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Self-description vs Self-description

Joel Snyder, PhD

It's a complex issue. I work with professional audio description technique based on four fundamentals that I developed many years ago—one of them involves editing from what you see, selecting what you will describe based on the answer to a question that the describer poses to him or herself: What is most critical to an understanding (he points to his head) and an appreciation (his hand is on his heart) of the image?

I think that this applies to self-description in a meeting as well. Yes, for a person who has low vision, having descriptions of physical characteristics can help them recall individuals and identify them on a second meeting. And it provides information about the individual that non-blind people take in visually, and when done by everyone at a meeting or conference, gives the blind or visually impaired people present a sense of the diversity or lack of diversity of those speaking, on a panel or in the room generally.

On the other hand, some blind or visually impaired people prefer not to have self-descriptions. I have had this discussion with a wide range of people who are blind—some feel uncomfortable formulating a self-description/that it is awkward or unfair to expect people to describe themselves, and that it takes time away from more meaningful information that can be exchanged. It can take up considerable time if twenty people each take a minute to describe themselves.

Further, an individual providing a self-description is creating a subjective message, and to what end? With professional description, we try to discern the most critical images being conveyed—developing a sense for what the focus is in a play, a film, in visual art and so on. But when a person self-describes, we choose based on what? A sighted person can access a wide range of information—but what's most important to the meeting or the issue at hand?

Do we describe gender and age and skin color but not physical fitness, weight, or skin condition? In one way of thinking, by doing so we are elevating race, gender, and age, and ignoring what sighted folks often notice such as physical attractiveness, unusual or unconventional surroundings or clothing, blemishes, weight, or things that might be

paramount to a sighted user and pointedly avoided in someone providing self-description.

So self-description often cherry-picks what will be described and perhaps creates a false sense of inclusion. If we are told someone is fifty, is that a visual description if they happen to look thirty? What if they look eighty? Is the color of one's hair important or only if it is green or purple? Similarly, should it be required that a meeting participant disclose their religion if it is apparent from visual indicators like a cross necklace or a Star of David?

What about race? And what language is most appropriate? Are we pressuring people to disclose their race if it is not visually apparent? If a person self-identifies as African-American, is that information actually part of what a sighted person has access to? It may be important to the individual but is it what's apparent to a sighted person? How can we know a person's race? Is a White South African who becomes a citizen of the U.S. an African-American? And it's perfectly acceptable to choose not to include an aspect of self-description—but at the same time, if skin color is not referenced by all, does “White” end up being the default. Is that appropriate?

Professional audio describers describe – we don't explain.

Now—having said all that, it may still be decided that all people in a meeting should provide a self-description. If so, a few suggestions, some of which have been developed/recommended by audio describers in the U.K.:

- Consider it in advance, if possible -- have it written down already and stick to what you have written. People who self-describe off the cuff tend to take their lead (in terms of which aspects they describe) from the people before them. This can often result in successive people's descriptions getting longer and longer. Be concise and brief in your self-description—a good rule of thumb is to restrict yourself to three key elements and one or two sentences.

- The amount of detail you describe yourself with in part depends on how many people are in the meeting. A blind person will get information overload if 35 people all go into huge detail about their hair, skin, height, clothes, and Zoom background.

- You might refer to your hair color, length and style. Facial hair, such as a moustache or beard can be a useful visual marker for a blind or visually impaired person.

- On a video call or online conference, your height is not generally visible, so how relevant is that? But then knowing that someone is very tall can be useful for a blind or visually impaired person at an in-person conference.

- Clothes and accessories—what you wear is a part of your identity. Again, don't over-describe or even feel it necessary to refer to your clothes at all, but a patterned shirt or top, a brightly-colored scarf or striking jewelr can be a useful visual marker for a blind or visually impaired person. A particularly loud shirt may become a running joke at a meeting: make sure that the blind or visually impaired person is in on it from the beginning.

Finally, consider the use of humor—

I am a middle-aged White man with a receding hairline – oh, alright, it has receded to the rear of my head leaving a fringe of gray stretching around to my ears and my white and gray full beard ... which covers a multitude of chins.