

# The Rise and Fall of 'Mentally Retarded'

How a term that replaced bad words became one — and how to stop it from happening again

Rick Hodges, 2015

Now, clinics in charge of Dr. Max Schlapp, seven assistant neurologists and three psychologists, held for the present at the Post Graduate Hospital, are receiving children from juvenile courts, from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, from churches and settlements—in all, from 147 different individual sources, and are giving each child the best possible examination.

**MORON**  
Mentally 10 to 12 yrs old  
WORK REQUIRING REASON & JUDGMENT

**HIGH GRADE IMBECILE**  
Mentally 8 to 10 yrs old  
COMPLEX MANUAL WORK

**MEDIUM IMBECILE**  
Mentally 6 to 8 yrs old  
SIMPLE MANUAL WORK

**LOW GRADE IMBECILE**  
Mentally 4 to 5 yrs old  
SIMPLE MENTAL WORK

**IDIOT**  
Mentally 3 yrs old & under  
SELF PRESERVATION

**STEPS IN MENTAL DEVELOPMENT**  
Where they stumble—the limit of development of each type.

parents, even when such care of the sick or defective child would be a great relief to the family. This is another proof of the need for a campaign of education of parents. Such education will be advanced in part by the nurses

In 1910, the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Persons adopted three classifications of people we know today as intellectually disabled, as defined by a newly invented way to measure intelligence we now call the IQ test. “Morons” were the most intelligent — they had IQs

between 50 and 70. “Imbeciles” with IQs between 25 and 50 were the second level. Those below 25 would remain “idiots.”

These terms, and the name of their association for that matter, did not strike these medical officers as insulting or offensive at all because, at the time, they weren’t insulting or offensive. They were simply medical terms. In fact, “moron” was a new word invented by Henry H. Goddard, a psychologist who helped devise the American version of the IQ scale and the three classifications adopted by the group.

A chart from a 1913 *New York Times* article about a survey counting and classifying “defective” children in New York City schools.

In 1987, the group changed its name. Years of the use of “idiot,” “moron,” and “imbecile” as common insults had already inspired a few name changes; this time, the organization went with a progressive, respectful new term that had been introduced in the 1960s, becoming the American Association on Mental Retardation.

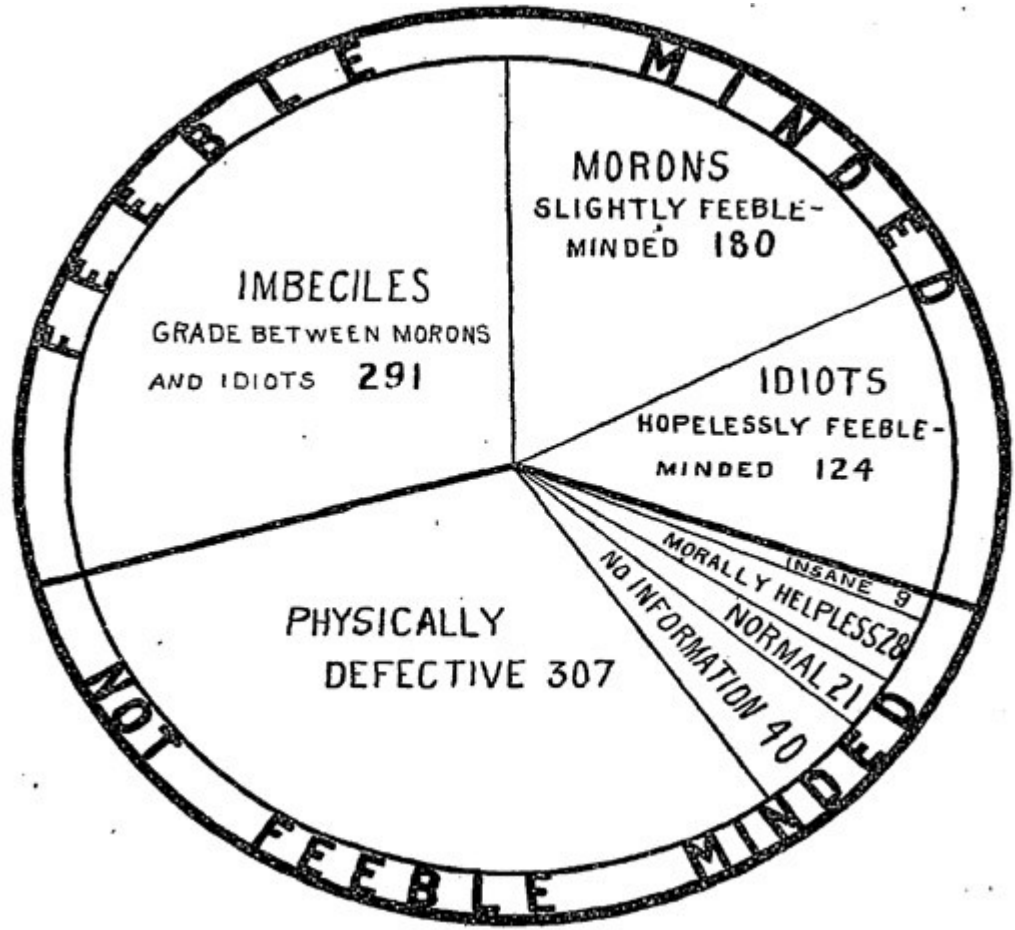
It took only two decades for popular culture to drag “mentally retarded” through the mud enough to prompt AAMR to change its name again. In 2007, it became

the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

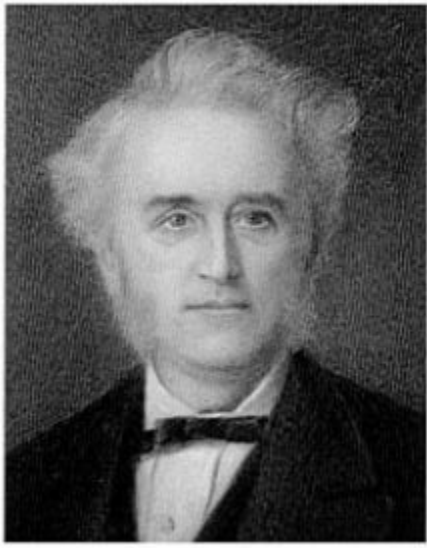
Another group, the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States, got around to dropping “retarded” from its name in 1992, but since it had been known as “The ARC” for many years, that group wisely made “The Arc” its official name, sans acronym. It won’t have to go through another name change.

“Mentally retarded,” once the respectful phrase that replaced the insults, is now the new term to hate among people with intellectual disabilities (the preferred term today) and their families and supporters. Many of these people are old enough to have lived when they themselves used the term in its proper, official manner, and thought little of it. Now uttering it, whether as an insult or just a label, will get you accused of hate speech, or at least earn you an angry tongue-thrashing or a shower of angry tweets. Like the “n-word,” to even speak or write it for its own sake may be a transgression — it’s often rendered as the “r-word.” Advocacy groups have launched [“r-word” campaigns](#) urging people not to use it.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with refining terms to avoid insult or reframe how people think about those we are labeling. For instance, Dr. John Langdon Down, the English doctor who first described Down syndrome in medical literature in the 1860s, didn’t name it after himself. Down called it “mongolism.” People with this syndrome, he reasoned, had eyes and bodies that resembled certain Asians he knew as Mongols, and like Mongols, they were of low intelligence, so perhaps they were related. He wrote of one child: “The boy’s aspect



is such, that it is difficult to realize that he is the child of Europeans; but so frequently are these characters presented, that there can be no doubt that these ethnic features are the result of degeneration.” Such was the racist medical logic of the time.



John Langdon Down

Mongolism as a term for Down syndrome lasted until the 1970s, long after its real cause (in most cases, an extra 21st chromosome occurring at random) was discovered and an accurate medical term (Trisomy 21) assigned to it. Interestingly, though, despite Dr. Down’s crude Victorian ideas, the name Down syndrome persists.

It’s different, though, when the only reason a term is considered pejorative is because people, starting with schoolchildren on playgrounds, took a perfectly acceptable term and transformed it into an insult — one used not simply to vilify those actually diagnosed with the applicable condition, but to insult any person or thing, to wit: “Sarah Palin is a retard,” or “*The Real Housewives of Orange County* is a retarded show.”

Used this way, “retarded” is, of course, an insult to people who really are “mentally retarded” because it is predicated on the idea that it’s undesirable to be mentally retarded. Saying “you’re retarded” to someone who actually isn’t means “you are just like one of those people who have been diagnosed with mental retardation.” The problem with simply abandoning an official label to the insulting masses is that it requires finding a new label, and we know what will happen next.

There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with the term “retarded.” It means slow. That’s probably a better descriptor than “disabled,” which implies someone will never be able to do something, as opposed to being slow to learn it. But constant use as a derogatory term has caused “retarded” to hurt the ears.

When a term becomes more known as an insult than by its proper use, as with “idiot,” “imbecile,” “moron,” and then “mentally retarded,” there’s a choice to be made by the affected community — in this case, people with intellectual disabilities, their families and advocates, and the organizations serving them.

The community can a) capitulate and run away from the term that was stolen from them and find a new one. Or it can b) take back its term, and defend the people it describes, by insisting that everyone stop using it as an insult, but continue to use it properly. In the case of “retarded,” this would involve declaring that they are proud to be, or love someone with, mental retardation, and that there is *nothing wrong with being mentally retarded*. The problem with simply abandoning an official label to the insulting masses is that it requires finding a new label, and we know what will happen next. The schoolchildren will use the new one as an insult. It will slowly become common, and acceptable, and as the children grow up they will take their insult with them. Then yet another new term will be required, and another round of name changing and manual editing will occur. Harvard linguist Steven Pinker coined the term “euphemism treadmill” for this churning of terms. “People invent new ‘polite’ words to refer to emotionally laden or distasteful things, but the euphemism becomes tainted by association and the new one that must be found acquires its own negative connotations,” Pinker wrote in the *New York Times* in 1994. “The euphemism treadmill shows that concepts, not words, are in charge: give a concept a new name, and the name becomes colored by the concept; the concept does not become freshened by the name.”

As John Cook presciently wrote in *Slate* back in 2001 when the American Association on Mental Retardation was contemplating its latest name change, “any psychologist will point out that changing the name is, in the end, folly. Whatever new term comes into favor today will seem insensitive, or worse, tomorrow. A nation of 10-year-olds has pretty much exhausted the pejorative power of ‘retarded’ and is eagerly awaiting a new state-of-the-art insult...In other words, the AAMR will almost certainly be going through an identity crisis again in 20 years, just to stay ahead of the game.”

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Perhaps Cook was hasty in predicting 20 years, since we still haven’t completed the process of purging “mentally retarded” from organization names and diagnostic manuals in 2015. And he was wrong that “retarded” had run its course, as it still thrives today. But the corruption of the new terms will likely happen sooner or later, especially when the r-word campaigns succeed in bringing shame and punishment for using “retarded.”

There’s a generational timing that drives the euphemism treadmill, especially for words involving disability. Some of the children who grew up using an insult borrowed from a legitimate diagnostic term like “retarded” became parents of kids with Down syndrome, autism, or other conditions and were horrified to find their children labeled with a term they knew only as an insult. Outraged, they demanded not only that everyone stop using the word as an insult, but that the legitimate label for their children also be changed. Many of these parents have no idea that the insult part came *after* the medical term, because their experience with it happened in reverse — first they used it, as snotty 10-year-olds, then they grew up and had children labeled with the term. I was part of that generation. My daughter was born with Down syndrome in 2000. She was labeled “mentally retarded” for the purpose of receiving government-provided benefits like physical therapy. By then, the term was often politely shortened to “MR.”

The campaign to get rid of the term was nearly in full swing by then, but government and medical bureaucracies took longer to respond. The term persists in just a few state laws and manuals today. In 2010, Congress passed a law forcing federal agencies to scour their literature and rules and scrub the term. The American Psychiatric Association held on until 2013, when it dropped “mentally retarded” from the fifth revision of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5).

I had, of course, grown up hearing “retarded” as an insult, but I understood the history better than most, since my father had managed group homes for the mentally retarded, and I was more comfortable with it as an official term. I knew real people with mental retardation almost as early as I heard it used as a slur on the playground. As a young schoolboy in the 1970s, I even used it myself, imitating another student, and a teacher admonished me. She told me I had insulted people who really did have mental retardation.

The same generational timing means that, eventually, nobody remains alive to remember the origin of the insults, and they become acceptable as insults and forgotten as medical terms. This is why those outraged people who are busy trying to purge “retarded” from the arsenal of acceptable putdowns use “idiot” without batting an eye. There is no current “i-word” campaign to stop people from using “idiot” in everyday conversation. I once heard the mother of a child with special needs call her child’s special education teacher a “moron.” She had no idea.

Everyone uses “idiot,” “imbecile,” “moron,” and one of the most popular put-downs is “duh,” which is an imitation of cartoon characters that were mocking the speech of people with intellectual disabilities. It appears to have emerged from the many parodies of the Lennie character from “Of Mice and Men” in cartoon shorts from the 1940s and 1950s.

Even people with intellectual disabilities themselves use these words as insults sometimes. My daughter has already picked up “duh” from middle school.

Given time, “retarded” may become the “idiot” of tomorrow, its origin long forgotten. This is already happening. Many people who defend using the term say it has nothing to do with people with disabilities. Most don’t remember where it came from, or think the term was abandoned long ago. And, of course, they’re now correct, since it has been removed as an official term in nearly every context and is disavowed by the disability community.

That’s how Ann Coulter defended tweets referring to President Obama as a “retard” in 2012. “No one would refer to a Down syndrome child, someone with an actual medical handicap, by saying ‘retard,’” Coulter said in a radio interview at the time. “Where do you think the words idiot, imbecile, cretin, moron, come from? These were all technical terms at one time. Retard has been used colloquially to just mean ‘loser’ for 30 years.” Aside from the bad timing — when she wrote this, a few official uses of “mentally retarded” were still hanging on — her logic is sound. It pains me to admit that a disgusting, obnoxious tweet like Ann Coulter has a point about anything, but there you have it.

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Here stands the status of the term “mental retardation” in 2015: Use it wrong, as an insult, and you’re out of line. But use it to refer to someone like my daughter who was diagnosed with what was once officially called mental retardation, as a statement of fact rather than an insult, and you’re still out of line. It’s now considered insulting to use the term the way it used to be used correctly.

By declaring the word an insult and also no longer an official term, the community set up a circular argument. If “mental retardation” is no longer an official, or acceptable, term for a specific group of people, how does using it as insult against those who aren’t in that group denigrate those who are? Like “idiot,” “moron” and “imbecile,” “retarded” is no longer an official term; it is merely an insult on par with “stupid.” It doesn’t officially refer to any group, and so it doesn’t denigrate any group. The previous link between insult and official term will fade from memory, as with “idiot.” One way or the other, by choosing to abandon the official term, the community gives up the right to be offended by it. They don’t own the word anymore. Instead, we will have to go through this process all over again with the new term.

There’s a way off the euphemism treadmill: Defend the word, and the people it represents. This way, nobody will be stuck declaring a term insulting even though they chose it for themselves just a generation earlier as a way to avoid insult. Refuse to let others turn you, or your child, into a crude insult by stealing your label. Shame them for using “intellectually disabled” or “special needs” as a common insult — and they are already doing it with those terms — but at the same time, proudly declare that it shouldn’t be used as an insult because there’s nothing wrong with being intellectually disabled. Stick to your guns. Stand and fight.

If we in the community of people with intellectual disabilities, and family and friends, had stood up for “mentally retarded,” the “r-word” campaigns would have involved a very different message: “Don’t use retarded as an insult. It hurts people who really are mentally retarded. *There’s nothing wrong with being mentally retarded.*” That’s a much more powerful statement of pride and understanding. It doesn’t capitulate to the insults, it defies them.

A couple of similar, offensive uses of group labels that outsiders perverted into insults come to mind: To “jew” someone down is to negotiate a price lower, which insults all Jews as cheap; to “welsh” on a bet is to refuse to pay when you lose, derogating people from Wales as untrustworthy when wagering. But the words “Jew” or

“Welsh” aren’t offensive in their own right, and no person of either group has lobbied to abandon them because others used them offensively. Jews still proudly call themselves Jews, and the Welsh, Welsh. To foster acceptance of, and pride among, people with intellectual disabilities, we cannot continue to run away from labels as if we are ashamed of the people behind them.

Imagine, reader, that your name is Joanne. (If your name really is Joanne, you’re in great shape.) Imagine that there are people who don’t like you or think little of you. Those people start using “Joanne” as an insult. “You’re such a Joanne!” they say to their friends when they make a mistake. What would you do? You would protest, and you would be justified in protesting. But would you also legally change your name from Joanne to something else? Would you insist no mother name her child “Joanne” again?

A euphemism, after all, is a polite word for something we don’t like to say out loud. We will only have real progress when we no longer search for polite words, but can say them out loud, and people with the label can use them with pride. The euphemism treadmill doesn’t solve the underlying problem; it only delays confronting it. As with a real treadmill, the euphemism treadmill gives the illusion of progress, but you don’t actually get anywhere.

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If we can’t jump off the euphemism treadmill and break this cycle, we might as well get on with the process. First, we’ll need to stop being offended when “retarded” is used by the Ann Coulters of the world, and let the word take its place next to “idiot” as a retired official term turned invective. Our loved ones aren’t “retarded” anymore, so we have no more basis for offense.

Next, we’ll need to start the process of shunning our new terms. After all, they’ll be declared taboo within a few decades. Knowing that, shouldn’t we feel ashamed of them now and find better ones? Or must we wait until the new generation of 10-year-olds spewing insults on playgrounds tells us it is time to be ashamed? Listen carefully and you’ll hear it — “special,” as in “special needs” is already a popular insult among the kids today. There are memes out there that use “autistic” to mean stupid. The treadmill is rolling.

No, I have a better idea. Let me break the cycle right now: Don’t use “intellectually disabled” or “special needs,” as an insult, because *there’s nothing wrong with being intellectually disabled*.

UPDATE May 2020: Since I published this article, I’ve seen the term “autism” used as an insult (to mean stupid) against people who do not have autism, and heard people complain about the use of “special needs” and “special ed” as labels for people with intellectual disability. The cycle continues.