

"I Think That I'm Broken"

An Oral History Examination of Disability in Academia

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Background

In Anthropology Seminar 491: Disability and Culture, students, like myself, conducted oral histories to explore experiences of "disability" as defined and described by their collaborators or interviewees. The final product of these oral history exhibits feature codes, quotes, and images that encapsulate key points of the interviewee's lived experiences.

The style and inspiration for this project comes from The Beyond Better Project and its Instagram page. The Beyond Better Project is a public humanities and social media project that aims to destabilize ableist narratives through oral history, storytelling, and art, with a goal to create greater understanding, appreciation, and empathy.

An introductory quote from my collaborator of this oral history exhibit:

"My name is Bethany. My pronouns are she/hers. I grew up in a tiny town in Wisconsin. I am the oldest of two children. I have one younger sister and two parents. I have worked here, this university for three years. I identify as a straight white woman with invisible disabilities"

Methods

Data for this project was collected through a singular oral history, conducted in the following way

- Connected with and contacted Bethany
- Conducted an oral history interview with Bethany
 - Focusing on disability and education
- Transcription of the interview
 - Editing of transcript
 - Review & editing from Bethany
- Read through and established codes
 - Coding- identifying underlying themes
- Found correlation between these sections
- Created 5 code titles for the related sections
- Final Review from Bethany

Codes and Findings

'Smart Kid' - The experience of being idealized as the 'smart kid' and the standards and academic validation that develops because of this stereotype.



"I did college in three years. A lot of that was because I was taking 18 credits every semester, because I was taking summer courses, because I was taking like difficult courses that counted for other things or multiple things. And once again, it was like **I needed to be the strongest student in the room, the person who had studied the hardest or knew the most.** ... Like this obsessive compulsion with being better rather than just like, Oh, I want to make sure I pass this class right? Like, it was not that for me. **It felt like I would die if I did not pass this class.**"

"Brain on Fire" - How Bethany described a panic attack when she had no terminology to articulate her experience. Quote used to code mental health experiences.

"So with my anxiety and some of my neurodivergence comes a lot of really easy overstimulation. So I used to lock myself in the bathroom, in the basement, because it was like the quietest place in the whole house. And then **the water faucet was dripping, I could hear it and I had a full blown panic attack about it. Because and I didn't understand why I was so upset, why my brain felt like it was on fire essentially, if I had to put like a physical sensation to it or like why, I was like, 'I can't deal with this'. I thought that that would maybe make things harder for my family. I remember I was in the kitchen of my of my parents home and like it's attached to the living room. They're just saying there watching TV and all of a sudden I'm crying, don't know where it came from. And I told my parents, 'I think there's something wrong with me. I think that I'm broken'"**



Sister - Beyond just the biological term for sister but what it truly means to care for kin.



"if my sister had a bad day, like everything was dropped, I would just sit and pay attention to them and do whatever they wanted to do. And that was it, right? Or like I remember specific times where like my sister would try and hurt themselves and we would go like spend time in the hospital and like my parents might not even come to those things, but I had to be there every time, right? Like I was one taking her to the hospital. So some stuff like that, I remember like canceling a lot of social plans to make sure that I was, like, attentive to my sister and what she needed. I think, like, when I think of basic needs, like housing, clothes, food, my parents did those things right. But when I think of like mental health care, talking through things, being able to discuss feelings, dealing with the really shitty shit of mental illness, I did that."

Terminology - A path through therapy and learning the words to describe and define her experiences and the relief and validation that came from it.

"Having the formal diagnosis, being able to say this is what's up was leaps and bounds, because otherwise I just felt like either I was not crazy enough and nothing was happening or I was too crazy and I couldn't find help for myself... I remember like after I walked out, I went to my dorm and I just cried and cried and cried and my roommate was like, 'Oh My God, are you okay?' And I was like, 'I'm so excited'. Like, **I'm so excited to have these words for this, right? It was just so, like, validating to know that there was something, right, that I wasn't making it all up in my head.** And personally, yes, I was right because it's all in my head. But I wasn't making it up, you know. It was so validating to hear someone else say, Yeah, that sounds really hard. And like, here's why I think that's happening. It sort of validated like, **I'm not this broken person and that where I'm coming from and my experiences be that academically in needing that validation or be that within my family are not things that I could control"**



"Red String" - Collection of self reflection, looking back, & light bulb moments.



"If you think of like a murderer documentary, right? Where they do that thing with the red string, it kind of felt like that, like, oh, everything is that. And like, even now I'll have light bulb moments... So then I was like, Sit down and reflect like, okay, maybe this is different, I just didn't know. So I think like **one of the ones that comes up often is like the panic attacks, because as a kid, I just thought that I was like freaking out or like having a fit or like throwing a fit, throwing a tantrum. So, like, hearing my friend's experiences with some of those, I was like, Oh, that's very different. Like, that wasn't just like a tantrum. I wasn't just being a baby"**

Discussion

Bethany's experiences correlate with a few main themes from disability and culture studies:

Stigma - (Ysasi et al. 2018)

- Initially wanted to try to keep her experiences from her family
- First therapist not taking her experiences seriously - "you're just stressed"

Language - (Andrews et al. 2022)

- Expresses her joy and relief upon finally learning words to articulate her experiences
- Finds it empowering to identify her disabilities through words

Disability in Academia - (Price 2011)

- Experience with invisible disabilities throughout her academic course
- Now works with students in an academic setting

Conclusion

Oral history has proven to be a useful analytical tool in the collection and understanding of personal stories and experiences. This story exemplifies just one of the many experiences of disability within academia, an incredibly common experience yet not regularly discussed. The use of oral history to articulate one person's lived experiences can create a greater understanding of your own. In conclusion, it is incredibly important for these stories to continue being told and shared so that nobody else assumes they are broken.

A conclusion to Bethany's story:

"For me, though, it is somewhat empowering to be able to identify those as disabilities, because I think once again, there's power in that language of like it's almost like this isn't my fault sort of thing. I'm not broken, my brain just doesn't make chemicals like it should." - Bethany

Acknowledgments & References

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