RESEARCH NOTES

Forensic Medicine

- seen through the eyes of a social anthropologist

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ABSTRACT

For the average Dane death has become part of daily life. The media paints a picture of numerous violent acts, but even though we come across it on a daily basis certain aspects of death, e.g. working with the dead, are still seen as taboos.

This article is based on my internship at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Odense in February 2011 where I participated in the daily routines, and therefore had the opportunity to see how the employees relate to death and the dead.

The section "A Room of Impurities" deals with the symbolical impurity of the autopsy rooms at the Institute, since death, according to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, is a taboo and therefore something symbolically impure. In the section "Subjects or Objects?" another aspect of working with the dead is presented. The employees at the Institute have an ability to see the dead as both subjects and objects and to switch between these. The dead body as an object can equally be seen as something impure. The last section "A Part of Human Life" compares the taboo surrounding the Institute of Forensic Medicine with the view upon death in Tibet, and concludes on the manuscript.

Keywords:

Death, taboo, forensic medicine, symbolic impurity, participant observation

INTRODUCTION

During the latest centuries the view upon death in Danish society has changed. Due to the growing focus upon terror, violence and death in the media, it has become popular [1].

Even though some aspects of death are focused upon, death is not truly a part of our everyday lives. It seems the closer death is to a person, the greater the taboo [2]. We are attracted to the distant death, of which we are exposed to through the media, but repelled by the death of friends and relatives; the death that is close to us [3]. This death is isolated and is only attended to by professionals within certain physical and emotional frames, e.g. the autopsy rooms at the Institute in Odense [4]. This article deals with how the employees at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Odense deal with the taboo surrounding death and the dead.

DOING FIELDWORK

The Institute of Forensic Medicine in Odense consists of a department of Forensic Pathology, a department of Forensic Chemistry and a department of Forensic Anthropology. It is part of the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. The staff cooperates with the police or the National Board of Industrial Injuries when significant deaths occur on Funen or in the Southern part of Jutland [5].

From 1 February to 25 February 2011 I was an intern at the Institute. During this period I participated in several inquests, 12 autopsies, and got to observe everyday life in a forensic institute. The internship was part of my training to become a physical anthropologist. Since I have a Bachelor's

degree in social anthropology, I became aware of the possibilities to analyze the work process and the human relations in this process. Social anthropology deals with the study of culture and social structure, whereas physical anthropology deals with the study of human biology. This gave me a different perspective; the perspective of an outsider [6]. The method used for this paper is participant observations.

Being a part of the daily work at the Institute, I was able to observe how the employees acted around the dead. In my capacity as an intern, rather than a social anthropologist, I avoided disturbing the daily routines, and making the employees feel observed. This was only a possibility since employees often have interns following their work. In my role as an intern the primary goal of my stay was to learn how the Institute functioned. This made it possible to become acquainted with the ethical and moral aspects, and the taboo that is combined with the work in a forensic institute, which is elaborated in the next two sections, "A Room of Impurities" and "Subjects or Objects?".

A ROOM OF IMPURITIES

When entering the autopsy room at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Odense the room is physically clean and sterile. The room is high-ceilinged and it is cleaned on a regular basis, which upholds an esthetic expression, but also makes sure that potentially contagious bacteria do not leave the Institute [7].

During the autopsies you wear white garments, a green laboratory coat, a mask, gloves, plastic covers for your arms and a plastic apron. The sterile garments are primarily worn to avoid contamination from diseases

the dead might have or to avoid contaminating any DNA that might be on the deceased [8]. By maintaining these kinds of hygienic precautions, a distance between you and the dead is created [9]. Wearing these garments is a precaution, but it can also be looked upon as a symbolical act. In the book "Purity and Danger" the anthropologist Mary Douglas describes, how primitive and western society distinguishes between what is pure or impure; what is order or disorder; what is accepted and what is looked upon as a taboo. The pure involves things that are holy or elevated, and this purity is strived for, while the impure is associated with danger, risk and contamination. What is said to be impure is, according to Douglas, determined by a set of hygienic rules [10]. Even though autopsy rooms are physically clean places, they are symbolically impure, because they harbour the taboo of death [1]. Thus by wearing these sterile garments, an attempt to protect oneself against this symbolic impurity is made.

In continuation hereof the autopsy rooms at the Institute can be looked upon as *Rooms of Death*. They are not easy places to enter, since they are only accessible to the professionals [4]. It becomes what the anthropologist Erving Goffman calls a backstage area. Goffman distinguishes between a frontstage area and a backstage area, where the former is the area that is accessible for the attention and observation of the public, while the latter is only accessible for the professionals [11]. Death is hidden in the backstage areas to spare the public, so no outsiders have to deal with the dead, but also to conceal the people that work with the dead, and conceal and maintain the subjectivity of the dead [4,11].

The office building, which is separated from the building with the autopsy rooms, is a frontstage area, where the professionals can have meetings with people from outside the Institute. The room where the relatives can see the deceased is also a frontstage area. Upholding a separation between this room and the autopsy room is important, and the reason for this will be examined in the next section [9,11].

SUBJECTS OR OBJECTS?

It is possible to mistake a dead body for a living human being who is simply sleeping. But when you have a closer look it is obvious, that it is not. How do the people that work with the dead on an everyday basis relate to these dead bodies? And does the taboo follow this relation?

A technician at the Institute told me that he always looks upon the dead as human beings, but that he distances himself by not getting to know them. The past history of a deceased can be heartbreaking, and therefore it is an advantage not to acquaint oneself with every single person autopsied.

For the professionals, a dead person obtain a double status, since the dead body can be seen as a subject; the living person it used to be, and an object, since the doctors have to work with the dead body to find a cause of death. By looking upon the dead as subjects and objects, the employees distance themselves from the deceased [9].

The delicate balance between this double status is maintained on a daily basis, and it is necessary to maintain the professionalism needed to execute the work [9]. Objectification through professionalism is maintained, as the previously mentioned example shows, by not engaging oneself in every case since this would be mentally fatiguing [7].

Since the body reflects a life lived, the dead body's status as a subject is maintained by treating it with dignity. The previously mentioned technician told me that he always remembers that someone loved or still loves the

deceased, and this helps him maintain the necessary dignity. This not only shows an enormous professionalism but also an ability to switch between looking upon the dead as subjects and objects.

The outer appearance is closely linked to the identity of the deceased. It is important to maintain the integrity of the deceased, but maintaining the outer appearance for the sake of the relatives is also important [12]. After the autopsy the deceased is prepared by one of the technicians. The wounds from the autopsy are sown back together. The stitches in the hairline are no longer visible when sown, and the incision in the neck and torso are placed so that a shirt can cover them. When the deceased is dressed you cannot see the scars of the autopsy [13]. This clearly shows the dead body's status as a subject, since it is very important not to alter the appearance of the deceased.

According to Mary Douglas we have a set of classifications and anything that contradicts them is seen as disorder or taboo. We try to eliminate disorder to help organize our surroundings [10]. Like the autopsy rooms the dead bodies can equally be seen as symbolically impure. The object status of the deceased work outside these classifications since a dead body being autopsied no longer looks like a living human being. The deceased is cut open, and the brain and organs from the chest and abdominal cavity are removed for examination [14].

Preparing the dead after the autopsy, helps recreate the image of a subject; a person who is merely sleeping [9]. By doing this, order is restored, and our surroundings are once again organized and purified.

A PART OF HUMAN LIFE

Both the autopsy rooms and the dead bodies can be seen as symbolically impure, but this impurity is also seen in a different place of the world.

In Tibet, the most common way of disposing of a deceased is a "sky burial", where the body is cut open and fed to vultures. The sky burial takes place in a special sky burial site, and only *rogyapas*, or body cutters, handle the dead bodies [15]. After a person dies and up to the time of the burial, only certain people in the community are allowed to touch the body, since the dead can threaten the living [16].

As the example above shows, a parallel between Tibet and the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Odense can be drawn. In Tibet only certain people are allowed to handle a dead body. The dead are seen as threats, since they can infect the living with an untimely death [16]. The employees at the Institute of Forensic Medicine have the same need for protection against the symbolic danger that death brings, and the extra layers of clothes are worn for protection [1]. Thus the taboo surrounding death can be seen in both societies.

A distinct difference between the Institutes of Forensic Medicine and Tibet is the lack of a backstage area in the latter. The burial takes place out in the open, so it will remind the living that death is unavoidable [15]. In Denmark it is hidden in the Institute of Forensic Medicine, where it conceals the real death of friends and relatives [1,3].

So why is this interesting? Through comparison social anthropology reveals that death is connected to taboo as a part of human life. Even though there are different classifications surrounding the taboo of death in Tibet and Denmark, it is still ultimately a taboo.

Since taboo is a part of human life, it becomes the working condition for the employees in the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Odense. Taboos

are fascinating because ordinarily, people do not have a direct contact with them in their everyday lives [1]. Since the backstage area is the only place where it is possible to work with the object, it is necessary for an institute of

Forensic Medicine to hide death in a closed area [11]. Thus it is unlikely that the taboo surrounding an institute of Forensic Medicine will ever fully be extinguished, since it would jeopardise the work done.

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