

Bioarchaeology and Social Theory

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Editors

Bioarchaeology of Impairment and Disability

Theoretical, Ethnohistorical,
and Methodological Perspectives

 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-319-56948-2

ISBN 978-3-319-56949-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-56949-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017939871

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

This is an exciting moment in the growth and development of bioarchaeology. Bioarchaeologists such as the editors of this volume, Jennifer F. Byrnes and Jennifer L. Muller, are pushing ever further into new frontiers. This collection of studies begins a productive dialogue between bioarchaeology and critical disability studies (CDS). The bridging of these two disciplinary approaches is so novel that these chapters are filled with possibility, convergence and tension. The 14 chapters presented here take on method, theory and data in ways that are decidedly innovative and boundary-pushing. The authors are clear about why disability studies have been a difficult area to break into and these difficulties include the diverse and conflicting definitions of disability and impairment in contemporary populations with the attendant heightened challenge of defining it in ancient and historic populations, often basing assessments only on skeletal remains. The same goes with variation in cultural contexts within which disability may be acknowledged or not. It is difficult to do this in contemporary cross-cultural contexts, and doing so for archaeological ones is even more challenging. The editors of this volume have urged their authors to move towards rectifying these and other challenges posed by this approach. They have also prodded the authors of various chapters to move from subjective descriptions of skeletal maladies to objective and even quantifiable assessments by using clinical standards and modifying those for skeletal data.

This approach is different from the emerging scholarship on the bioarchaeology of care although some of the chapters do integrate ideas about how individuals who are different may have been cared for. The chapters in this volume grapple with creating and tinkering with a social model of disability that views disability as a signifier imposed upon individuals by society. To understand this, one has to examine the ideological and sociopolitical underpinnings of who is deemed to be normal and who is labeled as disabled. The social model of disability is challenging to work within because it is often difficult to bridge the biology-culture schism. As the editors suggest in their opening chapter, if we see disability as a form of social identity that is only partially based on biological differences, it opens up ways to integrate a wider range of theoretical approaches that include things such as inequality theory, gender theory and structural violence.

Readers will be drawn into the debates, critiques, observations and promotions of critical disability studies in Part I of the volume. In taking this theoretical approach on, the editors have wisely invited scholars from other disciplines to help think through the challenges that bioarchaeologists face in adopting a CDS approach. For example, a physical therapist provides a way to think about how disabilities are differentially experienced by individuals. The section ends with a provocative case study from South Asia regarding microcephaly by a disability histories scholar.

Part II of the volume covers case studies that utilize ethnohistoric and archival information to explore “ability, disability and alternate ability” and provides ways to integrate historical documents into questions about disability in different cultural contexts. This is followed by a series of case studies that rely more on bioarchaeological data and in particular these case studies grapple with both qualitative reconstruction of context as well as presentation of skeletal data that is quantitative and precise. From the exploration of back pain in past populations to osteoarthritis, the authors carefully reconstruct convincing portraits of how individuals with pathologies that likely affected the quality of their daily lives were treated.

The final part of the book pulls from many of the themes and theoretical approaches discussed through the text to present three case studies that place interpretations of disease and disability into a richly configured set of cultural contexts in order to discuss the poetics or meaning that cultures make regarding certain pathologies.

This collection of chapters speaks to a growing interest in pushing the boundaries of what can be said about the presence and absence of skeletal pathologies. These case studies provide a more nuanced way of thinking about the paleopathology paradox, where it has been proposed that we may be missing many of the sickest individuals who die because some may leave no skeletal indicators. The focus on trauma, injuries and extreme forms of pathology that do leave distinctive and interpretable changes on bone contribute to fleshing out other ways of discussing frailty and resilience in individuals, households, groups, communities and regions. It is an impressive set of chapters and they challenge bioarchaeologists to be ever more diligent in mining many different sources of information in order to reconstruct a more holistic way of thinking about people’s pain and suffering in the past, and how this may have impacted community behavior and the cultural activities that made things better or worse for individuals depending on their identity and/or life history moment.

Understanding disability, injury, healed traumas and other pathologies permits bioarchaeologists to contribute to the broader anthropological conversations that attempt to explain human behavior in all its variety and temporal depth. Thus, these kinds of studies demonstrate that bioarchaeology is of central importance to the anthropological enterprise.

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Jennifer L. Muller is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology, Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York, USA. She received her Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology, State University of New York at Buffalo in 2006. Muller's research embraces the holism of anthropological study, integrating theoretical perspectives and methodologies from the cultural, biological, and archaeological subfields of the discipline. Her research has specifically focused on how discrimination-based inequities impact human biology in African diasporic populations and among the institutionalized poor. Foundational to this research is the understanding that the body is both biological and social, and that the insidious and pervasive attributes of structural violence may assault the body in a multitude of ways. Muller also examines postmortem structural violence; the idea that discriminatory practices continue to harm the poor and marginalized after death. Muller's dissertation focused on the relationships between traumatic injuries and inequality in the W. Montague Cobb Human Skeletal Collection housed at Howard University in the District of Columbia, USA. Her research on the institutionalized poor has included bioarchaeological and/or historical analysis from New York State poorhouses, including: the Monroe County Poorhouse, Rochester; the Erie County Poorhouse, Buffalo; and the St. Lawrence County Poorhouse, Canton.

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