

APOV: Who are you looking at?

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Volume 9, Issue 1, 2021

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0009.102> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0009.102>]

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Keywords:

disability; sociological ablism; decivilising processes

In *The Civilizing Process*, first published in German in 1939, and then republished in English in 1978–82, the great German sociologist Norbert Elias traces the origins of manners and self-restraint in human culture. He discusses things like sex, nudity, hygiene and violence. This makes for a fascinating book, a detailed psychohistory. What started in court etiquette gradually spread to all sections of society, as complex social connections overcame instinctive and unrestrained behaviours.

This may sound obscurely academic, but it was heard in my youth and still today in injunctions such as ‘Don’t stare’, ‘Don’t eat with your mouth full’ and ‘Put your hand over your mouth when you yawn’. People organised their own behaviour so as not to offend others or impinge on their space. There was what Elias calls an ‘expanding threshold of repugnance’.

In 2019, there are ample reasons to fear that *The Civilizing Process* that Elias identified may have run down. As a disability scholar, I notice how it is disabled people who are the first victims of this process, but I think it goes much wider than just my own research area. For example, I have talked to people with learning difficulties who have been sellotaped to trees by bullies and urinated on. On Facebook, some people collect photographs of people who look unusual, so as to laugh at them. Parents of children with disabilities tell researchers that they feel their children have become tourist attractions. Everyone gawks or feels they have the right to ask whatever questions they are curious about.

If you speak to anyone who, like me, has restricted growth, otherwise known as dwarfism, they will tell you that they have been photographed on a stranger’s phone camera more times than they would like to remember. My friend Eugene Grant tweets daily about the small indignities he experiences as a dwarf around Tyneside. Many of these originate in the cruelty of others.

So let me tell you about dwarfs and being stared at. I have developed a mathematical formula for it. Basically, it’s an exponential phenomenon.

If you’re one person with restricted growth and you walk down the street, you’re going to get ten people staring at you. Without fail. Maybe one takes a photo on their camera phone, and two people shout out midget. Par for the course, an average day for Tom.

But if there are two of you who are restricted growth, and you appear in public, there's a lot more interest. Two dwarfs are a story. Remember, it's exponential. So this time, my son and I go out, we attract the attention of 100 people, several more camera phones, a bit of back chat, it's not much fun.

And I also have a daughter: she's short too, we like to do family things. So now there's me, my son and my daughter, and suddenly we have 1000 people staring at us, passing comment. Traffic is starting to back up. The police are putting up crash barriers and traffic cones. There's probably a concession stand.

The trouble is, my daughter has her boyfriend – lovely fellow. Also short. So there's daughter plus one, my son too, and me. That's four real life dwarfs. Now there are ten thousand people staring at us, there are camera crews, it's an item on local TV news, basically a small town has come to a complete standstill.

So while, I think it's great when my son has a girlfriend, there's always the risk that she will be short too. You can imagine. One hundred thousand staring people. It's like Glasto, on a street near you. People selling drugs, a chill out zone, and Kylie Minogue is headlining all over again. I am not sure the South of England could cope with it.

But speaking seriously, I was very interested, ten years ago when I first started using a wheelchair, how it made me invisible. It seemed as if people were prepared for people on wheels, they knew about wheelchair users, and they just ignored them, it was as if they looked through you. I was stared at so much less. The wheelchair is like the stealth bomber of disability, it flies under the radar without being spotted. Which is a vast improvement in my life. I still look odd, but I am less immediately noticeable.

I think we have got a problem in Britain. Perhaps encouraged by reality TV, people have become a spectator sport. The British, who were once known everywhere for their politeness and decorum, no longer hold back. We are no longer a self-restraining people. Our threshold of shame is much lower than it was fifty years ago.

We do what we want, because we consider we have a right to go anywhere and do anything or stare or pass comment on anyone, or make any sort of noise if we want. I notice this on the bus or train, when a passenger, in a public space, feels they can watch a show on their screen without headphones. It obviously does not occur to them, until someone points it out, that they may be disturbing other people. The mobile phone, or tablet, facilitates this narcissism. It allows us to photograph anyone 'strange'. It creates a bubble around us. We can have a loud conversation as if the caller and ourselves are unheard by anyone. The personal electronic device insulates us from criticism and makes us impervious to others and their rights.

The technology is a symptom, not a cause. The deep reason is individualism. Norbert Elias says it was a chain of mutual dependency and a sense of common humanity that encourage people to see others as individuals with feelings. But perhaps because now we no longer need others in the same way, so we are no longer required to respect others.

For example, I can go to the supermarket and pick out a single portion of food, and I can buy it at the automatic check out, and I can go home and pop it in the microwave, and eat it in front of my personal screen, and never interact with anyone. On public transport, I can wear my headphones or speak on my personal phone, and never connect with anyone adjacent to me.

I think the answer to the isolation, and also the staring, is to make connection. Every time I say hello to the child that stares and laughs, or to their parent, I reveal myself to be a human being in their eyes, a person with feelings. When I make contact with the security guard in the supermarket, or talk to the assistant on the railway, I am making visible the chain of mutual dependency in which we are still all linked together, despite our apparent independence. For everyone, these ties become revealed when the bus does not turn up, or the train breaks down, or when there is a power cut. Suddenly, we revert to what we were a few decades ago: considerate of others, working together, talking to each other.

I think disabled people have a special role to play here. We are the ones who are stared at, after all. We are the ones who cannot pretend we do not need anyone else. We make the bonds visible. We show that community is still as important as ever. And just as we get the intrusive stares and nasty words, so we also get the selfless acts, the doors held open, the offers of help, the willingness of others to inconvenience themselves so that we can be included. I feel so honoured to be remembered, to feel these positive connections every day. I think they are vital. Once we see ourselves as normal and others as dispensable, we are in a very uncivilised situation indeed. We remember that two years after the original publication of *The Civilising Process*, the mother of Norbert Elias died in Auschwitz. And that the first victims of Nazi euthanasia were hundreds of thousands of disabled people, labelled as 'ballast existence', lives unworthy of life.

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644