

From whence came mental retardation? Asking why while saying goodbye.

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Abstract:

Reflections of the Senior Author

The senior author (senior in more than one sense) was given cause to reflect on the meaning of the term mental retardation when he received his 30-year certificate and pin for continuous membership in the American Association on Mental Retardation in 2005. When he became a member of the organization in 1975 as a doctoral student at Columbia University, it was the American Association on Mental Deficiency that he joined. Although the focus of his studies at Columbia was mental retardation and even though that term had been the accepted terminology in the field for many years, the primary organization for students, professionals, scholars, and advocates in mental retardation still used the term mental deficiency in its moniker. This remained the case for the first 10 years of his membership. He is now a member, of course, of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, the official name as of January 1, 2007. He is also a member and board member of the Division on Developmental Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), which was formerly known as Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD), and earlier still as CEC-MR. Although these organizations have not explicitly rejected mental retardation as a term, they have clearly acknowledged the importance to their identities of terminology that is more inclusive, less stigmatizing, or both.

Keywords: developmental disabilities | terminology | human conditions

Article:

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Changing Terms or Changing Minds?

The term mental retardation has consistently been used to describe people who are more different than they are alike (Gelb, 1997). It has been used as an amalgam for very diverse human conditions. The core of the field of mental retardation has been the assumption that somehow there is an “essence” that eclipses all of the differences that characterize the people described by the term. Sometimes, it has been used to describe someone who needs constant care. Other times, it has described someone much like yourself but who needs more help with academic skills. Sometimes, it has described a person with severe physical disabilities or has referred to someone you would pass on the street without notice. The characteristics of its referents are uncertain.

What is certain about the term mental retardation is that it became a stigmatizing label with universally negative connotations. According to Dudley (1997), people with the label have found that they are not embraced as part of the disabilities rights movement. Triano stated, “I define disability as a natural and beautiful part of human diversity that people with disabilities can take pride in” (Triano & Obara, 2005, p. 3). She has acknowledged, however, that a person with a “cognitive disability” is likely to be “excluded and left out” of the disabilities rights movement (p. 2). Speaking of the special difficulties faced by people with mental retardation in becoming part of the movement for self-advocacy and civil rights Triano noted:

Hannah Arendt once said that, “the most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.” Since its founding, the disabilities rights movement in the U.S. has served as a strong voice for radical revolutionary change. But

no radical revolutionary force can remain so as long as it refuses to constantly evaluate itself and adapt according to the demands and needs of the changing times. When the strategies we use start to exclude and offend key segments of our community, allow participation by only those privileged members who can afford to participate, and rely on a tactic of secrecy to the point where it becomes an access barrier for members of our community with cognitive and other disabilities, then we have ceased to be radical and revolutionary. (Triano & Obara, 2005, p. 3)

The importance of changing not only words but concepts concerning what we have called mental retardation for decades has been emphasized by scholars who have examined the importance of this moment in the history of the field. Danforth (2002) cautioned that simply choosing seemingly stigma-free terms will not solve the problems that have plagued the field of mental retardation. He pointed out that if we only change the words we use, then terms like intellectual disability or developmental disability “will likely begin to accumulate cultural stigma the moment they are adopted” (Danforth, 2002, p. 52). Walsh (2002) observed, in fact, that when new terms have been proposed, they have never been intended to create negative stereotypes. On the contrary, he noted that:

the terms we employ are simply tools we happen to be using at the moment. When they wear out, we should get new ones. In an ironic way, perhaps, that is precisely what has been happening without our realizing it—how else, in little more than a century, could we have gone from idiocy to feeble mindedness to mental deficiency to mental retardation? (p. 72)

Our questions in this article are specific to the term mental retardation. Our review of events of the field during the last century yielded a general picture of movement from older terminology to mental retardation. What is not so clear from our study of histories of the field, however, is where the term came from originally and when it was adopted as a substitute for previous terminology. As the term now seems to be passing away, our questions are the following: From whence came mental retardation? What does the answer to that question have to teach us today?

The earliest reference to the term retardation that we have found was written by George Twitmyer, Superintendent of Schools in Wilmington, Delaware, and published in 1907. It is a remarkable document given the focus at the time on what was called “feeblemindedness” and the growing emphasis on the institutionalization of children and adults with this diagnosis. In explaining how the term retardation was being used at that time in schools, he said:

For several years the failure of many pupils to be promoted regularly from grade to grade—retardation—has been a subject for the serious consideration of all connected with the management of the Wilmington schools. With the hope of ascertaining definitely the causes of retardation, two lines of inquiry were instituted; one bearing on the course of study and the quality of teaching in the several grades, the other bearing directly upon the individual child. (p. 98)

In reporting the results of his study he wrote:

The causes of mental retardation as discovered by our teachers, may be roughly stated as follows, viz: irregularity in attendance and truancy; bad or indifferent domestic conditions and low ideals of life and conduct; want of parental care and discipline; vicious associates; malnutrition and fatigue; defective eye-sight, defective hearing and such physical defects as catarrh, enlarged tonsils and adenoids; tobacco and alcoholic poisoning; the sequellae of scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, whooping cough and typhoid fever; chorea and nervousness manifested in mental irritability, depression, emotional excitement, morbid fears, lack of self-control, persistent ideas, weakness of memory and concentration, exaggerated mobility, tremors and twitching movements of groups of muscles; stammering, stuttering, and other developmental defects. (p. 99)

Twitmyer's list of causes of mental retardation includes almost all of the categories of special education as they are defined today. Most impressive in his article is his challenge to educators regarding the needs of these students.

Every school has some unfortunate children who cannot keep pace with their more fortunate neighbors; they are known as “backward children, dullards or defectives.” These children are often burdened with some physical defect or mortgaged by some inherited abnormality which, if properly diagnosed and treated, may be relieved. Children are dullards by the law of cause and effect. The dullness or retardation of every child is the effect of some cause, sometimes trivial, sometimes serious, but generally discoverable

and remediable. It is the duty, nay the high privilege, of the teacher to discover the retardation, diagnose its causes, where possible, and suggest to parents the proper treatment. (p. 98)

A more specific definition of retardation in relation to school performance was offered a year later by Cornman (1908), Superintendent of Philadelphia's public schools. He observed that since graded schools and compulsory attendance laws were established, the issue of promotion from grade to grade had come to be based on academic performance and that the child:

who fails of promotion and therefore requires more than a single year or term to do the work regularly allotted, is "retarded" in comparison with those who have progressed at the normal pace. It is a matter of indifference ... whether the cause resides in the child himself, in home or school conditions, or in a combination of these and other factors. (p. 245)

Cornman (1908) analyzed data from five city school systems and concluded that the number of students found to be retarded increased as students progressed through the grades: the number of children falling behind increased dramatically through the fourth or fifth grade and then decreased, seemingly because older children tended to drop out after failing to succeed in school. Cornman also provided his own list of causes of retardation:

A certain proportion of the retardation is due to the fact that pupils are already over age on entering school [therefore they were considered below "average" for their grade] ... In some cities a large number of foreign born children are retarded on account of difficulty with the language. ... A certain percentage of children have serious physical or mental defects, which prohibit normal progress in regular classes and these go to swell the retardation figures in every school system ... another cause of retardation which operates in schools as in all undertakings under human management, is inefficiency, inefficiency of a particular teacher, principal, superintendent, or administrative system. (pp. 254–255)

"Laggards," Schools, and Retardation

In 1909, the book *Laggards in Our Schools* was published under the auspices of the Russell Sage Foundation. The research on which the book was based had been conducted by Leonard Ayres, Director of the Department of Education and Statistics for that foundation. Throughout the book,

he referred to students who were not at the appropriate grade level for their age as retarded. He did so without regard for the possible causes of retardation in individual students or groups of students. Although he found that retardation was a more serious problem in some school divisions than in others, he found it to be a widespread and serious problem in American society in general. With regard to the numerous city school systems he studied, Ayres reported that on the “average about 33 percent of all pupils in our public schools belong to the class ‘retarded’” (p. 3).

In his report, Ayres (1909) emphasized that there was no single cause of retardation. He discussed, in fact, some earlier claims as to the sources of retardation in public schools. In speaking of his findings regarding immigrant children, for example, he found that in general:

There is little relation between the percentage of foreigners in the different cities and the amount of retardation found in the schools. Some of the most foreign cities make very good records, while in some of our most American cities school conditions are very bad indeed. In the country as a whole there are more illiterates proportionately among native whites of native parents than among native whites of foreign parents. (p. 6)

After dismissing immigrant status, language differences, gender, and other demographic differences as major sources of retardation, Ayres (1909) pointed to race differences as a notable source of variation in rates of retardation: “In Medford, Massachusetts, only 7.5% percent of the children are retarded according to the standard adopted, while in Memphis, Tennessee, among the colored children, 75 per cent are retarded” (p. 3). Ayres made no further comment on this disparity. It speaks, however, to the overrepresentation and disproportionate representation of minority students in some categories of special education today.

Lightner Whitmer: What Is Meant by Retardation?

Lightner Witmer was one of the first American psychologists, and he was the editor of *The Psychological Clinic*. In 1910, he wrote an article for that journal that is reminiscent of articles that have been published about mental retardation in recent years. Under the title “What Is Meant by Retardation?” he made several statements that were prophetic of the direction of the field of mental retardation for decades to come. He prefaced these comments with a discussion of the historical work of Itard, Sequin, and others; and he clearly linked his use of the word retardation to this tradition:

Retardation is not a disease, it is not a brain defect, nor is it necessarily the result of a brain defect. ... It is a mental status, a stage of mental development. Take a perfectly normal child of six years of age and let him arrive at the age of ten with the same characteristics that he had at six and he will manifest retardation. Let him arrive at the age of twenty with characteristics entirely normal for a child of six, and his retardation will not only be all the more severe, but will be the cause of a permanent arrest of development, for the reason that he will then have passed the formative or developmental period (p. 127)

Goddard and Permanent Retardation

By 1910, Goddard was heavily invested as a psychologist in the existing terminology of what was known as feeble-mindedness. He was also heavily entrenched in the argument that the most appropriate placement for children with feeble-mindedness (including those “high-grade” morons that he was most interested in studying) was a residential institution (Smith, 1985). He was also in the midst of his major research efforts to support his eugenic arguments regarding the hereditary basis of feeble-mindedness. It must have been of considerable interest to him, and perhaps some consternation, to know of the conversations concerning mental retardation that were taking place among “schoolmen” and some of his fellow psychologists.

In September of 1910, Goddard addressed the term retarded and placed it into the context of the prevailing thought concerning “subnormal” children:

It is sufficient for the present purpose if we understand by a subnormal child one who is behind his grade. We shall then subdivide these into the temporarily subnormal, or retarded, and the permanent subnormal, or arrested.

The temporarily subnormal children are those whose backwardness is due to sickness, physical impairment or unfavorable environment. When the cause is removed, the child progresses at normal rate.

The permanently subnormal children, if not at once totally arrested, are at least “permanently retarded” so that, while not absolutely standing still, they yet progress but

slowly and become increasingly below the normal child of corresponding age, finally becoming completely arrested. These are the feebleminded. (p. 242)

In speaking to the National Education Association, Goddard (1910) elaborated on his views about retardation by saying that if it was due to illness, poor school attendance, or being new to a school, the child would soon overcome his lagging school performance. Otherwise, Goddard argued:

We must conclude that the child is either a moron or an imbecile. Such children will always be behind and will finally stop development completely sometime before they are 12 years of age. ... First, they must be removed from the regular classes. One of these children will easily take as much time of the teacher as four normal children, while he may cause her as much disturbance and mental fatigue as all the rest of the school. (p. 244)

Ultimately, in Goddard's thinking the best place for such children was a facility like the Training School of Feebleminded Boys and Girls at Vineland (Smith, 1985).

Mental Retardation: The Lost Trail

For many years, the terminology advocated by Goddard prevailed. Terms such as idiot, imbecile, moron, feebleminded, and mentally deficient continued to be used well into the 1940s. Goode (2002) has documented the efforts of Elizabeth Boggs and others who pushed successfully for the adoption of the term mental retardation in the post-World War II era. We have been unable to find documentation, however, of the life of the term from its use prior to World War I until its widespread use after World War II. Assistance with this question from the readers of *Mental Retardation* is welcomed.

An Invocation From Leonard Ayres

Ayres (1909) believed that the “laggards” of his book title were children who were learning in school that they were failures. He saw these “retarded” students as a tragedy in American public education. He closed his book with the following comments. They seem to be as important today as when he wrote them in 1909 for understanding what is, perhaps, truly an essence of the intellectual disability experience, regardless of what it is called.

Under our present system there are large numbers of children who are destined to lives of failure. We know them in the schools as the children who are always a little behind physically, a little behind intellectually and a little behind in the power to do. ... There is no teacher but will recognize the picture of ... the boys and girls with whom this book deals. ... They constitute a large part of all of the school children in most ... of our school systems. These are the children that many of our schools are conforming in the habit of failure. ... Success is necessary to every human being. To live in an atmosphere of failure is tragedy. ... [it is] not an intellectual matter at all but a moral matter. (p. 220)

Indeed! More important than changing terms is changing our minds about the needs and potentials of the people with the disabilities to whom the words refer.

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