants stated that the differences between them and the blind disappeared in joint activities with the blind. Some participants were so involved in joint activities that they forgot they were with blind people. Research participants were amazed by the abilities of the blind people they saw during the hike and learned about from the blind people's stories. The participants were very surprised by the blind people's independence in familiar and new environments and their efforts to take care of their everyday activities, provide for themselves and find the things they needed. The opinion was expressed that we should be like guests who wander into the world of the blind, where there is respect, assistance, care and good emotions.

It has been revealed that hikes with the blind encourage responsibility for the person next to you, teach people to be attentive and alert, and take care of their personal safety as well as the safety of the person hiking nearby. This creates a bond between the hikers and trust in each other. It has been observed that hiking

with the blind, the conversations and support that are established, allow the acquisition of knowledge that is very meaningful.

Research participants got to know blind people who are energetic, have goals for the future and live full lives. They thought that people without disabilities were not always so persistent and knew how to enjoy life: *they are full of energy and full of plans, and just, how they will make money, how they do sports, just a full life, and they tell about all kinds of adventures <...> we complain about little things when they have a completely different world, contact with the world; we are so weak in front of them. So vulnerable in our ability. Our ability against disability.* Half of the research participants were surprised by the openness of blind people to questions about disability. They noticed that as soon as they made contact, the blind people were very open and willing to talk about themselves and their disability, they did not consider the questions to be uncomfortable and were willing to engage in dialogue: *the most surprising was their openness and humour, their positive approach to life; they were talking about it very openly.* The blind people were so open that they did not shy away from making fun of their disability (*you can make fun of things, like falling into a hole. Or tripping over something, falling down, the issues that could seem very sensitive*).

The analysis of the interviews with the blind indicated that the hikes enriched and brought together the worlds of the blind and sighted through joint activities and communication (Fig. 4.).

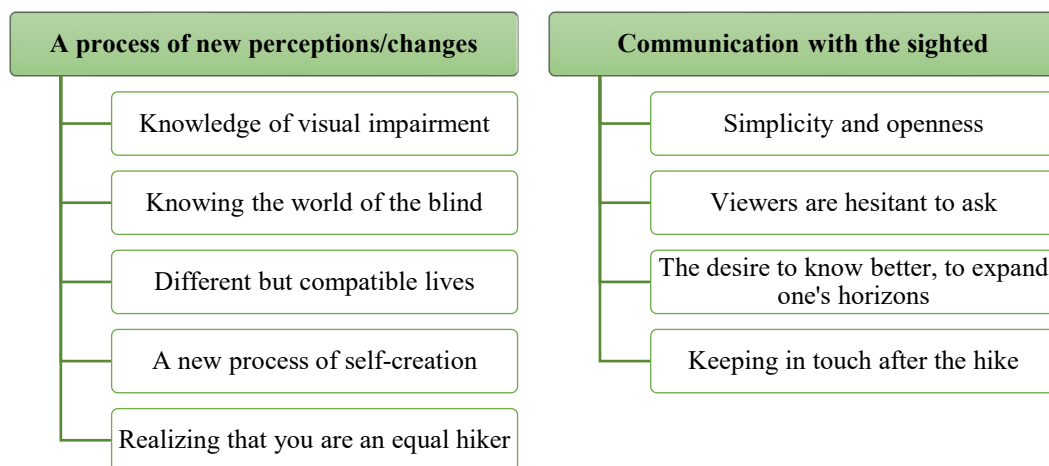


Figure 4 Analysis of changes influenced by hiking: categories and subcategories

From the perspective of the blind, the hikes allowed the sighted to learn more about their disability. The hikers were interested in the characteristic symptoms of visual impairment, when the participants lost their sight, whether blindness was congenital, and whether there was a family history of such cases. Blind people also tried to make sighted people aware of their disability: *first of all, I try to give people information, to tell them about all the specifics of people with visual*

*impairment, perhaps communication possibilities and all the other things, so that people have that information and understanding and they could feel free and unrestricted to communicate fully.*

During the hikes, blind people were asked various questions related to their daily life and routine, hobbies, mobility, adaptation in the domestic and public space and urban environment. They tried to answer these questions and tell people how they live and deal with difficulties. It has been revealed that although the lives of blind and sighted people seem different, they are similar: *the lives of blind and sighted people are somewhat different, but can be very compatible; the daily routine of blind people is not different from that of sighted people, except that blind people sometimes need more extensive non-visual sensory support to access information or perform an action, or the use of special tools adapted to the blind.* According to the research participants, although it is assumed that blind people are unable to participate in joint activities, the reality is different: their disability does not prevent them from engaging in activities they enjoy with sighted people.

After the hike, the blind people started to realise that they are important and capable of self-realisation, they can experience new things because a new process of self-construction has begun. Blind people discovered new possibilities for themselves: *new opportunities to know themselves first, then to know others, to learn, experience, discover something new and broaden their horizons, to explore possibilities in general; I can realise myself and grow, know myself even better and allow other people to know me.* This process was influenced by the participation of sighted people, their attitude towards the hikers, their appreciation of their capabilities, and their closer acquaintance with each other. When hiking with sighted people, blind people felt equal to everyone instead of marginalised and excluded: *when we experience hiking, we do not feel marginalised, because we hike and participate in journeys equally, which reduces social exclusion; I always felt that people spoke to me, I did not feel excluded, I felt that I was in my space with my company.* There was a realisation of the absence of borders between the blind and sighted worlds, the blind felt that through the eyes of the sighted, they became people just like them but with a slight impairment that did not interfere (*you realise that any limits, borders, if there were any, they are practically gone*).

The research results have revealed that for the blind, communication with sighted people is a particularly important part of the hike. It is characterised by simplicity and openness, mutual encouragement, willingness to get to know each other better, broadening horizons, and keeping in touch after the hike. A unique communication is established; it creates a strong bond that people do not want to break. For the blind, communication is a motive to hike.



## **Discussion**

Through the hikes, blind people have brought sighted people closer to themselves, their disability and the world in which they live through their communication. Blind people noticed how attitudes towards them changed and sighted people started to see disability in the same way blind people do. The above-mentioned research finding reflects the theory of the social construction of reality by P.L. Berger & Th. Luckmann (1999) in which the understanding of reality is dynamic. During the hikes, blind people were the first to encourage other hikers in attempts to find common ground and dispel uncertainty about the blind people's lives, their ability to hike and take care of themselves. According to J. Ruske (2014), social participation and active involvement provide conditions for positive acceptance and a realistic view of one's disability which is the basis for the construction of dignity in persons with disabilities.

By meeting on hikes and engaging in common favourite activities, sighted and blind people experienced a sense of togetherness allowing them to build a meaningful and mutually enriching relationship. They felt part of a community while hiking. According to Ruske (2014), togetherness is one of the components of the subjective concept of dignity in persons with disabilities; it opens the heart, making us vulnerable and sensitive to the other. Togetherness is about equality, friendship, harmony with the environment and shared experiences. There are common points with the research work of J. R. Sinkuniene (2012, 41), as "those community members who have been publicly encouraged or rewarded in the community feel a greater sense of belonging and are more connected to it".

After the hiking experience, the blind construct a new self-creation, a realisation that disability is not such a big disadvantage that it could prevent them from joint activities and making friends. A similar approach is expressed by P. L. Berger & Th. Luckmann (1999, 166) because "the individual becomes who he/she is perceived to be by others who are significant to him/her", and interaction with others impacts the baggage of social knowledge and self-construction. The research results confirmed the statements by M. Spierts (2003) that education and upbringing in socio-cultural activities help to develop competencies and skills that lead to adequate individual and social behaviour, and that animation, as manifested in educational activities for the blind, stimulates people and helps to build social relations. The insights by other authors that being in nature is relaxing, allows one to know it better and experience positive emotions have also been confirmed (Gomez-Marti, 2019; Bandukda, et al., 2020; Winter, et al., 2020).

## Conclusions

1. The research on the experiences of joint socio-cultural activities of blind and sighted people has revealed the significance of hiking as an important and new socio-cultural activity that has not been researched before.
2. The experiences of sighted and blind people revealed in the research have highlighted that joint hiking "erases" all differences and borders and breaks down stereotypes. Sighted people have the opportunity to see up close and learn about visual impairment and the world blind people live in, which brings them even closer to their fellow hikers and encourages their wish to maintain their friendships.
3. Hiking as a joint socio-cultural activity is more than a form of tourism or recreation. A joint hike of blind and sighted people is a multidisciplinary activity, including educational, animation, social communication, sport, tourism, social psychology, public health, and other fields of view.
4. In the future, hikes could become one of the effective socio-cultural activities for sighted and blind people to get to know themselves better, express themselves and feel like equal members of society.

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