

ON THE LANGUAGE OF MENTAL RETARDATION

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The Situation

Don't make the mistake. Rick Heber didn't settle the matter. Herbert Grossman isn't settling the matter. In days long past, neither did Tredgold, Goddard, Wallin or Doll. And in the days to come, neither will you or I. Mental Retardation is how we wish to define it. And it sounds exactly how we want to call it. We're allowed to redefine or rename it anytime we get an official quorum to agree, which we've been wont to do incessantly, and which we actually do periodically. Mental retardation is our invention--very real, of course, as are so many other human inventions. However, people not only reinvent very old wheels but also such very new wheels that the fresh product is altogether different from the original in form, substance and purpose. So too, Mental Retardation--at least from time to time. So too, Learning Disabilities--even moreso; hence this attempt to foster analogies from my field to yours.

The Terms

Over the years, many terms have been used to label this thing, this state, we now call "mental retardation." To look for the origins of those terms is like looking for the origins of language. That is, although there was a time when our ancestors did not have language, and today we have it,

it would be fruitless to look for the point at which language arose. So the labels and metaphors we use to communicate concerning mental retardation developed naturally more than they were created intentionally. But while we don't well enough know how the field got started and grew, much less how the language was created to understand it, we do know that some terms are used interchangeably and others in specific context when speaking to this problem. As most readers know, the favorite generic label today is "mental retardation." In the past, but here and there to this day, the following terms were/are used to identify the problem: mental deficiency, mental subnormality, feeble-mindedness, mental handicap, and slow learner. In the past, the term "moron" was used to identify those we now generally call the mildly retarded, and whom the schools call the educable mentally retarded or "EMR." In the past, the term "imbecile" was used to identify those the schools now label the "trainable" mentally retarded or "TMR." Today the "severely mentally retarded" and/or "profoundly mentally retarded" have replaced the "idiot" as a designation for the most seriously retarded. Of course, as labels have been employed to identify various groups and subgroups on the intellectual hierarchy, there are numerous groupings to categorize by etiology (or causation) of disability. For example, some nomenclature schemes differentiate between people with demonstrable clinical syndromes and those who are aclinical (without obvious pathology). Still other schemes differentiate on the basis of level of independence, physiognomy, or where the person lives (e.g., in an institution or in the community). There were even terms used to separate those in the institution who work (worker boy or girl) from those who don't.

Certainly related to the Babel we have created as our language of mental retardation is the incomprehensibility of much of our history as a field. For example, Victor, The Wild Boy of Aveyron, was important not

because one can learn from his life that wild boys are noble and educable, but that one can learn from this story that all people are noble and educable (Itard, 1932). That distinction doesn't appear in the textbooks which recount the story of Victor and his teacher; and to miss that distinction is to miss the main point of Itard's work. After all, why should we be surprised if deliberate and systematic training succeeded in helping a child change, even a severely handicapped child, even a wild boy? A visit to any circus demonstrates to the most reluctant nativist that lions can be tamed, elephants can be trained to do things that elephants don't typically do, seals learn tricks, and dogs master the most intricate routines. There is even some evidence that dolphins communicate with each other and monkeys communicate with us. The most compelling lesson to be learned from the saga of The Wild Boy of Aveyron is not that capability is educable but, rather, that there are incapable people on earth who need and deserve our attention--and we have been ignoring them. The great surprise should not be that Victor learned, but in the very fact of our astonishment that he did learn. What might be also surprising to people today is that a medical doctor once would devote a significant period of his life to so mundane an activity as teaching one severely handicapped child. That's almost unbelievable in our generation. Yet, despite the most illuminating and sensitive recent books about Victor on what Shattuck calls, The Forbidden Experiment (1980), the field of mental retardation itself continues to persevere on the "educability" issue. Was this a psychotic child, an idiot child or a hoax? We in the field ponder without resolution a question that Itard, himself, asked and answered to his satisfaction: "This must be a human creature." And so, the field of mental retardation is left with little more than being "stuck" on unraveling Itard's curriculum. Did Locke contribute more to Itard's thinking than Condillac?

Or we speculate on what eventually happened to the child whom Itard's housekeeper, Madame Guerin, took care of--after Itard, in despair, fled the situation. Despite the illuminating histories from those outside of the field in recent years, we in mental retardation still worry about whether Itard's wild boy was or wasn't an incurable idiot. But the lesson we must eventually learn if we are to help such people is that every child, even a wild child, is "a human creature." And on that issue, we spend little or no time worrying about the meaning of such an assertion, much less the consequences if we were to deny it.

Confused language begets confused thinking. In our day, the bricks of Babel were used to build the mental retardation industry. For some people, the analogy of the Tower of Babel to the mental retardation monolith is not inconceivable.

The Understandings

Mental retardation, learning disabilities, mental illness, those and other disabilities are inventions--important, useful, effective, but inventions. A person is mentally retarded because an agency or some official body designated him or her as mentally retarded. One is labeled retarded, learning disabled, you name it, in the same way one is labeled a college student, or a Democrat, or a Republican, or a Rotarian--by being pulled or admitted to the group. What does mental retardation mean--actually? What we--professionals in consort with government and consumers--mean it to mean. Ditto learning disabilities. Once upon a time, mental retardation was incurable and irremediable and occurred at birth or early age. Today, it can happen almost anytime--at least through adolescence, and there are large government grants aimed at not only preventing but reversing the condition.

Once upon a time, we said that mental retardation included three percent of the population. Later we revised that to permit as much as sixteen percent of the population to be labeled "retarded." But on reconsideration, we changed the definition again, so today no more than two percent of the people are so labeled. And if you think mental retardation is mercurial insofar as the way we have changed our language, and thus modified our population, examine the history of the learning disabilities movement. After the shock, one will either laugh or cry or, most probably, say, "What the hell!"

References

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