MURPHY'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO DISABILITY STUDIES: AN INQUIRY INTO OURSELVES

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Abstract—Robert Murphy's career, culminating in the study of disability, gives evidence of deep commitment to understanding the human condition in adversity. His life-long interest in the psychological, sociological and cultural significance of behavior; his work on alienation, developed through fieldwork in small scale societies in South America and Africa; his fascination with the estrangement that arises from the conflict between our need to integrate and to be autonomous; and his own experience of a progressive debilitating disease provided him with rich insights for his interpretation of disability. This paper examines Murphy's contributions to our understanding of the meanings and implications of disability, for those who personally experience it, and for the 'others' in their lives.

Key words—disability, alienation, liminality

Towards the end of his life Robert Murphy used his own intimate experience of disability and his intellectual acumen as an anthropologist to broaden our understanding of human behavior. Having embarked on "a kind of extended anthropological field trip" as he faced his own degenerative disease process, a progressive paralysis caused by a spinal cord tumor, he guided us through his personal conceptions of disability. His eloquent testimony offers a not surprising conclusion: [1, p. xi].

A serious disability inundates all other claims to social standing, relegating to secondary status all the attainments of life ... It is not a role; it is an identity, a dominant characteristic to which all social roles must be adjusted [1, p. 106].

Murphy's personal identity had already been embattled before he acquired a disability: his mother died in his early teens, he described his father as a hostile, remote figure, lost to alcoholism and finally to death when Murphy was a young adult, and he characterized himself as a working class kid in an Ivy League university. Murphy had become well-attuned to the personal consequences of societal constraints. But he was intrigued to discover the parameters of the new social space he now occupied, as a middle-aged man with a disability. Like many anthropologists, he took great pleasure in observing "culture-in-action," although in this case, obviously he would have preferred to be solely an observer. In response to these new experiences, and accustomed to their roles of participant observers, Murphy and his anthropologist-wife, Yolanda Murphy, embarked on a field trip lasting more than a decade, exploring the lives of people with disabilities.

The Body Silent was but the last in a long series of Murphy's probing, insightful anthropological works concerned with making sense of basic human experiences. At the end of his career, he brought all of his own forceful humanity and the weight of his analytic skill to bear upon his own disability experience and the American disability experience. Murphy's life-long interest and expertise in interpreting the psychological, sociological and cultural significance of behavior provide a methodology for exploring the meanings of disabling conditions in our society. The results are fascinating.

To begin, Murphy uses the psychological concepts of projection and identification to explain the interpersonal effects of a disability, noting that

... people impute their feelings, plans, and motives to others and incorporate those of the others as their own. Through these processes, the disabled arouse in the able-bodied fear that impairment could happen to them and, among relatives and friends, guilt that it hasn't [1, p. 117].

At the same time, he explores the state of disability in the larger social context, viewing disability as "a disease of social relations no less real than the paralysis of the body" [1, p. 4]. And he goes further, to use the concepts of selfhood and sentiment observed in persons with disabilities, as well as those around them, as an allegory of all interpersonal relations in society.

Thus Murphy's work is both a commentary about social relationships and about his personal journey; the framework of his last major work is the phenomenological explication of social, economic and psychological effects of life as experienced. The bridge he creates between persons with disabilities and those without them in *The Body Silent* is perhaps his most lasting contribution.

His work also provides a persuasive rationale for the use of anthropological insights to inform medical practice. Disability research, as explored by Murphy, has enhanced western medical institutions, providing

for a broader framework, different options and a greater awareness of the salience of cultural factors in sickness and health. By addressing medical questions, specifically about the psychological, social and economic concomitants of disability, he demonstrates that disability research can provide a means for addressing fundamental issues about human social interaction, and about personal/social distinctions. Furthermore, the experiences associated with disability force us (the person with the disability and the 'others' in that person's life) to confront questions rarely addressed, namely, about taken-for-granted assumptions about our places in the world [2].

While *The Body Silent* is Murphy's most explicit contribution to disability studies, his life's work offers an even more comprehensive contribution. Long before his involvement with disability research, as a social anthropologist documenting small scale tribal social and cultural life, Murphy sought to understand how humans make meaning of their worlds. His fieldwork in Amazonia and in Africa provided ethnographic data that he could use to address basic questions about the human condition, specifically how we, as individuals, figure out our places in the world [3]. For example, in his classic "Tappers and Trappers: Parallel Processes in Acculturation," co-authored with Julian Steward, he explored the impact of the ecological setting on subsistence activities, and incorporated the rubber trade and emergent global economic system as critical variables in the adaptation of the Mundurucu of the Tapajos River in Brazil. In that study he focused on the effects of material relations of production to family and village social structure. In his later work, among the Tuareg, nomadic pastoralists of the Sahara and Sahel in northern Africa, he focused on social interactions in a small scale endogamous society, in which social distance and role ambiguity may be partially resolved through deferential behavior associated with the use of facial coverings to alter communication.

By the time he had completed his north African study, he was deeply committed to understanding alienation, a facet of social life omitted from the vision of the structural–functional world of anthropological theory at the time. At the end of his essay describing the use of the veil in maintaining social distance among the Tuareg, he notes that mechanisms associated with the establishment of social distance are necessary in all societies; he concludes with a brief comment that backslapping is "a lonely gesture" typical of the middle class male in our own society:

But his aloneness is not the tragedy and dilemma of our place and time only, for alienation is the natural condition of man.

This focus on documenting the tension between self and society suffuses Murphy's ethnographic and theoretical work.

But critical acclaim for these successful ethnographies could not have prepared him for his own new role as an outsider within his own cultural milieu. He had chosen to live in the alien environments of Amazonia and the Sahara; he had not chosen to be an outcast as a professor of anthropology in an American university.

In the position of one cast out, he began to reflect on this special condition of otherness in which he found himself. The concept of estrangement had been basic to his conception of the human condition: simultaneously social and anti-social, simultaneously needing to define ourselves as individuals apart and as individuals within a social environment. This dualism is at the heart of Murphy's definition of the human condition. Citing Freud and Simmel, he writes that both

... found the key to the human condition in alienation and struggle, in the paradoxical frustration of man's possibilities as a prerequisite to his humanity [4, p. 130].

The conflict of our needs to integrate and to be autonomous creates estrangement in all of us. By synthesizing Marxian, Freudian and phenomenological concepts, Murphy has described a dialectic based on the creation and resolution of conflict between the needs of the individual and of the social group.

The individual seeks security and order as a condition of his psychological functioning ... but society just as certainly requires tension and flexibility [4, p. 240].

For Murphy, disability provides an opportunity to examine this conflict, this central tension between self as independent being and as a component within a social network. As he notes, the individual "thinks of himself in separation from his fellows, and his consciousness exists entrapped in a weak and mortal body" [5].

The meanings of disability need to be teased out of our understandings of humans as sentient beings, socially and psychologically created anew by each individual. "Life does have purpose and values, but these are humanly bestowed. We are meaningful, ... because we believe we are ..." [4, p. 207]. However, for persons with disabilities, the shared cultural understandings, the taken-for-granted assumptions about human interaction patently do not work; those who experience disability are forced to confront an 'obvious' world and make sense out of its non-obvious responses.

Murphy's work may usefully be compared to Goffman's classic work on stigma [6], which offers a sociological approach focused on documenting what happens to persons with disabilities, what is done to them, to what extent they are stigmatized and/or treated as deviant. In contrast, as a cultural anthropologist, Murphy argues for the importance of making sense of the meaning of the experience as it is lived. He stresses the need to listen to and attend to those with the disabilities, as well as to those

'others' around them, all of whom are making sense of their lives in relation to the differentnesses they experience.

By focusing attention on our drive to make meaning out of our experiences, Murphy poses fundamental questions about the human condition. With this perspective, we note that 'disability issues' are aspects of all of our experiences, as we are all within and outside of the social context at different points in our lives. Disabilities affect both those with the disabilities, and those reacting to and/or caring for others.

Murphy and his colleagues have suggested that the study of ritual provides a powerful metaphor for the study of the status of persons with disabilities [7]. These individuals may usefully be described as living in a liminal state, in Victor Turner's words, "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" [8]. The notion of liminality is more than a social construct defining ambiguity in one's place in the society, but expresses the notion of ambiguity of who one is, and fundamentally, of what defines one's place in the social universe. Furthermore, the references to invisibility, darkness and death often cited in writings and observed in speech about the disabled, are suggestive of a permanent state of indeterminacy of status and role, and are similar to attributions observed about others at the margins of society, for example, males undergoing puberty rites in aboriginal Australian societies [8].

The drive to make meaning out of our experience also incorporates a psychological dimension. Murphy has addressed an aspect of this in his discussion of the "disembodied self", a perception of a separation of mind from the experiences of pain and diminished ability [1, p. 25]. And yet he has simultaneously recognized the interrelationship of body and mind: "As my body closes in upon me, so also does the world. My space is shrinking steadily, my mobility is lessened to a vegetal state" [1, p. 193].

The themes of struggle between self and other, and of autonomy and integration suffuse Murphy's work. His greatest contribution to disability research is not the insight offered by his own experience with a progressive disease, it is his creative quest for addressing transcendent questions. It is our fortune that his own experience led him to consider these issues in the last years of his life, and to challenge us to consider them in our own research.

Murphy made a practice of connecting with others, of finding ways to influence, cajole and generally convince others that a life spent in retreat was a life lost, to oneself and to others. With the onset of his disability in mid-life, he increasingly felt a pull to retreat inside himself. Yet, he simultaneously found ways to deepen his commitment to engage the world outside of himself, to fight against the impulse to withdraw and disengage.

Murphy's progressive paralysis was not the first occasion in which he felt the pull to turn inward. From his earlier life experiences he had become a veteran in the struggle, and he had come to recognize the conflict as an essential part of living and living well. This recognition is one of his significant contributions; by examining his own life he provided us with an understanding that disability experience is a slightly altered version of other life experiences. If any sentiment can help lower the barriers between people who have disabilities and those who do not, it is the notion that the experiences associated with disability are part of all of our lives; aspects of the experience resonate within us all. The bridge Murphy built to connect people with disabilities and 'others' stands as his monument to the importance of disability studies.

REFERENCES

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2. Although beyond the scope of this paper, this line of reasoning may be critical for applied anthropology. In order to make a system work better, or be more responsive to those affected by it, it may be critical to understand at the most basic levels how systems work, whether or not they are behaving as we may wish. Murphy's inquiries into the underpinnings of our thoughts and assumptions cause us to consider these issues as part of the process of creating systemic change.
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