

An Anthropological Journey to The Field of Disability: Teaching and Research by a Disabled Anthropologist in Greece.

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Abstract

This article will discuss the relationship between anthropology and disability based on my fieldwork at a high school catering to special educational needs in Greece. More specifically, it will present the negotiating terms of the disabled anthropologist/teacher, who is conducting fieldwork inside and around the school area, as an example of autobiographical ethnography. I will explain the kind of perception and the degree of the identity that is the disabled person both as teacher and ethnographic researcher. These are two fields that 'bother' the disabled anthropologist/teacher and at the same time they create the condition for self-reflexivity on the nature of anthropology as well as teaching. Incidents that illustrate tensions, arguments, and collaboration with the informants (colleagues, students, parents, education officials, academics) during the participant observation, set up the template for the anthropological undertaking as well as the teaching procedure. This article also critically presents the events following the fieldwork when the anthropologist moves workplace by leaving the high school catering to special educational needs, where he taught and conducted the fieldwork, to teach at a general high school. This transition provides us with additional ethnographic data regarding the relationship between special education and general education by considering how students at the general high school then reacted to my fieldwork when I shared it as part of my social science teaching. This journey illustrates and explains why disability exists at the limit of the intersubjective experience inside the Greek educational system.

Key words: Disability, special education, Greece, autoethnography, anthropology of education.

Introduction

This article will discuss the relationship between disability and education in Greece reflected in my anthropological study conducted in the 'Quiet Place', a high school catering to special educational needs in Athens, where I taught Social Sciences from 2004 until 2013.¹ Approximately 80 male and female disabled students² from 13 to 20 years of age with motor and/or intellectual impairment attend the aforementioned school. It is an autobiographical ethnography which covers two periods: The first concerning my participant observation in the Quiet Place from 2008 until 2011, the second concerning students' remarks about my anthropological fieldwork during my teaching of social science classes at the 'City Centre' school where I have been teaching from 2014.³ My students' comments on the Quiet Place ethnographic data enriched the ethnography and helped me clarify my position in the field having already distanced myself from it. Teaching and research converse and together they make up the production conditions of the autoethnography. The main research question that concerns this article is what the negotiating terms of the research and professional self are when these elements relate to the identity of being disabled (I am person with visual impairment). The answer to this question aspires to provide supplementary information about the relationship between special and general education in Greece as well as discuss methodological issues of ethnographic research in the educational environment.

In 'Writing Disabled Lives: Beyond the Singular', Anne Finger (2004) asks an important question about disability life writing: "How can we as creative writers move from the story of our life to the story of our lives?" (Finger, 2004: 613). She answers the question: "by reconstructing disability on both a personal and socio-political level" (Finger, 2004:615). On the same question Margaret Rose Torrell (2011) in her article 'Plural Singularities: The Disability Community in Life-Writing Texts' adds that the prevalent conception regarding autobiography is that it is a personal reconstruction of the self. A perception which is related to the fact that we associate the narration of the disabled individual with a lonely, isolated narrative; just as 'the disabled' are considered, isolated and idiosyncratically lonely.⁴ But if we acknowledge the heterogeneity of experiences, namely that every disabled

individual interacts with a series of identities (nationality, sexuality, class) then we should accept that these interactions can be detected in an autobiography which reconstructs the subject. Therefore, an autobiography has the potentiality to talk about the lives of ‘the disabled’. In Semi Linton’s work (2007) we realise that her narrative tries to encompass the activist views and she aims not at reformulating them a new but at embracing her collective subjectivity. On the other hand, Lennard Davis expresses similar concerns: “By narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story” (Davis, 1997: 3-4). Thomas Couser (2009) is more optimistic about the capacity of autobiography to resymbolize disability and create a community identity within the telling of a singular life story.

My view, as developed in the current article, mainly emerges from my experience in the “Quite Place”. There, when the question whether or not to proceed with the emancipatory research was raised – assuming that, I would be more effective as a disabled anthropologist in approaching my informants’ voices in relation to their needs – that was not possible. The disability professionals (psychologists, social workers etc.) being responsible for satisfying my informants’ needs thought that I was interfering with their work. In the course of time, I realised that my informants’ voices did not join my voice which gave me a sense of isolation in the field and estrangement from it, and not because I had fixed views on disability as I had initially thought. I was forced to make concessions to the performance of actions in the field which taught me that no matter how strong my views are, the production conditions of the ethnographic data are equally strong. Later on, I realised that I could partly overcome these obstacles if I incorporated these exclusions, as experienced during fieldwork, in the ethnographic data and, more generally, my visible presence in the text helped me with the conclusions of the research.

At this point Couser (2009:44) notes that the “rhetoric of emancipation” has the potential to resymbolize disability. This statement has led Garland-Thomson to suggest that likewise, autobiographical narrative have the power to resymbolize disabled identity (Garland-Thomson 2004). Additionally in ‘Shape Structures Story: Fresh and Feisty Stories about Disability’, she explains the important work that representing disability communities perform: because “we think of disability as at once individualized and isolating rather than communal and shared, the concept of a disability community in which one might thrive seems counterintuitive”; therefore, to tell the story of “mutually sustaining” “human communities” is to resymbolize disability as a cultural, social and political identity (Garland-Thomson 2007: 115).

Additionally, the empowering process of the autobiographical narrative sheds light on the perception of the research work; the interactions that take place during academic events. For instance, after I completed my anthropological study, I participated as a speaker in an international conference in Greece. The members of that conference were mostly members of the Greek academia. After I finished my presentation on the methodological issues on the study of the body in disability, the only question that came from the audience was: “How can you remember all these?” The conferee did not conceal his surprise and admiration, as he explained to me later. He wondered how difficult it must be for a person with vision loss like me, to present his research without consulting a text. Later on, while attending other conferences, I realised that surprise comes with awkward moments from the audience; a reaction which gets in the way of addressing questions after each of my presentation. A certain amount of scepticism was also expressed during my research and before the final text was produced about the degree of advocacy of my disabled informants; as a member of the academic community told me: “We don’t want you to write a manifesto”. Therefore, the disability narrative’s isolation precedes the text and predisposes the researcher, who even if he has proceeded to as much inclusive as possible in depiction of his informants’ voices and bibliography, he seems to be faced with very firm preconceptions about his own attempt in the academic environment. These incidents demonstrate that autobiographical ethnography does not act to the detriment of the diversity of experiences but may provide the researcher with more evidence towards a collective reconstruction of disability.

From the Disabled Anthropologist to the Disabled Students: a Journey on the Borderline of the Intersubjective Experience

Just a few days before I started working at the Quiet Place, I had visited the Directorate of Secondary Education, which the school is administratively attached to. There, a colleague, working as administrative staff, after helping me by providing information on how I would reach the school told me:

I hope you’ll make it. Other teachers didn’t wish to work in this school and asked to be moved to another. I have visited the school only once and couldn’t stay there for more than an hour.

Another colleague sitting next to me, added: “These children really need people like you.” I inferred that she was referring to my own disability. When, three years later, having been accustomed with school life, I decided to move on to an anthropological study on disability these words came to mind. I ran into one of these colleagues a few times at the Directorate office and she asked me what I thought of life at the Quiet Place. Once she accompanied me to the street waiting to help me hail a cab. A cab stopped, I took the back seat and she, leaning to the front passenger’s window, told me: “You should know, I admire you.”

The sight of the disabled body, its seeming ataxia may cause uncomfortable feelings or admiration to a school visitor, who will not justify the mess in a children’s room in the same way with the mess in a classroom with disabled students (Mitchell 2001:392). The sight of the disabled students and the thoughts of their observers, expressed in terms of collegiality, create an intervening vacuum between visible bodies and invisible perceptions; a vacuum in which, it seems that, the student and school activity takes place in interaction with the wider social environment. This vacuum is filled with our innermost thoughts, which often, like in the words of my colleagues in the Directorate office, are expressed through a language which overemphasizes the disabled bodies (Mitchell, 2001:393). We speak, we comment upon the disabled bodies either by referring to our own difficulty to accept the conditions of disability or by emphasizing the efforts of people who work or are about to work (like in my case) with disabled students. This language immures the image of the disabled in personal assessments of how bodies different from ours can exist in time and place (ibid). Many school colleagues interpreted the reactions of people outside the Quiet Place, who came in contact with students during visits, arranged or accidental meetings, as the behaviour of those who did not have the same knowledge as them on disability.

According to Jean Paul Sartre (1966), the act of seeing the other poses a kind of threat to the beholder’s existence, a threat that transfers into the body; a dark body which shakes the idea of existence. My colleagues’ words at the Directorate of Secondary Education reminded me of my reaction, when at the age of 12, long before the symptoms of my sensory impairment appeared, I was watching a TV portrait of a blind professor, listening him narrating his life story. Mixed feelings of admiration and fear overwhelmed me. When, many years later, I was talking to him on the phone I mentioned those feelings to him as well as my amazement that I could recall how I had felt, although 15 years had passed. ‘Aggelos’⁵, a professor of Medieval Studies, laughed and replied: “You know, our childhood memories are very strong and stay with us for the rest of our lives”. He made me realise that my feelings had nothing to do with the fact that at that time I had become a person with visual impairment myself, but that I had chosen to remember his TV appearance because back then Aggelos was something unusual for me.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, my focus on the Quiet Place’s structural features did not often agree with my students’ personal experiences. I could tell that many of my students were aware of the structural problems of their education, the artificial barriers and logistical deficiencies, however, many of them articulated a personal voice focusing on individualized explanations rather than structural ones to interpret their disability and their school life. The hard thing for me to do was to approach the relationship between disability and school life as closely as possible to their own voices, given that disability is not always visible and correlations of my informants’ voices should not be influenced by stereotypical perceptions of communication based on the degree and type of each impairment (motor, mental, sensory).

‘Gerasimos’, 20, a student in the final year of the Quiet Place who is a wheelchair user, asked time and time again during the Social Studies class:

I can see your point as regards disability; we have to fight, not to give up but can you please tell me: If you knew there was a pill that would make you get your eyesight back and me walk again, wouldn’t you take it?

I was unable to answer this question. While I had embraced a socio-political understanding of disability and opted for a forceful, often aggressive, rhetoric against the features of social organisation of ableism that creates barriers to the disabled like us, Gerasimos – although able to understand my orientation – was constantly making me talk with him on a personal level.

Gerasimos: Before I go to sleep, I try to understand why this is happening to me. Why am I disabled? Why can’t I walk with my brother? Before I fall asleep, I pray for all of us; for you too. I want you to get your eyesight back and me to be able to walk again.

As the conversation was going on, I was running out of strength and could not express my arguments. I was just listening to him. “Do you think about what I say or does it go in one ear and out the other?” I honestly replied: “Yes, I do think about it”. Gerasimos wanted, or at least this is what I thought, my emotional awakening. To make me confess that no matter what I say about the rights of the disabled, what I also wanted deep inside was not to be disabled. These conversations have proven that apart from the collective representations of disability there is an unexplored emotional world which has no obvious connection with the general characteristics of ableism. Gerasimos provided the opportunity to assume that he would ask me the same things irrespective of where we were; in the general or special school. His thoughts had to do with his own questions, his innermost thoughts which, as he told me, “I try not to share with others because I don’t want them to see me sad.” Disability is not only social and political but also defined by the self-determination of the individual and their frequent refusal to adopt a more combative attitude (French 1993).

Influenced by Michel Foucault’s interpretation of self-knowledge as a socially and culturally pre-determined state⁶, I realised that a juxtaposition of experiences was required between the ways in which Gerasimos and I coped with our own different disabilities. Whereas I had a lengthy theoretical education on disability and social theory, Gerasimos had a life story and his experience with disability was mostly through his relationship with his familiar environment. So, it seems that as I attached more significance to my dialogue with the theoretical texts of disability, I was underestimating the emotional expression of experiences like Gerasimos’. And while initially I thought that my argumentation had a liberating and empowering effect on my students and by placing disability in a general, invisible, social framework I was helping them not to concentrate too much on the biological conditions of their existence, Gerasimos showed me that in his case exactly the opposite was happening. Every time I talked to him about the rights of the disabled – about this radical theory on the social definition of disability- he expressed negative feelings. A young colleague who had frequent conversations with him, told me:

“When I entered the classroom after you, Gerasimos told me that you get on his nerves “I want to kill both him and the priest. They tell me to fight from the wheelchair. Can you give a fight from the wheelchair?”

The colleague put his attitude down to his pious family environment. “It’s a lost cause; it isn’t worth the effort. He’s 20 years old. You can’t change his way of thinking.”

On the one hand Gerasimos made me feel uncomfortable, but on the other, I started thinking that personal experience is not solely the result of social and symbolic representations but also a communication process which cannot be reduced to general interpretations. Personal experience is crushed under the weight of general explanatory models. The different ways of interpreting disability and the diametrically opposite points of departure for our thinking between Gerasimos and me made me wonder if empathy creates the potential for dialogue and interpretation of the narration of emotions independently of the special school structural features. I return, thus, to my initial objective; the connection between personal experience and the wider social environment, though through a different angle. Would these conversations be exactly the same whether we were in the City Centre School or the Quiet Place? If we depict the student’s views, we draw the conclusion that the Quiet Place fades out and my informant’s internal world unfolds. This has to do with the degree of collaboration between the teacher and student and not solely with the place where this collaboration occurs; in the special or general school. Facilitating the expression of personal experience serves as the main analysis tool for the research, but at the same time, it determines the research, as well as, the teaching orientation. At this point serious questions are raised about whether Gerasimos would always express negative feelings and if this depends on the place.

I decided I should not insist on our conversations with Gerasimos but relate what he had said with several school life incidents. One morning, as I was standing opposite him at the corridor, I heard him asking loudly for someone to lift him up in his wheelchair. His body had slightly slipped down and the belt holding him in place was too tight. The care assistants were busy coming and going, taking the students to their classrooms as the bell had just rung. Nobody paid attention to him. Then, addressing me, he started shouting:

See, nobody pays any attention! Nobody cares! If you don’t suffer yourself, then you can’t understand what it’s like. That’s the way it is. We have to bear our own sufferings.

This is when the place acquires significance; when the place connects with his internal world. Then the school becomes the place where “nobody cares about him”.

Narrating Disability at The Special and General School: a Continuous Transition of Emotions and Meanings

A few years later, while I was trying to explain the participant observation methods to students at the City Centre School I decided to read out in class the above-mentioned ethnographic data regarding Gerasimos. The students were paying close attention and when the narration was over they remained thoughtful for a few moments. There was an uncomfortable feeling in the classroom which made me feel uneasy so I immediately started talking about thick description as an ethnographic style of writing. Amalia, an 18-year-old student interrupted me: "Can we please go on with the research? I find it very interesting. We're not aware of these things." Other students made the same request asking me to tell them more about the Quiet Place. While I was narrating the most important parts of my ethnography from the Quiet Place all I could hear was their breathing. There were times when they did not move from their seats when the bell rang for break and asked me to go on. At those moments I made several assumptions about what they might be thinking.

All these assumptions, these interpretations based on the conventional codes of emotional expression, is a key feature of educational practices. Our emotions and our students' emotions are usually interpreted according to the prevalent conceptions of the communication limits which define both our presence as educators and our students' presence within the school unit. The relationship between experience and structure affects the analysis of everyone's behaviour. The prevalent conceptions of the communication limits dictate our emotions the same way the medical diagnosis of the disabled students explains and entrenches the empathic processes within the limits of the prevalent sensibility.

At the Quiet Place, the students' suppression of emotion, as well as our suppression, is highlighted by the prevalent values of the materiality of emotion in terms of impairment, while in the City Centre School the narration of the disabled students' suppression – so far in my career – seems to identify disability as a locus in the reflections of which the predominant emotion is of sorrow. In both types of schools, the relative content of the collective experience crystallizes when we accept that personal experience connects with the emotions aroused by the impairment in the cultural environment in which both types of school exist. The invisible social oppression can be viewed, according to Corker, in the interpretation of emotions, diverse and often conflicting, which make up a personal and cultural application platform of methodological research tools and educational practices [in this case] concerned with emancipation. (Corker 2001:36)

In the light of the above, as an anthropologist and educator I had to decipher my emotional involvement to what Gerasimos said, my students' reactions to it, and what was coming to my attention in the relationship between us at school. Modifying the course of action on the base of the politics of emotion provides balance and makes the materialism hegemony discriminations less severe. Corker, in anticipation of the social model advocates' objections that her approach divides the demands of the disabled, suggests a synthesis of experience of disability which will reveal the different views of the disabled [like mine and Gerasimos'] and at the same time will explain the politics of emotion as the key-concept which will bring out all voices. She accepts as important material for analysis dreams, fantasies, desires, denials and arguments between disabled and non-disabled individuals.

After the presentation of the ethnographic data to the general class there were lengthy conversations and disputes among students about how their class would be if there were disabled students among them. There was disagreement about accessibility, academic performance and the socialization terms of the disabled students at the City Centre School. These conversations didn't reach a conclusion, they hung in the balance, proving to me that the presence of the disabled students in education witnesses an ongoing transition process regarding not only the inclusion practices but above all the thought process before the incorporation of these.

The concept of rhizome, appearing at the philosophical thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988), is a process which takes place irrespective of the environment. The tree of existence roots vertically into the earth, the roots may grow together with the tree, they can be transplanted and the tree along with its roots may well continue to exist in a different environment. (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:27). Rhizome has neither beginning nor end; it is always in the middle. According to Dan Goodley (2007), the disabled child and the child with learning difficulties is neither a complete student nor a single conceptual category. It is a body in constant transition, an incomplete body; a root that spreads with no beginning nor end (Goodley 2007:324). Before they even start to communicate, the disabled students' bodies become in the narration symbolic objects predetermining the reactions of their communication. Their body, an incomplete body, which, depending on the environment (the school or outside this), is used with different terms every time.

This process of constant transition appears in the case of another student. Makis, a student with motor impairment, older than his classmates, around 24, first attended the Quiet Place and then a general high school. He grew up in institutions, because his family had left him in the hands of the hospital's social service he was born in, at a provincial town of Peloponnese. I did not know much about him and after a long time I found out from the school social worker that the student came from a Roma family and that many years later while attending the Quiet Place he sought out his parents. The social service of the institution hosting him helped him find his roots. Family relationships were restored when the student met his mother for the first time – she had entered into a second marriage with another Roma and given birth to three more children – and Makis decided to go and live with them. It was a double transition: from the institution to the family and from the Quiet Place to high school. The transition did not work out. On returning to the Quiet Place in Athens, Makis talked at every opportunity about his unsuccessful transition, his incomplete rhizome, his incomplete presence.

During this time he left the institution and as he told me: “I entered an independent living programme”. He remained at the Quiet Place but for the first time he lived with the institution's support in his own apartment together with other people attending the same programme. He did not lose contact with his family; they talked on the phone. Makis cared about his younger siblings and always put money aside from his disability allowance for their clothing or whatever they asked for and stayed with them during school holidays.

At the time many people from the Quiet Place asserted that his mother was exploiting him financially and she wanted her son back home at any cost because Makis' disability allowance was significant to her. Makis knew about this and once told me:

I know that my mother wants me back for my allowance, but what else can she do? She raises three young children. She is left alone. The wine killed my stepfather. She told me over the phone the other day that she wants to get married again. She's with a man who also has three children of his own. I told her she can do whatever she wants but I don't agree with this marriage. My father remarried and has two more children and my elder brother has also married and has two children. He got divorced recently and brought his new girlfriend to my mother's house; who from what I hear is also pregnant. He has no permanent job; he works as a gravedigger. How many people can die in a small village?

One day Makis asked Aphrodite, his maths teacher from the Quiet Space, to come over to his apartment to help him pack some things because his elder brother would come and take him to the village for his summer holidays. Aphrodite asked me to accompany her because she didn't want Makis' brother to see her alone and become the centre of gossip. It was towards the end of July, the first summer after Makis graduation from the Quiet Place. Makis' brother was late. It was past midnight when the doorbell rang. Aphrodite answered the door. Outside an expensive car with the engine on was waiting and as Aphrodite was carrying her student's luggage she saw a priest without a cassock getting out of the car. We asked Makis who the priest was and he said that he's the one who arranges the funerals. He had come along with his brother to Athens because on their way back they had an appointment with some people in Patra. They would make a stop there before getting to the village. Makis said in a whispering voice that the priest wanted to visit a brothel in Patra and that was the reason why he came along with his brother. He also said that he liked boys. Aphrodite was upset. There was no time to react. The priest was in a hurry. We helped Makis get into the car and it disappeared into the night.

In September, Makis came back to Athens. After graduating from the Quiet Place, although he entered the University of Athens, he stayed only for a few months and in the end he decided to re-attempt this transition; to return permanently to his family and give up his studies. After he settled in the village he gradually lost touch with his old classmates and those who insisted on contacting him had a feeling that Makis was not doing so well. When asked if he liked his life there, he minced his words: he was not that happy, he was thinking of coming back, staying with his family was something he wanted to give it a try but he was not sure. A continuous transition process that never concludes. Before going back to the village, he registered at the University with Aphrodite's support, his favourite teacher as he used to call her. Aphrodite accompanied him to the university and helped him gather up his books from the bookshops. He attended some classes, but before the exam period he announced to us his decision to return to his mother's home. It was a step backwards, Aphrodite and I said, but on the other hand I thought that he wanted to try and live on his own terms. We were not sure though if that was his own will or the result of coercion. Maybe it was a fear for the future; that he would not make it in Athens, he would not make it at university. A few years before, Makis had transitioned from the Quiet Place to high school. At first, as he told me, his new classmates and teachers accepted him and welcomed him with open

arms, but afterwards they gradually left him alone. Not having any help with his homework, he headed for the institution and the Quiet Place again. Nothing good had turned out from that transition.

Another concept that appears in the philosophical thought of Deleuze and Guattari is the “plane of immanence”. Immanence, as Cliff Stangoll (2005:204) notes, is the surface on which all the powers of existence can emerge. Our fantasy, Aphrodite’s and mine, about how Makis’ life would be if he attended university, is based on the real object of our student’s body. Makis’ disabled body created, on the one hand, an expectation to overcome obstacles and, at the same time, an opportunity to assess how obstacles can be overcome. This level of Makis’ immanent qualities, the connection between vision and reality, subjective judgments and object (disabled body), is found not only in our thinking but can be seen in Makis’ life as well. In his perpetual transition (returning to the family) but also in his will to get on with his life and do away with the wounds of the past; to explain why his mother had turned him down that is. “If I don’t settle this, I won’t be happy here, not at university not anywhere” he told me. Makis’ story cannot be interpreted in terms of ‘passive/active participation’ but is characterized by a continuous movement of incomplete journeys which illustrate the borderline nature of special education in the general or special school environment. All these constitute what we call school life. Students’ reactions in response to educational and care practices are interpreted as either positive or negative. But, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997:23) has pointed out, the classification of emotions as positive or negative when in the realm of extraordinary bodies is socially constructed.

The foregoing is a matter of identity. In disability studies as well as feminist criticism it has been pointed out that the identity of the disabled individuals is perceived as a mistake (Oliver 1990, French 1993, Garland-Thomson 1997, Butler 1993) and that this has to change through the change of stereotypical perceptions on disability. Corker argues that even if a pluralistic model, which accepts all kinds of otherness, is applied, still, the new views on disabilities that will develop will once more be the prevalent ones. So, there will be an overall interpretation of disability, which still will limit the expression of disabled people. Garland-Thomson’s interpretation, as she herself admits it, is influenced by postmodernism and theories on materialism (1997:143-6). Disability as matter, from the aspect of visibility, if not accompanied with performativity, Judith Butler mentions (1993), can cover the thoughts that never found an outlet, the way it happened with my students’ thoughts at the City Centre School about my students’ disability at the Quiet Place.

In any case, in the relative bibliography it has been argued that not all the disabled have the same experiences; many talk about their own experience and in many cases they compare experiences according to the kind of the impairment they have (Corker 1998, Silvers 1998). These observations made Mairian Corker (2001:39) argue that the materiality involved in the symbolisms of conversation among people who speak and listen, and the stairs, among people who walk, is an element that interprets mutism or motor impairment in terms of physical barriers. However, we cannot interpret the ontology of disability only on the basis of the social world which imposes its own ‘reality’. Analyzing the aesthetics of disability, Anita Silvers notices that the existence of a disabled person is a “transitional” event (Silvers, 2002:240).

Conclusion

This article presented the course of my ethnographic research in the educational environment. Instances of interaction with my students are analysed when I decided to present it at the schools I taught. Through the narration of this course, I intended to discuss how disability develops in the various educational environments in Greece. My presence in the Quiet Place caused inner and outer emotional conflicts in my attempt as an anthropologist to manage both my position as a researcher and my identity as a disabled person. These elements of subjectivity were influenced by the memory and the past of my informants as disabled or non-disabled subjects in the relationships developed in and around the field which enriched the ethnographic data and heightened the awareness of the production of emotions and meanings without the limitation of time and place of the fieldwork.

More specifically, my understanding of the production of these emotions deepened when I introduced the ethnographic data in my lessons at the City Centre School. The interaction generated by the ethnographic data from the Quiet Place between me and my students helped me to further clarify my own moral dilemmas concerning my presence in the research, not only as an anthropologist but also as an educator and a disabled person. The educational process lies in the interactive relationship between the educator and the students which I consider an integral part of my ethnography. This process has brought to the fore the intersubjective nature of the experience when the association between experiences and school life events is made. Thus, making me discuss afresh, after the completion of the fieldwork and writing, the symbolisms of disability in relation to the

characteristics of the educational system. By observing the processes of empathy, I was led to the conclusion that the intersubjective experience does not solely relate to our attitude towards the symbols of disability (wheelchair, white cane). This would mean, as I came to realise during the research, substantiating specific ideas concerning impairment. What matters is how aids participate in the research and educational processes as reflected in our reactions in the field. As Merleau-Ponty pointedly remarks, we do not recognise the blind only as people who hold a white cane to see (Merleau-Ponty 2005:165-6). The white cane or the anthropologist's black sunglasses and the students' wheelchairs are embodied functions. These objects help us understand various aspects of the empathy processes without the need of a forced confession of our feelings.

In our discussions, Gerasimos was constantly focusing on my thoughts and the lack of accessibility in his school, wishing, as I came to realise over time, to make me think about his situation. Gerasimos employed a specific strategy of emotion identification through the emotions of others. This helped me understand that not only does the marginality of disability relate to the rules of the educational system but that it also emerges out of the disabled students' strategies of survival which leads to the understanding of the limits of the educational system.

The stories go on with Makis' case whose attempt to change schools and his final decision to change direction and connect with his family created a life story, which like Gerasimos', encouraged my students at the City Centre School to eventually talk about their school life. But in doing so they placed their experiences at a distance from those of Gerasimos and Makis.

Not only do these findings make up the conclusions of the ethnography but they also urge me to continually reevaluate the relationship between teaching and fieldwork. My cognitive and emotional processes, reflected in the text, is the tangible medium, as described by Marylyn Strathern (1987) with the term 'evocative anthropologist'.⁷ In the school environment, emotions are deconstructed and take on a relativistic content to be reconstructed during the participant observation, which constitutes the template in an intersubjective environment.

To support the notion that the narrative of the disabled person is falsely considered as a lonely, isolated narrative – exactly the same way the disabled people are generally and stereotypically considered: isolated and idiosyncratically lonely – elements of autobiographical ethnography were introduced in the current research. If we accept the heterogeneity of experiences in all types of schools, that is to accept the fact that every disabled or non-disabled person interacts on a net of events, then we can accept that these interactions can be seen in an autobiography where the 'lonely' subject is reconstructed. In the light of this explanation, my students' comments at the City Centre School helped me realise that having many disabled people in a group that focuses on disability (at the Quiet Place) does not mean that disability as a state-identity is produced inside it. For instance, Makis' story, when used as a teaching subject, caught my students' interest and retrieved from their personal memory preconstructed perceptions regarding disability. At the same time though, focusing on life stories reconstructs the collective experience and offers ample evidence which shows that disability lies on the borderline of the intersubjective experience in every type of school.

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Notes

¹ A pseudonym is given for the school name.

² In this article, the terms 'disabled students', 'disabled teacher/anthropologist', 'disabled person' and 'disabled people' are used to emphasize the collective responsibility for shaping disability which the term 'people/person with disability' fails to

do as it narrowly focuses on the impairment and not on the social and cultural processes that construct the identity of the disabled person (Barnes, 1992; Bury 2000).

³ Pseudonym of a general high school.

⁴ See also Snyder and Mitchell (2000) *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses on Disability* pp 9-11. Mitchell reaffirms these concerns in "Body Solitaire".

⁵ All names of informants that appear in the article are pseudonyms,

⁶ In his attempt to explore the condition of the subject [of different subjects], Michel Foucault focused on the socio-political conditions of existence; the mechanisms for exercising power that create the subjective dimension (Foucault 1983). His approach inspired the advocates of the social model of disability, like Mike Oliver (1990), who analysed disability through the prism of collective experience; a constructed experience which arises under ableism, which in turn defines the terms of disableism, through mechanisms that oppress the disabled. The subject isn't determined according to its independent existence but by the mechanisms for exercising power. So, knowing of the self is a predetermined state (Foucault 1983:73-4).

⁷ The term 'emoter' mentioned in Robert Yanal's work (1999) can also be applied.

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