Research article

Exploring the social construction of disability: An application of the bioarchaeology of personhood model to a pathological skeleton from ancient Bahrain

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A B S T R A C T

Considering that paleopathology is the study of ancient disease, the social correlates of disabling conditions in the past have been undertheorized by bioarchaeologists and paleopathologists. I offer the Bioarchaeology of Personhood as a model that, when paired with traditional analytical techniques, can enhance bioarchaeologists' ability both to explore the social construction of disability and to engage with an interested public. This model is based upon five tenets: (1) modern Western constructs of identity and individuality are not universal; (2) personhood is comprised of many facets, which are entangled with one another and are prioritized situationally; (3) a longitudinal "life course" paradigm is well-suited to the bioarchaeological investigation of personhood; (4) personhood can extend beyond the biological lifespan; (5) bioarchaeologists should be open to alternative modes of interpretation and outreach. Its strengths include the use of multiple lines of interdisciplinary evidence, accessibility to diverse academic and public audiences, effectiveness as a pedagogical tool, and articulation with other theoretical frameworks. The utility of the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model is demonstrated with a case study from ancient Bahrain, in which the embodied life course of a young woman with disabilities is reconstructed via fictive narrative.

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1. Introduction

Methods and theories from paleopathology and bioarchaeology are essential for reconstructing health, disease, and life histories in the past. As such, these disciplines are well positioned to explore the ways in which disability, as one aspect of personhood, is embodied across individual life courses and constructed socially across times, places, and cultures. Disability is defined by the World Health Organization (2015) as a complex phenomenon that includes impairments in body function or structure, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. This integration of biological and cultural qualities would seem to make disability an ideal subject for broad anthropological inquiry. Yet with some important exceptions (e.g., Roberts, 1999, 2000, 2011), paleopathologists and bioarchaeologists have failed to make as sustained and meaningful an impact on disability studies as have cultural, linguistic, and medical anthropologists (e.g., Ginsburg and Rapp, 2013; Reid-Cunningham, 2009). Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the tides are beginning to turn, from Battles' (2011) body-oriented the-

oretical framework for an integrated anthropology of disability, to Southwell-Wright's (2013) overview of the unique contributions that bioarchaeology can make to studies of impairment, to recent conference sessions that invited scholars with a wide variety of geographic and temporal foci to reflect collectively on embodied Otherness in the past (Byrnes, 2015; Crandall and Stone, 2015), to treatments of the social construction of disability in the pages of this journal (Marsteller et al., 2011; Tilley and Oxenham, 2011; van Duijvenbode et al., 2015).

My contribution to this line of inquiry began with the anachronistic comparison of a prehistoric young woman with disabilities to the deaf man who excavated her remains (Boutin and Porter 2014). It continues in this article, where I argue that the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model, when paired with traditional analytical techniques, is an effective way to explore the social construction of disability. The model's strengths include its use of multiple lines of evidence from a variety of disciplines, accessibility and appeal to broad audiences, utility as a pedagogical tool, and articulation with other theoretical frameworks (e.g., the Bioarchaeology of Care). In the sections that follow, the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model and its five tenets are described, and its effectiveness is demonstrated with a case study from the Dilmun Bioarchaeology Project,

culminating in a fictive narrative that explores how bodily non-normativity may have been experienced by the aforementioned young woman.

2. Theoretical contexts

The Bioarchaeology of Personhood model gets its name from the "archaeologies of personhood" identified and characterized by Clark and Wilkie (2006). I adapted this concept to bioarchaeological inquiry, with a focus on how embodied experiences are materialized in (pre)historic human remains. Initial applications to past persons from Bronze Age Alalakh (modern Tel Atchana, Turkey) ranged from a putative craftsman (Boutin 2008), to an adolescent female buried without grave goods, to an architecturally and artifactually elaborate multiple burial (Boutin 2011). They demonstrated that this model's synthesis of archaeological and osteological data with sociohistoric contextual evidence can transform the burial of just one person into a prism through which a larger community and landscape can be envisioned (J. Buikstra, personal communication). In order to promote the applicability of this model, I describe its five tenets in greater detail below.

Archaeologies of personhood acknowledge that traditional archaeological research employs modern Western concepts of individuality and identity, causing it to conceive of past peoples as "autonomous and independently motivated and intentioned actor[s]" (Clark and Wilkie, 2006: 334). But just as cultural anthropologists have recognized that alternative forms of personhood (e.g., partible, dividual; Strathern, 1990) prevail in non-Western societies, so (bio)archaeologists should not expect fixed conceptions of the self across history and prehistory (cf. Fowler, 2004) – the Bioarchaeology of Personhood's first tenet. Moreover, archaeologies of personhood recognize "gender, age, rank, race, and other identities. . . [as constituting] a socially situated and performed persona" (Clark and Wilkie, 2006: 333) that is materialized through the body. Thus, the second tenet of the Bioarchaeology of Personhood is that identity cannot be parsed finely into gender or religion or class (or disability for that matter); instead, (bio)archaeologists must recognize these facets' embodied intersectionality and situational priority vis-à-vis one another (cf. Joyce, 1998, 2000, 2005; Meskell, 1999, 2004; Meskell and Joyce, 2003; Moore, 1994, 2006; White et al., 2009; Zakrzewski, 2015).

The third and fourth tenets rely on the passage of time, which is marked bodily by aging. Although age should not be privileged over other axes of embodied personhood, its comparative immutability allows age to undergird the fluidity of other axes – such as sex, kinship ties, or social status – across the lifespan. Bioarchaeologists must always contend with an interpretive divide between biological processes and their cultural interpretations, but the challenge is particularly acute for the aging process, in which osteological methods are used to assign skeletons to chronological age classes based on skeletal development or degeneration (Gowland, 2006). For this reason, a life course paradigm, like those developed by sociologists (e.g., Elder, 1994) and employed in archaeological (Gilchrist, 2004, 2012) and bioarchaeological (Agarwal and Glencross, 2011; Hawkey, 1998; Robb, 2002) interpretations, scaffolds the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model. A "'longitudinal' approach which examines trajectory and transition across the continuum of the human life, and which situates the human life span within social measures of time" (Gilchrist, 2004: 156), this paradigm is the third tenet of the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model. It also invokes the fourth tenet: that personhood is not limited to life—death, but extends from conception to post-death commemoration and memorialization. Hallam et al. (1999: 8–9) argue that even disembodied persons – whether "ancestors, martyrs or dead children; a reference in an archive, a corpse in preparation for disposal; or a 'voice' brought into being by a clairvoyant" – can have "a pro-

foundly vital and influential social presence." The idea that bodies can have social agency postmortem is just beginning to be explored by bioarchaeologists (e.g., Crandall and Martin, 2014). The Bioarchaeology of Personhood model contributes to this dialogue by pursuing the end stages of the life course, such as dying, death, funerary treatment, and ancestor veneration (cf. Acuto et al., 2014; Chesson, 2001; Gillespie, 2001; Williams, 2003).

The fifth and final tenet of the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model is an openness to alternative modes of interpretation, which can both provide a more humanizing view of past personhoods and communicate effectively and accessibly with a broad range of audiences. For more than two decades, archaeologists have reflected critically on how they write about the archaeological process and its findings, with concomitant concerns for the production of knowledge and public perceptions of the discipline (Gero, 1991; Hodder, 1989, 2000; Holtorf, 2010; Pluciennik, 1999, 2010). I argue further for the importance of practical concerns: in order to obtain and succeed in a tenure-track faculty position, scholars must demonstrate that their research makes a significant contribution to the broader discipline. The gold standard for these contributions is publication in peer-reviewed journals or books, which encourage conformity in manuscript structure, terminology, and even mode of inquiry. On the one hand, adhering to such normative forms of dissemination can ensure that a scholar maintains the faculty position that permits such research to occur. On the other hand, many of the resulting publications can only be read by public (and even some academic) audiences if hefty subscription or open-access fees are paid. We risk creating echo chambers of rarified scholarship that homogenize knowledge, privilege practitioners' normativity, and disengage (or worse, alienate) the public. Consequently, alternative media such as hypertext, fictive narrative, and spoken dialogue should be employed more frequently, insofar as they promote multivocality, foreground the ambiguity that is inherent to the (bio)archaeological process, and encourage reflection on the norms that regulate our disciplines and their practitioners (Joyce et al., 2002; see Van Dyke and Bernbeck (2015) and its associated open-access multimedia webpage for a recent example).

The interpretive format that I choose to employ for the Bioarchaeology of Personhood model is osteobiography in the form of fictive narrative (Boutin, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2015). I was inspired by the work of several authors of archaeological narrative (e.g., Bender, 1998; Deetz, 1996; Praetzellis et al., 1997; Praetzellis and Praetzellis, 1998; Schrire, 1995; Spector, 1993; Tringham, 1991; Tringham and Stevanović, 2012; Wilkie, 2003, 2010; Yamin, 2001, 2012) to apply this technique to ancient human remains. Phenomenological theories, whose premise of "being-in-the-world" (Csordas, 1994: 10) prioritizes embodied lived experience, also shape the sensory descriptions found in my narratives (Jackson, 1996; Leder, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Yet it is critical to heed Terrell's (1990) admonition that narratives about scientific data that infer causal relationships and proceed sensically and sequentially with a beginning, middle, and end risk being interpreted as "just so" stories about people and events in the past. For this reason, I explicitly acknowledge that the narratives I write are "fictive" (after Wilkie 2003) and represent just one possible interpretation. But even though these particular tellings are articulated by my imagination, they are not figments of it: as the annotations to the narratives make clear, they are based as much on robust archaeological, osteological, clinical, iconographic, and textual data as any other form of bioarchaeological inquiry.

Fictive osteobiographical narratives are comprehensible and of interest to a wide variety of audiences. The embedding of diverse lines of evidence broadens their potential appeal across academic disciplines to include the social sciences, humanities, and biological sciences. Experimenting with fictive osteobiographical narratives in a classroom setting also has numerous benefits: students have