Mental Defectives in 1900: People with Learning Disabilities in 2000. What's changed?: a response to Matt Egan’s paper

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It is most fitting to consider a century of change in relation to people with learning difficulties. As Matt implies, the rhetoric has moved through 360 degrees (both in England and in Scotland) but how far does reality live up to these grand words? In his presentation Matt has chosen to focus on the numbers of people labelled as having a learning disability. He argues that the numbers of people labelled has increased tenfold over the past century, and that the trajectory is still upwards. This is an interesting observation, and one well worth exploration. However, counting people with learning difficulties is a very inexact science, as Matt indicates, and we would be wise to examine the evidence, and some of the possible biases in the sources.

As evidence he uses a number of sources including Royal Commission and Education Department Reports, ‘expert’ commentary, and contemporary statistics from the Scottish Executive. Most precisely, using the GBCS Annual Reports, Matt arrives at 3 per 1000 of the Scottish population in any kind of state, private or voluntary services for mental defectives prior to World War 2. However, these figures need careful consideration. The availability of services has consistently lagged behind need. Now it is a moot point whether it was desirable for people to enter the sorts of services available in the 1930s, but the number of people receiving those services is, I would argue, not a strong basis for calculating the numbers of ‘mental defectives’. My own research into Bedfordshire in the 1950s shows that as soon as any kind of day service opened it was overwhelmed with applicants (Walmsley 1995). People did not come forward if there was nothing on offer. As soon as parents could see the chance of getting something worth having (as opposed to a place on an institutional waiting list) they’d come out of the woodwork! For this reason I’d caution against taking quite the position Matt does – the statistics really are quite slippery.

Another area for consideration is whether the changing labels Matt singles out actually represent the same phenomenon. ‘Mental defectives’ were, in the early C20, seen as a terrible threat to the race’ (Winston Churchill 1910). A contemporary commentator Alfred Tredgold, claimed,

the feeble minded and their relatives form a very considerable proportion, if not the whole, of the social failures and the degenerates of the nation  
(quoted in Jones 1986).

In England a category of ‘moral defectives’ was created in 1913, defined as people with,

Some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities on which punishment had little or no effect  
(Jones 1960 p.67)

These were quite openly people without measurable impairment. It was a very useful catch all category for a number of people who contravened societal mores, such as sexually active young women, and petty criminals. It is less likely that nowadays such people would be called ‘people with learning disabilities’. Tolerance of extra marital sexual activity has
increased and there are other categories for people whose behaviour cannot be accommodated in schools, or who commit petty crimes. I would argue that the category ‘people with learning disabilities’ is actually quite benign in the early twenty first century. They are most certainly constructed in public policy in both England and Scotland as people deserving, not only of pity, but also of rights. The sense of moral and eugenic threat that ‘mental defectives’ were seen to pose has evaporated, with other categories such as people with mental illness, asylum seekers and paedophiles being constructed as ‘dangerous’ and in need of control.

Matt sets out some possible reasons why the numbers of people labelled as having a learning disability continues to rise. As a major contributor he singles out the school system. It is hard to dispute the idea that schools are where people are first identified and classified. It is all too easy to do this with a captive audience who are available to be tested and measured. Mark Jackson (1996) argues that it was the introduction of compulsory schooling which really set the classification wheels in motion, and this seems to be convincing. There are some indications, though, that as people leave school so some manage to lose their labels, and blend into the population, so measuring school rates, although probably the easiest statistical task, does not necessarily represent the situation for adults. Unlike under the English 1913 Mental Deficiency Act (not repealed until 1959) there is currently no legal obligation to count people with learning disabilities. Some local authorities seek to maintain comprehensive registers, others do not. If counting someone as someone with learning disabilities is construed as an obligation to provide some kind of service, then not noticing them has some attractions for hard pressed social work or social services Departments.

The other area of interest in Matt’s paper is his speculation on the reasons why numbers have risen. Undoubtedly the growth of professional expertise is important, as are well intentioned philanthropic efforts. What perhaps needs also to be addressed is the old Marxist concept of the reserve army of labour. Documentary evidence, and statistics cited by Humphries and Gordon (1992) point to numbers of people who has been deemed to be ‘mental defectives’ being taken into the labour market during World War 2. This was reinforced by staff shortages in hospitals, and the need for space to care for people injured in War (several wards of Bromham Hospital, Beds, were closed for this purpose). No really substantial work has been undertaken in this area, but one might reasonably speculate that in times of full employment some people on the borderlands of learning disability are taken into jobs, and thus disappear, losing their labels.

Furthermore, we should be looking at where the pressures to label come from. New categories of people with learning difficulties have emerged. People with dyslexia, with autism, with ADHD are all groups which did not exist until the late twentieth century. What they were called and how they managed is a moot point. What is, however, difficult to dispute is that these labels are not imposed by some faceless bureaucracy, but fought for by families determined that their sons and daughters get proper recognition for their difficulties, and support. There can be benefits to being labelled if services follow.

In conclusion, then, Matt’s paper opens up a wealth of interesting and challenging issues. It is a topic worthy of further exploration. But just as classifying people as having an intellectual impairment is an inexact science, so is counting them. Matt’s argument raises as many questions as it answers – always a good sign.
References


Jones G. (1986), Social Hygiene in Twentieth Century Britain, London: Croom Helm
