

Review:

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Michael V. Angrosino (1998). Opportunity House: Ethnographic Stories of Mental Retardation. London, United Kingdom: AltaMira, 287 pages, ISBN 0-7619-8917-X (Paper) \$26.95, 0-7619-8916-1 (Cloth) \$69.-

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Abstract: This book summarizes ANGROSINO's participant observation of two decades of research and community service in a community house for individuals with mental retardation. The introduction provides a mirror of teaching oral history, participant observation and cultural narratives to students. In the following chapters the stories are organized by themes that present the lives, realities and daily-life experiences of individuals with mental retardation. The author contributes to the understanding of individuals with mental retardation from an insider and outsider perspectives in an attempt and to understand their humanity, feelings, and tribulations. The book gives voice to a population that has been silenced providing creative fiction that tells a story and protects the identity of those who want to be heard, the mentally retarded.

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1. Introduction

Michael ANGROSINO describes his book, *Opportunity House*, as an "opportunity of service." The author weaves a wonderful narrative, ushering readers into the world of individuals with mental retardation, giving voice, character, personality and a day-to-day context of being a person with mental retardation. ANGROSINO not only provides the context for mental retardation, but also presents a world of mental retardation from the perspective of afflicted individuals. The narratives reveal the humanity of his characters and their daily activities, tribulations, feelings and perspectives. This is one of the few books in which people with mental retardation are presented as what they are: *human beings*. [1]

2. Reflective Ethnography

The book begins as a reflection, using ANGROSINO's decade of work at Opportunity House, a community house for individuals with mental retardation in Florida, to teach students about life histories and ethnography. Starting in the classroom, the voice we hear is an exercise in how to collect narratives from participants and how narrative is created and re-created. Through these narratives, ANGROSINO deepens our knowledge of mental retardation. He is interviewed by one of his students, the narrative begins, and he becomes the participant, the re-creator of the narrative. ANGROSINO becomes the participant and starts the narrative by telling his story to his students about Opportunity House. This role reversal gives a new twist to the concept of knowing, perception and meaning and how these experiences and context give form to narratives and ethnography. Mental retardation is thoroughly explained, as are the lives of individuals with mental retardation. ANGROSINO seems to use a Vygotskian approach to the field of mental retardation through the presentation of his characters. VYGOTSKY (1993) said that people with developmental disabilities are not less developed but that they develop differently, whereas ANGROSINO holds that "retarded" essentially means "slower to process" and does not signify the absence of processing. [2]

The book is written in the first person through an autobiographical reflection of accounts. Although the author does not mention the number of participants, he gives voice to many stories. The book is not presented as a novel with a main actor; rather, the author presents stories that are diverse in terms of life experiences, situations and characters. It is a mosaic that reflects a community that represents levels of mental retardation and the intersection of multiple factors such as race, antisocial behavior, personality differences and, more importantly, individual differences. [3]

3. The World of Mental Retardation

ANGROSINO transports the reader to the world of mental retardation with sensitivity, depth and humanity. He depicts certain challenges that individuals with mental retardation experience, such as the inability to perform certain tasks with ease (e.g., memory skills, problem solving, and counting) as ways to describe the subject area and to usher us into the world of mental retardation with some measure of subjective compassion. These elements give the book a special touch, especially for those of us with able minds and bodies who may tend to forget the humanity of the person behind the too-common label. Individuals with mental retardation find a voice through ANGROSINO, a voice that tells us about their daily life experiences, their feelings and, most importantly, how they perceive themselves and the world around them. This is a world that is frequently tough, insensitive, cruel and challenging, a world with which the mentally retarded may have no choice but to cope. It is also a world that is real, like ours, with romances, challenges, crime and ups and downs. ANGROSINO humanizes the person behind the disability. "Everyone of us has things and other things that they can't do. Every single one of us is disabled when it comes to certain things" (p.61). [4]

As a researcher, ANGROSINO describes the process of gaining entry and being accepted by the residents. He tells how he began to understand the field of mental retardation by having direct experience with the residents and staff of Opportunity House. The book takes us on a journey aimed at making sense of individuals with mental retardation through their experiences and looking at them from an "outsider's" point of view; i.e. "I had a better sense of what it means to be a retarded person trying to negotiate a way through the 'system'" (p.25), "retarded people often think in very concrete terms" (p.27), from the perspective of a non-mentally retarded person. This outsider's perspective is what takes us inside the disabled person's worldview. We enter into their world, listening to their stories, their feelings and perspectives. ANGROSINO illustrates this reality and shows the feelings, the humanity of the person with mental retardation, "No, you're not a dummy. You get money because you're disabled ... Here I was, all along beating myself for being a retard, which don't get you nowheres in this cold, mean word, let me tell you" (p.61). [5]

In a way, ANGROSINO, as the outsider, puts the readers at an advantage: by being outsiders, we can understand the experiences and the world of mental retardation from an "ableist" perspective that we take for granted. ANGROSINO shares with us how he is being transformed in the process as he learns the virtue of patience and the sense of "otherness," recognizing that it was to his advantage to be knowledgeable in the area while always providing the outsider's perspective.

"I learned something really important from one of the parents I interviewed 'look, retarded means slow. My son doesn't learn at the same rate as the other kids his age. But it doesn't mean he doesn't learn anything" (p.19)

... "During the several years I spent there as a volunteer, I came more and more to see the pertinence of those same old questions: What does it feel like to be 'mentally retarded'? ... I could tell you that there was more to the story that met the eye" (p.30). [6]

ANGROSINO discusses other areas of mental retardation such as medication and its side effects. He describes drugs and their behaviors, their decelerating responses and how drugs can inhibit thinking. The issue of self-identity emerges through the book's narrative: how the characters form their identity as individuals with mental retardation and how they feel they are perceived by others and society. The stories discuss the intersection of mental retardation, race and social class. [7]

4. Creative Fiction

ANGROSINO's method relies on logs, personal memos and participant observation; this reliance can be both a weakness and strength. A weakness because the lack of direct recording of conversations can result in losing important information about factual data. We have to rely on his memory and on his creative fiction and interpretation of accounts. A strength because ANGROSINO spent a decade at Opportunity House collecting memories and

accounts of real situations. ANGROSINO says at the close of the book that traditional ethnography can be expressed through descriptive language and the interactionist tradition. He not only presents the objective, but also the shared subjectivity of his experience and recollection of the voices of individuals with mental retardation, recreating the stories in a "creative fiction" mode in order to protect the identity of his participants. The book is worth reading for those who want to understand the world of mental retardation and in so doing confront their own humanity face to face. [8]

References

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