

Body Language in Central America

Language as a tool to understanding the body and disability

Introduction

Much can be deduced about a culture's attitude towards the body and persons with disabilities from the language used to describe them. For example, in the United States, language has evolved alongside the manner in which we understand and relate to people with disabilities, from "invalid," to "disabled person."

Disability and language are so connected that the percentage of persons with disabilities in Honduras, according to a 2002 report of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, varies from 0.2% to 20.9% depending solely upon the language used to describe "disability."

The field of Disabilities Studies is virtually unknown in the international arena and the goal of Dr. McNamara's research is to bring this field of study to a wider audience in Mexico.

Research

Over winter break of 2010, I traveled to the Mayan indigenous ruins of Copán, Honduras to photograph how the body was represented in the stelae of that ancient city.

During the following spring semester, I conducted research in the University of Minnesota's YMCA Archives to see how the physical body was described in the reports and letters of YMCA directors in Mexico from around the turn of the century.

I also read literature relating to notions of the body and disability here in the United States to see how disability studies may translate to other cultures in Mexico and Central America.

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Results

During the period studied at the YMCA Archives (1908-1915), the YMCA Directors in Mexico were, for the most part, white men, and the manner in which they understood the body was largely racially-based.

"There is scarcely a national need greater than that afforded by the weak and inefficient physique of the Mexican."

"The majority of the young men (foreign) are college men with well developed bodies...The native young men differ because of race and climatic conditions."

--Report letter of G. I. Babcock—Sep 30, 1908, Mexico City

The use of diminutive language was and is a significant way in which the disabled community is oppressed.

Topics for Further Study

There is yet much to be understood about how language is used to separate "disability" from "normalcy." However, an understanding of disability cannot be complete without an understanding of its relationship to other social factors such as race, gender etc.

How disability relates to religion will be an important aspect of disability studies in Mexico as will the affect of industrialization on the bodies of people of that country.

The notions of disability and normalcy are socially constructed and language is a valuable tool with which to illuminate the history of that construction.

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