

Laura Bridgman, mental retardation and the question of differential advocacy.

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Abstract:

Accounts of the life of Laura Bridgman, who was deaf, was blind, and had a reduced sense of smell and taste, illustrate the differential in the valuing of, and advocacy for, people with mental retardation and people with disabilities. Bridgman (1829–1889) attended the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston and was tutored by Samuel Gridley Howe (1801–1876). Howe was an early advocate of education for students with mental retardation, however, when he obtained funding to educate these students, his blind students resented deeply the presence of students with mental retardation. Bridgman's journal entries outlining her resentment toward these students illustrate that she may have been acutely aware of the very real potential of being perceived incompetent and of the social consequences inherent in that perception. Bridgman's attitude can perhaps be explained as an attempt to avoid stigma by association and can explain the phenomenon of differential advocacy.

Keywords: developmental disabilities | disability | advocacy | education | specialized education

Article:

DISABILITY AND INVISIBILITY

When the writer Ralph Ellison died in 1994, a great deal of media attention was focused on his novel *Invisible Man*. That book, first published in 1952, is not, as the title suggests, science fiction. It is a fictional "autobiography" of a young man of African American heritage. Through it he relates his experiences of social and personal isolation. In the opening sentences Ellison's character declares:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (p. 2)

Ellison's character goes on to explain that his invisibility is created because others view him with eyes that are dominated by prejudice, bias, and false assumptions.

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes ... you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. (p. 3)

Ellison's powerful words about the construction of "inner eyes" helped his readers understand in a new way the experience of race as more than a set of physical characteristics or a shared social history.

Ellison (1952) demonstrated that the meaning of ethnic difference has often been constructed by powerful majority groups in ways that have resulted in oppression and racism. There has also been a long history of the social construction of the meaning of disability. These constructions have contributed to the invisibility of persons with disabilities in ways that are analogous to the invisibility created by racism. It is interesting to note, however, that the degree of this invisibility may be determined by the type of disability. It is also important to understand that people with differing disabilities have not always been united by their shared experiences. Instead, it is evident that invisibility has sometimes existed just as strikingly between people with different disabilities as between people with and without disabilities.

People with mental retardation have been among the most socially invisible of all people with disabilities. Even the actions of Helen Keller, the great advocate for people with disabilities and economic disadvantages, indicate that she placed a lesser value on the lives of people with mental retardation than on people with other disabilities (Smith, 1997). Another revealing example of this differential in the valuing of, and advocacy for, people with mental retardation is to be found in accounts of the life of Laura Bridgman.

LAURA BRIDGMAN: THE FIRST MIRACLE

Laura Bridgman was born into a prominent Massachusetts family in 1829. At the age of 2 she contracted scarlet fever, which left her deaf, blind, and with a reduced ability to smell or taste. She was, therefore, virtually unable to communicate with the world around her except through her sense of touch. In 1837, she came to live at Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. There she was tutored by the founder of the school, Samuel Gridley Howe. Howe devised a teaching method that built on her ability to feel the differences in the shapes of objects. Through drill and practice in distinguishing the shapes of objects that were familiar to her, he led her to the understanding that these objects could be given names. At first he used labels with raised print on them to assign the names that Laura came to comprehend. He then taught her to form these words using movable letters. He was thus teaching her by methods similar to those that were used for other students at Perkins who were blind. Eventually, however, he shifted to a communication method that had been developed for students who were deaf. He began teaching

her words using fingerspelling. He spelled words into her hand and then associated them with objects and actions. This was the method, of course, that would later come to be associated with Anne Sullivan's teaching of Helen Keller.

Laura's fame and Howe's success in teaching her were later eclipsed, in fact, by the extraordinary accomplishments of Helen and Anne. It is ironic that little note has been taken of the fact that Anne Sullivan, herself a student at Perkins, learned to communicate with Laura Bridgman and then applied what she had learned in her teaching of Helen Keller (Smith, 1987).

LAURA AND THE TABULA RASA

For several decades during the 19th century, however, Laura Bridgman attracted international attention, and Samuel Gridley Howe's work with her was heralded with as much admiration as the "Miracle Worker" would later receive. She became a symbol to many American intellectuals, "exemplifying the power of enlightened educational techniques and their capacity to transform seemingly hopeless cases" (Gallaher, 1995, p. 282). Laura was held up as a model of Victorian womanhood because of her courage and intelligence in the face of grave challenges. Some girls reportedly admired her so much that they

poked their doll's eyes out and named them [sic] 'Laura', while reluctant young students were reminded to always compare their own efforts with those of the little deaf and blind girl who had accomplished so much in the face of such overwhelming obstacles. (Freeburg, 1992, p. 199)

Howe's accounts of Laura's education, published in the yearly reports of the Perkins Institute, attracted the attention of leading philosophers, theologians, and writers of the time. Historians who have studied Howe's reports are convinced that he recognized from the beginning of his work with Laura that her education would be of interest in scholarly circles. His efforts to teach her may have been motivated by the deepest altruism, but, as Freeburg (1992) noted:

Howe recognized from the start that Laura Bridgman was not just another afflicted child in need, but 'an object of peculiar interest.' If he should succeed in teaching her to communicate, he surely realized, his work would have far-reaching religious and philosophical implications that would capture the attention of the world. (Freeburg, 1992, pp. 194-195)

For more than a century, John Locke's theory that the mind is a blank slate had dominated philosophy. The mind, according to Locke, was created by the experiential "writings" on that slate. The senses, therefore, determined the material character of the mind. If this portrait of the mind was accurate, then Howe would find that Laura's mind was empty of all images, including moral or religious formulations. On the contrary, as Howe began to communicate with Laura about ideas, he found that her mind was not a tabula rasa. He described her internal life as a soul jailed in a body that was "active, and struggling continually not only to put itself in communication with things without, but to manifest what is going on within itself" (S. Howe,

1893, p. 9). Howe described Laura's internal life, as he discovered it in its natural and untouched state, as being of the highest moral character. He wrote that:

Her moral sense, is remarkably acute; few children are so affectionate or so scrupulously conscientious, few are so sensible of their own rights or regardful of the rights of others. (p. 50)

LAURA AND THE QUESTION OF "DIFFERENTIAL ADVOCACY"

To support his argument that Laura was innately moral, Howe described her behavior toward other people after she had been liberated by his teaching and enabled to communicate. He reported that she was always eager to share with others and to help take care of sick people. He also said that she showed a keen sense of sympathy for people with disabilities. Howe noted, however, one exception to Laura's expressions of natural altruism. He said that she showed an "unamiable" lack of respect for the children at the Perkins Institute whom she considered to be mentally inferior to herself. Interpreting this as an understandable manifestation of her Anglo-Saxon heritage, he excused the advantage she took of these children when she expected them to "wait on her" (S. Howe, 1893, p. 20).

One of the most famous of Laura's powerful and influential visitors at Perkins was Charles Dickens. His admiration for her began when he read Howe's accounts of how he instructed Laura. It increased when he visited her in Boston. For Dickens, Laura Bridgman was

both charming and inspirational: a merry, graceful, and intelligent young girl, she seemed also to symbolize the possibility of spiritual awakening and redemption. (Gitter, 1991, p. 163)

Dickens (1842) described his visit to Laura at Perkins in *American Notes*. He relayed his impressions of her and quoted from Howe's reports. In his account he repeated Howe's observation that Laura had disdain for those children whom she believed to be intellectually inferior.

It has been remarked in former reports that she can distinguish different degrees of intellect in others, and that she soon regarded almost with contempt, a new-comer, when, after a few days, she discovered her weakness of mind. This unamiable part of her character has been more strongly developed during the past year.

She chooses for her friends and companions, those children who are intelligent, and can talk best with her; and she evidently dislikes to be with those who are deficient in intellect, unless, indeed, she can make them serve her purposes, which she is evidently inclined to do. (p. 39).

Laura was not the only student with both deafness and blindness that Samuel Howe attempted to teach. He was moderately successful in teaching a 12-year-old boy, Oliver Caswell, who had these disabilities. He worked with Laura and Oliver together at times and found Oliver "more affectionate and sympathetic than Laura, but not as quick or curious" (Meltzer, 1964, p. 101). Two other pupils with deafness-blindness spent short periods at Perkins with less

satisfactory results. One, Lucy Reed, was judged to have "subnormal intelligence" (Meltzer, 1964, p. 101).

Samuel Gridley Howe is a person of importance in the history of mental retardation. In addition to his work with students who had blindness and deafness-blindness, he was an early advocate for the education of students with mental retardation. In October of 1848 he convinced the legislature of Massachusetts to provide funding for a school for the "teaching and training of idiotic children" (M. Howe & Hall, 1904, p. 229). The school was initially housed at Perkins Institute. According to two of his daughters, however, Dr. Howe soon discovered that his blind students resented deeply the presence of the students with mental retardation under their roof. His daughters interpreted this resentment as an expression of fear that they might come to be associated with the mental retardation of these "weaker brethren" (p. 231). They quoted Laura Bridgman's journal as evidence of this feeling of resentment. Laura expressed the hope that the students with mental retardation would not actually come to Perkins and the fear that if they did they would "have our rooms ... [and] our nice sitting room in a few days" (M. Howe & Hall, 1904, p. 231).

STIGMA BY ASSOCIATION

Laura's fears regarding the perceived association between herself and her "weaker brethren" may not have been unfounded. Indeed, a literature has developed around the very notion of the transferability of social stigma: the process in which a "normal" person is seen by others as possessing the characteristics of a stigma merely by a close association with a stigmatized other. Goffman (1963) wrote about the acquisition of a social stigma by affiliation. Research has accumulated on the varying contexts in which stigma by association operates. Mehta and Farino (1988) demonstrated that students portrayed as having fathers who were either depressed, alcoholic, or incarcerated were perceived to have more serious living adjustment problems in college than were those portrayed as having nonstigmatized fathers. Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, and Russell (1994) further elucidated the process of stigma by association. They found that people clearly identified as heterosexual were perceived as less sociable (e.g., friendly, likable) and less civil (e.g., trustworthy or honest) when viewed conversing with persons identified as being homosexual. Was Laura's (and other's) resentment toward sharing close quarters with people who had mental retardation an effort to avoid the acquisition of yet another stigma?

There is evidence to suggest that mental retardation carries the most debilitating socially constructed stigma, more than alcoholism, depression, crime, or sexual orientation. As Edgerton (1993) pointed out:

One might speculate that no other stigma is as basic as mental retardation in the sense that a person so labeled is thought to be so completely lacking in basic competence. (p. 184)

Gibbons (1985) contended that persons with mental retardation themselves are acutely aware of this stigma and tend to react with derogation of their own peers' social competence and physical attractiveness.

The threat of being socially ostracized may also lead some families to engage in behaviors that minimize the threat of associated stigma. Birenbaum (1970, 1971, 1992) has commented extensively on the great lengths that parents of children with mental retardation may go to in an attempt to maintain the appearance of a nonstigmatized or "normal" family lifestyle. He concluded that some parents avoid agencies that provide services in order to maintain the appearance of a "conventional" family lifestyle.

Laura Bridgman may have been acutely aware of the very real potential of being perceived as incompetent and of the social consequences inherent in that perception. The threat of a devalued social identity provides a powerful incentive for maintaining both physical and social distance from people more seriously stigmatized. As Goffman (1963) suggested:

In general, the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual ... provides a reason why such relations tend either to be avoided or to be terminated, where existing. (p. 30)

Perhaps it is this attempt to avoid stigma by association that explains the attitude of Laura Bridgman toward people with mental retardation. It may also explain the phenomenon of differential advocacy.

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