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METAPHORS, MEMOIRS, AND NARRATIVES OF BLINDNESS

Keywords: blindness, disability memoir, life writing, rehabilitation

Blind people have always been treated as mysterious human beings, though their mysterious selves are much more frequently supposed than proven. That mystery appears in several cultures and languages in forms of metaphors which often depict blind people different from what they are like. These metaphors in sighted people's minds determine the (self)evaluation of blind people, consequently, they often tend to make special efforts to find their places in society. Thus, many of them are convinced, they should tell people how they perceive the world. The genre of these narratives, known as disability memoir and life writing, is said to be born with the work of Helen Keller, and its paradigm shifting role is often questioned by a number of disability rights activists. Although those activists deny the significance of disability life writing, the genre turned to be extremely popular by the turn of twentieth and twenty first century, consequently, it is supposed to play an important part in blind people's rehabilitation. The aim of the presentation is to highlight the role of disability memoir and life writing in understanding blindness. This paper, in strong accordance with the presentation intends to point out the dangers of metaphors, and initiates to discuss the paradigm shifting role of blindness narratives.

Introduction

This paper is a revised version of the presentation I held at the ICEVI Europe First Conference on Rehabilitation in Budapest, on June 1, 2019.

The fact that people from 16 countries attended the first ICEVI conference on rehabilitation seemed a unique opportunity to approach blindness interculturally. Consequently, it is not at all surprising that the event inspired me to collect sayings related to the word: "blind". So, first I asked the audience to give me some examples of how their cultures and languages reflect to the concept of blindness on one hand, and to blind people on the other. As my request was unexpected, only a very few participants shared examples with us. Thus, we could learn that in Russia people believe blind persons go to heavens. I must admit though that I failed to collect loads of sayings, idioms and metaphors, but the ones I received suggest some mysterious approach to blindness, so in my presentation I started lamenting on what blindness indicates, then I carried on with metaphors, which helped me to direct the audience's attention to the topic of disability life writing. I focused on disability memoir and how disability narratives appear on the social media. I aimed to highlight the significance of the words we, who are concerned, use in blogposts to describe our own situations and even ourselves, then the scope of my presentation turned towards cultural disability studies, which is a discipline to conceptualize and reconceptualize disability as lived experience. Finally, I arrived at the point where I could underline how blind people make the world a unique place and what blindness as a status gives the world. My presentation was aimed to emphasize what it means to be locked in metaphors and at the same time to be locked out of the mainstream world in spite of all the efforts the ones who are different make.

The Mysterious Nature of Blindness

According to Couser (2017) “disability [the relatively new concept of the 19th century — [SEP, 2016] has been a prominent *topos* in the Western literary tradition from antiquity to the present. Let us think of Oedipus, Richard III., Ahab”, and Homer’s Tiresias, the blind prophet. The pieces concerned in fine literature illustrate that disabled persons are generally mentioned in mysterious, mainly negative contexts. Although in this essay I do not aim to provide a detailed historical overview of the concept of blindness in literary masterpieces, I cannot ignore the fact that blind people are too often misunderstood, and blindness is misconceptualized. We should recognize and accept that fine literature is full of misunderstanding, misconceptualizing blindness. I do not think we must go too far to find examples. Let me point out some prominent ones. Firstly, the well-known masterpiece of H. G. Wells from the beginning of the twentieth century: *The Country of the Blind*, published in 1904, which speaks about blind people who live in a different world, a world of their own, and do not understand the only sighted guy who arrives there accidentally. However metaphorical the short story is, it may imply several aspects, for example, that blind people create their own world. But do we really live in a different world? Do we have a world of our own? Of course, not, we react immediately. We consider or at least wish to consider ourselves to be significant parts of the mainstream world. However hard we work on changing the already-existing thousands-of year-old picture of blindness, we meet metaphors even from the recent past implying that blind people are negative. Jose Saramago’s powerful work, titled *Blindness* is such an example. The extremely powerful novel appeared in 1995 in Portugal and has been conquering the world ever since. In the novel we, the blind are depicted (almost) like animals, as the blind professor of cultural disability studies David Bolt states in a critical essay published in 2007. Undoubtedly, we understand that in most literary masterpieces, such as in the above-mentioned examples, blindness is a metaphor, still, a very powerful one, actually, which may and often does impact people’s thinking. And obviously, we cannot delete metaphors all of a sudden, but we can reconceptualize them, for, at the moment, we still live wrapped in stereotype-based metaphors.

Metaphors

Verbal language reflects to all fields of life, including stereotypical thinking. The fact that blindness as a metaphor frequently means: not knowing, whereas sight equals with knowledge may influence what most people think about the blind. Do you see what I mean? Even though there have always been acknowledged disabled, including blind people ever since human life appeared on the planet (Hoffmann — Flamich, 2016), those who consider themselves able-bodied, or sighted often tend to demonstrate either their superiority or fear. Both attitudes may somewhat be attributed to metaphors. Thus, if the world fears to ask us, we should help them understand blindness. One way to promote this understanding is to read about all kinds of disabilities including blindness, and discuss the readings with people who are concerned.

Disability life writing

Although disability is a relatively young concept (SEP, 2016), writing on disability from inside, is “one of the most high-profile forms of disability narratives” (Couser, 2017a.:n.p.). Examples of speaking about living with an impaired body can well be found in literary history. Remember John Milton’s sonnet *On His Blindness* (1655) which reflects the fear of loosing sight, becoming useless, or even a burden, and it is only God that can accept people as

they are. Milton's work, however, can be regarded as a precise disability narrative, and a fragmented version of "disability memoir", although Couser (2009) would question this statement. Couser (*ibid.*) argues that autobiographical representations of disability was sporadic before 1900. Yet, Newman (2013) attributes the establishment of the genre: disability memoir to Helen Keller. The "boom" of publishing disability narratives started in the twentieth century (Couser, 2017a; b.). Thousands of books of disability narratives, including memoirs have come out in numerous countries ever since. You could provide us with a rich list of the ones appeared in your own countries. As disability narratives are informative, they teach us, thus they should be taught even though their literary qualities are often questioned. What can we learn from such discourses? The literary qualities of the quoted example here should not at all be

"It all began with snow. [...] I left for work. I have nothing against snow in the abstract. All things being equal. I am happy to live in a climate that has the occasional snowfall. Snow in the abstract is pretty. It makes the world fresh and silent. But snow in reality makes it harder to get around. Especially, when you are blind. As far as I know, you didn't use a white cane, but I do. Let me tell you, a white cane in the snow is something of an adventure. You cannot feel the texture of the surface underfoot. You lose landmarks. You can begin to feel disoriented. On top of this, I discover my waterproof boots are not what you'd call watertight. Every third step I feel water seeping through the seams. When I get to the bus stop, my feet are soaked [...] But weather is weather..." (Kleege, 2007).

Reading through this short paragraph from Kleege's open letter to Helen Keller, people may immediately meet aspects they hardly ever think over when considering how and when to help the blind. I am convinced that disability narratives may well be considered informative even on sensitive topics without making the disabled face and answer sensitive questions.

Like it, or not, writing disability narratives focusing on disability as lived experience is not limited to disabled persons to express themselves. As disability appears to be a trendy topic, there are journalists, actors, actresses, producers, musicians in the fields of creative writing, who collect disabled persons' life stories, and melt them into one long, artificial narrative I call pseudo disability memoir (Hoffmann, 2018). Most of these narratives seem to carry understandable, or misleading information indicating the authors' understanding of and fear from disability.

"I am simply unable to say the word: blind. But if we understood what the word really means [...] To enable (us, the sighted) to treat the blind or get in touch with them, as normally as possible, we should learn something..." (Sárosdi, Scherer, Gyulai, 2012).

We may immediately ask what sources can be considered reliable and authentic to learn from if we wish to approach disability holistically. How much do the sighted authors' viewpoints, ideas of blindness influence the pictures they paint about blindness or blind people? And how do the blind reflect to these mental pictures? As to give relevant answers to the questions above, I have thought to take a close look into blind persons' writings, especially blogposts. Therefore, at least three months before the present conference I turned to a closed Facebook group named Currently and Recently Integrated Visually Impaired Persons (Jelenlegi és egykorú integrált látássérültek közössége) and asked what inspired them and why they insist on blogging. With the questions I intended to prove that visually impaired people wish to provide the mainstream society with relevant information to promote understanding them.

My request was first received with enthusiasm, then however consistently I asked members to contribute I failed to get any explanation. Still, writing blogposts seems an extremely popular way of communicating any kind of disability.

The Cultural Model and its Implications

A significant number of the disabled believe in the power of raising awareness through cultural representations of disability (Flamich & Hoffmann, 2017). People feel they need talking about their fears from the things, facts, phenomena they do not know. Blindness is such a phenomenon. This approach has relatively recently given birth to a discipline known as cultural disability studies. The discipline offers several implications for understanding disability in theoretical and practical levels. Consequently it is relevant and applicable in various fields. For example i. education:

“Cultural Disability Studies in Education encourages educators and students to engage with disability as an isolating, hurtful, and joyful experience...” (Bolt, 2018)

Cultural disability studies, disability life writings by and with the help of disabled academics well illustrate, moreover, emphasize how disabled people make the world a diverse and inclusive place. Especially, when people are encouraged to look beyond and move away from the inherited disability-related stereotypes (Hoffmann & Flamich, 2016), and open up new perspectives.

An outstanding example of these perspectives is Georgina Kleege: More Than Meet the Eye; what blindness brings to art, a brave and unusual book where Kleege “puts theoretical treatments of blindness in dialogue with actual blind people: writers, scholars, scientists, and artists”. She also “introduces previously unknown blind and visually impaired artists”. Furthermore, Kleege “combines cultural critique with autobiographical essayistic inquiry” (OUP, 2016)

Among the increasing number of disabled academics’ emancipatory work, Kleege’s recent book, such as her earlier ones, as well as her essays strongly contribute to reconceptualizing the negative connotations of disability-related words and metaphors. Since it takes time to change the language which reflects cultural understanding of disability, we together via our active social participation and responsibility can make people re-conceptualize blindness, and never more consider this word to the synonym of not knowing.

Conclusion

As to illustrate the significance of communicating disability verbally, I started my presentation wondering what connotations the word blindness indicate, then I pointed out several metaphors to direct the audience’s attention to disability life writing. I pointed out some typical features of disability narratives on the social media. I highlighted the importance of the words we, disabled, use in blogposts to describe our own experiences, then the scope of my presentation turned towards cultural disability studies, the discipline to rely on disability as lived experience. Finally, I arrived at the point where I could emphasize that blind people make the world a unique place. My presentation was aimed to express what it means to be locked in metaphors, but until we change the language, we should change the images metaphors and collocations imply. Thank you for your cooperation!

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