

Insults according to notions of intelligence: Perspectives from education and newsmedia

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Abstract

Background: The terms idiot, imbecile, and moron are generally associated with notions of intelligence, having served both scientific and mundane roles across cultural-historical contexts and in many different countries. This study seeks to explore the degree to which the use of these terms is an everyday part of our lives and to map out the meanings being attached to them.

Methods: This study reports on their current usage in two arenas: within 29 academic papers published from 2016 to 2021, reporting on interviews or observations undertaken in educational contexts; and within 134 articles from four English language newspapers published in the first three months of 2021. Using a discursive and thematic approach to the analysis, it considers the degree to which these may be considered slur or taboo words, and whether they can be linked to discriminatory practices frequently experienced by groups with whom they are associated.

Findings: It is evident is that people use the terms differently in different arenas. However, they see them as negative, associate them with stereotypical characteristics, are happy to apply them to others, but want to avoid having them applied to themselves.

Conclusion: This study shows how widely these words are used across social contexts, and suggests that as with other historical terms for marginalized populations we need to regard them as slurs and treat them as taboo.

KEYWORDS

intelligence, slurs, taboo words

Accessible summary

- The study looked at the use of the words Idiot, Moron and Imbecile in 29 academic papers and 134 Newspaper articles.
- The terms were used by a many different people involved in education and in the news media.
- These three words are used to belittle others and people do not wish to have them used about themselves.
- Idiot, imbecile and moron are recognised as disapproving words, but they also act as slurs and so perhaps they ought to be forbidden.

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1 | BACKGROUND

This study is premised upon two key understandings:

- Notions of intelligence are a defining feature of education (Swann et al., 2012) and people's place in wider society (Rix & Ingham, 2021).
- Language and the terms we use both help to constitute and display ingroup and outgroup status, enforcing community boundaries, bringing people into a community, and casting them out (Herbert & Kukla, 2016).

These two key understandings potentially come together in the use of three words: idiot, imbecile, and moron. These terms are typically associated with a lack of "intelligence" (Conley, 2010) and were the dominant scientific terms at the start of the 20th century. These concepts were included for example in the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act in the UK, introduced by Goddard to the National Education Association of the United States in 1910, and by Sutton to the Australasian Medical Congress in 1911. I have included moron, alongside Idiot and Imbecile, even though it was a term introduced in the United States, and was the equivalent to the English term "feeble-minded" and the Australian term "mental defective" (Williams, 1996), because of its continued usage in the public discourse, and because it was the use of moron in a Daily Mail headline in 2018 that sparked this study.

Status is commonly defined by an ability to demonstrate specific knowledge in specific contexts, with superior status to those with the knowledge and even greater status to experts who can deepen that knowledge (Schoën, 1983). We have consequently developed a whole range of terms which are associated with this knowledge hierarchy (Rix, 2006). Formally these range from gifted and talented through to a long list of deficit categories, such as special educational needs, learning difficulties, additional support needs, learning disabilities, intellectual disability, cognitive impairment, emotional and behavioral difficulties, and so forth. There are also terms which have moved from the everyday into the formal realm of science and then back out again; terms such as idiot or imbecile. Others emerged from science before making the transition into the everyday, such as moron and cretin.

The scientific and legal status of such terms is evident, for example, in the first specific provision in the UK framed around people's position within the knowledge hierarchy, which was established in Highgate in 1847 and was called the Asylum for Idiots. Similarly, in 1889 the Royal Commission on the Blind and Deaf distinguished between the feeble-minded, imbeciles, and idiots (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1978). The global spread of these terms is demonstrated too by their presence across institutional texts, for instance in Huey's "Backward and Feeble-Minded Children":

Idiots—Those so defective that the mental development never exceeds that of a normal child of about 2 years.

Imbeciles—Those whose development is higher than that of an idiot, but whose intelligence does not exceed that of a normal child of about 7 years.

Morons—Those whose mental development is above that of an imbecile, but does not exceed that of a normal child of about 12 years. (Huey, 1912, pp. 6–7).

Such terms were still evident in legislation nearly a century later. For example, "imbecile" and "feeble-minded" could be found in Indian official documentation in 2001 (Rao, 2001) and "idiot" was included in British Common Law until 2006.

These terms have now moved out of the medical discourse (e.g., Ward, 1998). Their brief period of being what Hacking referred to as a "scientific kind" (Mendes, 2015) is behind us. However, they are still labels of a "mundane kind" (Mendes, 2015), used as part of our informal institutional language, sitting alongside words with a diametric meaning in the knowledge hierarchy; for instance lawyers continue to refer to a "moron in a hurry" as a test of copyright law, and schools call gifted and talented sessions "Genius Hours" (Ginsberg & Coke, 2019). In 2018, the Mail on Sunday newspaper could go with a headline "Are these the Morons who ruined Christmas?" while the next year the Mail's departing editor could be called a "newspaperman of genius"; the President of the United States could refer to himself as a "stable genius" while the Brazilian president could refer to protesting teachers and students as "idiots" and "imbeciles." The terms seem to have a role to play within educational contexts too. For example, before undertaking this study, the author noted how pupils refer to each other as idiots because they are different in some way, for example in relation to their faith (Vikdahl, 2019) or when referring to a teacher's academic prowess (Storage et al., 2016) and its usage was evident in the language of academics too (Bancroft-Billings, 2020).

The shifting meaning and consequential impact of the use of these terms reflects the manner in which they act as part of our confused reification of the notion of intelligence (McDonagh, 2008). The discourse which surrounds the history of institutions associated with the "idiot class" reflects a view that people "lacking intelligence" are a danger to themselves and others. Consequently, our institutional goals have been to cure and shelter the defective and protect society from them (Wolfensberger, 1975). The idea of this class of person being a danger to society was (and perhaps still is) a clear message from our institutions, as was the inability of "these people" to mix with "others" or to be accepted by "others." Alongside this long cultural history of otherness, was an association with the notion of fool through such stereotypes as the village idiot. The confused understanding about the meaning and impact of these terms is also reflected in current dictionary definitions, which frequently note that it is now offensive to apply the word to a person who would have been put in that category (e.g., Merriam-Webster, 2022: The FreeDictionary, 2022) but do not suggest it is offensive when applied generally.

Other words which arose in similar contexts are not evident in the same way. Retard and cretin in particular are seen more clearly as taboo words to be avoided. For example, in Australia, the courts have found against someone for describing someone as a cretin (Meade, 2021) and in the United Kingdom a politician has been berated from all sides for using the term (Elgot, 2018).

Similarly, there are many websites where you can find people bemoaning that retard is now taboo (e.g., Perlman, 2019); while in contrast, there are large scale online campaigns where hundreds of thousands of people have taken a pledge not to use it (Special Olympics, 2022). Other terms such as special, spastic, and mental are also used in derogatory ways, and people may associate them with issues of intellect but they have other meanings too and are still in current formal usage in different forms across a range of institutions.

2 | WHAT KINDS OF WORDS ARE THEY?

The linguistic appellation for these terms is debatable. Idiot, imbecile, and moron are pejoratives; generally, they are not taboo words and they may or may not be slurs. Pejoratives are expressions intended to insult or disparage, and which allow speakers to communicate emotional states beyond the underlying meaning (or truth) of what is said (Hom, 2012). Taboo words are extreme pejoratives, words which people know are socially frowned upon. Using natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) nomenclature they can be understood as words that are “very bad if someone says” (Goddard, 2015). Slurs have also been described as prohibited words, whose uses are offensive if those prohibitions matter to you (Anderson & Lepore, 2013). More generally slurs are described as expressions which derogate a particular group, defined by an intrinsic property and subordinating them within some structure of power relations, whose use invokes a set of externally determined, culturally, and historically situated attitudes (Davis & McCreedy, 2020); they denigrate individuals based on an aspect of their identity, placing them within an ideological space, with the potential to affect our expectations of them or our responses toward them (Burnett, 2020). In using slurs, even if they are aimed at a single individual, all members of the named group are potentially harmed by their use (Diaz Legaspe, 2018). It is suggested that the need for a slur to target particular groups or classes means that terms such as moron, idiot, and imbecile are not slurs:

The apparent presumption is that anyone who uses the N-word slurs all black people, but one who uses “moron” needn't be slurring every mentally disabled person (Anderson & Lepore, 2013, p. 26).

A central component of the debate around whether a word is a slur or not is linked to the need for a word or phrase that can be used in place of the slur and which is not derogatory. The need for a neutral counterpart is contested. Some suggest that slurs do not require an associated demographic category at all (Ashwell, 2016). They recognize that they can be associated with sanctioning people for behavior that deviates from dominant social expectations and norms. Diaz Legaspe (2018), focussing upon gender norms, identifies these as normalizing slurs, and maintains these vary from demographic slurs that have neutral counterparts. The challenge for Ashwell (2016) is that without a neutral correlate, reclamation of terms (she focuses upon “slut”) require changes in social norms.

3 | IS THERE A NEUTRAL CORRELATE?

“Do we insult people by calling them “idiots” because we want to align them with those devalued individuals whose intellectual, social and moral capacities are considered subnormal?” (McDonagh, 2008, p. 9).

The idea that there are no neutral counterparts for the notion of idiot, imbecile, and moron and that use of these terms does not invoke or target a particular group or class, is itself contestable.

In the context of English schools at the time of writing, for example, there are a range of groupings which can be seen to equate with these terms. The notion of idiot could be equated with the category of severe learning difficulties, an imbecile might be reframed as moderate learning difficulties, and a moron might be associated either with moderate learning difficulties or with the category of Social, Emotional and Mental Health. These groups of people experience historically and culturally situated stereotypical responses on a daily basis. People with learning difficulties are, for example, far more likely to be seen as worthy of abuse and to be dismissed by support services as the perpetrators of violence rather than as the victims (Sin et al., 2010). Along with people identified for behavioral difference, people identified with learning difficulties are also used to judgemental responses, particularly verbal abuse, which make them feel excluded and othered (Wayland et al., 2020).

Any claim for a neutral correlate must however be qualified by a recognition of the unreliability and permeability of the boundaries around such categories. Even if we may think we are talking about the same thing when we speak about a category associated with intellectual difference, we are probably not (Rix, 2022). Even within the same country the application of such concepts varies hugely: for example in 2019 in England 9% of children with a statutory assessment were diagnosed in one local authority as having a moderate learning disability, but over 40% in another, 1.1% were diagnosed with a severe learning difficulty in one authority versus 7.5% in another, and 4.6% in one authority were placed in the Social, Emotional and Mental Health category versus 22.6% elsewhere (Department for Education [DFE], 2020). The application of these labels does not depend on who a person is, but where they were when the assessment was undertaken and who undertook the assessment (Rix, 2015). The chaotic technical application of these terms however does not change many of the social presumptions about their existence. As is evident in debates around other protected characteristics (Equality Act 2010, 2010), such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race, many people recognize the fluid nature of categories while other people regard the boundaries of identity in far more restricted terms. It is worth noting too, that the behavior toward people with learning difficulties (identified in the previous paragraph) suggests other meanings are associated with their label.

It is also important to recognise the lack of consistency both in the definition of insults and taboo words over time resulting from their heterogeneous, context- and mode-dependent nature (Jay & Jay, 2013). The three concepts at the centre of this paper, absorb and drop meaning, varying across the ages and between spaces, “slipping

in out of different realms of understanding" (McDonagh, 2008, p. 21). In writings before the 1600s, for example, "fools" and "idiots" was used for anyone who was not part of their elite group; agricultural workers, women, nongentlefolk, melancholics, it was even used to refer to the disciples before they met Jesus. Idiocy was a matter of class and background (Goodey, 2011). Goodey demonstrates how in the centuries before the mid-eighteen hundreds, the gradual shift in arguments about religious texts and the nature of humanity's relationship with their God led to the emergence of the very categories and processes of categorizing which made it possible and desirable to start to identify all these different groups and then associate them with disruption of the norm; the groups which subsequently became formally labeled as idiots, imbeciles, morons and so forth.

"The idiot has been transformed into a resilient contrast group, a category of people against whom we rational modern (and post-modern) folk can identify ourselves, to affirm our intelligence and to assert our claims to respect and justice." (McDonagh, 2008, p. 2).

4 | MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Our understanding of idiocy and associated concepts as well as our identification and treatment of those to whom it applies "intersect with cultural and political notions in shaping a broad social understanding of human relations and human identities" (McDonagh, 2008, p. 20). It, therefore, seems important to consider the use of these terms and their potential interpretation, not only because research tends to focus upon more socially contentious swear words (Fägersten, 2014), but also because their impact is unlikely to be clear cut. Offensive language can be seen to contribute to the harm experienced within cases of harassment and discrimination and may have a consequence as a form of verbal abuse, but has not been shown to be harmful when used in passing, conversational and cathartic ways (Jay, 2009). However, the broader literature suggests that notions of intelligence (which lies at the heart of many definitions of idiocy, imbecility, and moronism):

- Impacts on the lives, identities, and relationships of individuals, families, and communities across the lifespan and within and between generations.
- Creates and perpetuates hierarchies and divisions according to ethnicity, social class, gender, and disability.
- Has a fundamental influence on individual and community educational experiences (Rix & Ingham, 2021).

This study is a first step in exploring the use and impact of these terms. In explicating the meanings behind words, it seeks to provide insights into people's thinking and the shared understandings of linguistic communities (Wierzbicka, 2005). The choice of arenas for analysis reflects to some degree the author's experiences in the field of education and as a parent and sibling of people who have been identified with learning difficulties. The author's background is fundamentally as an educationalist rather than a linguist (though he

did undertake a Master's in Applied Linguistics many years ago). It was in reading academic papers within the education field, that he came across quotes which included these terms and started him asking how widely spread their use was. Similarly, he was aware of the terms in his everyday life and their evidence in the news media presented an opportunity to examine a source which used language for very different ends.

This study seeks to explore: *How are the terms idiot, imbecile and moron evidenced in the everyday arenas of education and newsmedia?* It examines the use of these terms as an everyday part of our lives, to map out the meanings being attached to them and to explore whether they may be considered to be slur or taboo words.

5 | METHOD

The study sought data from two sources.

- Texts which emerged within interviews or observations within educational contexts.
- Texts which were constructed with a public audience in mind.

The texts from an educational context were identified through a systematic search of the literature following protocols based upon methods established by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Center (EPPI-Centre) to seek out the use of these terms within academic research associated with education since 2016. These methods aim to be explicit, principled, and methodical, addressing a clearly defined research question, with standardized processes for identifying and reviewing the literature.

The databases Scopus and Ebsco were selected to give a breadth across English language educational journals.

- the following sources were searched in Ebsco: Education Research Complete, Education Administration Abstract, ERIC, British Education Index, APA Psycharticles, APA Psychinfo;
- using the search terms: ALL ("idiot" OR "moron" OR "imbecile") AND PUBYEAR > 2015 AND TITLE ("school" OR "education" OR "classroom") AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")).

In total, 89 titles and abstracts were downloaded, 56 from Scopus, and 33 from Ebsco. All these papers were examined to ensure that they included the keywords, were within an educational context, and were in English. Sixty papers were excluded at this phase, the most frequent reason being their selection by the database because of references to authors with the name of Moron. The final selection of 29 papers came mainly from the databases in Ebsco (27) with just a couple from Scopus (2). This included two pan-national papers, with texts from Denmark, Hong Kong, India, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Australia (2) Turkey (2), United Kingdom (11), and United States (11). These sources included 69 uses of idiot (+ 48 of idiocy and 14 of idiotic), one use of imbecile (+3 of imbecility), and one use of moron.

The texts constructed with a public audience in mind, involved examining popular English language newspapers in four countries to seek out the usage of these three terms since 2016. The four papers selected were The Sydney Morning Herald, The Times of India, The New York Times, and The Guardian. This provided three papers that can be regarded as left of center and one right of center (<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/>), all having begun in the 19th Century, with well-established readerships, a high volume of traffic, and a reputation for either medium or high levels of factual reporting. The search was undertaken on LexisNexis on 13th March 2021, using the search terms "idiot or moron or imbecile." The initial search suggested 7534 uses of these three terms from January 1, 2016 to March 12, 2021. This was not a manageable number for analysis and so a more limited search was undertaken from January 1, 2021 to March 1, 2021. The use of all three terms was apparent across countries but was predominantly evident in the UK and US papers.

- The Guardian 72
- The New York Times 76
- The Times of India 18
- The Sydney Morning Herald (Australia) 16

On downloading the full text, 10 were removed as they lacked enough text to provide suitable context and 38 were removed as duplicates. This left 134 articles for analysis. This produced 182 references to the three focus words. There were 166 examples of idiot, six examples of imbecile (+4 of imbeciles & 1 French usage), and 35 examples of moron.

As a point of reference during this same period in these same newspapers, two words that may be considered taboo appeared in 60 articles, one term related to race was used four times and one related to gender was used 54 times, the level of duplication was not assessed. Another taboo word, "retard" "retards," or "retarded" was used 31 times; on 18 occasions this was as a formal label for learning difficulties, four uses were as a verb, five were as a term to describe trading on the financial markets and three times it was a French phrase. There was only one example of it being used by someone as an insult and this was a quotation from a piece of poetry. This perhaps reflects the view that is evident across media that retard is already considered a taboo word.

In drawing upon these two sources, it was anticipated that it would be possible to identify who the speaker was and to map out the meanings being attached to them. A discursive approach was taken towards the texts, examining them for ways in which the speaker may be constructing individuals as different (Mik-Meyer, 2016) revealing attitudes and practices that could have personal impact upon lives and experiences. Thematic analysis was undertaken, using an approach drawn from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through open-coding, the data were refined to identify concepts which represented aspects of that data, to seek patterns and to enable categorization, comparison, and synthesis. Constant comparison Mehdi Riazi (2016) was used to make connections between the data and the researcher's conceptualizations of the pragmatic and semantic

context, to develop categories and test the validity of the inferences underpinning them, continually comparing through the use of principles of similarity and contrast.

For each data set a data extraction template was completed. The term idiot, imbecile and moron was identified within the overall articles. The form and function of the article was noted, its source, nationality, and the context in which the identified term was used. The quote itself, in which the term arose, was examined to explicate the underlying meaning being attached to the term in question. No limit was placed upon categories of underlying meaning which could arise, but as similarities became evident and in line with constant comparison, categories were re-used or revisited for their salience. The educational sources were identified first. The process of reflection was started afresh when the newspaper sources were examined and subsequently new categories were able to emerge in response to the meanings and contexts of the new texts. Having identified a range of different categories, the texts were revisited to enable the development of thematic clusters. At this stage the intention was to look across the two data sources more directly with a view to find unifying thematic clusters; as will be discussed in the following section the unifying clusters did not appear quite as anticipated.

6 | FINDINGS

Within the academic journals, 32 sources were identified using one of these three terms (see Table 1). It was evident that the term was used by a diverse range of people involved in education. There were seven uses by teachers of unspecified gender, one from a female teacher and one from a male school leader. There was also one citation from another study, in which a teacher put the words in the mouth of a child. There were 10 uses by pupils and students too. These came from pupils in primary and secondary settings; three of these comments were overheard and one was a pupil imagining the thoughts of another teenage girl. There were six uses by academics, three as authors of the article and three as interviewees or references. The two other adults identified were a parent and a white, working class student working in a setting. The text sources were two historical publications, a test question and a book title written by a young person.

Within the newspaper articles, 134 sources were identified using one of the terms (see Table 2). Of these nine were stories repeated in a different article. It was evident that the terms were being used by people from all walks of life, but with the majority coming from people in positions of power—perhaps reflecting the tendency of

TABLE 1 People who used the term in education articles ($n = 29$ —with 2 sources in 3 papers)

Teacher/School leader	Pupil/student	Academic	Other adults	Text source
10	10	6	2	4

TABLE 2 People who used the term in newspaper articles (*n* = 134)

Actor/celebrity/sports/comedian	Journalist/reviewer	Politician/business/legal	Artist/musician/writer	Other
22	61	24	10	17

Note: Other = activist, complainant, defendant, film director, general public, person on social media, lab technician, man texting, mother, news manager, pilot, radio hosts, scientist, university teacher, former cult member.

TABLE 3 Context of term's use in articles (*n* = 29 and *n* = 134 but more than one use in some articles)

Source	Quote	Author's voice	Text/term referred to
Academic articles	23 (76.7%)	3 (10.0%)	4 (13.3%)
Newspaper articles	68 (49.6%) (8 repeats)	44 (32.2%)	25 (18.2%) (1 repeat)

TABLE 4 Meaning inferred from use of term in education articles (*n* = 29)

A general insult	People who cannot do something	A term	Yourself	A concept
2	3	5	16	3

newspapers to focus upon the views and experiences of such people. The dominant voices were the journalists themselves with 27 uses in reviews of some sort and 27 in opinion pieces of some kind. These terms were also used by 14 politicians in this 3-month period (including a deputy prime-minister) and were used by 32 people from the world or arts, entertainment, and sports. The breadth of individual "other" voices was also evident, but here too the tendency was upon newsworthy individuals and to be referring to people who had been the "victims" or "perpetrators" of wrong doing or who were campaigning about an issue.

The vast majority of uses within the Education articles were reported speech (see Table 3). The topics being discussed tended to reflect the focus of the paper itself, so there were quotes about pupil's views of teachers, other pupils, and particular experiences (e.g., making artifacts, having a single parent, having an excluded brother); teacher's views of working with particular groups of pupils (e.g., young children, boys, experiencing bereavement, experiencing marginalization) and talking about the process of teaching. The use by the author directly was either drawing upon a text source or an "established" term, and included one whole paper framed around a theorization of university communities as "idiotic." There was a more equal balance between reported speech and author's voice in the newspaper articles, with 68 direct quotes or reference in an article to someone using the term. It was noticeable that frequently the quote chosen by the author was to make a specific point which linked to the position the author was taking in the article. Similarly, the text/term referred to in the Newspaper articles was either the title of a film or book or a popular phrase, but on nine occasions this was selected by the author to express an idea, while on the other 19 occasions it was referring to the artifact itself (Table 3).

Within the academic journals, the dominant meaning applied to the terms was how it in some way applied to the speaker (see Table 4). Over 55% of usages were linked to people's descriptions of themselves, with the vast majority of these being about how other people make them feel or concerns about how they will be perceived. These included comments about:

- a need to disprove other people's views of the speaker,
- others impact on sense of self,
- having an inadequate intellect or a lack of knowledge,
- members of their family.

The underlying sense in many references was linked to intellect. It's use as an insult or to denigrate someone for what they had done was also in evidence but made up less than 20% of usages. The terms used included village idiot, idiot proof and rural idiocy.

In contrast to the education articles, within the newspaper articles the dominant usage was applied to other people (see Table 5). Over 75% of usages were linked with people's descriptions of someone else and an aspect of their personality, lifestyle, or capacity which was in someway lesser to the speaker. The dominant focus of this lesser nature was not intellect, however. The most evident difference was around:

- beliefs,
- a particular topic or political position, (e.g., for being left wing or right wing or supporting a particular political figure)
- having done something to the speaker (e.g., got in their way, upset them, brought a charge against them or called for their punishment).

Socially unacceptable behavior and violence were also key justifications for applying one of these terms to people (e.g., rioting, dressing up in public, being drunk, doing something dangerous, breaking rules). The next most evident grouping was as a general insult or as a saying or term generally being applied. The use of these terms as a general insult but not linked to a particular action was mostly a broad way of suggesting the person (or organization or animal) was lesser, while the application of terms and sayings was equally intended to highlight that a group of people was lesser. These groups were typically people of different beliefs or behaving in a way the speaker felt was socially unacceptable.

There were only five examples of the speaker applying the term to themselves, four of these were self-deprecating for comic effect and one was justification to downplay the significance of an act for

TABLE 5 Meaning inferred from use of term in newspaper articles ($n = 134$ but 2 allocated to 2 categories)

Laughable people	Violent people	People with different beliefs	Socially unacceptable people	Intellectually different people	A general insult	People who cannot do something	A term	People who did something to you	Yourself
7	7	22	15	14	19	14	28	5	5

Note: A term = 3 Idiots (1.1), American idiot, big fat idiot, covidiot, maskidiot, honest idiot/s (2), idiot swagger, the idiot (4), useful idiots (3), village idiot (2), translation (French idiots to morons and stupid & French imbeciles to idiots).

which the speaker was being accused. The intellectual difference which is typically associated with these terms was evident in less than 15% of their usage. It was used to describe people for fairly mundane differences too. For example, it was applied to people who:

- were not experts,
- denied the validity of scientific findings or evidence,
- were capable of being deceived,
- took someone literally,
- did not recognize the value in an idea,
- held a particular view.

Only once was it applied to someone having a learning difficulty, twice to someone as cognitively lesser and three times to someone not understanding something. There was another cluster of usages which also focussed about a lack of capacity, but these referred to particular things, for example, four related to driving, one to spelling, one to looking after money, one to being young, and three to being in the wrong place, making the wrong choice and serving the wrong food.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The contrast between the use of these three terms in educational articles and newspaper articles was striking. In the newspapers these words were primarily used to position people as other, to generate or reflect strong emotion towards them, with no intention of evoking sympathy or empathy. In contrast, it was clear from the educational articles that people saw these as terms to be avoided, which they did not want applied to them. It could be that this merely reflects the different focus of education articles—the tendency of research interviews to ask people to reflect upon their own sense of self or the focus of the academic author's in writing up. However, the same self-reflection is true of many opinion pieces in newspapers. Newspapers also seek emotive articles to draw the reader in. It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that the frequent use of the terms within newspapers reflects their wider cultural acceptance, while in the educational context, their connection to being lesser, particularly intellectually and knowledgeably, speaks to the knowledge hierarchy evident within that system (Rix, 2006).

Idiot, imbecile, and moron would definitely seem to be pejorative words, which people use to insult or disparage others and themselves, and which allow speakers to communicate emotional states beyond the underlying meaning of what they are saying (Hom, 2012). These three words, in particular idiot, are used freely across social settings by a broad cross section of the population. Across this small sample, there was no clear difference in their application. These words do not seem to be taboo words, however, in contrast to retard and the term related to race. This points towards a divergence in our collective and individual responses to different protected characteristics. Many terms that have a clear historical heritage which suggest a meaning that can be considered being

separate from their correlate grouping are seen as taboo regardless of this alternative heritage. It is recognized that these terms have a history of oppression and as such are both an unwelcome reminder of that oppression and a continuation of that oppression, causing ongoing offense purely by their usage, not solely by their usage when applied to that correlate grouping. Our collective avoidance of these terms arises because people have meta-linguistic knowledge about these words, which includes understanding of this cultural-historical context and which affects their interpretation of an utterance that contains them (Blakemore, 2015). It is also interesting to compare the general response to "retard," which is also a term primarily related to intellect, but one that was adopted in the United States, and one which has now been framed as generally offensive. This reflects, perhaps, a wider civic engagement with the impact of language as a result of civil rights movements within that country over recent decades. It may also be a result of the term's historical usage. In the United States, the term Mental Retardation was the institutional phrase of choice following on from the terms in this paper. In the United Kingdom, we moved to the term Mental Handicap, and Handicapped was not primarily associated with intellectual difference and—to the knowledge of the author—was never widely used as an insult.

So do we need to re-evaluate our approach to these terms? It is debatable whether these terms can be considered a slur. They are definitely used to denigrate others, and given that the dominant response in academic papers was a wish not to have those terms applied to oneself, it seems reasonable to suggest people find them distressing if not offensive (Anderson & Lepore, 2013). If we adopt the notion of a demographic slur, it would seem that there are definitely social groups who can be considered as the neutral correlate to idiots, imbeciles, and morons. If we accept the notion that these terms are primarily linked to a lack of intelligence, then as noted at the start of the paper there are many groupings who could be positioned in this regard (Diaz Legaspe, 2018). This is reflected too, by the dictionary definitions which already state it is now offensive to apply the term to people who would have been put in these categories. In response to McDonagh, we can say that in using these terms we are aligning people with individuals whose intellectual, social and moral capacities are considered subnormal.

It should not perhaps have been to the surprise of the author that the majority of uses of these terms in the context of news media were not specifically related to intelligence at all, but to a range of other differences, primarily related to beliefs and behaviors. This harks back to the time-honored use of these concepts, when they were primarily markers of social difference (Goodey, 2011). It suggests we are moving away from the 'scientific kind' of association with these terms and that the 'mundane kind' (Mendes, 2015) are back in vogue. They are once more embodying our own flaws, fears, incapacities, and failures, those parts of ourselves that we do not wish to look at (McDonagh, 2008).

If the terms are being associated with behaviors not linked to our dominant reifications of the notion of intelligence, one has to ask if

these behaviors (being laughable, dangerous, and antisocial) are generally characteristics which are stereotypically associated with the neutral correlate groupings for cultural and historic reasons (Davis & McCready, 2020). As highlighted in the background to the paper, this is certainly the case when you look back at the history of institutions and across a variety of media forms over the centuries. It also reflects a tendency evident across experiences of being the "other" where the "other" is framed as esthetically, performatively, and morally different (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009).

The denigration of a person on the basis of their intelligence, therefore, would seem like a slur that reflects a general level of disrespect for those neutral correlate groupings, reinforcing established stereotypes. It would also seem reasonable to suggest, in line with Burnett's understanding of a slur, that denigrations based around notions and stereotypes associated with intelligence will have a general negative impact upon the neutral correlate groupings' well being or at least reinforce current inequalities. As noted above, these correlate groupings are far more likely to experience physical and verbal abuse as well as more likely to be ignored by support services, and consequently feel excluded and othered (Sin et al., 2010; Wayland et al., 2020).

Debating about the nature of these words seems to have a significance beyond the niceties of a linguistic debate. It seems likely that the primary association for these terms is still informed by the scientific frame even when operating in a mundane way. They are about how we understand and value intelligence. It is their stereotypical associations that allow the terms to serve as the explanation for any behaviors, practices and beliefs at odds with the speakers'. This has relevance to the wider question about how they impact upon people's lives more broadly and upon people's experience of being othered and deemed lesser. If we blithely accept the shift back to a generalized use of these three terms, we overlook their impact upon people's sense of self as learners and as members of our school communities. But perhaps more importantly, we overlook the experiences of people with learning difficulties, who as individuals and collectively are so frequently the targets for discrimination.

A key lesson to emerge from the global civil rights movements is that words matter. They both reflect and reinforce attitudes, while challenging their usage requires people to consider the values underlying them and their associated thinking. This is not about whether we can still use these terms to talk about people to whom they once would have been applied; that argument is won. It is now about whether it is acceptable to denigrate people on the basis of their position in the knowledge hierarchy. If we carry on using these terms in our public spaces are we not perpetuating a culture of institutionalized disablism associated with intellect? Just as we have agreed that our use of language around people with other protected characteristics needs to change because of our historical negligence and malevolence, so too must we apply this learning to the people for whom this journal is named.

This study cannot say that the words idiot, imbecile, and moron are damaging to the groups of people we identify as

intellectually different. What it can say is that many people are happy to apply it to other people in public arenas, but that people want to avoid having it applied to themselves. It evokes a range of understandings related to difference and is primarily a way to say that one person is lesser than another. We can also say that it makes links between stereotypical, 'unpopular' behaviors and a person's cognitive functioning. Given the fundamental role that the notion of intelligence plays both in society and to our sense of self, and given our history of marginalizing the population to whom these terms were once applied, I would suggest that it is time for these terms to be accepted as slurs and regarded as taboo.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no ethical issues arising from this study as it was text based. This is an original work to which I have the rights. It is not being published or considered for publication elsewhere.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are available from the author on request.

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