

Intellectual Disability, Mental Health and the Erasure of Cultural Differences

Frank A. Renders
Anthropology
K.U.Leuven

E-mail: Frank.Renders@student.kuleuven.be

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ Topic paper: (dis-)advantages of anthropological knowledge + difference between 'cultural differences'
- ▶ Field of research: intellectual disability
- ▶ Subdivision: (1) Anthropology → I.D.
(2) I.D. → Anthropology
(3) Toward cross-cultural model of 'I.D.'

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ (1) Anthropology → I.D.

Anthropological perspective on the way knowledge is made about mental health in a residential institution for people with intellectual disabilities in the West (Belgium, The Netherlands)

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ (2) I.D. → Anthropology

Critical perspective on the way cultural differences are portrayed by employing 'intellectual disability' as a conceptual lens (e.g. I.D. in Indian traditions)

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ (1) + (2) This double movement reveals a recursive dynamic that characterizes western knowledge: “the erasure of cultural differenceS”
- ▶ Plural refers to the difference between cultural differences. Cultural differences are erased differently in the West than in the East (e.g. I.D. in Indian traditions)

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ (3) Constructing a cross-cultural model of (intellectual) disability that takes the difference between cultural differences as its epistemological-methodological starting point.
- ▶ Critical analysis of anthropological knowledge (about I.D.) + fieldwork in order to play a pivotal role

(1) ANTHROPOLOGY → I.D.

- ▶ Participant observation: caregiver + volunteer
- ▶ 'Interference' between different kinds of logic: (a) hegemonic (system) vs. (b) performative knowledge (life-world)
- ▶ (a) institutional paradigm of balance = recursive space-time pattern to promote mental health of residents (= visible world)

(1) ANTHROPOLOGY → I.D.

- ▶ (b) worldmaking: experiences of residents ('niche') and caregiver (moulding a 'professional' identity) (= invisible worlds)
- ▶ e.g. 'The Sick Body' (individual-social-cosmological level)
- ▶ (a) transforms (b) into renewed hegemonic knowledge (agency is symptom of their disability) = erasure of 'difference', not 'cultural difference'.

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ How are 'cultural differences' portrayed (in anthropological descriptions) when 'intellectual disability' is employed as a conceptual lens?
- ▶ e.g. 'South Asian Indian Cultural Orientations Toward Mental Retardation' (Susan Gabel 2004, In *Mental Retardation* 42 (1): 12-25)

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ *"The choice of 'mundh buddhi' was a critical one because several different terms were used by participants (viz. bhasi-people), and the research team had to determine which term was most consistently used to represent what participants seemed to think mental retardation signified"* (2004: 14).

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ (CRITIQUE 1) 'Horizontal' representation of cultural differences: I.D. is a universal phenomenon with different practices, beliefs and attitudes (e.g. The Netherlands vs. I.T.)
- ▶ Cultures are reduced into an enumeration of external features that are mutual comparable, beholden as units that are structurally not different (= descriptive acquaintance).

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ *"Their religious beliefs proved to be the most significant factors in the way these participants thought and talked about mental retardation."* (2004: 18)
- ▶ *"The first belief that disability is a god's given gift given as a result of the sins of a past life, reflects the Hindu belief in reincarnation, or rebirth (punarjaman)."* (2004:18)

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ (CRITIQUE 2) Cultures are made understandable in terms of their 'belief systems'. As such, S. Gabel reproduces an old scheme that was formulated by theologians to contrast the Hindu 'religion' with Christianity.
- ▶ Indian attitude toward these people is a less developed version of western model (mirroring the self in describing the other)

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ *"Most of my participants believed that mental retardation in the family was a sign that the person labeled with mental retardation or someone in the person's family had lessons from a previous life (karma) that must be learned in the present life. It is believed that having mental retardation (...) would provide opportunities to learn those lessons"* (2004: 18).

(2) I.D. → ANTHROPOLOGY

- ▶ (CRITIQUE 3) Problem of translation of concepts: S. Gabel connects dharma, karma, moksha, punarjaman etc... to 'mundh buddhi'. Today, however, we don't know what these words mean and how (and if) they are interrelated. No theory is at hand that explains what 'buddhi' means in the Indian traditions.

(3) Cross-Cultural Model

- ▶ 'Cultural differences' are erased differently
- ▶ (1) Anthropological knowledge about I.D. in institutional setting gives illustration of the dominance of hegemonic knowledge (symptom) and underexposure of 'world-making' (niche) capacities of the residents

(3) Cross-Cultural Model

- ▶ (2) Transformations of 'othernesses' into a 'sameness' in anthropological descriptions
- ▶ 'Mundh buddhi', 'dharma', 'moksha', 'punarjaman'... become variants of a single model, namely the basic structure of the West.
- ▶ Absence of conceptual framework in social sciences to understand (the interconnectivity between) these words.

(3) Cross-Cultural Model

- ▶ Toward a cross-cultural model of (intellectual) disability that takes the difference between cultural differences as its startingpoint.
- ▶ Hypothesis: 'Intellectual disability' is not a universal phenomenon. It is founded on western (theoretical) knowledge.
- ▶ Importance of X-fieldwork and critical analysis of anthropological knowledge.