



The Dignity of Humanity is Not a Scientific Construct¹

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Although society's improvement in many other areas can be disputed, at least on the surface, progress seems undeniable with regard to the scientific terms applied to persons understood to have intellectual disabilities. Ours appears to be an age of relative enlightenment when *Down syndrome* is compared against the racist *Mongolism* (or even worse, *Mongoloid idiocy*), and *mental retardation* is examined alongside predecessors such as *idiocy*, *imbecility*, *constitutional inferiority*, *subnormality*, *feeble mindedness*, *moronity*, *mental defectiveness*, and *mental deficiency*. Why, then, consider yet another name change for a venerable organization that evolved over 125 years from being known at its origin as the forbidding, almost medieval sounding, Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions of Idiotic and Feeble Minded Persons to the far more benign American Association on Mental Retardation?

The reason that the name should be changed is that the term *mental retardation*, like its predecessors, long ago escaped from the clinical realm of classification into universal English usage as a potent, utterly dismissive invective in the mouths of adults and school children. The injurious nominal form *retard* became a term of opprobrium alongside *moron*, *imbecile*, and *idiot*. As a descriptive, *retarded* is a commonly heard teen epithet to label someone or something as deserving ridicule, as in, "Those shoes are so *retarded*." Perhaps it is an affront to human dignity when the organization that exists to advocate for and serve a group of people identifies itself and them with a term that is pervasively used to invite contempt.

A plausible argument to continue using the term *mental retardation* might be that there is no better alternative. One could argue, incorrectly in my view, that any substitute term, however neutral at the beginning of its usage, will suffer the same fate of contamination by the stigma associated with this group. Admittedly, it is the existing prejudice to persons with intellectual disabilities that contaminates the words coined to identify them, and not the other way around. The fate of *mental retardation* is an example of this. The verb *retard* means to slow the progress of, impede, or delay. It was understood to be nonpejorative when it first began to be used.

Yet, it is less neutral than it appears. *Retardation* in combination with mental (pertaining to the mind) can be taken to mean slow-mindedness (or, more charitably, mental delay). As a descriptive term *mental retardation* may, thus, be considered to be on a par with the older term

feeble mindedness, or *psycho-asthenics* (asthenic = weak), which was used in the title of the Association's journal near the turn of the 20th century.

The real problem with all the previous terms is that they are composed of specialized, rarely used, or newly coined (e.g., *moron*, *psycho-asthenics*) words. Any terms that are reserved for a stigmatized group and are not part of common vocabulary will, over time, take on discredited connotations ascribed to the group it refers to. The solution is to use ordinary words whose meaning cannot be limited to the group in question, rather than inventing new terms or engaging in the futile attempt to redefine existing ones (Scriven, 1988).

Intellectual disability would be an excellent substitute for *mental retardation* because it is composed of words in common usage in the English language. Intellectual disability is clearly descriptive of the heterogeneous group to which *mental retardation* has been applied and can easily substitute for *mental retardation* in definitions and classifications without causing confusion. It is parallel to *learning disability*, yet semantically discrete from that term. *Intellectual disability* also has the virtue of linking those so identified with the humanity of all others with disabilities rather than identifying them as a thing apart. Changing the Association's name to the American Association on Intellectual Disabilities makes good sense for the workers in the field as well as the persons with and for whom they work.

Reference

Scriven, M. (1988). Philosophical inquiry methods in education. In R. M. Jaeger (Ed.), *Complementary methods for research in education* (pp. 131-148). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

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