

History of Stigmatizing Names for People with Intellectual Disabilities (Adapted from Reynolds, Zupanick, & Dombeck, 2016)

There has been a long list of terms used to classify, identify or clarify varying societal definitions of intellectual disability. In nearly every case, the terms were never meant to be derogatory or demeaning. Generally, they reflected the very best thinking and science of the time.

Defective

Prior to the mid-1800s, people with intellectual disabilities (ID) were all viewed as "defective". This was usually attributed to some religious or superstitious cause (by the "unenlightened") or as some symptom or outcome of medicine (by the "enlightened"). Prior to the mid-1840s, people with intellectual disabilities were considered indistinguishable from one another regardless of varying degrees of impairment.

Howe was the first to offer a classification scheme according to severity of intellectual disability (*On the Causes of Idiocy*, 1845). He also proposed that intellectual disabilities (and mental illness) were the results of "unhealthy lifestyles" such as gluttony, excessive or deviant sexual activity, or marriage between blood relatives. Even though Howe's theory was prejudicial and incorrect, this marked an important point in varying from medical views to a more social/community view of ID. Howe's classification system included idiots, fools, and simpletons.

Idiot is derived from the Greek language. It was used to classify people with severe intellectual disabilities. It referred to people who could not take care of themselves and required 24-hour care even though "idiots: did have some muscular control and cognitive ability. The term gradually became mainstreamed. By the mid-1890s, its derogatory usage caused the medical community to discontinue its use.

Fools were another category of idiots. Individuals in this group were thought to have almost no reasoning skills and major delays in speech.

Simpleton was intended to mean people with mild intellectual disability. Simpletons had adequate motor skills and good reasoning skills but difficulties functioning in society. The term simpleton never fully entered the worldwide medical community's terminology. The term was later replaced by "moron."

Alongside Howe's categories of idiots, fools, and simpletons, other terms were also historically used to describe varying degrees of severity. Originally, these neutral words referred to categories within a classification scheme. However, as the terms entered common language, they took on a prejudicial meaning with a stigmatizing effect.

Here are some other obsolete, classification terms for intellectual disability. These

terms no longer have any legitimate medical meaning. However, they are still used as insults.

Cretin

This term came from an old French word meaning Christian. The thought was that, even though people with ID had difficulties, they needed to still be viewed as Christian. Thus, they should be treated with kindness. Ironically, in today's language this term has negative connotation. Its meaning is derogatory.

Imbecile

This is another French term that is derived from Latin, meaning "without support". Used in the 16th century to denote those who were physically weak, it was later used to classify people with moderate ID. This term was used from the mid-16th century, to the early 19th century. Imbecile was a medical term to classify people with moderate ID. Like the term idiot, it gradually entered the vernacular and became a term of abuse.

Mongolism

Mongolism was a medical term used for individuals with Down syndrome. It was originally used by the person who identified Down syndrome (John Down) because he believed that the physical traits of individuals with Down syndrome were similar from Mongolians. Even though Mongolia's government requested that the World Health Organization stop using the term in the 1960s, it is a term that is still used today.

Moron

The term moron came from Goddard in the early 1900s to classify people with mild ID. Goddard created the novel word by combining parts of words like sophomore and oxymoron. The term was used to replace the term simpleton.

Feeble-minded

Feeble-minded came from the Latin word *flebilis*. It means, "to be lamented" and referred to people who did not have profound disabilities, but still required intervention and care.

Retarded

Retarded comes from the Latin *retardare*. This means, "to make slow, delay, keep back, or hinder." The first record of the word "retarded" in relation to developmental delay and cognitive impairments was in 1895. The term retarded was used to replace terms like idiot, moron, and imbecile. This was because it was not a derogatory term at that time. However, by the 1960s, the term became a word used to insult someone. The term mental retardation was removed from US federal law by passage of Rosa's Law in 2010.

Amentia

The term amentia has a long history. It is mostly associated with dementia. The difference between amentia and dementia was age. Amentia was used when someone developed deficits in mental functioning early in life. In contrast, dementia was used when someone developed mental deficiencies during adulthood. During the 1890s,

amentia was used to describe someone born with mental deficiencies. By 1912, ament was a label lumping "idiots, imbeciles, and feeble minded" into a single category. It was distinct from a dement. This was a label reserved for mental problems developing later in life.

Dementia

The term dementia is unique. Its meaning has not changed in hundreds of years. The term first emerged during the 16th century. It was used in reference to people who lost mental functioning. In 1912, the term dement was used to classify people who lost their previous level of functioning. Today, the term dementia retains a similar meaning. However, in DSM-5 (APA, 2013) dementia was relabeled neurocognitive disorder.

For many health care and disability professionals, diagnostic labels serve as a form of shorthand communication. Diagnostic labels rapidly communicate a set of symptoms associated with a particular condition. It may simultaneously suggest an appropriate treatment. However, when these conditions carry a social stigma, the diagnostic labels themselves become stigmatizing. The original, medical terms lost their intended meaning.

Intellectual Disabilities

In October 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill known as Rosa's Law. This law required the terms "mental retardation" and "mentally retarded" be stricken from federal records. Instead, these terms were replaced with "intellectual disability" and "individual with an intellectual disability." Subsequently, more recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders have adopted the term intellectual disability to replace the older term mentalretardation. This change was due in part to these changes in the law.