

The History of the history of learning disability

Abstract

This article traces and summarises historiographical trends in the history of learning disability. It identifies three major waves of historical approaches beginning with a medicalised analysis which emerged in the early twentieth century. This presented a story of medical progress which began with the asylum movement of the nineteenth century and represented 'idiots' as creatures of the asylum and objects of the medicalised gaze. In the 1990s a new social history challenged these assumptions, focusing on the iniquities of institutionalisation and the eugenics period, while attempting to give a voice to people with learning disabilities and their families in their own history. A cultural history movement later emerged to challenge the idea of learning disability as a fixed universal concept over time. It argued that the idea of learning disability (in all its different linguistic iterations) is contingent on time and place, and a product of the culture within which it is framed. Not all work fits neatly into one of these categories, sometimes they overlap and sometimes they cannot be easily categorised. Nevertheless, these broad frames of reference within the historiography of learning disability do point to wider social, cultural and political concerns, which are worth holding in mind as we consider how the 'work' of history can and does act to inform attitudes, policy-making and change. The authors describe the encouraging recent emergence of historian activists who seek to write and define their own history, and who may constitute a fourth wave in the historiography of learning disability.

Introduction

The history of learning disability is largely a recent history. It is only in the relatively recent past that the group we identify by this term has been seen as worthy of historical recognition, in any other guise than as creatures of the asylum and objects of medical attention.

The marginality of the learning disabled person in history has a number of possible roots. Ann Digby has noted how 'historically, the social marginality of people with learning disabilities has been mirrored by their academic marginality' (Digby, 1996, p.1). The nature of learning disability is such that those labelled by it leave virtually no written historical account. The conceptual definition of learning disability has always shifted with remarkable speed, suggesting an unstable, dominated group with no powers of self-definition. Natural fools, idiots, changelings, imbeciles, morons, cretins, mental defectives, sub-normals, the feeble-minded, the mentally handicapped, retarded or

impaired, the learning, intellectually or developmentally disabled, the developmentally delayed, those with learning difficulties, even the otherly-abled; all have loomed in and out of the historical imagination, shadowy figures playing different roles at different times, defined by others and with no apparent agency of their own.¹

However, much the same can be said about other groups previously objectified, marginalised or airbrushed from history; women, the poor, gay people, the mentally ill, colonised and ethnic minority populations. Yet these groups have begun, or in many cases already succeeded in, claiming and owning their history as part of a wider process of liberation, borne along on the waves of the 'history from below' movement and the so called 'cultural turn' (Green & Troup, 1999, p.33, p.231; Eley & Nield, 2007).

Even with these changes in the discipline of history, the field of learning disability history has remained small and the voice of the learning disabled person faintly heard, at least until more encouraging recent trends which have enabled people with learning disabilities to participate in researching and writing their own history, and a recognition by other historians of the importance of this. Why is this so? Roy Porter suggests that lunacy history overshadows the history of idiocy because 'madness continues to exercise its mystique, but mindlessness holds no mystique' (Porter, 1997). Porter adopts, consciously or unconsciously, the long standing concept of 'absence of mind' to define the idiot (Goodey, 1994) what medical practitioners, as they claimed idiocy as a domain for their definition and control, would come to call *amentia* (Wright, 2011, p.74-6) in contrast to the *dementia* of the person who has lost the mind they once had. To be without a mind is to be without reason, the basic requirement in modern societies for the right to equality and autonomy of the human being. As Goodey has commented, we cannot 'draw on the usual models of radical policy making [i.e. equality and autonomy]... borrowed from the liberation movements of black people, gays or women, as not only are the people we are talking about deprived of such things, they are not entitled to them in the first place because they do not qualify for the founding premise... of being rational' (Goodey, 2011, p.4). While these other groups have also experienced oppressive

¹ Terminology, as is discussed throughout this article, is an extremely complex but also revealing aspect of the history of learning disability. We have used the term 'learning disability' as the current accepted term in the United Kingdom, recognising that terminology varies significantly geographically as well as over time, and that terminology in the United States and elsewhere differs from United Kingdom usage. We address this where necessary within the article. To avoid historical inaccuracy we have used where appropriate the word 'idiot' as it was used to describe this group (or what may approximate to this group) in earlier periods and at times 'defectives' 'morons' etc. to describe groups as they were characterised in particular periods. None of these are acceptable terminology outside their historical context in public discourse today, all having become terms of abuse.

discourses, policies and practices which sought explicitly to undermine their claims to rationality and competence (Scull, 2012; Appignanesi, 2009; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012) the learning disabled community – while constituted differently over time – have been consistently perceived as having a complete absence of reason or mind. Thus people with learning disabilities, under whatever nomenclature, have often remained somewhat unsettling figures on the horizon of humanity, their human status uncertain, seemingly impervious in the minds of intellectuals to progress, resistant to treatment or cure.

There are of course pitfalls for any historian when trying to identify this group in the past (as X discusses further in this special issue). When people talked about ‘idiots’ and ‘imbeciles’ at different times in history, were they talking about a group who are the same as those we call people with learning disabilities today? Were the feeble-minded of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the same people as the mentally handicapped in the 1950s? It is difficult to give a precise answer to such questions. What we call learning disability today is not some fixed, universal, unchanging group throughout history whose name just happens to change every few decades. There is, of course, some overlap, but the concept of who fits into these categories changes, as each new name group expands or contracts with the values, priorities and preoccupations of different societies. In the medieval period, the vast majority of people could not read or write, nor did they need to, and all of the poor were seen by the rich as ‘idiotic’ (Goodey, 2011). They bore little or no relation to people we would describe as having learning disabilities today, and they were certainly never seen as a medical matter needing treatment – that idea only emerged in the nineteenth century (Jarrett, 2020). Since then we have had the ‘eugenic’ scare period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when mental deficiency was seen as a medical problem threatening the survival of society (Thompson, 1998; Jackson, 2000). This was followed at the end of the 20th century by this same deficiency being seen as a problem of learning, adaptation and the perceptions of others (Jarrett, 2021, p.50). Terms such as learning difficulty and learning disability were introduced, and advocates have campaigned for a ‘new’ culture of rights and inclusion (Soldatic & Johnson, 2020). They have become, again, largely a non-medical matter.

Each time terminology changes in this way, membership of the group it defines changes also, sometimes expanding, sometimes decreasing. Perceptions change too, sometimes more hostile, sometimes more accepting. This is how the history of learning disability has unfolded, a succession of claims to define, understand and be responsible for those perceived as lacking intellectual capacity. Historians therefore have to be very careful to avoid making assumptions from

a modern viewpoint about what constitutes a learning disability in other periods, otherwise, as the historian Patrick McDonagh has pointed out; they will simply find themselves “chasing shadows” (Stainton and McDonagh, 2001).

We identify three major trends, or waves, in attempts to document, interpret and make sense of ‘the history of learning disability’ in this article. Not all work fits neatly into one of these categories, sometimes they overlap and sometimes they cannot be easily categorised. These waves occur (broadly) chronologically, beginning with a scholarly interest in the history of learning disability in the early twentieth century, through to contemporary historical endeavours at the time of writing. Some narratives from earlier waves find a way to persist, while finding new forms of expression. We also remain mindful of calls to resist the ‘stabilizing narrativizing of ideas and people’, appreciating that ‘multiple intellectual lineages and the “has already been”-ness creates some degree of scholarly disarray because it eschews the concrete causal relationships between ideas presented as a linear and tidy intellectual history’ (Pickens, 2017, p.96). Nevertheless, these broad frames of reference within the historiography of learning disability do point to wider social, cultural and political concerns, which are worth holding in mind as we consider how the ‘work’ of history can and does act to inform attitudes, policy-making and change (Porter and Reid, 2010; Haddon et al., 2012; Jones, 2021)².

Thus we argue that the first wave of learning disability history was what we can call medical history, in which the intervention of the medical profession in the lives of people with learning disabilities is seen as both heroic and inevitable, a story of progress and reform. The second wave we describe as social history, which critiqued the optimistic medical version, denounced asylums as abusive and exploitative institutions of power and control, and attempted to give a role, and a voice, to people with learning disabilities in their own history. The third and most recent wave can broadly be called cultural history, by which we mean a form of history which believes that terms such as ‘learning disability’, ‘idiot’ or ‘deficiency’ have specific cultural meanings which change over time, and are very much a product of the culture, period, place and society in which they are deployed. We conclude the paper by reporting on what might be described as a newly emerging fourth wave, the work of ‘historian activists’. This refers to the small but growing group of people with learning disabilities who have taken up the mantle of historical investigation to explore, critique and contest previous ‘grand narratives’ of learning disability history (Tilley et al., 2021), representing a radical and encouraging departure from previous work.

² For further explication on the ways in which the discipline of history and the work of historians has been used to inform policy-making, we refer readers to the History & Policy website, <https://www.historyandpolicy.org>

The first wave: learning disability history through a medical lens

It is perhaps no surprise that the first wave of writing about learning disability history was led by medical clinicians and social scientists, who saw and claimed the so-called idiot as a (passive) player in their own historical account. A cohort of practitioners from the United States, where the drive to both improve, and control, the learning disabled was most powerful, wrote grand narratives in which the idiot gained historical identity only through the medical gaze. This began with Martin Barr's 1904 work *Mental defectives: their history, treatment and training* (Barr, 1904). Barr was director of a Pennsylvania feeble-minded institution and president of the American Association for the Study of Feeble-mindedness. He characterised idiots as a 'despised and neglected class' (ibid. p.1), the idiot a form of human who 'sees nothing, feels nothing, hears nothing, does nothing and knows nothing', the weak and feeble imbecile and simpleton only marginally better positioned (Ibid. p.2-3). Barr's narrative contained several themes that were to characterise this first wave of medicalised idiocy history. These included: a 'presentist' perspective;³ belief in the stability of the concept of idiocy through time and across civilizations; the pitiable degradation of pre-asylum life; the idiot coming into historical focus through the medical gaze (in particular when Victor the Wild Boy of Aveyron emerged from the woods into the hands of the Pinel, psychiatrist in chief at the Paris Bicetre asylum, in 1800); their questionable human status; the justifiable dominance of the asylum; and the marginality, or indeed invisibility, of the learning disabled person's voice. Above all, Barr hailed the new era of the asylum.

This treatise was followed by a succession of works that were more humane but accepted and amplified many of Barr's underlying assumptions. Three volumes from social worker Dr Stanley P. Davies, secretary of the U.S. Committee on Mental Hygiene, reflected the bewildering rapidity of semantic change in the field: in 1923 he wrote '*Social control of the feeble-minded*', in 1930 '*Social control of the mentally deficient*' and in 1959 '*The mentally retarded in society*' (Davies, 1923, 1939, 1959). In 1937 Albert Deutsch devoted two chapters to mental deficiency in his *The mentally ill in America*, which began with the declaration: 'before medicine, there was magic' (Deutsch, 1937, p.1). Leo Kanner, head of children's psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and 'discoverer' of autism (Waltz, 2013, p.50) published *History of the care and study of the mentally retarded* in 1964,

³ Presentism has been described as 'false analogies which, when stripped of context, can be made to look like their putative descendants' (Douglas Hay, 'The criminal prosecution in England and its historians', *Modern Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1984, p. 19). In other words we try to find explanations of the present by falsely drawing parallels with past events which, properly viewed in their historical context, have no such bearing on current events.

(Kanner, 1964) and R C Scheerenberger, president of the American Association for Superintendents of Mental Retardation Institutions produced his *History of mental retardation* in 1983 (Scheerenberger, 1983). Each of these works, as well as accepting Barr's medical narrative, introduced a recurring feature of learning disability history: a tale of bright beginnings followed by disappointment and 'failure', a cycle of therapeutic scientific optimism leading to disillusioned pessimism. The contemporary period is then framed as the one in which progressive policies and approaches will provide the 'breakthrough' that has failed to occur previously. This means that the immediate past is always the guilty era. For Davies in 1923 the so-called 'alarmist' period was the eugenic 'social indictment' of the first two decades of the twentieth century (Davies, 1923). For Kanner the 'eugenic scare' period extended from 1900 to the Nazi extermination programmes of disabled people (Kanner, 1964), and for Scheerenberger it persisted through the 1950s as institutions deteriorated and abuse proliferated (Scheerenberger 1983). Both Kanner and Scheerenberger identified the 1960s as a new era of promise, and cited the John F Kennedy foundation, formed in memory of Kennedy's 'defective' sister Rose, as its inspiration (Kanner, 1964, p.143; Scheerenberger, 1987, p.1)⁴.

The only British contribution to this wave of accounts of the successes of medical men (always men) and reformers in rescuing the beleaguered idiot population from abuse and starvation, came in social work academic Kathleen Jones's 1955 *Lunacy, law and conscience 1744-1845: the social history of the care of the insane*, and 1972 *A history of the mental health services* (Jones, 1955, 1972). She echoed the American narrative but populated it with a different cast, a cohort of 'influential men', most prominent among them Lord Shaftesbury, discovering a state of appalling misery where the mentally disordered 'chained, beaten and half-starved... lived in cellars and garrets, in prisons and workhouses' (1972, p. xi). She identified the 1845 County Asylums Act as the crown of Shaftesbury's work, releasing 'a new spirit of humanity, a rising class of important asylum doctors' (Jones, 1972, p.xi-xii).

The challenge of social history and the biographical turn

A challenge to this account, and a new movement in learning disability history, were initiated by the theorist Wolf Wolfensberger in 1975. He posited a cultural model whereby the

⁴ For the John F Kennedy Foundation see Edward Shorter, *The Kennedy family and the story of mental retardation* (Shorter 2000). Shorter calls Kanner's 'Eugenic Scare' period the 'horror period' and extends it from 1915 to 1960, the year before the Kennedy administration took office with its enthusiastic focus on retardation.

learning disabled person was consistently constructed and reconstructed, always to their detriment, by the societies in which they lived (Wolfensberger, 1975). These constructs could be overtly negative, seeing the learning disabled person as sick, subhuman or menacing, or masquerading under more benign facades, such as object of pity, burden of charity or holy innocent. Either way, argued Wolfensberger, the learning disabled person became 'subhuman' (Ibid.). He called these 'role perceptions' and linked them to practices of institutional and community abuse.

These theories informed a challenge, which emerged in the 1990s, to the dominance of the medical account, when several important works adopting new approaches and methodologies based on the social model were published. This second wave of learning disability history can be largely characterised as social history, ~~with some constructionist influences~~. James Trent's 1994 work *Inventing the feeble mind: a history of mental retardation in the United States* (Trent, 1994) focused on 'the fabrications and the gazes – pitying, fearful, knowing, controlling - of those in control of mental retardation' (Ibid. p.2). He dismissed the idea of an 'era of hope', accusing those in control of the asylum system of purposefully perpetuating long-term custody from the outset by making patients economically indispensable for the survival of the institutional monolith (Ibid. p.40-59). Two years later Digby and Wright's collection *From idiocy to mental deficiency* brought together similarly revisionist work by a group of British historians on the history of learning disability - the new British nomenclature for the 'client' group (Digby and Wright, 1996). This extended the historical study of idiocy to the medieval and early modern periods. For the first time, a presentation of the pre-asylum era was not predicated on themes of marginalisation, abuse and persecution, but showed people perceived as idiots recognised and sustained within communities without recourse to institutionalisation as a punitive or rescuing solution (Digby, 1996; Neugebauer, 1996; Rushton, 1996; Andrews, 1996). The asylum and eugenics eras were described and analysed in their British, as opposed to American, context (Wright, 1996; Gladstone, 1996; Jackson, 1996; Thomson, 1996).

Also in the 1990s there was a drive towards a more inclusive history, aligned to the broader 'biographical turn' characterising much social and historical research of the time (Bornat et al., 2000). This historical research actively sought the voice of the learning disabled person, and was carried forward by a small group of academics and learning disabled co-workers who formed the Social History of Learning Disability Research Group, hosted by The Open University. Using a policy of co-authorship, which allowed the person with a learning disability to give their account with minimal mediation and academic contextualisation, they produced a series of oral history accounts capturing life in the final days of the asylum, experiences of the move to care in the community, and family

histories (Atkinson et al. 1997; Atkinson et al., 2000; Rolph et al., 2005; Walmsley et al., 1999). They built on the earlier work of Potts and Fido who had chronicled the lives of people in a mental deficiency institution using oral history methods (Potts & Fido, 1991). This social history approach has also gained ground internationally, with an increasingly diverse range of countries and cultures documenting the lives of people with learning disabilities and their families over time (Johnson & Traustadottir 2005; Mitchell et al., 2007; Walmsley & Jarrett, 2019). Perhaps more controversially, this wave has also included a small but important collection of staff stories, raising complex questions about competing 'truth-claims' (Bylov, 2013). This history has explored the role of practitioners in the lives of people with learning disabilities over time. It has also acknowledged the impact of working in the eras of institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and community care on practitioners' personal and professional lives⁵.

Aligned closely to developments within the social history of learning disability has been an ongoing interest in the role of life stories and narrative (Ledger et al., 2021). Life stories in the context of learning disability have been defined by Aktinson (1997) as people's accounts of their own lives or past experiences, shared with others. While life story work has occupied a long-standing (if inconsistent) place within the sphere of health and social care practice, for the purposes of this article we are interested in the role that life stories have played within broader understandings of learning disabled people's lives in their socio-historic context. In other words their use as an 'analytic tool for trying to understand wider social phenomena' (Andrews, 2007, p.10). Life stories have offered new insights and perspectives on institutional life; on community practices and networks; on families and relationships (Atkinson et al., 2000; Rolph et al., 2005). The recording and sharing of life stories has also been tied intimately to developments in self-advocacy, enabling people to resist and challenge deficit-focused accounts of their lives, celebrate achievements and to draw attention to the material ways in which policy and practice impact on the lived experience (Goodley, 2000; Atkinson, 2010; Salman, 2020). Life stories have also played a role in inspiring other people with learning disabilities to learn more about history, thus informing the development in historical activism which we describe below.

Inevitably the methods employed meant that the main focus of this work would be on the twentieth century and would privilege those best able to communicate, who had the 'mildest' form of disability (see Bylov, 2006; Cadbury & Whitmore, 2010; Abraha et al., 2010; Delancey & O'Driscoll, 2010). However, the work was ground-breaking in its inclusion of a highly academically marginalised group. A critique of this research was launched from within the self-advocacy movement by Simone

⁵ For a wide-ranging account of staff stories, see the special issue Ethics and learning disability history: Revelation and reconciliation. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, volume 7, issue 3, 2013.

Aspis, who argues that academic researchers use disabled people with learning difficulties as 'subjects to be examined and picked around by non-disabled academics... we are used to prove non-disabled academics' hypotheses' (Aspis, 2000, p.2). Her critique connects to wider challenges regarding the so-called 'empowerment narrative', where scholars make claims that their research 'gives voice' to those who are disenfranchised in some way, while failing to question the privileged position they occupy within the relationship and the potential 'harmful effects that the work might inadvertently cause' (Andrews, 2007, p.42). In contrast, other self-advocates have framed this research as a 'partnership', mutually beneficial with the potential to raise awareness and change attitudes (Ledger et al., 2021; Tilley et al., 2021).

In 2004 Noll and Trent, arguing that that 'even disability history tends to leave out the feeble-minded' (Noll & Trent 2004, p.8), called for intensive work to 'discover a full history of those persons labelled mentally retarded in America' (Ibid. p.16). Their *Mental retardation in America: a historical reader* laid down an American chronological and conceptual framework, beginning with a brief pre-civil war (or 'ante-bellum') almshouse period in the early nineteenth century and moving through the 'age of institutionalisation' to the 'fightback' era of the move back to community under Kennedy. This work has been highly influential in shaping subsequent United States scholarship on learning disability, with its major focus on the strong eugenics and sterilisation movement from the early twentieth century to World War II and even beyond. Its grounding of the 'beginning' of learning disability history in the period of the asylum echoed the medicalised first wave, but with a greater emphasis on the overt complicity of clinicians in the 'social menace' indictment brought about by the eugenics movement.

Critiquing the category: cultural perspectives on the history of 'learning disability'

With this second wave allowing learning disability history to finally take form as a social history movement in its own right, an historical constructionist challenge to its underlying assumptions came from C. F. Goodey. Goodey argued that existing scholarship was guilty of presentism by seeking and identifying contemporary notions of intellectual disability in earlier periods to underpin a narrative of progress, thus removing any need to critique current practice (Goodey, 2001a). He challenged the belief of this positivist historiographical trend 'that the disciplines of psychology and education can produce stable scientific knowledge about the mind and behaviour, in the same way that physics produces stable knowledge about the laws of gravity' (Ibid. p.3). Arguing that learning disability was not a stable historical concept, he criticised the focus on the

asylum era and ignorance of the medieval and early modern periods, attributing it to the inaccessibility of primary texts on the earlier periods, the availability of institutional records from the nineteenth century, and unwillingness to engage with the history of ideas and how they are formed (Ibid. p.1-2). He claimed that there was no comparable understanding of what we might recognise as learning disability in the classical world or medieval Europe, and that modern psychological notions are first found in the religious (particularly Calvinist) and intellectual movements of the late-seventeenth century, notably the philosopher John Locke's linking of rational thought to human status (Ibid. p.7-13). From this point, Goodey published a body of work undermining existing assumptions about the pre-asylum era, arguing that medieval and early-modern ideas of idiocy were intimately connected with ideas of class and poverty, the labouring poor understood as an entire idiot class in early societies (Goodey, 1994, 1999, 2001b, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Stainton & Goodey, 2001). This work culminated in his *History of intelligence and 'intellectual disability'* (2011) which argued that, from the early modern period, the notion of intelligence rather than heredity as the passport to both spiritual and social advancement began to take root. Those without the capacity to reason or think abstractly became the ultimate out-group, the new sub-class of the learning disabled.

Goodey's attack on what he saw as the medicalised rootedness of the historiography in the institutional and eugenics era undermined the consensus that has proved surprisingly resilient, even as the waves of 'history from below', 'disability studies' and the 'voice of the patient' have finally penetrated the historical representation of people with learning disabilities. He challenged in particular the conceptualisation of idiocy as a universal, stable, scientific term over time, which the social history movement had largely accepted. Goodey's insights have been supported by McDonagh who, in his *Cultural history of idiocy* describes how

'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).

McDonagh argues that early tropes of idiocy such as the 'demonic idiot' share significant features with the later pathological or degenerate idiot in a process where 'older concepts of idiocy resurface within newer frameworks, or simply refuse to disappear', feeding into society's 'culturally charged beliefs' (Ibid. p.15). Gerald O'Brien has highlighted similar recurring tropes in his study of the phenomenon of the eugenics-era 'moron', consistently characterised through metaphors of atavism,

disease, threat, immorality and helplessness (O'Brien, 2013). Both O'Brien and McDonagh see the idiot as a cultural construction of others, a means of 'isolat[ing] a disturbing concept within a specific population rather than leav[ing] it loose to roam amongst "normal" humans such as ourselves... that part of ourselves we usually avert our eyes from' (McDonagh, 2008, p.9). Other works have examined in similar vein fictional and cinematic representations of this group's unstable legal status and transgressive sexuality, the constant tension between innocent holy fool and menacing sexualised sub-human, the idiot as symbol of social malaise and decay (McDonagh, 2000; Keely, 2004; Schmidt, 2004; Haliwell, 2004).

Discussion

What can we learn from the small but multi-layered surge in historical interest in idiocy since the 1990s (albeit with disciplinary roots stretching back as far as 1904), and from these three waves of intellectual disability history which we can broadly describe as medical, social and cultural? The early dominance of North American historians in framing and developing the historical account has had a significant impact in a number of ways. For example, it led to a greater concentration on the eugenics era and its regimes of sterilisation and punitive institutionalisation than on any other period. This is related to the importance of eugenic discourse in modern American cultural history, which featured a particularly toxic blend of biological theory with notions of feeble-mindedness, criminality and race. What Nicola Rafter has called the 'criminalisation of mental retardation' (Rafter, 2004) began with a series of ostensibly 'scientific' American studies of hereditarily 'degenerate' families (Zenderland, 2004).⁶ These studies 'drafted contemporary biological theories... onto... medieval beliefs' (ibid. p.166) to create the idea of the feeble-minded 'born criminal'. It was in the United States that intelligence testing, although begun in France by Binet, was developed and widely applied, underpinned by the belief that there was a universal quotient of intelligence that defined fitness to belong and survive in mainstream society (Gould, 1996, p.30). American notions of IQ became entwined with race and class when a massive military testing programme during World War 1 came to the alarming (and deeply flawed) conclusion that 37% of white Americans and 89% of black Americans were feeble-minded morons (ibid. p.227). Race and feeble-mindedness became further intermingled in problematic ways as southern states tried to replicate the institutional building programmes of the northern states while maintaining their racial segregationist policies (Noll, 1995; Larson, 1995). Finally, compulsory sterilisation was practiced legally in a number of

⁶ The main family studies were: R. Dugdale's *The Jukes: a study in crime, pauperism, disease and heredity* in 1877, Florence Danielson and Charles Davenport's, *The Hill Folk: report on a rural community of hereditary defectives* in 1912, A. H. Estabrook & C. B. Davenport's *The Nam family: a study in cacogenics* in 1912 and, most famously, Goddard's, *The Kallikak Family: a study in the heredity of feeble-mindedness* also 1912

states and there were intense public debates about practicing euthanasia on defective newborn babies (Reilly, 1991; Pernick, 1996). Mental deficiency in the eugenic era thus underlay major American public anxieties on class, race, crime and the right to life, which has resulted in this period being a major focus of American learning disability historical research.

While these issues and concerns were mirrored in Britain (and indeed Britain was the only country to enact all-encompassing national eugenics-based legislation, in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913) there was never compulsory sterilisation and the race issue was less immediate and therefore less toxic. This is not to diminish the importance of this period in Britain, which had important life-changing implications for those designated mentally deficient and which has been ably documented, notably by Mark Jackson and Matthew Thomson (Jackson, 2000; Thomson, 1998). A large body of important work has been produced on the British system of lifelong mental deficiency colonies and intensive community surveillance of community-based defectives (Simmons, 1978; Cox, 1996; Jackson, 1996; Thomson, 1996; Walmsley et al., 1999). However, this has partly been in response to the high level of focus on this era emanating from the United States, and has been instrumental in creating a distorted perspective of the pre-asylum era.

The chronological bias of the historiography to date can also be attributed at least in part to American influence, where the early history of learning disability is seen as primarily the pre-civil war period of the nineteenth century and the drift of the learning disabled population into almshouses and jailhouses prior to the building of an asylum system from the 1840s (Ferguson, 1994, 2004). There is only a very sparse body of work on idiocy in the American colonial period, based on limited archival evidence from just two states (Wickham 2003; 2006). With these exceptions the American focus has been almost exclusively on the institutionalisation period and the late-twentieth-century move to the community (e.g. Gelb, 2004; Reaume, 2004; Castles, 2004; Rothman and Rothman, 2004).

There has been a parallel attraction to the asylum and post-asylum periods in British history. David Wright has produced a number of works largely about the first idiot asylum at Earlswood and the work of its most prominent superintendent John Langdon Down. Wright has argued against the historian of psychiatry and mental illness Andrew Scull's characterisation of asylums as monolithic purveyors of medical hegemony (Scull, 1993) and suggested that in the case of idiocy there was a more mediated culture of reciprocity between families and medical men, with the asylum in demand as one amongst a number of support options used by families (Wright 1996, 2001, 2011). David

Gladstone and Deborah Cohen have described similar idiot asylum cultures and processes, although Cohen has noted a shift to a culture of shame, separation and lifelong incarceration in the late-Victorian period (Gladstone, 1996; Cohen, 2013). Allying himself more with the positivist account of the asylum, certainly in the case of Earlswood, Wright has argued that 'history needs to be rescued from mindless icon toppling' (Wright, 2001, p.155). He has also defended the reputation of the medical superintendent John Langdon Down from the allegations of racism made against him for his *Ethnic classification of idiocy* (1867) in which he identified five racial types in the idiot population, including Mongolian imbecility, later known as Down's syndrome (See Gould, 1990; Jarrett, 2020, p.207-15). He argues that Down's adoption of a unitary theory of the origin of the human family placed him on the liberal wing of Victorian opinion against the radical racists who believed in multiple origins (Wright, 2004). Jarrett has argued that Down's belief in the unitary theory of human origin does not distance him to any significant extent from the dominant radical racist faction of the Anthropological Society of London, with whom he was closely allied (Jarrett, 2020, p.207-13).

This focus on asylums and eugenics has meant that there was at first a general neglect of learning disability history in the medieval and early-modern periods. This medieval gap has been addressed more recently by the work of Irina Metzler and Wendy Turner (Metzler, 2016, 2018; Turner, 2018) in particular Metzler's 2016 comprehensive *Fools and idiots? Intellectual disability in the middle ages*. The early-modern period, usually understood as comprising the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, received little attention apart from Goodey's critique which explored the early modern origins of the modern concept of intellectual disability, and the early work by Neugebauer (1996), Andrews (1996, 1998) and Rushton (1996). However *Intellectual disability: a conceptual history, 1200-1900* (2018), a collection edited by McDonagh, Goodey and Stainton, includes contributions from Goodey, Jarrett and Gabbard on the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as contributions on the medieval period from Turner, Metzler and Dillig. More recently Jarrett's *Those they called idiots; the idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day* has a particular focus on the eighteenth century in Britain and argues that those designated idiots were included and accepted in eighteenth century communities in contrast to the institutionalisation of the nineteenth century (Jarrett, 2020).

Jarrett's argument contradicts earlier, and some current, accounts of this period. The absence of accounts of idiocy from the early-modern historical record has been taken by some historians to indicate that idiots must therefore have been an abused and neglected group, reinforcing the ideas expressed in the first medical wave of learning disability history. The most recent broad historical account of intellectual disability, which purports to give a full narrative of the

'phenomenon' (Wehmeyer, 2013) asserts that 'the absence of idiocy from the historical record suggests an early modern environment marked by idiocy's invisibility and neglect' (Wickham, 2013). It further speculates that in 'pre-scientific' societies 'conceptualisations of... intellectual disability were rooted in superstition and magic' and that therefore 'people with intellectual... disabilities were subject to discrimination and lived difficult lives' (Craig, 2013 p. 19).

Jonathan Andrews' account of the eighteenth century (1998) reviewed institutional records and found that very few idiots were in any sort of institutional care and that in fact institutions actively sought to exclude them (Andrews 1998, p.75-8). He also highlighted the 'profound disregard for idiocy as a medical problem' (Ibid. p.66). From this absence of institutional or medical attention he concludes that eighteenth-century idiots were highly marginalized, their 'lonely ontological status' driven by the idea of ineducability. He claims this began to change when 'a new romantic sympathy for the idiot' emerged in the early nineteenth century, displacing the earlier 'negative outdated view' in which they were held (Ibid. p.72). This reflects, again, a consistent and surprisingly enduring seam of opinion running through the historiography that learning disability history effectively 'began' in the nineteenth century, when so-called idiots came under the gaze of medical men and 'sympathetic' intellectuals. Research actually shows the group living integrated lives within communities and families before the nineteenth century, suggesting that nineteenth century accounts of marginalisation and neglect were rhetorical representations designed to justify the institutional drive of the asylum programme. However, these representations are still accepted by some historians today.

The field of learning disability history thus presents us with several complex issues. Firstly, a bewildering process of rapidly changing terminology, which reflects the constant emergence of new interest groups, who claim the right to identify, 'treat', manage and write about those people defined by the category. These groups include doctors, psychologists, political reformers, psychiatrists, freak show impresarios, liberating advocates and historians, whose claims are usually staked by the adoption of a new nomenclature. Secondly, the ease with which interest groups adopt this out-group as theirs to define and control reflects another theme of the historiography, identified first by Wolfensberger and developed by Goodey and others: the intellectual status of the learning disabled person as an 'empty vessel' (Wolfensberger, 1975; Goodey, 2011; McDonagh, 2008). They are constructed as others wish to construct them, creating a series of tropes which emerge, disappear and reappear in response to cultural change: the holy innocent, the natural fool, the simple trickster, the sub-human, the brute, the menace, the object of pity, the burden, the eternal

child. These tropes have surfaced and resurfaced over a thousand years. In this time the person designated as being an idiot or having a learning disability has not necessarily changed – but the fear, pity, excitement, love, loathing, anxiety or unease they arouse has shifted, and with them the idea of who that person is and what they represent. In this sense, people with learning disabilities, or whatever term has been applied to them at any given time, have been a source of discomfort and anxiety for intellectuals and medical professionals. Unable to see them simply as fellow human beings who happen to be different to them, they have seen them as a disturbing reminder that progress and the perfectibility of mankind and society may not be as inevitable as they would fantasise or wish.

Finally, it is the misfortune of people with learning disabilities to have been a constant disappointment to certain powerful others, first to Enlightenment intellectuals who desperately sought noble ‘natural men’ and then to the medical profession, who became enraged when their charges failed to ‘improve’ in their palatial asylums of medicine. Their perceived imperviousness to progress caused them to pay a high price for the disappointment they had caused, and they became the ‘defective’, the diseased organism eating away at the underbelly of civilization, who needed to be confined, so that they could wither away in custodial segregation.

As Goodey and others have pointed out, many historians of learning disability, including contemporary practitioners, have been drawn into this conceptual journey. While the errors of the previous era have been identified and analysed, there is always cause for optimism *this time*, with a new approach and a new ‘modern’ understanding of the learning disabled person. That person comes into focus not as themselves but as a reflection of those who define them. Characterised as abused and outcast before the medical gaze fell on them, they have then been buffeted and constrained within the ever-changing conceptual straitjackets placed on them. It is only in recent decades that their own voice has started to be heard in their own history, a small but significant step towards liberation.

The more recent work of those who describe themselves as ‘historian activists’ is evidence of an embryonic but potentially radical movement to challenge and contest these enduring conceptual loopholes. Emerging from and inspired by developments in both the social and cultural waves of learning disability history (in particular the life stories of advocates such as Mabel Cooper), this historical endeavour is aligned tangibly to social and political concerns. As Paul Christian has commented in relation to the term ‘historian activist’: ‘I like the term. Like if you know your history

you can use it. Like with Madhouse, use the stories of the past for change now. It's powerful' (Tilley et al., 2021, p.360). Supported by fellow 'activists' in the academy and beyond, these historians who live with the label of learning disability are engaged in a journey of historical discovery, learning about the past through research and workshops, while also becoming producers of knowledge and culture in their own right. They have found innovative ways to both generate new historical 'data', while facilitating and identifying new meanings, perspectives and understandings of past events (CEPF and Walmsley, 2012; Walmsley et al., 2019; XX c/f with other papers in the special issue). It is also important to note that much of this work is not to be found through the usual academic channels of books and peer reviewed articles, but appears in multiple forms within the 'grey' literature, including websites, exhibitions, performances, artistic expression, videos and sound recordings⁷. A considerable amount of work was also being produced in the 1980s and 1990s, some of it supported by the institutional establishments in which people were living. Examples include the oral histories collected at Starcross in Exeter, and at Calderstones, Brockhall and the Royal Albert in the North West of England. While this article cannot do justice to the wealth of this 'grey' material in existence – often at greater risk at being lost or hidden – it is important to highlight its significance, while acknowledging that it may constitute an alternative historiography awaiting further exploration and analysis.

Through this **productive and** interpretive work, historian activists are helping to destabilize taken-for-granted concepts of what it means to be (or to be labeled as) 'learning disabled', while using knowledge of the past to make connections with ongoing forms of oppression in order to advocate for change (Ledger et al., 2020). Being able to imagine alternative modes of being relies in part on one's location and knowledge base (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Knowing about the past can serve as the foundation for interpreting both one's present and imagining one's future (Andrews, 2014). In this way, extending the 'work' of historical investigation and interpretation to learning disabled people offers the potential not only to invigorate the historiography, but also to stimulate activism and advocacy. As Deinstag has argued 'Human beings fight over history because they conceive their pasts to be an essential part of who they are. And they are right' (1997, p.206, cited in Andrews, 2007, p.10).

⁷ See for example, the work of learning disability theatre group Access all Areas (www.accessallareastheatre.org), whose Madhouse re:exit performances offered a creative response to historic and ongoing experiences of institutionalisation. Also Purple Patch Arts' history project which culminated in *Present in my Past*, <https://vimeo.com/130333304>. A growing body of historical work is also being generated by self-advocacy organisations, for example Brighton and Hove Speak Out's *Our History Our Voice* project, <https://www.bhspeakout.org.uk/history-project>

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