

**New Words For New Purposes: A Challenge For The AAMR¹**

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"Tomorrow's playground insults are often foretold by today's professional diagnoses" (Ferguson, 1994, p. x).

Since its inception in 1876, the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) has operated under a series of names featuring the standard professional terms of each historical era: *feeble minded*, *idiot*, *mental deficiency*, and *mental retardation*. These sound more like the barbed taunts of third graders than the professional jargon of physicians, psychologists, or educators. They have been, or are, both.

In order to consider the question of what the AAMR might name itself now, I will explore the historical and linguistic roots of the *mental retardation* terms that have been used by leading organizations and the professions. My reason for moving backward in order to look forward arises out of a serious hunch that Professor Ferguson is unfortunately correct about both the past and the future. Terms such as *moron*, *idiot*, and *retard* have originated within the circles of respectable professional jargon only to be passed on to the lips of playground bullies. The various new *mental retardation* terms generated within professional circles today--*cognitive disability*, *intellectual disability*--are likely to follow the same historical path. They are born as seemingly unsoiled words with an apparent absence of cultural stigma. They are initially circulated among professionals as enlightened replacements for the older, stigma-stained terms. Yet, quite predictably, within a decade or so, the new terms accumulate the negative social weight of stigma that marked the old terms. The negativity of *moron* is soon forwarded to the apparently sanitary *intellectual disability*.

Mental retardation terms are invented and distributed for scientific and professional use. Over time, the latest terms accrue the deep and harmful cultural stigma that characterizes the older terms. Concerned professionals and family members scramble to outrun the encroaching stigma by inventing and popularizing new words to replace the old. Yet, this effort is unsuccessful. Professionals and important organizations such as the AAMR end up trapped in the half-life of our own terminology, racing ever ahead to invent unblemished new terms to replace the tainted old, finding that we can never quite outrun the stigma and negativity that our terms gather in wider cultural circles. The organizations and the professionals end up in the

ironic and sad position of providing the broader society with terms and concepts that maintain the social devaluation and political oppression of persons trapped under these terms.

Why and how do the mental retardation terms invented and used by professionals end up as playground insults? Perhaps if we know something about how and why this has occurred in the past, we can avoid making this mistake in the future. We can avoid choosing seemingly enlightened and stigma-free terms such as *intellectual disability* or *cognitive disability* with the foreknowledge that these words will likely begin to accumulate cultural stigma the moment they are adopted.

Reference

Ferguson, P. M. (1994). *Abandoned to their fate: Social policy and practice toward severely retarded people in America, 1820-1920*. Philadelphia; Temple University Press.

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